

2016

"Gained in Translation": Building the African Diaspora Through Linguistic Transposition in 20th Century Poetry

Cyril Vettorato

École normale supérieure de Lyon, cyril.vettorato@ens-lyon.fr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/priamls>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vettorato, Cyril (2016) "'Gained in Translation": Building the African Diaspora Through Linguistic Transposition in 20th Century Poetry," *CALL: Irish Journal for Culture, Arts, Literature and Language*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 21.

doi:10.21427/D7001K

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/priamls/vol1/iss1/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals Published Through Arrow at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in CALL: Irish Journal for Culture, Arts, Literature and Language by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@tudublin.ie, arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, brian.widdis@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)

“Gained in Translation”: Building the African Diaspora through Linguistic Transposition in 20th Century Poetry

Cyril Vettorato

ENS Lyon, France

Cyril.vettorato@ens-lyon.fr

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between language and diaspora by trying to look beyond the question of what befalls native tongues in the countries of arrival. The experience of forced migration undergone by African people brought to the Americas might have dispossessed them from their ancestral tongues, but it did not prevent them from aspiring to use language, be it the language of the former slave owner, to express their identity and shared historical experience. Using the example of American poet Langston Hughes and his Cuban peer Nicolás Guillén, this article will highlight the way poets from the African diaspora have influenced and translated each other as a way of bridging the linguistic and cultural gap brought about by history. The literature of the diaspora might well lie in that very rift, which calls for continued translation and rewriting of each other.

Keywords: diaspora; translation; internationalism; literary dialect; Cuban poetry; African-American poetry

The relationship between language and diaspora is not merely about the loss or transformation of native tongues in their host countries. A disjunction does lie at the heart of the diasporic experience, described by Paul Gilroy as “an historical and experiential rift between the location of residence and the location of belonging”.¹ This rift can indeed be a linguistic rift, an experience of linguistic uprooting. But in addition to this question of the more or less tragic fate of deterritorialized tongues, it is worth pointing out that language can be and has been used positively to envisage new forms of connecting with the “Mother Land”.

Relevant examples of this constructive relationship between diaspora and language can be found in the modern literature of the African diaspora in the Americas. In the so-called New

¹ Paul Gilroy: *Between Camps: Nations, Culture and the Allure of Race*. London: Goldsmith's College, University of London, 1997, p. 10.

World, where over 10 million African people were taken by force as slaves,² the modern elaborations of African American, Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Cuban identity, to name only three, have had little to do with the practice of the West-African languages of these communities' ancestors. Just like the concept of diaspora itself, which contains both the idea of a fracture and that of cohesion, the values associated with language in the literature of the African diaspora are profoundly ambivalent. The ancestors' African tongues were stolen by the former slave masters, which makes English, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonial languages of sorts; but these same languages are also seen as possible tools for emancipation and reconnection. The link of diasporic subjects to Africa is not seen as a given but as a process fuelled by an initial distance. Creative uses of language play a major role in this process of "having home-thoughts from abroad" – to use Stuart Hall's characterization of diasporic cultures.³ Perhaps more than any other form of creative use, translation has played a major role in moving beyond the binary opposition between the stolen African "mother tongues" and the imposed European languages spoken in the Americas.

In order to illustrate this transformative use of translation within the literature of the African diaspora, this study will focus on the works of Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), two major poets from the United States and Cuba respectively who influenced and/or translated each other. They started writing in the 1920s and 1930s, decades marked by the first widespread manifestation of a Black literary voice. This voice was at the same time vernacular and cosmopolitan. In New York, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s saw a valorisation of African American dialect and music as well as an interest in international affairs and cultures. For instance, at the same time as Zora Neale Hurston was writing the folklore-infused *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Claude McKay was recounting his time spent in France, Germany, communist Russia and Morocco in *A Long Way From Home* (1937). Hughes wrote blues poems and dialect poems, but also travelled all over the world and befriended foreign intellectuals such as Léon-Gontran Damas and Arthur Koestler. Nicolás Guillén, a major voice of the Cuban *Negrismo* movement of the 1930s, both imitated the spoken Spanish of Afro-Cubans and felt connected to the Caribbean, the Americas – especially in *West Indies Ltd* (1934) – and the World, travelling to Mexico and Spain in 1937. Guillén and Hughes both associated themselves with communism, which partially explains their internationalist standpoint. They reflected on global matters such as

² There is no definitive agreement on that figure amongst historians. See Ronald Segal: *The Black Diaspora. Five Centuries of the Black Experience Outside Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995, p. 14.

³ Stuart Hall: *Thinking the Diaspora: Home-thoughts from Abroad*. In: *Small Axe* 6 (September 1999). Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, p. 1-18.

decolonisation and imperialism, as much as they dug deep into the specific experience and culture of the poor – people of African and mixed descent in particular, but not exclusively - in their own countries.

This new form of literary imagination, which was connected both to the local and the transnational, relied on translation as a means of reinvention of the self. By investigating the relationship between Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén, we will explore this literary mechanism of building the African diaspora through linguistic transposition. The English translation of one of Guillén's poem by Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers, in particular, will serve as a quintessential example of this creative process. The guiding thread to this reflection will be the idea of translation as a medium of mutual redefinition of the local and the global.

Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén: Two Poetic Voices in Dialogue

Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén were both born in 1902 - a first, if anecdotal, common point. But being born in 1902 did not quite have the same implications in the United States as it did in Cuba. That year, the Caribbean island-nation saw the departure of American troops and the institution of the Cuban Republic, with Tomás Estrada y Palma – who had previously been exiled to the United States - becoming its first president. Despite slavery having only been abolished 16 years earlier, the condition of Afro-Cuban people was a far cry from that of Black people in the segregated United States. Historian George Reid Andrews notes that in the mid-nineteenth century, a Black and Mestizo middle-class developed in Cuba, especially in urban areas.⁴ Around 1850, a significant number of Afro-Cuban people occupied valuable positions in middle class sectors such as teaching, culture, journalism, and to a lesser extent medicine and Law. A number of Afro-Cubans also created successful small businesses, to the extent that the governor of Havana noted in 1854 that in this area free Blacks were demonstrating “a tendency to surpass White people”.⁵ This is not to say that racism was absent from Cuban society, but it did not prevent Guillén's parents, two Camagüey residents of mixed African and European origin, from securing a comfortable position in society. The poet's father was a highly educated man who founded a newspaper (*Las dos Republicas*) and was elected senator of Camagüey for the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party). Guillén's

⁴ George Reid Andrews: *Afro-Latin America: 1800-2000*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 124.

⁵ Verena Martinez-Alier: *Marriage, Class and Colour*. Ann Arbor: University Press of Michigan, 1998, p. 33.

biographer Ángel Augier insists on the fact that as a renowned individual who had “reached the highest realms of political life”, the poet’s father gave his family “a strong public prestige”.⁶ On the other hand, Hughes’ family, despite being educated, faced exclusion and poverty in a country where segregation was legislated. Hughes’ father, James Nathaniel Hughes, attempted to become a lawyer but was not permitted to take the bar exam because he was black. He consequently relocated to Mexico in order to be allowed to practise law. The poet’s mother, Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes, came from a highly educated family of teachers and political activists and worked as a teacher herself; which did not prevent the young Langston from living in poverty, both with his mother, who had difficulties finding a long-term job, and with his grandparents.⁷ In 1919 and 1920, 18-year-old Langston spent first a summer, then a whole year in Mexico with his father. This experience probably paved the way for his interest in Cuba and Guillén’s work. There, he became familiar with the Spanish language and witnessed what a less segregated society could offer, with his father having become a successful businessman and landowner.

In 1919, Nicolás Guillén published his first poems in local magazine *Camargüey Gráfico*; Hughes followed suit in 1921, with “The Negro Speaks of River” appearing in *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois’ magazine which served as the official publication of the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). This parallel appearance on the literary scene continued when Hughes published his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926, soon followed by Guillén with his *Motivos de son* (1930). This symmetry notwithstanding, the American and the Cuban had two very different literary personalities and discourses about race. Hughes wrote as a Black man in a segregated country, demanding the right for African Americans to “sing America” but also to “express [their] individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”⁸). He embraced Black identity, existentially and literarily, as shown in what he told Guillén in a conversation published in the *Diario de la Marina* in 1930: “I live among my people; I love them; (...) I should like to be Black. Really Black. Truly Black!”⁹ Guillén, on the other hand, embraced the plural heritage of the young Cuban nation – which was also that of his own family. His involvement in the *Negrismo* movement is not to be understood as a racial stance:

⁶ Ángel Augier: *Nicolás Guillén. Estudio Biográfico-Crítico*. Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1984, p. 14-16.

⁷ Arnold Rampersad: *A Chronology of the Life of Langston Hughes*. In: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p. 8.

⁸ Langston Hughes: *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* [1926]. In: David Levering Lewis (ed.): *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994, p. 95.

⁹ Nicolás Guillén: *Conversación con Langston Hughes*. In: *Prosa de Prisa: 1929-1972*, vol. 1. Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1975, p. 16-19.

most writers in this movement were White, and Guillén's treatment of Afro-Cuban elements was not perceived by readers as fundamentally different from theirs.¹⁰ Unlike Hughes' poetic rendition of the blues, the Cuban *son* put forward by Guillén in his writing is less a symbol of Black cultural identity than one of Cuba's inherent ethnic hybridity. Long before he became the Cuban nation's beloved national poet, Guillén looked for words and images reflecting its multiracial heritage: in "La canción del bongó" (1931) he calls Cuba "esta tierra, mulata / de africano y español";¹¹ an idea omnipresent in his works, as exemplified by "Son número 6" (1942): "Estamos juntos desde muy lejos (...) negros y blancos, todo mesclado".¹² Guillén's ideal of a *mestizo* nation owes a lot to Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969), who sought to re-evaluate the cultural influence of Afro-Cubans in the nation's culture from the early 20th century onwards. Ortiz's anthropologic project is not an isolated case in Latin America: in Mexico, philosopher José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) discussed the same topic in *La raza cósmica* (1925), as did Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) in Brazil with *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933). In a manifesto-like text used as a foreword to his poetry collection *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931), Nicolás Guillén unequivocally endorses Ortiz's ideal of racial and cultural miscegenation as an opportunity to found a new, stronger nation: "Por lo pronto, el espíritu de Cuba es mestizo. Y del espíritu hacia la piel nos vendrá el color definitivo. Algún día se dirá: "color cubano". Estos poemas quieren adelantar ese día."¹³

The difference between Hughes' Black self-empowerment discourse in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and Guillén's praise of Cuban miscegenation is largely a reflection of national differences. Being identified as a "Black writer" anywhere usually implies having to position oneself relatively to the current state of how "the negro problem" is understood and dealt with in that particular place, at that particular time.¹⁴ The exchange between Guillén and Hughes shows that the initial distance between two circumstances – therefore, between the problems and questions the writer of African descent has to ask themselves while writing – is not an issue, but the beginning of a solution. When Guillén discovered Hughes' poetry in the late 1920s – notably through José Antonio Fernández de Castro, his friend and editor of

¹⁰ Richard Jackson: *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008, p. 26.

¹¹ Nicolás Guillén: *Summa poética*. Madrid: Catedra, 2005, p. 77. "This land, a blend / of African and Spanish".

¹² Nicolás Guillén, *Summa poética*, p. 141. "We've been together for a very long time (...) Black and Whites, it's all mixed together".

¹³ Nicolás Guillén: Prólogo. In: *Obra Poética*, vol. 1. Havana: Unión, 1974, p. 176. "From the get go, the spirit of Cuba is multiracial. And from the spirit to the skin, the final colour will come to us. One day, people will say: "Cuban colour". These poems are meant to make this day come faster".

¹⁴ See Robert E. Washington: *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Revolt*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

the newspaper *El Diario de la Marina* – he was dazzled by the new opportunities it opened for him as a poet. Guillén himself had been a contributor to the newspaper’s Black column, “Ideales de una raza”, when Fernández de Castro translated a selection of Hughes’ poetry into Spanish in that same newspaper, in 1928.¹⁵ Guillén was so impressed that he mentioned Hughes as early as 1929, before he had even met him, in a poem entitled “Pequeña oda a Kid Chocolate”: “De seguro que a ti / no te preocupa Waldo Frank / ni Langston Hughes / [El de ‘I, too, sing America’]”¹⁶ Hughes then visited Cuba the next year and met both Fernández de Castro and Guillén, both of whom he would stay good friends with. According to Arnold Rampersad, it was Hughes’ visit to Havana that year and his encouragement that convinced Guillén to start writing Afro-Cuban themed poetry; Hughes in particular is said to have suggested to his Cuban friend to appropriate the *son* musical genre the same way he himself had done with the blues.¹⁷ Guillén’s first *negrista* poems appeared in April 1930 under the title “Motivos de Son”, showcasing indeed a very different approach to poetry from that of his previous poems, which followed the classical form of the sonnet.¹⁸ Guillén openly acknowledged the influence of Hughes’ poetry in an article entitled “Sones y soneros” published on 10th June 1930 in *El Pais*; an article, quite interestingly, intended as a response to a critic who said these poems could not have been influenced by Hughes because they were deeply Cuban.¹⁹ Guillén sent Hughes his poems, prompting an enthusiastic response in a letter dated 17th July 1930: “¡Hombre! ¡Que formidable tu *Motivos de son!* Son poemas muy cubanos y muy buenos. Me alegro que tú los has escrito y han tenido tanto éxito.”²⁰

This marked the beginning of a long literary friendship, with elements of one poet’s work regularly echoing elements in the other’s, and vice versa. In 1933, Hughes paid tribute to his Cuban experience in a poem entitled “Havana Dreams”, where he plays with the Spanish

¹⁵ Laurie F. Leach: *Langston Hughes: A Biography*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004, p. 45.

¹⁶ Quoted in James De Jongh: *Vicious Modernism. Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 57. “Clearly you / aren’t interested in Waldo Frank / or Langston Hughes / [The one of “I, too, sing America”]”.

¹⁷ Arnold Rampersad: *The Life of Langston Hughes Vol. II, I Dream a World*. London: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 155.

¹⁸ Nicolás Guillén, *Summa poética*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Nicolás Guillén: *Prosa De Prisa, 1929-1972*, vol. 1. Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1975, p. 20-21.

²⁰ Quoted in Arnold Rampersad: *The Life of Langston Hughes Vol. I, I, Too, Sing America*. London: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 202. This letter and its context are also discussed in Lesley Feracho: *The Legacy of Negrismo/Negritude: Inter-American Dialogues*. In: *The Langston Hughes Review* 16:2, Autumn 1999-Spring 2001, p. 2. “Man! Your *Motivos de son* are so fantastic! These are at the same time very Cuban and very good poems. I am happy you wrote them and they were so successful.”

language: “¿Quién sabe? Who really knows?”²¹ In his 1937 poem “La voz esperanzada”, Guillén once again alluded to Hughes’ “I, too”: “Yo / hijo de América, / hijo de ti y de África”.²² When Langston Hughes put out *Cuba Libre*, a selection of poems by Guillén he had translated with Ben Frederic Carruthers, a leading African American scholar of Spanish and Professor at Howard University, this mutual influence became even more apparent. In some instances, the reader finds themselves unsure whether they are reading a poem by Hughes, a poem by Guillén translated by Hughes, or even a poem by Hughes translated to Spanish by Guillén, then back. “Down the Road”,²³ for instance, is a puzzling piece. In spite of the English book not divulging which of Guillén’s poems is being read, one can recognize that its source is “Iba por un camino”, a poem published in 1945 by Guillén.²⁴ There already were traces of Hughes’ works and American blues music in the original poem, especially its rhyme scheme and the motif of the road as a metaphor for fate. The first verse and title, “Iba por un camino”, is a reference to and translation of the first verse of one of Hughes’ most famous blues poems, “Bound No’th Blues”: “Goin’ down the road”.²⁵ When he translated Guillén’s poem into English in the 1940s, Hughes mischievously acknowledged this derivation by entitling the translation “Down the Road”, a self-quote of sorts. In another instance, Hughes translates only part of a 1934 poem – part 7 of “West Indies LTD”, starting with the verse “Me matan, si no trabajo” – and calls this new poem “Blues”.²⁶ Hughes cuts up the Cuban poem in this particular fashion to point out the presence of a “blues” form in it, a purpose made clear by the English title, which is unrelated to anything present in the original poem. Indeed, the Spanish version may be interpreted as following the blues rhyme pattern that Guillén discovered while reading Hughes, with the repetition of the first two lines and a rhymed variation on lines 5 and 6: “Ayer vi a un hombre mirando / mirando el sol que salía / Ayer vi a un hombre mirando / mirando el sol que salía / el hombre estaba muy serio / porque el hombre no veía”.²⁷ While translating Guillén, it is obvious that Hughes was doing more than mechanically transposing a foreign text into the English language. He was translating a part of himself, or better, continuing a decades-long poetic dialogue that was integral to his

²¹ *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, p. 173.

²² Nicolás Guillén, *Summa poética*, p. 126. “I / son of America, / son of you and Africa”.

²³ Nicolás Guillén: *Cuba Libre*, translated by Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers. Los Angeles: Anderson & Ritchie, 1948, p. 93.

²⁴ Nicolás Guillén, *Summa poética*, p. 154.

²⁵ Langston Hughes: Bound No’th Blues. In: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, p. 76.

²⁶ Nicolás Guillén, *Cuba Libre*, p. 25.

²⁷ Nicolás Guillén: *La grandes elegias y otros poemas*, Ayacucho: Fundacion Biblioteca Ayacuch, 1984, p. 10. “Yesterday I saw a man watching / watching the sun comin’ up / Yesterday I saw a man watching / watching the sun comin’ up / the man was very serious / because the man could not see”.

own definition as a writer as well as it was to Guillén's. This two-way literary relationship was so enriching for both poets that their works are, to a certain extent, woven together. The translation of Guillén's poem "Mulata" by Hughes and Carruthers is an eloquent example of this complex dialectics of the "self" and the "other".

From "Mulata" to "High Brown": Literary dialects beyond the untranslatable

For Hughes, translating Guillén into English is both an interpretation and an appropriation. With another African American intellectual, Spanish Professor Ben Carruthers, he tried to understand with great subtlety the vernacular expressions and witty remarks present in the original text, to better render it in a language equally infused with vernacular touches – except this time, though, he was working with the African American vernacular²⁸. For instance, Hughes and Carruthers render a woman's "búcate plata / búcate plata / poqué me voy a corré"²⁹ with "Git some cash, / git some cash, / else jes' watch my feet!"³⁰ This re-inscription of Afro-Cuban elements in the American context is a clear sign of the existence of a community of discourse, an on-going transnational literary exchange through which the literary diaspora invents itself at several places at a time. Intertextuality and translation are forms of writing in their own right, and they participate in the production of diasporic subjects. As suggested by David Scott, literary and cultural theory should describe the Black diaspora culture as a "tradition of cognitive-ideological discourse and social-institutional practice"³¹ that inscribes identity in the present, "a multifaceted ensemble of texts, practices (social, political, and aesthetic) (...) [that] produce subject (and subjectifying) effects of identity/difference".³² When Hughes translates Guillén, or when Guillén writes poetry with Hughes' poetry in mind, they re-imagine themselves as writers and as subjects in the light of the other's work.

"Mulata" was first published in 1930 in *Diario de la Marina*, as part of Guillén's attempt to create an equivalent of Hughes' African American poetics. This poem, characteristic of the

²⁸ Hughes and Carruthers worked on the translations together, but Hughes had the last word on the versions published in the volume. The manuscripts seem to suggest that both of them translated "Mulata" and that the final version is mostly based on Carruthers' first draft, later edited by Hughes. See Vera M. Kutzinski: *The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 145-146.

²⁹ Nicolás Guillén, *Summa poética*, p. 71. "Some money, / some money, / or I'm going to run away."

³⁰ Nicolás Guillén, *Cuba Libre*, p. 7.

³¹ David Scott: An Obscure Miracle of Connection: Discursive Tradition and Black Diaspora Criticism. In: *Small Axe* 1 (1997), p. 108.

³² David Scott: *Refashioning Futures*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 126.

“eye dialect” of Guillén’s first *negrista* texts, was probably written in part with one of Hughes’ pieces in mind, “Black Gal” (1927).³³ In this poem, the American writer took the voice of a Black woman who is sad because her partner has left her for a light-skinned woman. The male speaker in Guillén’s poem seems to respond to this very situation, telling the light-skinned woman to stop trying to seduce him and steal him away from his beloved dark-skinned woman:

Mulata

Ya yo m'enteré, mulata,
mulata, ya sé que dise
que yo tengo la narise
como nudo de cobbata.

Y fíjate bien que tú
no ere tan adelantá,
poqqe tu boca é bien grande,
y tu pasa, colorá

High Brown

Yep, now I gets you, high brown !
High brown, I knows you likes to say
how wide my nose is anyway
like a tie-knot flattened down.

Well, look at yo'self an' see
you ain't no prize to wed.
Yo' mouf' is awful big fo' me,
an yo' naps is short an' red.

The very title of the poem itself is enough to give one an insight into the linguistic and cultural difficulties Hughes and Carruthers might have faced in translating it. The *mulata* - a word referring to women of mixed European and African descent - is a central fantasmatic figure in the Cuban imaginary; it has no exact equivalent in the United States, where any person with some African origins is labelled “Black”.³⁴ This figure appeared in Latin-American colonial, then post-colonial literatures: we can trace the gradual outbreak and evolution of this sensual and sinful creature from the texts of Spanish-Peruvian Juan Caviedes (1645-1697), most particularly *Caballeros chanflones*, to those of Cubans Francisco Muñoz del Monte (1800-1868) and Creto Gangá (1811-1871), and Dominican Manuel del Cabral (1907-1999). The stereotypical *mulata* cumulates the refinement of the White woman, at the surface, and the assumed primitive sexuality of the Black woman lying beneath that reassuring surface: “ser mulata, es imitar / en el mirar la gacela, / la leona en el

³³ Langston Hughes: Black Gal. In: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, p. 121.

³⁴ Audrey Smedley: *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993, p. 9.

amar”.³⁵ In other Latin-American countries, the myth of the hyper-sexualised *mulata* also gained prominence: in Brazil, a popular saying goes: “a branca pra casar, a preta pra trabalhar, a mulata pra foder”;³⁶ in Puerto Rico, Luis Pales Matos writes “Dale a la popa, mulata, / proyecta en la eternidad / ese tumbo de caderas”.³⁷ However, the *mulata* has become “the principal signifier of Cuba’s national cultural identity”, perhaps more than it did any other nation.³⁸ Guillén himself depicted the *mulata* as an emblem of sensuality in a later piece: “De aquí no te irás, mulata, / ni al mercado ni a tu casa; / aquí molerán tus ancas / la zafra de tu sudor”.³⁹

How could this word be translated into English? The words “mulatto” and “mulatta” do exist in American English, but they are offensive and do not carry the same imaginary as the Spanish term, even though they are etymologically linked to it. Moreover, beyond the word’s meaning lies its specific poetic use. The way Guillén employs this term in this poem is ingenious: he uses it to appropriate and re-signify the imaginary of the *mulata* with an element of pride. The stereotypes of the sensuality of the *mulata* are pretexts to a symbolic reversal, which is almost precursory of the “black is beautiful” slogan of the 1960s. Hughes and Carruthers make a lexical choice which allow them to displace this element of irony and empowerment in his own context. The expression “high brown” is an African American street slang word referring to a light-skinned Black woman. In the early 1940s, Zora Neale Hurston noted down this expression in her “Glossary of Harlem Slang”.⁴⁰ Guillén’s *mulata* was both the impersonation of a woman of mixed background who is contemptuous of Black people, rejecting her own African side to adopt the position of a White Cuban, and a centuries-old literary figure; she has become a working class African American woman who scorns her own people because her skin is lighter. In the United States, light-skinned African American women are sometimes portrayed as nourishing a superiority complex, or even as deceitful and superficial. This idea was already present in the oral culture of the early twentieth century. Lawrence Levine recorded the following African American folk song in 1909 Mississippi: “I wouldn’ marry a yaller girl ; / I’ll tell you the reason why : / She’s all the

³⁵ “Being a mulata is to become / a gazelle when you charm with your eyes, / and a lioness when you make love.” Francisco Muñoz del Monte: ‘La mulata’. In: Jorge Luis Morales: *Poesía afroantillana y negrista: Puerto Rico, República Dominicana, Cuba*. San Juan: La Editorial, Puerto Rico University, 1981, p. 195.

³⁶ “The White woman to marry, the Black woman to work, and the mulata to fuck.”

³⁷ “Shake your booty, mulata, / project into eternity / the jerk of these hips” (“Plena del menéalo”).

³⁸ Vera M. Kutzinski: *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1993, p. 5.

³⁹ Nicolás Guillén: Secuestro de la mujer de Antonio. In: *Summa poética*, p. 85. “You will not leave this place, mulata / to go to the market or go home; / In this place your hips will wear out / The jar of your sweat”.

⁴⁰ Zora Neale Hurston: Glossary of Harlem Slang (1942). In: *Spunk: The Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston*. Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1985, p. 94.

time sitting in another man's lap / And telling her husband lies."⁴¹ Guillén's satire is displaced and re-signified, losing its intertextual value and sensual imagery to become a sort of neighbourhood anecdote turned all-American parable. Hughes and Carruthers found local urban expressions and an imaginary that are as colourful as Guillén's, but make the poem fully African American.

Several elements were similarly adapted in order to make the most of this translational experience. For example, Hughes and Carruthers did not translate "no ere tan adelantá" literally. The word "adelantá" is a dialectical form of "adelantada", which refers to a very light-skinned person of mixed African and European descent. Guillén's *mulata* prides herself on looking almost White, and the narrator cheekily reminds her of her alienation by insisting on her African features: "tu boca é bien grande, y tu pasa, colorá".⁴² The English version's narrator just tells the young woman she is not very attractive ("you ain't no prize to wed. / Yo' mouf' is awful big"). As they transpose the poem to a Black neighbourhood in the United States, Hughes and Carruthers make it sound like its lines had been taken directly from an African American oral tradition like *playing the Dozens*, in which participants creatively tease each other in hyperbolic terms: "yo mama lips so big she can whisper in her own ear!"⁴³ Langston Hughes decided to "americanise" the Cuban poem, and in the process he "cubanised" his own writing. This creative process of cross-cultural adaptation continues in the rest of the poem:

Tanto tren con tu cueppo,	So much switchin' wid yo' hips,
tanto tren;	jes' so hot !
tanto tren con tu boca,	So much twitchin' wid yo' lips,
tanto tren;	jes' so hot !
tanto tren con tu sojo,	So much witchin' wid yo' eyes,
tanto tren ;	jes' so hot !

Si tú supiera, mulata,	If you jes' knew de truf,
la veddá;	Miss High Brown,

⁴¹ Lawrence Levine: *Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 196.

⁴² "Your mouth is very big, and you have red nappy hair".

⁴³ Onwuchekwa Jemie: *Yo' Mama! New Raps, Toasts, Dozens, Jokes and Children's Rhymes from Urban America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003, p. 217.

¡que yo con mi negra tengo,
y no te quiero pa na!

I loves my coal black gal
and don't need you hangin' round.

Here the displacement in a new cultural context is made obvious by the rewriting of the third stanza, where Hughes and Carruthers replaced the anaphora of “tanto tren” with another anaphora that ironically expresses the informal meaning of “tren” (“train”) when referring to a woman (“jes' so hot”) and, alternatively, with a series of variations absent from the Spanish version (“switchin”, “twitchin”, “witchin”) – a type of wordplay that cannot fail to bring to mind African American oral culture, especially what Geneva Smitherman calls “tonal semantics”, a way for speakers to reach their audience by using “repetition and alliterative word-play” that can take the form of “alliterative dichotomies”, as in Malcolm X’s “the ballot or the bullet”.⁴⁴

The most significant part of the translation and transposition effort emerges on a lexical level. Whereas Guillén’s poem draws from a literary tradition of Black eye-dialect that can be traced to the Spanish “Siglo de Oro” (“Golden Age”), to the baroque poetry of Luis de Góngora (1561-1627) and to the verse of 19th century Cuban satirist Creto Ganga, the African American vernacular language Hughes and Carruthers use in 1948 can be identified by the reader with the Black modernist aesthetic put forward by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, starting with Hughes himself. In other words, through their poetic dialects, they position themselves in two distinct ways in two distinct literary histories. The way Guillén’s narrator pronounces words – “corbata” (“tie”) becomes “cobbata”, “porque” (“because”) turns into “poqqe”, “tus ojos” (“your eyes”) becomes “tu sojo”, “para nada” (“for no reason”) is elided to “pa na” – is echoed by the English version’s narrator’s African American pronunciation : the word “mouth” is spelled “mouf” and “just” becomes “jes””; the final “g” is elided in the “-ing” verbal forms and a non-standard “s” is used for the first person singular. “High Brown” becomes a Langston Hughes poem, more than just a linguistic transposition of Guillén’s work: the translation effort leads to an appropriation, which sheds light on certain analogies and differences. The “untranslatable” cultural, historical, literary and anthropological elements – different racial categories, linguistic and conceptual tools, literary models – become creative challenges for the writer and his co-translator Ben Frederic

⁴⁴ See Geneva Smitherman: *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977, p. 142-143.

Carruthers: as Barbara Cassin put it, “the untranslatable is not what we cannot translate, but, on the contrary, what we never stop translating”.⁴⁵

Linguistic transposition as “Practice of the Diaspora”

The translation by Hughes and Carruthers of Guillén’s Afro-Cuban poetry provides us with a striking example of what critic Brent Edward Hayes has termed “the Practice of Diaspora”.⁴⁶ When these American intellectuals translate Guillén, they do more than just pay tribute to another intellectual who happens to be of African descent as well: they attempt to bridge their linguistic and cultural differences in order to conceive a common relationship to society, articulated by language. It is in the very tension between English and Spanish, as well as between standard and vernacular language, that the literary diaspora can be located – a movement more than an essence. Diaspora, Edwards writes, is “above all *practiced* in the multilayered and convoluted exchanges between periodicals (...) in their sometimes uneasy and sometimes misdirected attempts to carry blackness beyond the boundaries of nation and language.”⁴⁷ The literary diaspora is not a heritage, in the sense of something atavistically passed from generation to generation, but a practice; and language understood not as an abstract system closed onto itself but as a fluid means of communication and creation can be one of the major grounds for this practice. Creating a personal poetic style that is, at the same time, the transposition of a poetic style from a different national space, leads to the invention of a new, transnational, shared literary space. Translation and intertextuality allow poets of African descent from different countries to rethink their own positions as writers thanks to what Alexis Nouss has called “the revealing test of otherness”, a test that brings to light verbal resources, ideas and perspectives that were in the poet-translator’s own mind, although in a latent state.⁴⁸

The literary relationship between Hughes and Guillén is only one of many. Afro-Brazilian poet Solano Trindade creatively rewrote both of them in “Tambem sou amigo de América”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Barbara Cassin: ‘Présentation’. In: *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Paris: Le Robert, 2004, p. xvii. “par ‘intraduisibles’ il ne faut pas entendre ce que l’on ne *peut pas* traduire (...), mais, bien au contraire, ce que l’on ne *cesse pas* de traduire.”

⁴⁶ Brent Hayes Edwards: *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

⁴⁷ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice*, p. 118.

⁴⁸ Alexis Nouss: Traduction et métissage. Sixth lecture of the “L’horizon poétique de la traduction” series, Traduction & Paratraduction research group, transcript by José Yuste Frías, Vigo: University of Vigo, 2005. Cf. http://dissonancesfreudiennes.fr/Library/Textes/Actes_Grambois/Actes_Grambois_2005/Alexis_Nouss_Traduction_et_metissage.pdf. Accessed 14/2/2013.

⁴⁹ Solano Trindade: *Cantares ao meu povo*. São Paulo: Editôra Fulgor, 1961, p. 99-100.

and “Nicolás Guillén”⁵⁰ respectively, as did Barbadian author Kamau Brathwaite with “Word Making Man, poem for Nicolás Guillén in Xaymaca”,⁵¹ full of quotes from and variations on Guillén’s poetry, and “Blues”⁵² a personal revision of the hughesian blues poem.⁵³ Maybe diasporic writing itself can ultimately be characterised as an act of translation, understood - as Abdelkebir Khatibi suggested - not as a “transfer from one language to another” but as “a relation maintained between several languages, in a state of extreme tenseness”.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Solano Trindade, *Cantares*, p. 82-83.

⁵¹ Kamau Brathwaite: *Middle Passages*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1992, p. 9-14.

⁵² Kamau Brathwaite: *Black + Blues*. New York: New Directions, 1995, p. 21-23.

⁵³ The poems Brathwaite’s work bring to mind are: p. 83 (“Po’ Boy Blues”), p. 112 (“Hey!”), p. 98 (“Caribbean Sunset”) and p. 124 (“Sunset-Coney Island”). [In: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*.]

⁵⁴ Abdelkebir Khatibi: ‘Incipits’. In: Bennani et al.: *Du bilinguisme*, Paris: Denoël, 1985, p. 171-195.