

“Our America” That Is Not One: Transnational Black Atlantic Disclosures in Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes

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In the past two decades, discontent with the exclusions operative in nationalist frameworks of American and Latin American Studies has placed issues of transnationalism, hybridization, and a diasporic view of cultures at the center of attention. As a provisional academic base for this desire to think more globally, scholars have invented a new tradition, so to speak—the transnational and burgeoning field of hemispheric American Studies. Thus, the recent collection, *José Martí’s “Our America”: From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*, calls for such a change of paradigms. In their introduction, the editors single out Cuba, the birthplace of poet and revolutionary José Martí, as a fertile location for their project:

For Cuba lies at the intersection of Our America’s two principal transnational cultural formations: the geocultural system we have come to know as the Black Atlantic and the complex region of interactions among the Spanish, Native American, and English peoples (extending from the Caribbean to California) that we have come to call the Latino Borderlands. (Belnap and Fernández 11)

Cuba’s nationalism, from José Martí and Cuba’s late-19th century Wars of Independence to post-1959 formations under Castro, has always been a *mestizo* and *mulato* nationalism. One reason was that

in Cuba abolition was not a consequence, but a *condition* of independence (Sommer, *Foundational Fictions* 125): in contrast to the U.S. and most of Latin America with the exception of Puerto Rico, Cuba achieved independence only in 1898, thanks to the full participation of Afro-Cubans in the anti-colonial wars against Spain, whose investment in Cuban independence was motivated by their desire for racial justice. Indeed, Cuba's population in the modern era, "slightly over half Spanish in origin and slightly under half black or mulatto, with a small number of Chinese" (Bethell 20), suggests an encounter of the two distinct New World diasporas known as the "Black Atlantic" and Martí's Spanish-speaking "Our America"—on equal terms.

While the discourse of *mestizaje* and racial amalgamation nourishes Cuba's nationalism, and while the notion of *cubanidad* is built on the myth of racial synthesis, this symbolic reconciliation has repressed actual and continuing conflicts of race and their memory. Indeed, 20th century Cuban history, culture, and literature bear testimony to the uncanny reassertion of resistant diasporic black voices sublated into the dominant *mestizaje* nationalism. One major purpose of this essay is to examine the relationship between the Black Atlantic and José Martí's "Our America"—cultural formations intersecting in Cuba, as pointed out in the passage quoted above—as a troubled and unstable one. Whereas "Our America" stands for the homecoming of Blacks in the interracial nationalism of Martí's Latin America, the Black Atlantic stands for the continuing homelessness of Blacks in the Americas, and the memory of exile, displacement, and the violence of the Middle Passage.

In his study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy deconstructs the notion that Black traditions in diaspora can be imagined as solid "roots," suggesting instead that Blacks have a transnational and nomadic tradition he calls the Black Atlantic. According to Gilroy, it is "routes" (the diasporic memory of the rupture of the middle passage), not "roots" (the nationalist memory of a historic homeland) that matter most: "English and African-American versions of cultural studies," Gilroy writes, "share a nationalistic focus that is antithetical to the rhizomatic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation that I call the Black Atlantic" (Gilroy 4). The essence of the Black tradition in the Americas, i.e. the Black Atlantic, defies conventional identification of "tradition" with "roots," the stable and arboreal metaphor for the beginnings of nations and nationalisms.

Gilroy's thesis posits a new and thought-provoking relationship between modernity and tradition. Rather than imagining a rupture between the old and the new, a duality between past roots and their

modern break-up and loss, as is conventionally suggested, Gilroy argues that, as far as diasporic Black culture (in the Americas as well as Europe) is concerned, the traumatic rupture is embodied by tradition itself. Slavery and the middle passage “have constituted the black Atlantic as a non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the manichean logic of binary coding” (198). Gilroy’s theory of the Black Atlantic is thoroughly anti-romantic and anti-nostalgic: the modern quest for origins cannot retrieve a lost authenticity and purity, but will only mirror the same displacement that initially prompted the black modern self’s search for his/her roots. The Black journey toward the source leads from illusion to disillusionment, as it does not come to rest in the retrieval of a pre-lapsarian golden age, but yields only images of earlier journeys and former exiles that remind the modern black self of her/his own present journey towards identity. The result is a self-reflexive awakening to a pervasive state of rootlessness and diaspora, conflicting and coexisting with the (equally persistent) desire for arrival and homecoming. According to Gilroy, the Black Atlantic world of diasporic exile is symbolized in black expression by a persistent imagery of sea and ships, of distances measured between unidentified places of destination and departure that leave the central subject lost, adrift in space and time; “I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean . . . ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland” (Gilroy 4).

Taking as my examples transnational links between Cuba’s Nicolás Guillén and the North American Langston Hughes, the task of this essay is to re-examine the black experience in the Americas as reflected in black expression.¹ Conventionally imagined as a path from “slave ship to citizenship,” the black experience is conceived as a linear journey of progress from exile to emancipation and (the hope for) full citizenship. This conventional model underlies many critical accounts of African American cultural expression, such as LeRoi Jones’ *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, even if their subject is the *permanence* of the black voice of exile in contemporary African American culture, thus contradicting the “black progress” model, as in LeRoi Jones who writes, “the Negro as slave is one thing. The Negro as American is quite another. But the *path* the slave took to ‘citizenship’ is what I want to look at” (Jones ix). In the introduction to his classic study of black music, LeRoi Jones posits a dichotomy between the past—slavery and its expressive forms (i.e. the spirituals and the blues)—and the present

that is undermined by his own examination of the permanence of past (the black voice of exile) in contemporary black expression. Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic reconceptualizes the results of Jones' research, which are at odds with the linear narrative of the black journey "from slavery to citizenship" (even if 'citizenship' appears in quotation marks). With Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, we have a working hypothesis that allows us to reconceptualize the unresolved dynamic between black homelessness and homecoming in the Americas in a new, and I would argue, more plausible way. Rather than clinging to the narrative of progress (from slave ship to citizenship), Gilroy's thesis suggests a non-linear, contrapuntal model of the black experience in the Americas.

Eschewing both nostalgia and redemption through progress, the black experience in the Americas can be modeled as a pendulum, swinging back and forth irregularly between opposite poles of homelessness and homecoming in the nations of the Americas. Rather than identifying successive and separate states of past and present, the black voice of exile and the black affirmation of inclusion represent alternating pulses. The transnational, utopian affirmation of black citizenship in the Americas—celebrated in Guillén's Cuban *poema-son* and Hughes' American blues poetry, especially in Hughes's title theme, "I, too, sing America"—represents only one side of a pendulum: its upswing to progress, inclusion, *mestizaje*, inter-racial brotherhood, the utopian hope of national reconciliation, the end of the Middle Passage and the legacy of slavery. Its counterpoint, periodic downswings of the pendulum, reveals the actual instability of black citizenship in the Americas. As we shall see in the following discussion, contrapuntal downswings disclose the permanence of the legacy of slavery by evoking the marine imagery of black exile (ships, sea) identified by Gilroy with the Black Atlantic. Temporarily dissolving the solidity of Martí's syncretic figure of "Our America," the downswing of the pendulum reveals an "Our America" That Is Not One (to apply racially the gender concept from Luce Irigaray's theory of multiplicity and difference that focuses on writing and thinking sexual difference, often by engaging the monologic discourse of Western European philosophers and teasing out a repressed dialogic engagement with the feminine Other upon which that tradition is erected).

In the following discussion of connections between Guillén and Hughes, I will trace oscillations between these two counterpoints, the *mestizo* / *mulato* synthesis and the troubling return of the repressed memory of exile. Afro-Cubans, like African-Americans, vacillate between a utopian desire for "homecoming" in the discourse

and social practice of New World nationalism and an alternative re-membering of their displacement in the Middle Passage, an exile that the exclusions of contemporary racism perpetuate.

Gilroy's thesis about an unhomely, nomadic Black tradition recalling the trauma of violent displacement directs our attention to an unknown presence, a transnational x-factor in Black expression in the Americas. This textual unknown would exceed what José Piedra calls the limits of intelligibility of Western literate logic for two reasons: first, because the violence inflicted defies expression in language, and second, because the Black voice speaking/writing in one of the European languages adopted as New World nation-languages articulates Caliban's curse, so to speak, against and through Prospero's very language that s/he has been taught to use. Suddenly, what was lost in translation returns to become audible and visible, and yet remains tantalizingly irresolvable within the logic of Western communication.

As a case in point, through the poetry of Guillén and Hughes, the suppressed voice of Caliban, the desires, memories, themes, settings of colonized blacks erupt into the elite discourse of North American and Cuban literature. In both poets, this "re-discovery" of the black vernacular represents an anti-colonial strategy in Cuban and American literature. Both Hughes and Guillén break with the mimicry of white poetic forms and traditions. As José Piedra argues in his comparative discussion of African American blues poetry and the Afro-Cuban *son* poetry, "drum poetry" is black poetry inspired by the rhythms and forms of black vernacular speech and music. Like jazz and blues, the Afro-Cuban *son* is African-based music; "son" means "sound," "sones"—"sounds" is how the popular Afro-Cuban dance songs were called, but "son" also has a double meaning referring to identity ("son"—"they are") so that, as Piedra notes, the *son* is also a black "song of self . . . roughly translatable as 'the they are' or 'he they are,' . . . No wonder Argeliers León rebaptized *el son* as *lo son*, the grammatically neutral form of being—an emphatic form of 'they are' which is grammatically applicable to all and/or to none" (113). The percussive rhythms of black significations erupt in the English and Spanish language in the poetry of the North American Langston Hughes and Cuba's Nicolás Guillén. Hughes' and Guillén's work parallel each other in many ways: both were born in 1902, and both, in Harlem and Havana respectively, pioneered black modernist expression in poetry in the 20s and 30s, when black arts were in vogue at the height of the Harlem Renaissance and the Afro-Antillean movement.² Both translated the voices of their people, the vernacular speech and music of the black (under) world, into poetry.

The encounter between Hughes and Guillén and their life-long friendship thus seems as inevitable as it is natural. Here, I need only outline their relationship in broad strokes, as it has already been written about extensively: Hughes and Guillén met twice in Cuba, in 1930 and 1931 (they would meet a third time in Spain in during the Spanish Civil War, and again in New York in 1949). Their first encounter in March of 1930 was the most momentous event: Hughes, already a celebrity since his 1926 publication of *The Weary Blues*, was avidly interested in learning about and listening to performances of Afro-Cuban dance and music. Hughes' new acquaintance Guillén acted as the Harlemiter's tour guide through the music halls of black Havana. According to Hughes' biographer, Arnold Rampersad, Hughes "had one crucial recommendation for Guillén—that he should make the rhythms of the Afro-Cuban *son*, the authentic music of the black masses, central to his poetry, as Hughes himself had done with blues and jazz. This idea startled Guillén" (Rampersad, vol.1: 179). Rampersad's ends his account of the first Hughes-Guillén encounter establishing Hughes as Guillén's teacher.³ Whether or not Guillén's debt to Hughes is as large as Rampersad claims, one month after Hughes' visit, Guillén made his literary breakthrough with "*Motivos de son*" ("*Son Motifs*"), eight poems written in the vernacular of the Afro-Cuban underworld of Havana. In his own occasional prose and autobiographical accounts, Guillén does not acknowledge such a direct influence. On the contrary, in his autobiography, *Páginas vueltas*, he recalls how his *son*-poems were generated through a dream that suggested the rhythmic repetition of a phrase, "negro bembón," a phrase that would become the refrain (*estribillo*) and title of the first of the eight *son*-poems he famously wrote the very next day. Neither in his interview with Hughes in 1930, "Conversación con Langston Hughes," (*Prosa de prisa*, vol. 1: 16–19), nor his commemoration of Hughes after Hughes' death in 1967, "Recuerdo de Langston Hughes," (*Prosa de prisa*, vol. 3: 314–16), nor in his autobiography (*Páginas vueltas*) does Guillén mention such a direct influence by Hughes. Indeed, in *Páginas vueltas*, Guillén offers an alternate account of the genesis of "*Motivos de son*" in which he remembers that crucial words rose up in his consciousness in a dream. (Given the enormous affinities between Guillén and Hughes, I do not think that the controversy that has developed between Guillén and Hughes scholars over the "Hughes prompt" theory matters all that much. Clearly, Guillén's work took shape nourished by Afro-Cuban vernacular arts and by Guillén's expert knowledge of it, and Guillén's and Hughes' achievements seem greatest when seen as complementary rather than a race between rivals over "having been there first.")

Formally, the “*Motivos de son*” resemble *son* lyrics,⁴ and Guillén’s *sones* were indeed themselves immediately set to music by Cuban composers.⁵ Written as dramatic monologues narrating brief everyday events, their topics—troubles of daily life, color hierarchies among blacks, poverty, lovers’ quarrels, overt sensuality, and prostitution—displeased vocal sections of the Afro-Cuban middle class.

Guillén and Hughes kept up an ongoing exchange about their work. In 1948, a U.S. press published poems by Guillén (mainly selected from *Motivos de son*, *Sóngoro cosongo*, *West Indies, Ltd.*, but also the later collections *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas* and *España*), translated for an American readership by Hughes and Frederic Carruthers. The collection was entitled *Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén*. Since translations are always implicit transculturations, we should pay close attention to the way Hughes has brought Guillén’s Afro-Cuban poems across the border to a U.S. and African American public. Rather than following a chronological order, Hughes and his collaborator rearranged the poems into eight sections entitled (in this sequence), “Cuban Blues,” “Habaneros,” “West Indies,” “Songs for Soldiers,” “Here we are!,” “Federico,” “Mulatto Poems,” and “Propositions.” What meets the eye first is the coinage “Cuban Blues,” a signal term suggesting to the U.S. reader parallels between a well known African American musical form, the blues, and an unknown Cuban counterpart, which, as the reader familiar with Guillén’s work quickly learns, turns out to be the *son*. The first section, “Cuban Blues,” contains translation of nine poems, including all six of the collection’s translations from the 1930 sequence “*Motivos de son*.” As an example, I’ll discuss “Negro Bembón” (“Thick-Lipped Cullud Boy”), since this is the poem containing the nuclear chant of Guillén’s oneiric inspiration:

“Negro Bembón”

¿Po qué te pone tan brabo,
cuando te disen negro bembón,
si tiene la boca santa,
negro bembón?

Bembón así como ere
tiene de to;
Caridá te mantiene,
te lo da to.

Te queja todavía,
 negro bembón;
 sin pega y con harina,
 negro bembón,
 majagua de dri blanco,
 negro bembón;
 sapato de do tono,
 negro bembón . . .

Bembón así como ere,
 tiene de to;
 Caridá te mantiene,
 te lo da to.

(from "Motivos de son," *Obra poética* 91)

"Thick-Lipped Cullud Boy"

How come you jumps salty
 when they calls you thick-lipped boy,
 if yo' mouf's so sweet,
 thick-lipped cullud boy?

Thick-lipped as you is
 you got everything.
 Charity's payin' yo' keep.
 She's givin' you all you need.

Still you go around beefin',
 thick-lipped cullud boy.
 No work an' plenty money,
 thick-lipped cullud boy.
 White suit jes' spotless,
 thick-lipped cullud boy.
 Shoes two shades o' honey,
 thick-lipped cullud boy.

Thick-lipped as you is
 you got everything.
 Charity's payin' yo' keep,
 she's givin' all you want.

(Trans. Hughes and Carruthers in *Cuba Libre* 5)

The theme of the poem is the colonized mind, blacks' internalization of white-defined color hierarchy, rendered in terms of a racial stereotype: the "negro bembón" ("thick-lipped colored boy") who hates his black features. The speaker of the poem (or the principal voice of the *son*), identifiable as another Afro-Cuban by her speech in the idiom of the black urban underclass, is likely the boy's lover who is paying his keep. Affirming the Negro's black features, the female principal voice tells him to stop complaining and take more notice of his actual comfort paid for by "charity," i.e. herself, which is giving him "everything" he may ever need or want. This poem is representative of the *Motivos* cycle—written in black vernacular speech, which Langston Hughes translates faithfully into American black dialect—it also mimics the musical call-and-response pattern of interchanges between lead vocals and chorus in the *son*: the refrains "tiene de to" ("has everything"), in the second and fourth stanzas, and "Negro Bembón" ("thick-lipped colored boy") in the third and first add up to an compound chant that transcends the poem: the phrase "Negro Bembón tiene de todo" ("the thick-lipped colored boy has everything"). This refrain echoing the woman's speech amounts to the x-factor discussed by José Piedra in his essay, "Through Blues"—black sounds and signifiers function as counterpoints within the sequential narrative of the poem. In "Negro Bembón," it is an intelligible message of a simple affirmation of blackness: "Be yourself." (In other poems, such as "Sensemayá: Canto para matar una culebra" ["Sensemayá: Song for Killing a Snake"] [from *Sóngoro cosongo, Obra poética* 131–32] the *son*-refrain can also take the form of so called *jitanjáfora*, purely rhythmic sound-phrases mimicking Africanisms and drum-language without any direct meaning in Spanish. The refrain-chant in "Sensemayá" ["¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!"] is a more extreme example of José Piedra's x-factor where the black voice of Caliban, or the voice of the bongo drum, erupts within the dominant European language of Afro-Cuban poetry. Guillén's famous poem "Sensemayá" is a translation/transculturation into Cuban poetry of an Afro-Cuban ritual chant for killing a snake.)

Let me return to Langston Hughes' coinage "Cuban Blues," for it is a suggestive term. In Cuba and Guillén's poetry, there is no such thing as "Cuban Blues." Yet Hughes' composite fiction of the *son*-blues clearly exists, if only in translation. The textual space of translation in *Cuba Libre* gives birth to a synthetic lingua franca in a transnational encounter whose "sounds" are both those of Guillén's original *poema-son* and Hughes "blues" translation. The space of translation is therefore, as I would like to argue, one of the sites of intersection between the two transnational formations discussed in

this essay: the Black Atlantic and José Martí's *mestizo* "Our America." The crucial point here is that these trans-national connections are forged and articulated by Afro-Cubans and African Americans themselves, not on their behalf—in an alternative and transnational black public sphere that circumvents mainstream media of communication and yet nevertheless allies itself with Cuba's dominant national myths of racial amalgamation and anti-imperialism, by claiming them in a black voice.

With *Sóngoro cosongo* and *West Indies, Ltd.*, Guillén continued his exploration of Afro-Cuban themes, speech, and music. Robert Chrisman remarks that had "Guillén's career ended with *Motivos de Son*, he would have been designated a Negrismo poet" (Chrisman, "Nicolás Guillén, Langston Hughes" 812). Yet marked shifts in emphasis occurred: while "*Motivos de son*" are strictly black (*negrista*) poetry, its settings and idiom confined to Havana's black subculture and excluding the social life of white Cubans, *Sóngoro cosongo* widens the scope from the black urban underworld to Cuba as a nation. In the prologue, he introduces his new poems as "*unos versos mulatos*" ("mulatto poems") (*Obra poética* 102). (*Sóngoro cosongo* also contains older and previously unpublished poems, such as "Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano" [*Obra Poética* 106] ["Small Ode to a Black Cuban Boxer," *Man-making Words* 53–55] that Guillén had composed in 1929 as a poem about the famous Cuban boxer, Kid Chocolate.) The voice of the Afro-Cuban bongo drum, speaker of the hybrid phrase, "*sóngoro cosongo*," a chant intermixing African and Spanish elements to the extent that they are inseparable (this inseparability precisely being Guillén's point), appears in "*Motivos de son*" before it becomes the title of the second volume, *Sóngoro cosongo*. In the first volume, "*sóngoro cosongo*" is the refrain (*estribillo*) of the *son*-poem "Si tu supiera," where it follows the principal voice and narrative (a monologue of a spurned lover who watches his former woman pass by on her way to her new mate, without being recognized by her, and who jealously muses that she will abandon her new lover the way she abandoned him when he ran out of money). This chant, formerly seconding (as the chorus-refrain of the *son* script) the principal voice of the *son*-poem in question, an individual, black, male voice (the spurned black lover's song of desire and loss) is now promoted to a national, Cuban voice in Guillén's second volume of poetry. Still black, the hybrid sounds of the bongo drum now urge the case for a mulatto Cuba, claiming the rightful share of Afro-Cubans in Cuba's mixed-race nation. Guillén often repeats his call for a cross-racial nationalism in Cuba, such as in "Palabras en el trópico" ("Words in the Tropics"): "y Cuba ya

sabe que es mulata!” (“and Cuba now knows she’s mulatto”) (*Man-making Words* 140–41).

While subtle, this shift is nevertheless momentous. It signifies the Cuban Guillén’s rejection of the “road to Harlem,” and what Harlem represents to Guillén—the U.S. model of race segregation that created Harlem, both its achievements in the black arts and its social misery, conditions Guillén’s American friend Langston Hughes and African American writers in general had to live with. Early on, in a 1929 essay entitled “El Camino de Harlem,” (“The Road to Harlem”), Guillén had warned Cubans against going down this road leading to “black ghettos” and a society divided by race. Guillén criticizes the increase of segregation in public spaces in Cuba. His critique is targeted not only at whites-only spaces like beaches, but also includes warnings against blacks-only institutions established in response to white exclusion. Guillén’s position is that both blacks and whites have the duty to create and participate in a common Cuban society. Mutual exclusion takes Cubans on the “road to Harlem”: “Ése será el día en que cada población cubana—a todo se llega—tenga su ‘barrio negro,’ como en nuestros vecinos del Norte. Y ése es el camino que todos, tanto los que son del color de Martí como los que tenemos la misma piel que Maceo, debemos evitar. Ése, es el camino de Harlem” (*Prosa de prisa*, vol. 1: 6). (“This will be the day when each Cuban village—we know everything is possible—will have its own ‘black barrio,’ as with our neighbors to the North. And this is the road which we all have to avoid, both those who are the color of Martí and those who have the same skin color as Maceo. This is the road to Harlem.”) It is important that we recognize the limits the parallel between Harlem and Havana certainly had for Guillén: Harlem is the “unofficial capital” of black America, a black city within a white country, but Havana is the capital of mulatto Cuba, the mulatto capital of a mixed-race nation. If Guillén’s intention in “*Motivos de son*” was to lift the repression of black life and arts in Cuba’s society (and to decolonize Cuban literature), the creation of an Afro-Cuban poetry along the lines of African American literature was not his final goal. In fact, to segregate Cuban culture by race would be near impossible according to Guillén. Echoing José Martí’s famous phrase that “Cubans are more than whites, mulattos or Negroes,” (Martí, *Martí Reader* 160–162). Guillén writes in his prologue to *Sóngoro cosongo*:

La inyección africana en esta tierra es tan profunda, y se cruzan y entrecruzan en nuestra bien regada hidrografía social tantas corrientes capilares, que sería trabajo de miniaturista desenredar el jeroglífico.

Opino por tanto que una poesía criolla entre nosotros no lo será de un modo cabal con olvido del negro. El negro—a mi juicio—aporta esencias muy firmes a nuestro coctel. Y las dos razas que en la Isla salen a flor de agua, distantes en lo que se ve, se tienden un garfio submarino, como esos puentes hondos que unen en secreto dos continentes. 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. (*Obra poética* 102)

(“The African injection in this country is so profound, and so many bloodlines crisscross in our well irrigated social hydrography, that one would have to be a miniaturist to disentangle that hieroglyph.

I further believe that a creole poetry here would not be complete if one forgot Negroes. In my judgment, the Negro brings very strong ingredients to our cocktail. And the two races which on the island come out as flowers from water, when seen from a distance, they spread out in an underwater link, like those deep bridges which secretly unite two continents. For the time being, Cuba’s soul is mestizo. And from the soul—not the skin—will we derive our definitive color. Some day it will be called “Cuban color.”)

Sóngoro cosongo thus undermines important political implications of the synthetic fiction of a “Cuban blues” created by Hughes’ translations of Guillén’s poetry in *Cuba Libre*. Guillén’s *son* and his Afro-Cuban arts claim no separate sphere in Cuban letters for blacks. Rather (rejecting the “road to Harlem”), Guillén’s poetry, culled from Havana’s black urban subculture, seeks entry into the walled precinct of Cuba’s lettered urban culture. Literacy is enfranchisement—Guillén’s poetry seeks the inclusion of marginalized sections of the real city of Havana into the elite realm of what Angel Rama has called “*la ciudad letrada*” (“The Lettered City”). Rama’s study, *The Lettered City* (1996, published in Spanish in 1984) is a history of Latin American culture as the product of a “lettered class” of elite intellectuals whose power derives from writing, urbanism, and the state. *The Lettered City* depicts the hierarchy between the planned order embodied by the colonial cities of New Spain and the surrounding hinterlands they colonized and exploited, and the slow de-colonization of this relationship after independence. Rama’s study explains the Latin American background to Guillén’s urban brand of post-colonial textuality as it demands the recognition of Afro-Cuban writing as “official,” public Cuban literature.

Sóngoro cosongo begins with two “mulatto” poems that put the prologue’s theory of Cuba’s multiculturalism and mulatto poetry into practice. The first, “Llegada,” (“Arrival”) (*Obra poética* 103–04) celebrates the presence of Africans in Cuba as a positive force and an indispensable component in the making of a mestizo America: “Traemos / nuestro rasgo al perfil definitivo de América” (*Obra*

poética 103) (“We contribute our features to the definitive profile of América”). The second poem, “La canción del bongó” (“Song of the Bongo Drum”), proclaims the Afro-Cuban bongo drum as a melting pot that draws the Cuban people together, both whites and blacks. Indeed, here the bongo drum itself speaks, with a voice of authority that is used to commanding obedience from all Cubans, regardless of race or class:

Ésta es la canción del bongó:
 –Aquí el que más fino sea,
 responde, si llamo yo.
 Unos dicen: Ahora mismo,
 otros dicen: Allá voy.
 Pero mi repique bronco,
 pero mi profunda voz,
 convoca al negro y al blanco,
 que bailen el mismo son,
 cueripardos y almprietos
 más de sangre que de sol,
 pues quien por fuera no es noche,
 por dentro ya oscureció.
 Aquí el que más fino sea,
 responde, si llamo yo.
 (*Obra poética* 104)

This is the song of the *bongó*:
 Here even blueblood
 answers if I call.
 Some answer, “Right now!”
 Others say, “On my way!”
 But my hoarse rejoinder,
 deep bass voice,
 calls both black and white
 to dance the same *son*.
 Brown of skin or brown of soul
 more from blood than sun,
 those who are not night outside
 get darker deep within.
 Here even blueblood
 answers if I call.

(trans. Hughes and Carruthers, *Cuba Libre* 81)

Notice the change from “*Motivos de son*”: in *Sóngoro cosongo*, both black and white follow the call to dance the *son*—now, the *son* is

portrayed a cross-racial Cuban arts form, a performance that forges the mulatto nation in its melting pot: those dancers who do have not dark skin become darker “inside.” The drum, formerly forbidden on Cuban plantations by masters haunted by fears of slave uprisings and memories of the Haitian revolution, is recognized as an institution catalyzing the “making of Cubans” out of the descendants of slaves and slave masters. Guillén’s second collection, and especially this poem and the prologue, contain the key components of Cuba’s nationalist myth of *mestizaje* that are still invoked today in the writings of Cuban theorists such as Gustavo Pérez Firmat or Antonio Benítez-Rojo: music and dance as scripts of transculturation (as in the figure of the bongo-playing Desi Arnaz), the Cuban “stew” or “cocktail” (*ajiaco*), and a rich metaphorical language of cultural crossings.⁶

How does Hughes’ and Carruthers’ American translation in *Cuba Libre* handle Guillén’s shift of emphasis from a *negrista* to cross-racial mulatto aesthetic? Guillén scholars agree that Guillén, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo puts it, “desired a Cuba that was ‘*mulata*’; that is, a form of nationality that would resolve the deep racial and cultural conflicts by means of a reduction or synthesis that flowed from the proposal of a creole myth” (Benítez-Rojo 126).⁷ As noted above, *Cuba Libre* creates a separate rubric entitled “Mulatto Poems,” which contains five poems (including “Song of the Bongó”) which present both sides of the coin: the utopian myth of a racially amalgamated Cuba as well as versions of the tragic mulatto complex, poems about Cubans’ repression and denial of “miscegenation” (such as “The Grandfather” [*Cuba Libre* 83]). However, other poems invoking the triumphant homecoming of blacks in the syncretic culture of the New World (such as “Llegada” [“Arrival”] and “Words in the Tropics” [“Palabras en el trópico”]) are found in a separate section entitled “Here we are!” In other words, Hughes and Carruthers did not create a section that would showcase the racial amalgamation in Cuban culture in contrast to U.S. Jim Crowism—a section named, say, “Cuban *mestizaje*,” “Cuba: Crossing the Color Line,” or possibly “I, too, sing Cuba” (echoing Hughes’ own syncretic mulatto poem in the Guillén spirit, “I, too, sing America”). This is despite the fact that Hughes personally sympathized deeply with the integrationist approach to the race problem, and was very uncomfortable with the separatist politics of the Black Arts movement of the 60s (Rampersad 411).

Instead, the translators chose to organize the collection according to concepts applicable in the geopolitical climate of “Harlem” (rather than that of “Havana”): the blues, the mulatto, the establishment of the black arts in general. Clearly, the achievements of

Cuba Libre (building a transnational bridge between Afro-Cuban and African American literature via alternative media, that is, a book published by a small press, a limited edition of 500 copies) are substantial: the recognition of common forms of black popular culture (the *son* and the blues) and vernacular black poetry as an anti-colonial strategy. On the other hand, *Cuba Libre* mutes the unique circumstances of Cuba that allow a black writer like Guillén to blend black expression into the universal voice of the nation.

The revolutionary eruption of black voices in literature in the 1920s and 30s we just discussed with respect to Guillén and correspondences between his *son*-poems and blues poetry needs to be historicized, as it has been, as a phenomenon that occurred within a complex international confluence of many intellectual currents. Some of these were problematic, as Guillén was well aware, such as the primitivist vogue and Negrophilia in Euro-American modernism that motivated white interest in African expression. In his poem “Pequeña oda a un negro boxeador cubano” (“Small Ode to a Black Cuban Boxer”), Guillén portrays a black Cuban boxer in New York in a Martíán setting of a Cuban in U.S. exile, held hostage in “the belly of the monster.” The Cuban boxer’s commercial success in New York is seen as deriving in part from the Anglo American vogue for blackness and Harlem, yet the poem asserts the value of the black boxer’s success despite and above its clearly understood conditions—white exoticism. Thus, the poem concludes, “So now that Europe strips itself / to brown its hide beneath the sun / and seeks in Harlem and Havana / jazz and *son*: / the Negro reigns while boulevards applaud! / Let the envy of the whites / know proud, authentic black!” (*Man-making Words* 55). Guillén insists that the Cuban conditions under which the black arts flourished on the island (while coinciding with the European “re-discovery” of African arts in the 20s and 30s) were the local and authentic contributions of African culture to Cuba’s national culture. Afro-Cuban arts, thus, are not to be confused with superficial and passing “fashions” elsewhere (*Prosa de prisa*, vol. 1: 100). Further, considerable differences of national context remain that divide Hughes’ and Guillén’s transnational alliance: the Afro-Antillean movement of the 20s and 30s among whose well known members Guillén’s name is generally mentioned, alongside with Puerto Rico’s Luis Palés Matos and Cuba’s Alejo Carpentier, was a primarily “white” group, Guillén being the only “black” member (Kutzinski, “Re-Reading Nicolás Guillén” 164–65). The Antillean practice of *poesía negra*, or *poesía mulata*, as Vera Kutzinski points out, is not the same as “black” or “mulatto poetry.” The Spanish term says nothing about the race of the author—it refers to poetry

about blacks, or poetry that celebrates black culture as a topic (Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets* 9, 155, and 203–04 n21). The flowering of black expression in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, in contrast, (recall Guillén's careful distinctions between race categories in "Harlem" and "Havana") was a self-representation by black artists of black people in the modern world. While its condition was white patronage and a broad white American audience, white Americans read "Negro American" literature of the 20s as expressions of the racial Other, rather than as figures of a national cross-racial synthetic American Self.

The unique conditions for the cross-racial appeal of Afro-Cubanism for Cuba's civic religion, as Vera Kutzinski argues in *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*, lay in the nationalist desire to formulate indigenous cultural alternatives to Cuba's growing economic and cultural domination by the U.S. "Afro-Cubanism was an attempt at making poetry a stage for nationalist discourse, . . . by tapping specific cultural institutions with a long history of resilience: the syncretic forms of Afro-Cuban popular music and dance became the new signifiers of a desire for cultural and political independence" (*Sugar's Secrets* 154). In Cuba, black themes and styles thus became part of Cuba's nationalist discourse, or Cuban nationalism became highly invested in multiculturalism, to a very large part because throughout the history of the Cuban republic, Cuban independence was besieged by the U.S., which Martí dubbed "the colossus to the North." In other words, Cuba's discourse of power became wedded to opposing discourses of resistance because of the threat of foreign intrusion. This remained the case under Fidel Castro, needless to say. Thus Roberto Fernández Retamar's influential 1971 manifesto "Caliban: NOTES Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America" reinforces the Martíán anti-imperial thesis of geopolitical conflict between "Our (mestizo) America" and the Yankee "Other America." Black and white Cubans embrace each other as brothers in their national struggle against North American neo-colonialism.

As noted at the outset, my deeper motive in revisiting the transnational handshake between Guillén and Hughes is to argue that the black journey in the Americas does not take the form of "linear" progress "from slave ship to citizenship," but that, following Gilroy, the non-traditional tradition of the Black Atlantic destabilizes these national dynamics. A more convincing pattern is rhythmic alternations between opposite experiences of exile and homecoming. Thus, Hughes and Guillén's transnational, utopian affirmation of black progress from slavery to citizenship in blues and *son* poetry, as well as in the transnational compound, "Cuban Blues,"

represents only the pendulum's periodic upswings to black homecoming in New World nationalisms. The downswings, in contrast, expose the actual instability of such celebrations of black satisfaction and arrival. Periodic breakdowns reveal the hopeful cross-cultural synthesis as little more like a brave gesture of "whistling in the dark" facing cyclical backlash of racism and exclusions.

This bleak resurfacing of black homelessness in the Americas is most apparent in the parting of ways between Hughes and Guillén in their later careers after the decline of the Harlem Renaissance and the Afro-Cuban movement. But preceding these movements, another such moment of backlash happened in the "Guerrita de 1912" ("Little War of 1912"), when "between three thousand and four thousand Afro-Cubans . . . were massacred by the army and zealous volunteers" (Helg, "Race in Argentina and Cuba, 1880–1930" 55) in the province of Oriente, the cradle of all of Cuba's revolutionary and independence movements. As mentioned earlier, white creole Cubans and Afro-Cubans had fought side by side in the struggle against Spain, and José Martí, the leader of the independence movement, was a militant anti-racist. Nevertheless, racial tensions exploded only a decade after Independence in 1902. Historian Aline Helg has depicted the history of the racial conflict leading up to 1912 in *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1919*. For one, the American occupation of Cuba between 1899 and 1902 reinforced segregation and imposed immigration laws that restricted Chinese and black immigration. For another, though, after Independence, despite universal suffrage and equality regardless of race, sex, and religion, the white Creole elite excluded blacks and mulattos from higher army and government offices and tried to cut channels of social mobility for non-whites. As a result, writes Helg, "after independence, Afro-Cuban intellectuals faced the difficult task of destroying the image of the uncivilized black and claiming their rightful share in the new society" (Helg, *ibid.* 54). In 1908, they formed an Afro-Cuban party, the Partido Independiente de Color. From then on, things escalated quickly: first, the Independentists were accused of racism, "on grounds that they were mobilizing blacks against whites"; two years later, in 1910, a law was passed that "prohibited political parties representing one particular race," upon which the Partido Independiente de Color was outlawed (Helg, *ibid.* 55). Their leaders, jailed and later released, campaigned unsuccessfully against the law, and then, in May 1912, organized an armed rebellion. The government repression ended in a massacre, which stifled mass political organization by Afro-Cubans. José Martí's prophecy in his 1893 essay, "Mi Raza" ("My Race") had been proven false: Martí wrote,

In Cuba, there is no fear of a racial war. Men are more than whites, mulattos or Negroes. Cubans are more than whites, mulattos or Negroes. On the field of battle, dying for Cuba, the souls of whites and Negroes have risen together into the air. In the daily life of defense, loyalty, brotherhood and shrewdness, Negroes have always been there, alongside whites. (Martí *Reader* 161)

From this brief excursion to the events of 1912, let me jump ahead to the post-Castro period. Nicolás Guillén, Cuba's poet laureate under Castro, writes of satisfaction and arrival in a Communist state which has established the Cuban foundational myth of interracial brotherhood by absorbing it into the doctrine of a third-world proletarian revolution. It is usually argued that Guillén abandons his minority concerns with Afro-Cuban forms and themes of the pre-revolutionary period and dedicates his poetry to universal Cuban themes. As Antonio Benítez-Rojo puts it, "with the triumph of the revolution in 1959, Guillén's poetry enters a new period; that is, he abandons the discourse of resistance . . . and places himself within the discourse of power" (Benítez-Rojo, *ibid.* 132). The reasoning behind this shift is that, under Castro, the black "Sons of Caliban" receive official recognition as Cuban citizens, by a Communist regime that legitimates itself by pronouncing the former slaves masters of their island.

The title poem of Guillén's 1964 collection *Tengo* ("I Have") thus celebrates the achievement of desire: Its concluding lines reflect contentment, "Tengo, vamos a ver, / tengo lo que tenía que tener" ("I have, let's see, / I have what I had to have.") (Ellis, "Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes" 158).⁸ Another poem in the same collection, titled and beginning, "Vine en un barco negrero. Me trajeron." ("I came in a slave ship. They brought me.") (Ellis, *ibid.* 158 or *Man-Making Words* 184–87) remembers the Middle Passage to trace a linear journey of Afro-Cubans from the slave ship to their triumphal homecoming in the Cuban nation. The poem follows a narrative of black progress, traced through Afro-Cuban heroes such as Antonio Maceo, the black general of the Cuban revolutionary army against Spain. It ends with the ex-slave and black speaker affirming Cuba's national myth of racial equality:

¡Oh Cuba! Mi voz entrego.
En ti creo.
Mía la tierra que beso.
Mío el cielo.
Libre estoy, vine de lejos.
Soy un negro.

Oh Cuba! I give you my voice.
 I believe in you.
 The land I kiss is mine.
 Mine the sky.
 I am free, I came from far off.
 I am a Black man.

(trans. Márquez and McMurray, *Man-Making Words*
 186–87)

Guillén's poem is a powerful rendering of the idea of the Black diaspora, as Paul Gilroy quips, as a journey from slave ship to citizenship. If there is one single poem that dispels the legacy of violence unleashed by the plantation, and pacifies the troubling ghosts of the slavery past through the synthesis of the black voice with the voice of New World nationalism—this is it. Its message of national reconciliation is so powerful and authentic because it is an Afro-Cuban himself who has given it his voice and signature.

Yet, some of Guillén's later poems, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo demonstrates in his study, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, show that Guillén's former Calibanesque voice of resistance returns when he rejects the Communist doctrine of the "New Man" (in "Digo que yo no soy un hombre puro" ["I tell you that I'm not a pure man"]). In this poem, writes Benítez-Rojo, Guillén reassumes the rebellious voice of Caliban who rejects the paternalistic indoctrination of the "White Father." Guillén's speaker flaunts his noncompliance by returning to the language of pleasure and desire dominant in his son-poems: "and I like to eat pork with potatoes . . . / I'm impure, what do you want me to say? / completely impure. / Nevertheless, / I think that there are many pure things in the world / that are no more than pure shit" (Benítez-Rojo, *ibid.* 139–40 [For the full Spanish original and English translation, see *¡Patria o Muerte!*, trans. Márquez, 210–13]).

In contrast, Hughes' poetic career ends on a negative note in an America that, unlike Guillén's Cuba, never became officially his: a nation officially segregated until the 50s where the idea of interracial amalgamation was never part of the nationalist discourse. As Keith Ellis points out, Hughes' last poem before his death in 1967 sounds the theme of homelessness, Hughes having been denied the satisfaction given to Guillén (Ellis, *ibid.* 156). Ellis explains that his "last poem, 'Flotsam' . . . is also a weary blues, the poet's homeland not affording him the anchor he desperately sought over four decades of his writing" (Ellis, *Ibid.* 156). While this is certainly true, the leads from Gilroy enable us to go a step further and recognize in the very title, "Flotsam," marine imagery signaling

the Black Atlantic. In “Flotsam,” Hughes resumes the voice of black exile, returning to the scene of the Black Atlantic where nomadic blacks are countryless outcasts, adrift and lost in a void:

On the shoals of Nowhere,
Cast up—my boat,
Bow all broken,
No longer afloat.

On the shoals of Nowhere,
Wasted—my song—
Yet taken by the sea wind
And blown along.⁹

“Flotsam” echoes another of Hughes’ poems written in the 40s, “Border Line,” where all the elements of Hughes nomadic poetic thought are present:

I used to wonder
About living and dying—
I think the difference lies
Between tears and crying.

I used to wonder
About here and there—
I think the distance
Is nowhere. (*Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 325)

The theme of countryless nomadism sounded by the title of Hughes autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, articulated in “Border Line,” hints at the outcome of Hughes’ personal “middle passage” expressed in “Flotsam.” The black journey from displacement and slavery towards the hope of arrival described in Hughes’ poetry and autobiography takes place between “here” and “there,” or the utopian place of arrival and homecoming (as Guillén’s Cuban citizenship) and the place of departure (Africa, slavery). The speaker in “Border Line” muses that the journey may end in shipwreck, because the distance between “here” and “there” is “nowhere.” In other words, there has been no progress, no departure, no arrival. “Border Line projects the collapse of transcultural black identity in the New World: instead of building a bridge culture “in between” Africa and America, a home between the lines, Hughes’ speaker asserts the annihilation of the borderlands journey into “nowhere.”

Guillén and Hughes are headed in opposite directions: Hughes' speaker is on the downswing of the pendulum of the black journey in the Americas—headed towards the deterritorialization of established roots and thus returning to, if we follow Paul Gilroy, the essence of the tradition of Blacks in the Americas, the Black Atlantic, an anti-genealogical rhizome of trans-national currents and flows. In Hughes' last poem, "Flotsam," on the other hand, and in Hughes' very evocation of the "shoals of Nowhere," an unspecified place of displacement, we can detect the seeds of another resurgence of the utopian hope of inclusion, suggested by the phrase, "Yet taken by the sea wind / and blown along." Placeless and timeless like Hughes' "nowhere" of displacement, the idea of utopia, too, suggests an unspecified place, a no-where. It could very well be to the shoals of utopia that Hughes' boat could be blown next. Clearly, while very pessimistic, "Flotsam" does not put a final stop to the fluid dynamic of the Black Atlantic. Hughes' poem suggests a continuous motion and an ongoing rhythm, polydirectional and unpredictable, as in the irregular swings of a pendulum, between an abstract state of exile and other unknown places, without specifying, but neither excluding, other, renewed upswings to homecoming and national inclusion.

In conclusion, several thoughts follow from this discussion of transnational continuities in the work of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén. First, it is clear that hemispheric cultural and literary studies will face the same issue of a problematic unity as national cultural and literary studies. That is, just as black voices in the Americas cannot be subsumed under "roots" within the unity of distinct national traditions, neither can they be said to come home within the transnational, transculturated family of "Our America." As discussed above, the Black Atlantic implies an Our America-That-Is-Not-One. It implies an inclusion of blacks that is unhomely, conditional, periodic rather than permanent and fixed. Secondly, transnational and interdisciplinary research in comparative studies of the Americas needs to delve deeper into translation theory when studying the trans-national traffic of parallel expressive forms like "blues" and *son*. It is naïve to imagine transnationalism as an exchange that leaves the goods in question unchanged. The fact is, as we have seen with the example of "Cuban blues," translation always implies transculturation, a reinvention, equally destructive as creative, within a new ethno-national context. Next, the Guillén-Hughes connection entails further questions about facile distinctions between an "authentic" black art by Afro Cuban or African American artists and the passing "vogue" for black arts in Europe and the U.S. It is true that both Langston Hughes (in his famous

essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”) and Nicolás Guillén (in a parallel essay entitled “Cuba, negros, poesía” [Cuba, Blacks, Poetry]) made identical claims about a fundamental difference that black vernacular expression makes: both point out that for blacks in the Americas, the use of black vernacular rhythms and speech is a question of ontology, whereas it is a question of phenomenology or epistemology for the European or Euro-American artist. The white outsider-poet uses black forms as exotic means of distortion of conventional perception. In contrast, the black poet uses black forms because they evoke a black reality and existence from the archive of collective memory. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes writes: “[J]azz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul— . . .” (308). For Hughes, the “vogue in things Negro” (307) has connected the black artist with the culture of his people, enabling him to delve into the archive of black expressive forms and memories. It is clear that the connection between jazz, blues and other black musical forms and the black artist is an existential one, rather than an arbitrary aesthetic choice. In “Cuba, negros, poesía” [Cuba, Blacks, Poetry] (*Prosa de prisa*, vol.1: 94, 101), Guillén demonstrates his sharp awareness of differences in meaning of the black aesthetics for Afro-Cubans and for Europeans.

[W]hen that exotic wave [for black arts] reached the island [Cuba], it was not a surprising novelty: rather, it opened in a single blow the proper way, enabling us to understand that through black expression it was possible to achieve a Cuban expression; an expression of Cubanness without regard to skin color, neither black nor white, but integrated through the friendly attraction of those two fundamental forces in the social composition of the island. . . . [P]opular knowledge immediately became the richest mine of artistic exploration, . . . poetry delved into it to find rapidly primary, virginal substances, which did not need to be invented or exported, as has happened in other literatures, where the *fashion* languished until it expired. (*Prosa de prisa*, vol. 1:100).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the authentication of ontology suffers a first partial failure at the border-crossing. As Guillén’s Cuban *son* becomes a “Cuban blues” in Hughes’ translation, the memories of Havana are exchanged for the memories specific to “Harlem.” How and to what extent does the common transnational memory of the Black Atlantic—deeper than nation-memory if we follow Gilroy—mitigate the national factors lost and gained in translation? The point of his essay would be a prodding to keep the question open and the outcome moving along, even as more evidence and material is assembled.

Notes

¹ There is a substantial amount of trans-national comparative research on African American blues and Afro-Cuban son poetry, including links to Francophone Caribbean literature. See Cobb, Chrisman, Ellis, Jackson, Kubayanda, and Piedra.

² Readers interested in Guillén's role and the context of Cuban literature and the Afro-Antillean movement may refer to the special issue on Guillén edited by Kutzinski in *Callaloo* no. 31, vol. 10, 2, and Ellis, Benítez-Rojo's chapter on Guillén in his study *The Repeating Island, Cobb Harlem, Haite, and Havana*, Ette, Jackson, and Kutzinski *Sugar's Secrets and Against the American Grain*.

³ "On one man certainly, Cuba's future national poet, his impact was immediate. Although Guillén had previously shown a strong sense of outrage against racism and economic imperialism, he had not yet done so in language inspired by native, Afro-Cuban speech, song, and dance; and he had been far more concerned with protesting racism than with affirming the power and beauty of Cuban blackness. Within a few days of Hughes's departure, however, Guillén created a furor in Havana ('un verdadero escandalo,' he informed Hughes with delight) by publishing on the 'Ideales de una Raza' page of April 20 what Gustavo Urrutia called exultantly 'eight formidable negro poems' entitled *Motivos de Son (Son Motifs)*. For the first time, as Hughes had urged him to do, Guillén had used the *son* dance rhythms to capture the moods and features of the black Havana poor. To Langston, Urrutia identified the verse (which was dedicated to José Antonio Fernández de Castro) as 'the exact equivalent of your 'blues'.' Not long after, Urrutia reported that Guillén was suddenly writing 'the best kind of negro poetry we ever had; indeed we had no negro poems at all' in Cuba until the new work. And when a local critic denied a relationship between Hughes and Guillén's landmark poetry, Guillén refuted him at once in 'Sones y soneros,' an essay published in *El País* on June 12 that year. With such a result, Hughes's visit of Cuba had not been in vain" (Rampersad, vol. 1: 181).

⁴ On the origins of the *son* and for an analysis of the first *son* dating from the late 16th century, "Son de la Ma' Teodora," detailing its synthesis of Spanish, African and *taino* components, see Roberto González Echevarría, "Literature of the Hispanic Caribbean" (7–10). Like the blues, the *son* has an African call-and-response structure. Keith Ellis offers this account of its structure: "The *son*, a musical form of contagious and provocative rhythm, is divided into two parts: the *motivo* or *letra* sung by the *sonero*, the principal voice, sometimes in harmony with a second voice; and the *coro* (which may also be called the *estribillo*, the *sonsonete*, or the *bordón*) in which voices of the players of other instruments reply to or second the *motivo*" (Ellis, *Cuba's Nicolás Guillén* 65).

⁵ In 1980, a special edition of "*Motivos de son*" was published on the occasion of their 50th anniversary. The book includes the musical scores

to Guillén's *son*-poems composed by Amadeo Roldán, Alejandro García Caturla, Eliseo Grenet, and Emilio Grenet. See Guillén *Motivos de son*, Eliana Dávila, ed.

⁶ Towards the end of the poem, the voice of the *bongó* challenges those Cubans who would disobey its authority and its call for whites and blacks to become brothers: "habrá quien me escupa en público, / cuando a solas me besó . . . / A ése, le digo: / —Compadre, / ya me pedirás perdón, / ya comerás de mi ajiaco, / ya me darás la razón, / ya me golpearás el cuero, / ya bailarás a mi voz, / ya pasaremos del brazo, / ya estarás donde yo estoy: / ya vendrás de abajo arriba, / ¡qué aquí el más alto soy yo!" (*Obra poética* 105) ("There are those who would insult me / but not deep in their hearts, / some who spit on me in public / but kiss me in private. / To them I say, / Buddy, / you'll ask my pardon yet, / you'll eat my pot stew yet, / you'll call me O.K. yet, / you'll drum my tight skin yet, / you'll dance to my song yet, / we'll be arm in arm yet, / you'll be where I am yet. / You'll come up from below yet, / for top dog here is me!") [trans. Hughes and Carruthers, *Cuba Libre* 82]). —I am referring to Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Life on the Hyphen* and Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island*.

⁷ See also Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets*, 163; "Re-Reading Nicolás Guillén," 163; and the essays on Guillén in *Callaloo's* special edition on the Cuban poet; Chrisman, "Nicolás Guillén, Langston Hughes," 812; Ellis, *Cuba's Nicolás Guillén*, 201.

⁸ See also the translations of "Tengo" in *¡Patria o Muerte!*, trans. Robert Márquez, 190–95.

⁹ "Flotsam" is literally the last poem printed in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 562. First published in *The Crisis* (June-July 1968), 94, "Flotsam" is followed by an Editor's note stating that this is the last of seven poems Hughes submitted to *The Crisis* for publication prior to his death in 1967.

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