The Worlds of Langston Hughes

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CHAPTER TWO

SOUTHERN EXPOSURES

Hughes in Spanish

Langston Hughes hermano,
hermano de raza
y también por ser hombre
y humano,
mi admiración te alcanza.

[Langston Hughes, brother, / brother in race, / and it is also for being a man / and human, / that my admiration takes hold of you.]

——Pilar Barrios, “Voces”

Y canto esa día,
Langston, Langston,
Para todos esa día,
Langston, Langston!

[And I sing of a distant day, / Langston, Langston, / For all, a distant day, / Langston, Langston!]

——Alejo Carpentier

One need not to subscribe to Walter Benjamin’s view of original and translation as so many shards of a greater language to imagine some semantic overlap between the Spanish noun negro and its English counterparts.¹ Such overlap has invited much theoretical speculation on kinship relations among the cultural formations of the African diaspora in the Americas. But can a “spic” really be a “Negro,” even a “nigger,” and vice versa? Is there, for instance, such a thing as a black Cuban?² Nicolás Guillén, who is often credited with having started “a movement known as Afro-Cuban poetry,” struck a different note when he wrote in El Nacional (Caracas) in 1951 that the interest in Afrocubanism was something that came entirely from outside Cuba:

“Poesía afrocubana,” “música afrocubana,” “arte afrocubana”… Que quiere decir esto? A mi juicio… no quiere decir nada. Es en todo caso una manera rápida de hablar, una convención que no responde a ninguna realidad en el panorama de la cultural nacional. Considerar que existe lo “afrocubano” como
When one tries to determine, then, just how similar the word *negro* in, say, early-twentieth-century Cuban literary and popular usage is to racial epithets such as “Negro,” “black,” “darky,” “boy,” or “nigger,” as they have circulated in the USA at different points in time, it quickly becomes apparent that claims to cultural equivalence are far more complicated in historical and literary practice than they appear in theory. In this chapter and the next one, I analyze Langston Hughes’s poems in their Spanish translation to try to untangle some of these complications.

**A NEGLECTED ARCHIVE OF TRANSLATIONS**

Langston Hughes’s reputation in the Hispanic Americas is the stuff of legend. Maribel Cruzado and Mary Hricko, translator-editors of *Langston Hughes. Blues* (2004), even claim that Hughes was the “Afro-American writer most widely read in the world.” Translations of a few of his poems first appeared in Cuba between 1928 and 1930. Others quickly followed, notably Xavier Villaurrutia’s and Jorge Luis Borges’s, which in 1931 found their way into two leading avant-garde journals, Mexico’s *Contemporáneos* and Argentina’s *Sur*. From there, Hughes’s fame spread swiftly and not just among fellow writers. To many, Hughes was “uno de los poetas negros más interesantes del momento” (one of the most interesting black poets of his time). Even after his death in 1967, Hughes remained the best-known and most admired US American poet in the Hispanic Americas since Longfellow and Whitman. Along with Cuba’s poet laureate, Nicolás Guillén, Hughes continues to be regarded as the most important “Negro poet” of the twentieth century in many parts of the Hispanic world, including Spain. What accounts for this immense popularity, which has been unmatched not only by any of Hughes’s African American contemporaries but also by any of the canonical Anglo-American modernists? What was it about Hughes’s poetry that so compelled Hispanic Americans?

Unless they had access to the English versions of Hughes’s poems and could read them in that language, Hispanic Americans would have come into contact with what at first glance seems a relatively small portion of his
poetic corpus: to date, 164 out of a total of 856 poems have been translated into Spanish. With the help of an Excel spreadsheet and Mullen’s 1977 landmark bibliography of translations of Hughes’s work into Spanish, I began by mapping the trajectory of every single known Hughes poem translated into Spanish and printed in either a book or a periodical (see appendix). Between 1928, the year of Hughes’s first official visit to Cuba, and the end of 2004, more than three hundred translations of Hughes’s poems were published in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela. They were printed in no fewer than eleven anthologies, twenty-nine periodicals, and the Spanish versions of Hughes’s autobiographies. Although perhaps not as important to the overall circulation of Hughes’s poems in translation, three stand-alone poetry collections—Julio Gáler’s Langston Hughes. Poemas, Herminio Ahumada’s Yo también soy América, and Cruzado and Hricko’s Langston Hughes. Blues—significantly boosted the number of poems available in Spanish at different points in time. That this substantial archive of translations has gone largely unexamined has blurred both the broad contours and the specifics of Hughes’s reputation in the Hispanic Americas. My work here is meant to begin the process of providing firmer ground for such speculations.

To his translators, as to those who wrote poems in celebration of him and used his verse in their own writings, Hughes was not one poet; he was many. My analysis of the corpus of Hughes’s work disseminated in Spanish translation shows both broad trends among Hughes’s translators south of the USAmerican border and significant individual variations. Which poems his translators chose to carry over into Spanish, and which they omitted, also speaks to what each considered representative of either Hughes the New Negro poet or Hughes the revolutionary. Equally telling is how translators from different countries treated individual poems. There are fascinating differences among multiple translations of the same poem, some of which I explore in detail here. Hughes’s translators across the Americas—be they poets, journalists, or academics—had varied reasons for being interested in his verse, and the ways in which they rendered his verse in Spanish gives us access to some of their motivations. In this and the following chapter, I explore what Hughes, the man and his literary corpus, came to mean to audiences in Cuba, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, and Argentina, to name but a handful of the countries in which translations of his poems saw print. Was Hughes the “darker brother” with whose predicament those in the long shadow of their northern neighbor identified, regardless of their own ethnicity or race? Was he a political radical offering up poetic versions of the revolutionary sentiments of the Internationale? Or was he the rebellious vanguardist whose poems they admired for their formal daring? In particular, I scrutinize translations by José Antonio Fernández de Castro (1887–1951) from Cuba, Ildefonso Pereda Valdés (1899–1996) from
Uruguay, Xavier Villaurrutia (1903–50) from Mexico, and (in chapter 3) Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) and Julio Gálé from Argentina. All these translations provide historical and textual testing grounds for theories of black internationalism that relativize assumptions about cultural and political sameness and equivalences often so deeply lodged within the academic discourses of African American and African diaspora studies that they have become virtually invisible. Brent Edwards’s excavation of the intellectual history of the term “diaspora” is an important step in “remind[ing] us that ‘diaspora’ is introduced in large part to account for differences among African-derived populations, in a way that a term like ‘pan-Africanism’ could not.” 17 I add to his work close-ups of how Hughes’s poems were reframed as they passed from English into Spanish.

Considering both larger trends and the texts of individual translations, I argue that several distinct regional and international discourses, notably anti-USAmerican imperialism, socialism, and modernism, provided the triple lenses through which Hughes’s poems were refracted in the Hispanic Americas. While it is often difficult cleanly to separate these interlocking lenses, I foreground the connections translators made between antiblack racism and imperialist oppression in this chapter and defer my remarks on comparative modernisms and the politics of different modernisms in the Americas until the next chapter.

**THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION**

There is strong evidence that translators frequently appropriated Hughes’s verse for their own nationalist agendas rather than using it to spread the seeds of black political awareness across the Hispanic Americas.18 The discourse of anti-USAmerican imperialism flooded the Hispanic Americas during the aftermath of the Spanish-Cuban-American War (1895–98). It proved quite inseparable from nascent nationalist ideologies in a number of countries, providing translators and literary commentators alike with fertile ground for analogizing external and internal colonization: that is, they likened the USA’s neocolonial encroachments in the Hispanic Americas to the antiblack racism that Hughes scorned in so many of his poems. Such analogies also facilitated the absorption of Hughes’s poems about racial oppression into the discourse of revolutionary class struggle radiating outward from the Soviet Union, especially during the 1930s. Taken together, these two refractions add up to substantial reformulations of an English-language discourse of blackness—New Negro-ness, if you will—that, though often regarded as international, reflected and was part of the peculiar history of USAmerican race relations during the early twentieth century. To argue that translations of the poems associated with the discourse of New Negro-ness played a crucial role in making Hughes an unofficial USAmerican cultural
ambassador in the Hispanic Americas has countless implications beyond
the academic fields identified with the study of race and blackness, most
immediately for comparative New World or hemispheric studies and for
conceptualizations of literary and cultural influence more generally.¹⁹

Hughes’s fame in the Hispanic Americas is inconsistent with what Guido
Podestá calls “the cultural blockade actively promoted by intellectuals after
[José Enrique] Rodó” and with Rodó’s critical pronouncements, in Ariel
(1900), in “response to the expansion of United States cultural [and, one
might add, ideological] habits in Latin America.”²⁰ Podestá’s argument
that Rodó’s vision of the USA as a “barbaric” nation discouraged Hispanic
American scholars from engaging in comparative studies of Hispanic Ameri-
can and USAmerican literatures makes good sense. “To the advocates of
the cultural blockade,” he writes, “a comparative study of this nature would
have meant acceptance of ‘affinities’ with a society portrayed as the nega-
tion of truly cultural European (French) values.” His claim that “the perva-
sive consumption and construction of prejudices against African-Americans,
even among indigenistas, deterred even more a cultural and political appreci-
cation [among Hispanic American intellectuals] of what was being written
by African-Americans in the United States” does not, however, easily follow
from Hughes’s example.²¹ Just the opposite seems to be true. In many parts
of the Hispanic Americas, postwar Europe’s vogue nègre translated into a
more than faddish awareness of the local importance of racial topics which,
in the 1930s and 1940s, produced numerous collections of poesía negra
americana in Cuba, Chile, Uruguay, and elsewhere, along with scores of
new journals and professional societies devoted to Afro-Hispanic American
cultures.²² The work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and other New
Negro artists and intellectuals appeared regularly in Hispanic American
magazines and newspapers.²³ The criticisms of internal colonization that
they voiced loudly during the early decades of the twentieth century appear
to have resonated with Hispanic Americans of many colors and ethnicities.²⁴
The marginal position that African American writers and thinkers occupied
within the USA became a ready analogue for how many Hispanic Ameri-
cans perceived their own countries’ situations vis-à-vis what José Martí had
famously dubbed the “monster” in whose entrails he had lived when in
exile in New York.²⁵ Such hemispheric resonances may also explain why
one finds Hughes’s poems in Hispanic American anthologies of USAmerican
poetry in the company of Anglo-American modernists such as Eliot, Pound,
Stevens, Frost, and Hart Crane just as often as one encounters him in major
anthologies of poesía negra, such as Ildefonso Pereda Valdés’s Antología de
la poesía negra americana (1936) and Emilio Ballagas’s Mapa de la poesía
negra americana (1946).²⁶

To some extent, then, Hughes’s marginalization at home made him all
the more popular among artists and intellectuals from the Hispanic Ameri-
cas. Hughes’s position as a Negro writer in the USA does not, however,
sufficiently explain his popularity in the Hispanic Americas. Other writers in this category—notably Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and James Weldon Johnson—appeared with some frequency alongside Hughes in both sorts of anthologies. But their poems rarely made it into journals, and no one ever translated enough of them for a book-length collection. The same is true of most other twentieth-century USAmerican poets, including white modernists. Hughes was also neither the only New Negro who had ever lived in or visited the Hispanic Americas nor the only one who spoke Spanish. Johnson, William Carlos Williams, and Hart Crane are notable examples of modernists with contacts south of the border of the USA.

Like the work of other USAmerican Negro writers included in Hispanic American anthologies, Hughes’s poetry stood outside mainstream literary canons, including the incipient canons of modernism. Not a few Hispanic American anthologizers remarked on this exclusion. On this point, the Mexican poet Salvador Novo wrote in 1931: “Pocas antologías poéticas [en los Estados Unidos] se atreverían a incluir en sus páginas producciones de poetas negros. Y cuando lo hagan, como lo hace Louis Untermeyer, escogerán poesías en dialecto de Paul Laurence Dunbar, patriarca de los poetas negros de América, cuya mayor preocupación era precisamente la de no concentrase en el dialecto” (Few poetry anthologies [in the United States] dare include in their pages works by Negro poets. And when they do, as Louis Untermeyer has, they choose dialect poetry by Paul Laurence Dunbar, the patriarch of American Negro poets, whose main worry was precisely not to limit himself to dialect).

As late as 1955, Eugenio Florit, who was teaching at Barnard College when he compiled his Antología de la poesía norteamericana contemporánea, remarked that, with the exception of Hughes, Dunbar, and Cullen, “no ha aparecido ningún poeta de significación nacional entre los de la raza de color” (not a single poet of national significance has emerged among the poets of color) in the USA.

Florit includes a total of thirty-eight poets in his bilingual volume, ranging from Masters, Sandburg, and Stevens to Pound, Eliot, Williams, Auden, Lowell, and Wilbur. Hughes stands out as the only African American contributor. Notes Florit:

A pesar de todo ello y de esa universalidad que creo ver en los poemas de Hughes, me parece que esta poesía se mantiene aparte, muy mezclada aún con lo pintoresco, y sin incorporarse como poesía a la corriente nacional. Esta situación es evidente si observamos que en casi ninguna de las excelentes antologías que se publican en los Estados Unidos aparecen poemas de poetas negros.

[Despite all this and despite this universality I believe I see in Hughes’s poems, it seems to me that this poetry exists apart, very much mixed up with the picturesque, and without being incorporated as poetry into the national mainstream. This is evident when one considers that no poems by Negro
writers are included in almost any of the excellent anthologies that are now being published in the United States.\[30\]

In fact, if one constructed a USAmerican literary canon from Hispanic American anthologies between 1936 and 1976, it would differ markedly from that of the USAmerican academy for that same period. The same is true when one compares collections of black poetry from James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of Negro Poetry* (1922 and 1931) to Robert Hayden’s *Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets* (1967) with the anthologies of *poesía negra americana*.

**BLACKNESS AND UNIVERSALITY**

Given the substantial number of translated Hughes poems, a closer analysis of this archive logically begins with those poems translated with the greatest frequency and printed in the widest array of venues, both during the early years and later on. Some provisional patterns emerge quickly. The single most translated poem of Hughes’s in Spanish is “I, Too” from 1925, the “Epilogue” from *The Weary Blues*. It circulated in the Hispanic Americas in no fewer than fifteen different translations, with four additional versions published in Spain. “I, Too,” typically under the title of “Yo también,” appeared in nine anthologies and fifteen periodicals; it was also reprinted numerous times. Gastón Figueira attributes Hughes’s popularity in the Hispanic Americas specifically to this poem and “la intensidad de su sentido social” (the intensity of his social sentiments).\[31\] The next most translated of Hughes’s poems, though a distant second to “I, Too,” is “Negro,” an earlier lyric from *Crisis* (1922), which appeared in Spanish nine times. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Cross,” also from *The Crisis* (1921 and 1925, respectively), generated nine and seven different translations each.\[32\]

The four most-translated Hughes poems are all part of *The Weary Blues* (1926), as are the majority of his other lyrics translated during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—a total of seventy-six poems. In fact, all but one of the Hughes translations that Villaurrutia and Borges, along with Rafael Lozano and José Antonio Fernández de Castro, published between 1928 and 1931—respectively in *Contemporáneos, Sur, Crísol, Social* (see figure 1) *Revista de la Habana*, and the *Diario de la Marina*—were of poems from that collection.\[33\] Poetry anthologies published during the next two decades also selected some poems from *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), as well as from journals such as *Opportunity* and *New Masses*. But this was not enough to alter a clear preference for *The Weary Blues* that has persisted until today.\[34\]

A glance at the group of twenty-six poems translated during the 1920s and 1930s reveals surprisingly common choices on the part of very different translators. Even if not all of these poems fit the category of what Edward
Figure 1. Page from Social, 1928, with José Antonio Fernández de Castro’s translation of “I, Too.”
Mullen rather disparagingly calls “nostalgic portraits,” their selection alone—indeed, independent of the specifics of a given translation—shows a penchant for emphasizing aesthetics over politics. To most of these translators, *la raza negra* was a valuable cultural commodity that could serve the cause of nationalism and provide an important link with European literary modernisms through which Hispanic American intellectuals could affirm ties with the cultural elites of France and Germany. In the Hispanic Americas, even in countries with significant numbers of citizens of African descent such as Cuba and Brazil, it was quite common at the time to separate blackness as a cultural commodity from the social and political realities of racial conflicts. In literary contexts, terms such as *negro, mulato,* and *negrista* were often used interchangeably, regardless of a writer’s perceived or claimed racial identities. In this way, blackness could be rhetorically integrated with nationalist and anti-imperialist causes quite regardless of the marginalization of darker-complexioned populations that existed, and exists today, throughout the Hispanic Americas. The Afro-Antillean movement, which flourished in Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 1930s and exemplifies transatlantic modernisms’ strong investments in blackness as a revitalizing aesthetic, is but one example of such contradictions.

With few exceptions, then, the poems Hughes’s translators chose did not emphasize the contradictions between culture and politics that led to political crises at home, among them the banning of the Partido Independiente de Color in Cuba in 1910 and the Partido Autóctono Negro in Uruguay in the late 1930s. Their selection of poems and their actual translations constructed Hughes’s verse in Spanish as a vehicle for nationalist and transnational anti-imperialist alliances. His poems were appealing because of their presumably restorative “primitivism”—evident in rhythms that some described as “eminentemente espontánea,” “desliteraturizada,” and “un poco sincopados, como la música de jazz” (extremely spontaneous, unliterary [or deliteraturized], a bit syncopated, much like jazz is)—without being politically limited by race.

_Sencillez,* “simplicity,” is a related term that keeps recurring in commentaries on Hughes’s style, linking him to Martí. In the eyes of these commentators, _sencillez_ was a prime poetic vehicle for what some called truth, others “excesiva franquesa” (excessive candor). The Chilean scholar and teacher Andrés Bansart, in his posthumously published _Poesía negra-africana_ (Santiago de Chile, 1971), described Hughes’s lyrics as “obras maestras de sencillez: ninguna palabra rebuscada, pero palabras verdaderas” (masterful works of simplicity: not mannered words but truthful words). The Spanish poet Rafael Alberti, in the brief unsigned note about Hughes’s poetry that prefaces his 1937 translation of “I, Too” in _El Mono Azul_ speaks admiringly of “sus sencillos poemas, que no sólo los negros de su país aman y repiten, sino que también los escritores y lectores del Mundo han sabido ya valorizar” (his simple poems not only beloved by the blacks in his own country who repeat them but also already praised by writers and readers in the rest
of the world).\textsuperscript{41} Juan Felipe Toruño, who greeted “el arte poético negro” as a welcome alternative to what he regarded as the stylistic contortions of certain vanguardist movements such as \textit{Ultraísmo}, summed it up well in his prefatory remarks to \textit{Poesía negra} (Mexico City, 1953): “No tiene secretos esa poesía”—this poetry has no secrets.\textsuperscript{42} Similar language, in English of course, can be found in Rampersad’s introduction to the 1993 edition of \textit{The Big Sea}, where he refers to Hughes’s “honest, water-clear prose” that is “utterly devoid of affectation” (BS, xxv). When one reads Hughes’s lyrics side by side with their Spanish-language versions, one readily realizes that these poems are neither simple nor direct. Even lyrics such as Hughes’s “Negro” offered Hispanic American (and other) readers multiple points of nonracial identification concurrent with the opening line, “Yo soy negro” (I am a Negro)—notably “worker,” “singer,” and “victim” \textit{(CP, 24)}. “He conocido ríos,” as Borges rendered the first line of Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”—“I’ve known rivers” \textit{(CP, 23)}—is especially effective for its use of a first-person pronoun that could easily be separated from the “Negro” in the poem’s title (for more on this poem see chapter 3).

Not only did Hughes’s translators tend to select poems that allowed Hispanic Americans to imagine unity along nationalist lines and around international causes. They also, in the actual translations, strategically reinforced certain areas of identification at the expense of others to ensure that that all Mexican—or Cuban, Uruguayan, or Argentine—voices could “acompañar” la voz de Hughes para decir a coro: ‘Yo también soy América’” (join Hughes’s voice in proclaiming, in unison, “I, too, am America”).\textsuperscript{43} Ildefonso Pereda Valdés’s version of “Mulatto” (“Mulato”), one of Hughes’s most confrontational early poems about racial mixing, exemplifies such efforts. Like most of Hughes’s Hispanic American translators, the Uruguayan was attracted to the racial elements in Hughes’s verse, and “Mulatto” was one of the Hughes poems he selected for his anthology to represent “la rebullión de la raza.”\textsuperscript{44} That Pereda Valdés himself was not only a professor of literature but also a poet and editor of some note who had two volumes of \textit{poesía negra} to his credit—\textit{La guitarra de los negros} (1926) and \textit{Raza negra} (1929), both published in Montevideo—makes it all the more remarkable how little his translation attempts to capture the source poem’s texture.\textsuperscript{45} Omitting Hughes’s indents, italics, and exclamation points, all of which further the poem’s dramatic form, Pereda Valdés transforms passages such as

\begin{quote}
\textit{I am your son, white man!}
A little yellow
Bastard boy.
\end{quote}

\textit{(CP, 101)}

into lines that fail to create any sense of the poem as a drama of lyric voices locked in a bitter quarrel:
Yo soy tu hijo, hombre blanco,
Un pequeño bastardo amarillo.46

Compare this with the energetic version of this poem that Julio Gálé published in his Poemas de Langston Hughes in Buenos Aires in 1952. His final lines also omit the italics, but at least they remain centered and emphatic: “Soy tu hijo, hombre blanco! / Un pequeño, turbio, bastardo rapaz” (Poemas 69). One might say that Pereda Valdés’s translation, to use his own words, “pales” by comparison with its source text.47 This sort of structural and tonal flattening-out makes the translation static on the page, yielding verse entirely bereft of the intensity of racial confrontation and of what Florit called the “delicioso sentido del humor y la ironía” (delicious sense of humor and irony) that marked Hughes’s poetry for so many of his admirers.48

Pereda Valdés was also among the first to tout Hughes as “el poeta de la revolución social,” linking his poetry explicitly to international socialism.49 In his introduction to the same anthology in which “Mulato” appeared, he moves from lauding Hughes as “un gran poeta que canta con el alma de su raza” (a great poet who sings with the soul of his race) to stressing that Hughes “[s]e hace un poeta revolucionario y canta como el más universal de los poetas de su raza: al sentimiento racial se une la solidaridad con todos los explotados del mundo” (becomes a revolutionary poet and sings like the most universal poet of his race: racial sentiment is joined by solidarity with all of the world’s exploited peoples).50 These remarks show how carefully Pereda Valdés constructed Hughes’s “universality.” He firmly aligned a discourse of blackness that might spell cultural and political separatism with the more inclusive rhetoric of political solidarity among all the victims of capitalism. To illustrate this joining in Hughes’s own poems, Pereda Valdés selected “Union” (“Unión”), first printed in New Masses in 1931, and “Always the Same” (“Siempre lo mismo”), which had appeared in Negro Worker in 1932 (CP, 165).51 He might have made bolder choices. For instance, he might have selected “Good Morning Revolution” or “Advertisement for the Opening of the Waldorf-Astoria” (CP, 162, 143), both of which had appeared in New Masses in 1931–32 and were, in fact, translated by Miguel Alejandro for Nueva Cultura in 1936 (see figures 2 and 3), the same year that saw the first edition of Antología de la poesía negra americana (it was reprinted in Uruguay in 1953).52 It is especially telling that Pereda Valdés did not pick Hughes’s “Scottsboro,” published in Opportunity in 1931 (CP, 142–43). Afro-Hispanic American authors may well have “shared Hughes’s hatred of Fascism as exemplified in his comments on Scottsboro.”53 Yet Hughes’s translators, especially in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay—countries with relatively small populations of African descent—favored inclusive abstractions such as “todos los oprimidos / del pobre mundo” (“all the whole oppressed / Poor world,” CP, 138) over
2 LANGSTON HUGHES
POR MIGUEL ALEJANDRO

EL ESCENARIO


eUsted es una reina radiante, una brillante estrella que ilumina el cielo.»—Nueva Cultura, 1936.

Langston Hughes, el poeta negro de la Revolución

Arrozado a la privación, vida de mis señora amantes, las partes inferiores que a aman
con su mayor y en su cuerpo el mero y el cuerpo del mundo capaz de hacer
continuar a una demanda informativa sobre la situación de la U.S.A.

—No sabemos nada.—Eso no es cierto.—Estamos estudiando.

1. Que Washington, es la capital de las estatísticas y que ocupa en estas naciones a 28.000 individuos (que algún día harán su
propia y creencia estadística).

2. Que el último libro tiene habitaciones variadas

3. Que fuert, de 190.000 obreros, tiene ya menos de 13000.

4. Que hay jardines en Bonnery.

5. Que hay jardines en Bonnery.

En la crisis universal, y la mundial, se debe a una tensión de las relaciones internacionales.

Se podrá juzgar esto como una burla, como un ruego de humor latín, pero los más

autóctonos vuelven nacional no lo desprecian, sino lo confirmamos acumulando datos.

Por Upton Sinclair sabemos que la industria de materias primas en Nueva York está muerta y con significativa que haya 100.000 obreros de obreros que no trabajan, se transigieren al surto y el surto se transigieren al surto.

El 90 por ciento de las transacciones se realizan por medio de créditos.

La caza estadounidense de intereses es hacer un absoluto intelectual y su
obstaculismo se expresa en este arreglo, colectivamente, por medio del Gobierno. Siste-

a simple al proceso de la crónica, que permite que uno se preste dinero a uno

mismo. Ahora es como una dudosa cons-

cua de Marx. Juicio, estudiaremos libros de esta en-

landadad, qué deberíamos hacer? La única

solución de la crisis es consecuencia distri-

buida las fuentes nacionales de la riqueza,

creando de productos mercenarios para preve-

nición de una caza rebajada y fabricadas para usar de todos los trabajadores del

en otros materiales de lino, serán introducidos a filos.

Debemos saber a nuestros hermanos de esque

con estas soluciones, sino inmediatas para

pensar en su propio interés. ¿Por qué no ordenar y organizar las organizaciones que

la producción, en bien de la seguridad y

hora de las habitaciones de las Ollas Unidos?

También podemos tomar estas palabras

como ejerciendo determinar si se nos confirma

donde los bienes sociales palpitantes con

un procesamiento liberal y financiero.

Ruido a las Américas. El gráfico demuestra

ela horrible hacendado de la mercen-

aria humano en las balas de los bienes

piece.

La situación actualmente arroja de platafor-

mas para un nuevo tipo de sembradores que

revisa todos los problemas con contri-

bución. Con este libro, se refiere el capital-

ismo venádico que esa no ha sido despojado

por el mismo durante 25 años y que ahora está al borde de la bancarrota.

Esta existencia de parte, es la misma

siendo que no es para los trabajadores

blancos, ¿qué será para los trabajadores

de color?... Aunque, si hemos de recu-

rernos en verdad, los blancos, hoy en día,

son también negros, y los negros, son sus

menos. Por esto, los libros de obra

en más extraña de lo que se creía. Y esta

contexto, que se prevé en

presentación en una distinta superficial pa-

ra, con la pátina de una exculpación y ev-


[341]

Figure 2. The first page of Miguel Alejandro’s article on Hughes from Nueva Cultura, 1936.
Figure 3. Title page from *Nueva Cultura*, 1936.
more disquieting lines such as “8 BLACK BOYS IN A SOUTHERN JAIL. / WORLD, TURN PALE!” (CP, 143).54

There were two ways in which translators such as Pereda Valdés could make Hughes’s poems more universal. One was to select poems without precise references to the USA, be those geographical, cultural, or political. The other was to suppress such contextual references, including distinctive musical traits, such as the responsorial form of blues lyrics and other repetitions suggestive of blues or jazz. This would explain, for instance, why none of Hughes’s blues poems were translated prior to 1952, the date of Julio Gáler’s Poemas,55 even though Hispanic American reviewers had celebrated those very poems from the beginning. The closest we get to a translation of a blues poem is “Canto de una muchacha negra,” a version of “Song for a Dark Girl” from Fine Clothes to the Jew (CP, 104) by one G. Caparicio, which was included in Pereda Valdés’s Antología.56 This poem, also printed in Emilio Ballagas’s Mapa de la poesía negra americana57 as “Canto de una joven negra,” is one of two Hughes poems in the Antología with geocultural references to the USA. The other one, also from Fine Clothes to the Jew, is of course “Mulatto.” In “Mulato,” the place name in the phrase “Georgia dusk” is retained in “Crespúsculo de Georgia.” But the more charged and rather conspicuous “Dixie” in “Canto de una muchacha negra”—conspicuous because it is part of the refrain “Way Down South in Dixie”—finds itself folded into the translation’s more generic “south”: “Allá lejos, en el sur,” or, as Ballagas has it, in his enhancement of the poem’s rhythms, “Fué allá en el Sur, en el Sur.”58 The elision and transmutation of such specific reference points were a translational strategy that facilitated the north-south passage of certain Hughes poems.

Richard Jackson contends that Hughes’s “radical image” among Afro-Hispanic American writers “also helped account for [his] popularity outside the Black Diaspora in Latin America.”59 That Hughes spent a year in Russia and was on friendly terms with known Hispanic American Communists—notably the Cuban Nicolás Guillén, whose poems he would translate in the late 1940s, but also the Chilean Pablo Neruda and the Argentine Raúl González Tuñón—no doubt made him a politically appealing figure for many members of the Hispanic Americas’ intellectual elite.60 Yet if the poems that circulated most in translation are any indication, Hispanic Americans, though they praised Hughes’s political radicalism often enough, were apparently less attracted to the actual poetic manifestations of his politics. Pereda Valdés’s Antología is a case in point. It was the most influential collection of poesía negra americana for the better part of three decades. When it was reprinted in 1953, its editor made no changes in his lineup of Hughes’s poems, nor elsewhere in the volume, even though, by then, he surely would have seen a far greater number of poems than he had in the mid-thirties, including those in Hughes’s A New Song, rejected by Knopf for its radical politics and finally published by the International Workers Order in 1938.61
Pereda Valdés’s unchanged selections no doubt contributed to maintaining a pattern that was well established by the early 1950s among Hughes’s Hispanic American translators: admiration for his leftist politics coupled with a conspicuous avoidance of his radical poetry.

This paradoxical pattern ran parallel to the treatment Hughes’s blues poems experienced in the Hispanic Americas. Although this practice shifted somewhat first with Julio Gálcer’s Poemas and then Herminio Ahumada’s Yo también soy América (1968), later anthologizers still tended to stay away from Hughes’s revolutionary poems, regardless of whether they thematized racial or political subjects. One example is the 1971 Chilean anthology, Poesía negra-africana, published posthumously by the students of Andrés Bansart, who regularly taught courses on the subject at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in Santiago in the 1960s. (Pereda Valdés also taught courses on African American literatures in Chile but at the Universidad de Santiago and the Universidad de Concepción.) The editors offer this anthology not only so that Hispanic Americans may be more aware of the plight of African Americans but “también para que los latinoamericanos se sientan más solidarios de sus hermanos de Tercer-Mundo en la lucha contra todos los tipos de imperialismo” (also so that Latin Americans feel greater solidarity for their Third-World brothers in the struggle against all types of imperialism). Yet, with the exception of “Yo también,” none of the Hughes poems they include—“Poema” (“Poem 1,” CP, 22), “Tener miedo” (“Afraid,” CP, 41), and “Nuestra tierra” (“Our Land,” CP, 32–33)—have much to say about the so-called Third World or imperialism. But labels such as “social revolutionary,” “radical,” and “militant” stuck, and they followed Hughes for decades to come. Even in 1971, when the Black Arts Movements in the United States had produced any number of younger radical poets, the Bansart anthology still presented Hughes as the premier voice against black oppression.

It was broader ideas and concepts, then, not cultural particularities that facilitated the construction of parallels between Hispanic Americans’ neocolonial situation in relation to the USA and the domestic plight of African Americans in the USA. My epigraphs to this chapter suggest this to be true of Hispanic American writers as different as the Cuban Alejo Carpentier and the Uruguayan Pilar Barrios, who paid homage to Hughes in their own verse by evoking generalized sentiments of brotherhood and shared hope. Through their preference for particular poems and their formal choices, translators made Hughes’s verse compatible with their own and their readers’ cultural values and political agendas.

**WHO SINGS AMERICA?**

The Hispanic American career of “I, Too” is perhaps the best example of exactly when and how this happened. Two well-known anthologies, Pereda
Valdés’s *Antología de la poesía negra americana* and Ballagas’s *Mapa de la poesía negra americana*, were the first to feature translations of “I, Too.”

In fact, the only two Hispanic American anthologies in this genre that did not include “I, Too” were Hildamar Escalante’s *Breve informe de poesía norteamericana* (Venezuela, 1947) and Hortensia Ruiz del Vizo’s bilingual *Black Poetry of the Americas* (1972).

In 1953, the Nicaraguan writer Juan Felipe Toruño included his version of “I, Too” in *Poesía negra: Ensayo antológica* (Mexico). Other versions followed, in Bansart’s *Poesía negra-africana* and José Luis González and Mónica Mansour’s *Poesía negra de América* (Mexico, 1976). In addition to being included in both Gálérs and Ahumada’s collections, the poem was also printed in a 1955 Mexican anthology of USAmerican poetry, Eugenio Florit’s *Antología de la poesía norteamericana contemporánea*.

Perhaps even more important, however, is the fact that years before being anthologized, each of these translations of “I, Too” had made their way into many different journals and other periodicals, including *La Nueva Democracia* (Uruguay, 1938), *Sustancia* (Argentina, 1942), and *El Diario de la Marina* (Cuba, 1930), where they would no doubt have reached many more readers than the books did. All told, publishers printed fourteen different versions of “I, Too” in eighteen Hispanic American periodicals.

“I, Too” proved unusually versatile in the hands of its Hispanic American translators. In what follows, I consider entire poems rather than only exemplary lines, analyzing in close detail four of the earliest translations of “I, Too”: one each by Jorge Luis Borges and Xavier Villaurrutia, both avant-gardists, and two by José Antonio Fernández de Castro, the politically progressive editor of the Sunday Literary Supplement that Cuba’s leading newspaper began to carry in 1926. Unlike Villaurrutia and Borges, Fernández de Castro had an interest in African American cultures that went well beyond the literary uses of blackness we find in the poetry of fellow countryman Emilio Ballagas. In fact, Fernández de Castro appears to have been something of a Cuban Carl Van Vechten. I will return to his translations in this chapter, using Borges’s and Villaurrutia’s versions only as initial benchmarks and points of contrast and comparison. Borges’s other Hughes translations are the focal point of the next chapter.

I begin with “I, Too” as it appeared in the 1925 *Survey Graphic* issue that became *The New Negro*, followed by Villaurrutia’s and Borges’s translations, which appeared within months of each other in Argentina and Mexico in 1930. Here and throughout the chapter, I also use boldface to flag noteworthy discrepancies in diction and structure, and I point to minor variations across the different Spanish versions in the notes.

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And I eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.

(CP, 46)

Yo también canto América
Soy el hermano oscuro.
Me hacen comer en la cocina
Cuando llegan visitas.
Pero me río,
Y como bien,
Y me pongo fuerte. 71

Mañana
Me sentaré a la mesa.
Cuando lleguen visitas.
Nadie se animará
A decírmelo
“Vete a la cocina”
Entonces.

Y tendrán vergüenza—
Además, verán lo hermoso que soy.

Yo también soy América. 72

(Placing these texts side by side reveals how closely both translations follow Hughes’s format and where they adjust the source poem’s shape. Apart from the fairly minor differences in diction between these translations, we see that Borges alters some of Hughes’s punctuation, moving the dash to the end of a different line and adding an ellipsis at the very end. He also...
drops a line, throwing off the poem’s structure slightly. Changes like these will assume greater weight in the context of my more detailed discussion of Fernández de Castro’s two versions below. For the time being, I only want to point to one major variation: the rendition of Hughes’s “darker” as “oscuro”—rather than “más oscuro”—which has two noteworthy effects. First, replacing “darker” with a less overtly racialized adjective implicitly places greater emphasis on skin color’s metaphoric value than on its social and political significance.74 Second, eschewing the comparative fixes the persona’s (racial) identity rather than making it relational. Villaurrutia’s grammatical change of “They’ll see how beautiful I am” to “They will see that I am beautiful” (Verán que soy hermoso) further stabilizes the relative states of social existence on which Hughes insists in English.

Fernández de Castro’s more complicated translations employ similar strategies to very different effect: they make Hughes’s poem more, not less, black. Fernández de Castro first met Hughes in Havana in 1930. During Hughes’s visit, the journalist-editor introduced the young poet to prominent writers and artists de color, among them Gustavo E. Urrutia, who edited “Ideales de una Raza,” a special page on black culture in El Diario’s Sunday supplement, and the national-poet-to-be Nicolás Guillén. Both Fernández de Castro and Urrutia, whom Hughes called “one of the leading journalists of Cuba,” read USAmerican newspapers and journals fairly regularly, including the Amsterdam News (New York), Crisis, and Opportunity.75 Rampersad suggests that Fernández de Castro first came across Hughes’s poetry in Countee Cullen’s Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets (1927), which included “I, Too” (Life, 1:178). The Cuban clearly owned a copy of The Weary Blues by 1928, since seven of the eight Hughes poems he translated then and in 1930 were part of that volume: “Soledad,” “The White Ones” (“Los blancos”), “Sea Calm” (“Calma en el mar”), “Poem [2]” (“Poema”), “Suicide’s Note” (“Nota de un suicida”), and “March Moon” (“Luna de Marzo”). “Afraid” (“Miedo”), from Fine Clothes to the Jew, is the only exception.

Given Fernández de Castro’s keen interest in poetry and black culture, translating Hughes was not a passing fancy for him.76 The renowned journalist produced the very first Spanish version of “I, Too”—“Yo, también…”—which appeared in the Cuban journal Social in the fall of 1928. Between 1928 and 1930 he translated a total of eight Hughes poems, as well as excerpts from Not Without Laughter. In March and April of 1930, he published another version of “I, Too” in La Revista de la Habana and El Diario de la Marina.77 “I, Too” was the only Hughes poem that Fernández de Castro translated and published twice within a short period of time; it is also the only one of Hughes’s lyrics translated into Spanish more than once by the same person.78 His translations stand out from the rest for the formal decisions he made as he carried this poem across to Cuban readers, many of whom, like his fellow editor Urrutia, were mulatos.
In Fernández de Castro’s hands, Hughes’s poem became more explicitly “militant” in each incarnation. On the one hand, Fernández de Castro claimed that “en la traducción han perdido a veces toda la fuerza e intensidad que poseen siempre en el original” (in translation we sometimes lose all the force and intensity that the original always has). On the other, perhaps to compensate for this loss, he grafted onto Hughes’s poem his own expectations of what would constitute such force and intensity, re-making Hughes into more of a protest poet than he actually was at this early stage in his career. While this view is consistent with perceptions of Hughes’s politics at the time—Cubans and Mexicans had already begun to identify him with the Left by then—the political sympathies that led him to spend a year in the Soviet Union in 1932–33 were not easily discernible from the early poems translated into Spanish. If “I, Too” could be read as more combative than contemplative, on the surface at least, the other brief Hughes lyrics that Fernández de Castro also translated were not exactly clear articulations of either black pride or radical-Left politics. For instance, no translator could have turned lines about the damaging effects of white dominance such as “O, white strong ones, /Why do you torture me?” and “So deeply scarred, / So still with silent cries” (CP, 37, 57) into ready expressions of black pride. In fact, none of the usually pithy lyrics circulating in Cuban and Mexican periodicals by the end of 1931, twenty-two in all, show Hughes in the role of the “poeta militante negro” in which Fernández de Castro would cast him five years later in El Nacional. Even if we grant that Hughes’s early blues poems may have been received as politically radical in their day, other poems in The Weary Blues and especially what some saw as the “unsanitary, insipid, and repulsing” ones in Fine Clothes to the Jew would have much more readily carried sentiments of black pride or militancy.

Rather than choosing a different poem, Fernández de Castro created with “Yo, también…” the kind of poem he thought Hughes should have written. I compare Fernández de Castro’s two versions of “I, Too,” both titled “Yo, también…,” this time side by side with my own retranslations back into English to highlight structural and rhetorical changes.

**Yo, también, honro a América**
Soy el hermano negro.

Me mandan a comer a la cocina, Cuando vienen visitas…
Pero me río, Como bien
Y así me fortalezco.

Mañana,

Me sentaré a la mesa

---

**I, too, honor America**

I am the Negro brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen, When visitors come…

But I laugh [to myself], I eat well

And so strengthen myself.

**Tomorrow,**

**I will sit [seat myself] at the table**
Y aunque vengan visitas
Nadie se atreverá
A decirme
“A la cocina, Negro.”
Al mismo tiempo
Se darán cuenta
De lo hermoso que soy,
Y se avergonzarán.
¡Yo, también soy América!  

And even though visitors will come
No one will dare
Tell me
“Off to the kitchen, negro.”
At the same time
They will realize
How beautiful I am
And they will feel ashamed
I, too, am America!

Yo, también, honro a América.
Soy el hermano Negro.
Cuando vienen visitas
me mandan a comer a la cocina.
Pero yo, río,
como bien
y así, me fortalezco.

I, too, honor America.
I am the Negro brother.
When visitors come
they send me to eat in the kitchen,
But I, laugh [to myself],
I eat well
and so, strengthen myself.

Mañana,

Tomorrow,

me sentaré a la mesa
aunque vengan visitas.
Nadie se atreverá a decirme:
“a la cocina, negro!”

I will sit [seat myself] at the table
although visitors will come.
No one will dare tell me
“off to the kitchen, negro!”

Entonces

Then

verán lo hermoso que yo soy,
Y se avergonzarán.

they will see how beautiful I am,
and they will feel ashamed.

Yo, también soy América.  

I, too, am America.

There are two remarkable differences between the source poem and the
two target texts. One is structural. Note that Hughes wrote this poem in
three, not two, stanzas framed by a one-line refrain. As we will see, ad-
justments to the poem’s overall structure in both these translations reso-
nate with smaller, similarly startling alterations that Fernández de Castro
made throughout. The other difference is far less obvious: it is the accent
in “América” that prevents it from reflexively collapsing into the English
“America,” better known by many in the Western Hemisphere as Los Es-
tados Unidos, the United States of America. Unlike its famous historical
precedent, José Martí’s “nuestra América,” the “América” in these trans-
lations potentially encompasses all the Americas.  The small accent that
Spanish supplies changes dramatically what and how this noun signifies to a
non-English-speaking American, then and now. In a sense, “América” functions as a false cognate. It eases the poem’s transfer to a different linguistic and cultural context without, however, reconciling multiple and divergent meanings. Of course, all Spanish translations of “I, Too” share the inescapable dia-
critical difference in América when compared to “America.” The disparity assumes greater significance in this particular case because Fernández de Castro also decided to translate “I…sing” as honro instead of canto, the verb all other translators preferred. There are two typical variations of this line. Borges’s “Yo también canto América” and Villaurrutia’s “Yo también canto a América.” The latter personifies the grammatical object to in-
voke Whitmanian multitudes. Replacing “sing” with honro prepares the path for rendering “I, Too” much more equivocal than Hughes’s own verb choice would allow. The sounds of alliteration link honro with hermano more strongly than the verb canto would have and thereby tonally under-
score the persona’s desire for equality and brotherhood. More important, however, the shift from “sing” to honro infuses the persona’s singing with a specific purpose: that of honoring an object that has now also shifted, namely from “America” to América. The substitution of a univocal verb also dulls Hughes’s irony, making the poem more praise song than social critique, at least initially. This opening note is inconsistent with choices Fernández de Castro made later on in his translation(s). At the outset, it is the persona’s presence, rather than his singing, that honors America. Be-
cause the persona in Fernández de Castro’s version need not be a bard, the poem’s so-called message can be more easily detached from its aesthetic value. The ambiguous quality of singing that sounds at once criticism and praise is at the root of Hughes’s layered irony in “I, Too.”

To the extent that Fernández de Castro’s translation retains some of Hughes’s irony, that irony now serves a different purpose. Within the trans-
lation’s contrastive two-stanza format, the “I” moves smoothly from a state of social and political exile (stanza one) to one of inclusion (stanza two). Although, as in Hughes’s poem, the ability of the hermano negro to honor and hence become América stems from the very stumbling blocks in his path, Fernández de Castro offers more certainty about the persona’s ability to overcome obstacles. Like Hughes’s “too,” the adverb también, wedged in between subject and verb, announces the existence of such hindrances be-
fore the poem details them. Part of the persona’s identity resides within this appositive, whose grammatical position is analogous to the persona’s social position: he has to make a place for himself in a situation that does not, but should, include him—grammatically and socially. In Hughes’s poem, writing poetry (“I sing”) creates the possibility for social acceptance through self-
acceptance (“I am”). Poetry, then, is not a vehicle for social inclusion but a medium in which the poet can imagine such a state. While “I, Too,” posits that singing confers being, it does not show actions to produce predictable,
measurable effects, in this case, remedies for racial discrimination. Structurally, Hughes’s poem does not suggest a course of action beyond singing. In the second stanza, Hughes relocates the persona from the kitchen to the dining room without explaining that sudden change from being hidden away on public occasions—“when company comes”—to the future possibility of grudging social acceptance (through embarrassment or shame) and eventual respect (appreciation for beauty).

The 1930 “Yo, también…” entirely dispenses with the wistful note of uncertainty on which Hughes ends his second stanza (“then”). In Fernández de Castro’s earlier version, the added negro already appears in an emphatic position at the end of the line. In the 1930 translation, that word also moves to the end of a stanza, which causes the adverb “then” to be pushed to the beginning of the next sentence to connect it grammatically with the last stanza. In the process, Hughes’s “besides” drops out altogether, so that “Besides, / They’ll see how beautiful I am,” which had initially been rendered as “Al mismo tiempo / Se darán cuenta / De lo hermoso que soy” (At the same time, / They’ll take note / Of how beautiful I am) turns into “Entonces / verán lo hermoso que yo soy” (Then / they will see how beautiful I am). The change is literally more visible here than in the earlier version, which also retains Hughes’s capital letters at the beginning of each line. Like the addition of the second negro, this revision in the translation is willful, and the effect it produces, especially when combined with other interpretive decisions, is substantial. The second version restores Hughes’s original three-stanza shape, but added line spaces after “mañana” and “entonces” force a formal symmetry that does not exist in Hughes’s poem. Thematically, what results from this symmetry is an unproblematic progression from present discrimination to future acceptance, with two, not three, stops along the way: “tomorrow” and “then,” rather than “tomorrow,” “then,” and “besides.” The shorter third stanza is now the direct outcome of an earlier action on the part of the persona to which all reactions—fearful silence, apperception of beauty, and resulting shame—are directly attributable. In both translations, the act of seating oneself at the table (“me sentaré a la mesa”) rather than simply staying there or being invited to sit,89 causes others to take note of the speaker and to experience shame at the same time (avergonzarse is closer to feeling humiliated). The reflexive verb sentarse registers a sense of rebellious action more strongly than its English counterpart “to sit” can. This is very different from Hughes’s “I’ll be at the table,” which is silent on how that state of being will have been achieved.

A fundamental divergence between “I, Too” and “Yo, también…” comes into view here: the difference between ontology and politics, that is, a state or quality of being versus a social position one assumes. “I, Too” values the speaker’s being, not his actions; singing, for Hughes, is a mode of being more than an action. That Hughes in his Selected Poems (1959) changed “I’ll be at the table” to “I’ll sit at the table” (CP, 625) does not much alter
this stasis. Withholding directional, kinetic verbs, Hughes allows us no certainty on how equality is achieved, or even what it might mean. In his poem we know neither how the speaker moves from one social space to another nor what precise roles his actions and the acknowledgment of his beauty play in such a movement. Hughes’s placement of “besides” at the opening of the third stanza suggests that aesthetics, though they might precede ethics—the speaker is beautiful before he is perceived as such by certain others—do not prompt moral behavior; the speaker’s beauty, be it innate or perceptual, is not the reason that he sits at the table. “Besides” separates equality, a possible result of the ethical choice to abstain from racial discrimination, from the perception of just how beautiful the speaker is, implying that he is already aware of his own beauty. The final measure of the singer’s darker beauty is, of course, the poem itself.

“I, Too” also leaves us unsure about the exact source of “their” shame: does it come from not having noticed the darker brother’s beauty before or from having denied him equal standing in spite of his beauty? Does sudden awareness of beauty cause feelings of shame, or have those at the table been humiliated into seeing, and appreciating, the persona’s beauty because he refused to leave the table at the appointed time? By avoiding causation, allowing only for a spatial and a temporal movement—“tomorrow,” “then”—that trail off into the contemplative “besides,” Hughes poses poetry’s ethical and political efficacy as a question. Related to this question is the doubt Hughes sows through the relational comparative “darker,” both about the persona’s racial identity and about who “they” might be. Although the opposite of “darker” is, of course, not “white” but “lighter,” USAmerican readers, conditioned by a specific history of race relations, would have tended to resist a comparative that, in addition to unsettling racial binaries, also opens up the no less discomfiting possibility of color and class distinctions within racial groups.

Apparently dissatisfied with the poem’s searching philosophical mode, Fernández de Castro tried to streamline its political message. In his versions, conscious acts of resistance to racial injustice result in equality and “at the same time” force the acknowledgment of the negro’s beauty: “Al mismo tiempo / Se darán cuenta / De lo hermoso que soy.” In this scenario, action, or activism, becomes the only possible guarantor of political and social equality because it produces shame, humiliation, and guilt. The translations’ insistence throughout on stark contrasts and active confrontations also cements the implicit sense that repetition is stasis. Doing so invalidates repetition as an aesthetic principle and an imaginative vehicle for social change. Eschewing subtlety, Fernández de Castro substitutes “y aunque” (and even though) for Hughes’s repeated “when” in the second “when company comes,” which bolsters the notion of variation-as-change by rendering it literally visible. Yet in the end the pervasive adversarial mood this translator creates as he systematically infuses the poem with undertones of
conflict puts literary form at odds with political content, making the visions of brotherhood he had initially projected less than convincing. The final declaration, “Yo, también soy América,” now stripped of its exclamation point, rings hollow, especially after the translator has dispensed with the dash that dangled the final line from the rest of the poem to avoid conveying a sense of simple fait accompli.

Fernández de Castro’s repeated use of negro in place of Hughes’s “darker” is, to me, the strongest sign of this Cuban translator’s discontent with the young Hughes’s poetics and his politics. This problematic adjective apparently gave all Hughes’s translators considerable pause. Oddly enough, only post-1950s translators chose the most literal option, más oscuro. Fernández de Castro’s version is unusual not because it forgoes the comparative. Other translators did this as well; in fact, Lozano, Gáler, and Toruño used the same adjective, negro. Nobody else, however, repeated the word in the poem. Fernández de Castro not only repeats it but also adds an exclamation point in his second translation. “Nobody’ll dare / Say to me, / ‘Eat in the kitchen,’ / then” becomes, first, “Nadie se atreverá / A decírmelo / ‘a la cocina, negro’” and then, with the first line break removed, “Nadie se atreverá a decírmelo: / ‘a la cocina, negro!’” Although this echo adds thematic emphasis, as a formal device, it is inconsistent with the erasure of other repetitions.

The adjectival negro stands out even more in the Diario version because of the now-restored line space after América. In its new location, the adjectival increases the poem’s sting, creating a harsher tone than Hughes’s poem has. This harshness in turn sharpens the contrast between the adjectival and the nominative uses of negro so that the poem’s opening reclamation of a loathsome racial epithet, and the stereotype that goes along with it, can come into relief as a triumphant assertion of racial pride. The choice is that much more significant because Fernández de Castro’s interest in racial issues and Afro-Cuban culture made him well aware that the Spanish negro would have had a far more offensive ring to a Cuban than to an African American from the USA, who at the time would have preferred the term to “black.” The more acceptably permeable color line in the Hispanic Americas, especially in the Caribbean, accounts for such different responses.

In the absence of the infamous one-drop rule and Jim Crow laws, racial taxonomies in the Hispanic Americas, which focus on color and phenotype more than on blood, have remained more elastic. This does not, however, make their effects any more benign. Even in “a distinctly Negroid country” such as Cuba, one cannot disregard the existence of what Hughes called a “triple color line” (IW, 10). During the early twentieth century in particular, an educated dark-complexioned member of the Cuban middle class would not have identified as de raza negra. He or she would likely have preferred terms such as de color or mulato/a to negr/o/a. Although also used as a colloquial term of endearment by Cubans of all hues, this label still spelled lower-class economic and social status. Fernández de Castro pushes
the (Spanish) negro into close, and troubling, proximity to its seeming
English cognates, the capitalized Negro in “hermano Negro” and the low-
ercase negro in “‘vete a la cocina, negro!’” Another English source text
surfaces here. This text, if we can call it that, is not Hughes’s poem but
consists of the USAmerican discourses of blackness and on race in which his
poem is embedded. In the former, “Negro,” as in the phrase New Negro,
symbolizes racial pride; in the latter, “negro” is closer to “nigger.” Both
discourses mediate the transition from Hughes’s poem, which employs nei-
ther word, to Fernández de Castro’s translations.93 The latter’s choices,
however, do not make his translations any less Cuban; in fact, the Spanish
negro accomplishes quite the opposite. By the time the word resurfaces, it
has brought about an unexpected darkening of the poem’s implied, and
silent, interlocutors. The Cuban setting loosens and shifts racial categories
assumed to be more rigid and predictable in Hughes’s poem. They remain
so despite the fact that Hughes’s own language, especially the comparative
“darker,” worries assumptions bound up in the racial dualities that most
USAmerican readers would almost reflexively supply. Any darker brother
would automatically have been coded as black rather than perceived as a
darker shade of white. What USAmerican readers at the time would likely
have apprehended as a black/white conflict, Cubans would more readily
have understood as an intraracial situation in which the lighter implicit in
darker would signify mulato.

By insisting on negro and inviting readers to supply the silent mulato,
Fernández de Castro effectively cubanized Hughes’s poem. In the same way,
Guillén cubanized Hughes by calling him a “mulatico” (little mulatto) who,
more than anything, wanted to be “negro de verdad” (really, truly black).94
What Guillén’s affectionate appellation implied is that, in Cuba, Hughes
was a mulato rather than a negro, someone who would already have sat at
the table, to be sent off to the proverbial kitchen only when certain foreign
company came. In I Wonder As I Wander, Hughes actually recounts being
denied entrance to a USAmerican-controlled Havana beach and being ar-
rested when he resisted (IW, 11–15). The incident, quite an embarrassment
to his Cuban hosts, was also reported in “Ideales de una Raza.”

WHO INFLUENCED WHOM?

One of these hosts was Nicolás Guillén. Like Hughes himself, the Cuban
poet was a mulatico and of the same age. Although Guillén, who is at the
core of my fourth chapter, did not translate any of Hughes’s poems, he is
worth mentioning here because many have taken his poetry, most notably
his “Motivos de son” from 1930, as exemplary of the influence Hughes’s
early verse supposedly exerted on Afro-Hispanic American writers. These
kinds of influence studies are chiefly built on suppositions grounded in precious little historical and textual evidence. Faced with a lack of concrete historical evidence and armed with comparisons that liken Guillén’s *poemas-son* (son poems) to Hughes’s blues poetry, critics have made much of the largely unrecorded conversations Guillén and Hughes had in March of 1930. Maribel Cruzado and Mary Hricko have even gone so far as to declare that Guillén himself translated Hughes’s poems, which he decidedly did not. His personal interactions with Hughes in the spring of 1930 were probably what finally motivated Guillén to put pen to paper and produce eight poems that differed dramatically from his earlier verse. But what literary influence Hughes’s poems had on Guillén’s was unquestionably mediated by Fernández de Castro’s translations, especially of “I, Too.”

What I have called the cubanizing of Hughes prepared the textual ground on which the two different sets of cultural values and sensibilities that Hughes and Guillén embodied could and did meet. It is not coincidental that the *Motivos* were first published in the same *página negra* in the *Diario de la Marina* that would feature Fernández de Castro’s second translation of “I, Too” only weeks later, in April of 1930. That Guillén’s poem had appeared in “Ideales” before that retranslation may also explain some of the formal changes in the second version of “Yo, también . . . ,” notably the looser strophic arrangement and the added exclamation point.

Guillén, in fact, dedicated the *Motivos* to Fernández de Castro, not to Hughes. This, to my mind, is a resounding tribute to the fact that Fernández de Castro was the one who introduced him to Hughes’s poems not once but twice, in 1928 and again in 1930. By the time he met Hughes in person, also through Fernández de Castro, Guillén was already well aware of this and other Hughes poems in translation, having no doubt seen the journalist’s first version of “I, Too” in *Social* two years earlier. Guillén likely reencountered the translation in March of 1930 in the short-lived *Revista de La Habana*, along with Fernández de Castro’s article “Presentación de Langston Hughes.” In that article, the journalist attributed to Hughes’s poems “un vigoroso orgullo racial, una combatividad desconocida hasta el momento presente por parte de los productores intelectuales de esa raza” (a strong racial pride, a combativeness heretofore unknown among the intellectuals of his race). In his final translation of “I, Too,” then, Fernández de Castro tried to encapsulate in a single word—*negro*—the political energy of the militant racial pride that he had imputed to Hughes’s poetry only a month earlier. That Fernández de Castro’s translations of “I, Too” resonated with Guillén is evident from certain thematic and textual affinities between these translations and the poems from the *Motivos* that explicitly stage conflicts between *negros* and *mulatos* or, more often, *mulatas*. One of these poems, “Ayé me dijeron negro,” is of particular interest because in it Guillén plays on the same racial theme as “I, Too” does: hiding from
view dark-skinned family members “when company comes.” (More on this in chapter 4.) This social practice was familiar to Cubans from well before the USAmerican military occupation after the Spanish-Cuban-American War.

Like Fernández de Castro’s translations and unlike Hughes’s “I, Too,” “Ayé me dijeron negro”—which Hughes published as “Last Night Somebody Called Me Darky” in Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén (1948)—hinges on the word negro. Hughes himself may have remembered Fernández de Castro’s unorthodox translation of “darker” as “negro” when he rejected, though not without considerable hesitation, both “Negro” and “black” as desirable options for rendering that poem’s title and opening line in English. To the extent, then, that Guillén’s poemas-son were influenced by Hughes’s early lyrics and in their turn affected Hughes’s own thinking about race and color years later when he set out to translate those very poems, Fernández de Castro’s translations of “I, Too” played a decisive role in shaping that influence. They refracted “I, Too” in the prism of a Cuban discourse on race and color at whose core resides the figure of the mulata. As they insinuate themselves into Fernández de Castro’s translations, the discursive properties of this feminine icon unsettle gender along with racial categories. In “Yo, también…” the persona is negro, unlike Hughes himself, who looks very mulato in the photograph printed above the translations in the Diario (see figure 4). Once author and persona appear as more distinct than they would in “I, Too,” because they share neither the same color nor the same language, it also becomes less plausible to postulate shared gender.

That most of Hughes’s Hispanic American translators, including Fernández de Castro, were not black according to racial standards in the USA further complicates the points I have made about mediation and literary influence by adding into the mix the cultural differences that exist.

Figure 4. Page from El Diario de la Marina, April 27, 1930, with José Antonio Fernández de Castro’s translation’s of three Hughes poems. Courtesy of George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville.
within, as well as between, individual nation states. One need only think of languages such as Brazilian Portuguese, Misquito, or Quechua to appreciate the existence of myriad linguistic differences within the Hispanic Americas. The geopolitical entity typically known as Latin America (among English-speaking North Americans and Europeans) is by no means as homogeneous as surface appearances, produced by the use of the once-imperial Spanish as the region’s major lingua franca, might suggest. Because the legacies of slavery are unevenly and unequally shared throughout the Americas, the racial categories and social practices to which slavery gave rise during and after the nineteenth century can differ widely across the Hispanic Americas, not just between the USA and the rest of the hemisphere. The cultural and political valences of blackness were and are significantly different in parts of the Hispanic Americas, such as Cuba and Brazil, where the de jure and de facto abolition of plantation slavery occurred late in the nineteenth century and was thus not a distant memory during the early twentieth. The fact that there are notable differences in how racial distinctions have affected Hispanic American societies internally, in relation to each other and to the USA, has still not taken sufficient hold in comparative literary scholarship originating in the USAmerican academy. In that academy, assertions of cultural equivalence have been key constitutive elements in the formation and legitimization of academic fields such as African American and African diaspora studies.

The fact that Hispanic Americans appreciated Hughes’s poems—in the form of translations, essays, and other kinds of approbation—says little about the relative presence or absence of antiblack prejudice in those parts of the Americas. What it does suggest is that both Hughes’s poems and his politics were quite compatible with the anti-imperialist sentiments that had flared up again after the Spanish-Cuban-American War and continued to simmer in many parts of the Hispanic Americas for much of the twentieth century. In countries that preferred to see antiblack racism entirely as an import from the USA, what fell through the cracks, however, was due attention to local racial tensions and disparities. Ironically, Hispanic Americans’ interest in black literature from the USA, more so than from either the anglophone or francophone Caribbean, did not necessarily translate into greater attention to racial conflicts in their own backyards. Nor, for that matter, did it invariably make Hispanic Americans more aware of artistic efforts by the writers of African descent in their midst. This disconnect might explain why Hughes’s work could be embraced by so many different groups in the Hispanic Americas and yet that embrace did not translate into any lasting support for Afro-Hispanic American writers across color lines. Hispanic Americans may have included Hughes and a smattering of other New Negro poets in their anthologies. But in the end, they did at home the very thing they criticized abroad: they excluded from accounts of
Hispanic American literature the work of writers who explored race relations critically.

**TRANSLATION AND DIASPORA**

Comparisons of the sort that I proffer in this chapter inevitably prompt a reexamination of the concept of diaspora. As valuable as this idea has been to African American and postcolonial studies, it has also left in its wake a host of unexamined theories about cultural equivalences across national borders. Although the rhetoric of racial origins and essences has largely been replaced, in literary studies and elsewhere, by a more dynamic emphasis on shared historical experiences, the latter has spawned no less problematic assumptions about, and indeed expectations of, cultural homogeneity among the various parts of African, Asian, and other diasporas. In academic theory and practice, such assumptions have begun to flatten out the historical dimensions of diasporas’ local communities, refashioning them into less varied cultural geographies than they actually are. What has been lost, at least to some extent, in the rush to assert transnational links between cultures is the very commitment to exploring the racial and ethnic heterogeneities that had energized diaspora studies in the first place and had offered ways to imagine communities in other than national configurations. Diaspora studies have developed their own protocols for erasing or suppressing “cultural asymmetries” (in Venuti’s suggestive phrase from *The Scandals of Translation*) and for rendering invisible local “foreign” elements that would produce incoherence. Homogenizing protocols have left their imprint on most comparatist projects, mainly in the form of transhistorical analogies that presume misleading degrees of likeness and equality among local diasporic constituents. For example, that African slavery was a colonial practice throughout most of the New World does not justify the assumption that discourses on race, literary and otherwise, function in similar ways in different languages and social contexts across the Americas. Because translation can be “uniquely revealing of the asymmetries that have structured international affairs for centuries,” it offers a particularly useful framework in which to rethink comparisons based on the belief that race, culture, and class interact in analogous ways in various American contexts or that kinship always involves likeness. That USAmerican comparatists would be the ones to have produced most critical narratives of literary blackness in the Americas is a reflection that “the economic and political ascendancy of the United States [has] reduced foreign languages and cultures to minorities in relation to its language and culture.” Ironically enough, diaspora, in these narratives, becomes “an effective way of disseminating the legitimacy of the nationalist form itself,” that is, of upholding nationalism “along racial and ethnic lines.” Instead
of considering intellectual traffic in the Americas as a two-way street, most USAmerican scholars have drawn patterns of cultural influence that spread in one direction only: from north to south. The field of African American (literary) studies is no exception to this rule. In inquiries into the “the shared cultural forms used by black writers to reconnect to a common, ancestral resonance,” which started to multiply in the 1970 and 1980s, it is a critical commonplace to assert that African American writers based in the USA were instrumental in disseminating ideas of literary blackness across the Americas and particularly in the Hispanic Americas. In his role as an inter-American cultural broker, Langston Hughes has been an especially popular example of such cultural exports. What has been largely ignored, however, is the likelihood that Hughes’s work as a translator and his sustained contact with Hispanic American authors affected his own views on how racial politics aligned with literary aesthetics.

That Fernández de Castro’s mediation of the literary relationship between Hughes and Guillén went in both directions shows that one cannot simply assume “deeply rooted interconnections among writers of the black diaspora.” Unless we wish to posit that such interconnections are essentially nondiscursive, a possibility that Mullen’s figure of deep roots implies, we have little choice but to concede that literary relationships and the national and international communities that form through and around them are always mediated by larger discursive formations. This fairly basic point has special significance in international settings where texts cross not only political but also linguistic borders. The discourses of blackness that spread worldwide alongside imperial discourses on race are a case in point. Discourses of blackness flourished during the early decades of the twentieth century as writers of African descent and their writings traveled, jointly or separately, between destinations such as Paris, New York, Madrid, Havana, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires. What Brent Edwards has termed black internationalism was constituted by a plethora of writing in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, among the better-known languages. The specifically literary discourses of blackness that evolved in the context of the African diaspora not only intersected with but were vital parts of the historical avant-gardes we call modernist in English. Hughes’s poems in Spanish translation exemplify the intense heterolingualism that makes it impossible to conceive of, let alone analyze, often far-flung correlations between writers and literary texts without taking careful measure of the role of translation.