CHAPTER THREE

Buenos Aires Blues

Modernism in the Creole City

Au centre, une logique urbaine occidentale, alignée, ordonné, forte comme la langage française. De l'autre, le foisonnement ouvert de la langage créole dans la logique de Texaco. Mêlant ces deux langues, rêvant de toutes les langues, la ville créole parle en secret un langage neuf et ne craint plus Babel. Ici la trame géométrique d’une grammaire urbaine bien apprise, dominatrice; par-là, la couronne d’une culture-mosaïque à dévoiler prise dans les hiéroglyphes du béton, du bois, de caisses et du fibrocinment. La ville créole restitue à l’urbaniste que voudrait l’oublier les souches d’une identité neuve: multilingue, multiracial, multi-historique, ouverte, sensible à la diversité du monde. Tout a changé.

[In the center, an occidental urban logic, all lined up, ordered, strong like the French language. On the other side, Creole’s open profusion according to Texaco’s logic. Mingling these two tongues, dreaming of all tongues, the Creole city speaks a new language in secret and no longer fears Babel. Here the well-learned, domineering, geometrical grid of an urban grammar; over there the crown of a mosaic culture to be unveiled, caught in the hieroglyphics of cement, crate wood, asbestos. The Creole city returns to the urban planner, who would like to ignore it, the roots of a new identity: multilingual, multiracial, multihistorical, open, sensible to the world’s diversity. Everything has changed.]

—Patrick Chamoiseau, Texaco

Mostradme un blanco más poeta que Langston Hughes.
Traedme un Duke Ellington.

[Show me a white man who is more of a poet than Langston Hughes. / Give me a Duke Ellington.]

Raúl González Tuñón, “Ku Klux Klan”

In 1938, after having spent several months in Valencia and Madrid as a correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American, Hughes, along with most of the other “international,” decided to leave the war-torn capital. The city
had been under siege since November of 1936, and provisions and ammunition were running low. In *I Wonder As I Wander*, Hughes recounts how, in “an alcoholic fog,” he hastily stuffed his bags and pockets full of books, manuscripts, banderillas, shrapnel, and other souvenirs. A wine bottle from the farewell party Hemingway and others had given for him still dangling from his neck, the inebriated Hughes had to rely on the good graces of one of his friends to help him cart his belongings to the bus station in the wee hours of the following morning. That friend, who did “not object to being a pack mule,” was none other than the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén. The comedy with which Hughes invests this exit scene relieves the sense of emergency that had been building for pages.

I was so tired, so sleepy, and so unsteady on my legs, and the things I had in my hands, under my arms, and in my pockets were so heavy that I had to stop every few hundred yards and put everything down to rest. Guillén declared that we were going to miss the bus if I didn’t hurry. To get another permit for another bus on another date from the military authorities might take weeks. I replied that I didn’t care—to go ahead if he wanted to—just drop my stuff on the ground and leave me.

“**Caramba, chico,**” Guillén cried, “Madrid might be cut off from the rest of the world soon—you might never get out.”

“**Nichevo,**” I said. “**Que le hace.** Damn if I care! I can’t walk any faster with this stuff—and I’m not going to leave my typewriter here, and these books that the writers have given me, nor my banderillas and my few clothes I’ve got. So go ahead.”

But Guillén stuck with me. (*IW*, 394)

Another image flickers here, ushered in by the incongruous Russian word Hughes flings at Guillén, who would have been much more likely to use the expletive “¡coño!” than “caramba”: that of an abandoned, cursing traveler sitting atop a mountain of luggage at a train station in the midst of central Asia. There is, however, a significant difference. Unlike his earlier travel companions, the Cuban stayed with Hughes, and they caught the bus to Valencia together.

**NEXUS MADRID**

During the Spanish Civil War, Madrid was a place bustling with travelers, journalists, and expatriates, much like Paris had been in the 1920s. For African Americans such as Hughes, the city of “[f]lamenco and explosives” (*IW*, 391) was a place where it was possible to “embrace both the Communists’ internationalism and their own vision of pan-Africanism simultaneously.”⁴ Hemingway was there on the same reporting mission as Hughes and Nicolás
Guillén, and so were many others. They mingled with Spanish writers at the Madrid chapter of the Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas para la Defensa de la Cultura over suppers of beans and onions, the sound of explosions and antiaircraft fire only occasionally interrupted by Guillén’s singing. Members of the Alianza included the poets José Bergamín, Rafael Alberti, Miguel Hernández Gilabert, León Felipe, and Manuel Altolaguirre, all of them members of the Generation of ’27, which had also included Federico García Lorca before he was murdered by Nationalist militia in 1936, days before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The Hispanic American artists whom Hughes mentions meeting in addition to their Peninsular colleagues include the composers Amadeo Roldán (Cuba) and Silvestre Revueltas (Mexico), the musicologist Vicente Salas Viu (Chile), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), and the young poets Octavio Paz (Mexico) and Pablo Neruda (Chile) (Essays, 150–51; Life, 1:345–55). As Franco’s siege went on, Madrid became a veritable haven for modernist artists of all stripes, brought together by the fight against fascism. Many of them were avowed communists, some, like Guillén and Neruda, card-carrying comrades. Hughes had already met some of them, notably Neruda, at the International Writers’ Congress in Paris in 1935, to which he makes brief reference at the end of chapter 7 of I Wonder. Naturally they all read one another’s work. Hughes recounts that he “was busy translating, with the aid of Rafael Alberti and Manuel Altolaguirre, the ‘Gypsy Ballads’ of Federico García Lorca, and his play, Bodas de Sangre” (IW, 388). Alberti, in turn, paid tribute to Hughes by translating his poetry. In August 1937, he published Spanish versions of four of Hughes’s poems in El Mono Azul, the Alianza’s journal: “Yo Soy Negro” (“Negro”), “Estoy haciendo un camino” (“Florida Road Workers”), “Hombre convertido en hombres” (“Man into Men”), and “Yo también” (I, Too”). These poems followed Miguel Alejandro’s translations of “Good Morning, Revolution!” (“¡Buenos Dias, Revolución!”) and a section of “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” (“El Waldorf-Astoria [Fragmento]”) in Nueva Cultura (Valencia) in 1936 (see figures 2 and 3 in the previous chapter).

One of the more extraordinary products of this congregation of poets and soldiers was the pamphlet Romancero de los Voluntarios de la Libertad from 1937, which collected verse written and sung by soldiers in the trenches and at the graves of fallen comrades. Their songs, some of which had been scribbled on parts of uniforms, followed Alberti’s “A las Brigadas Internacionales” and Hughes’s “Song of Spain,” which opened the collection. The pamphlet was edited by the German novelist Gustav Regler, then the political commissar of Garibaldi Brigade. Perhaps the most unusual aspect of this publication is not just that it was illustrated with various unidentified drawings but that it featured poems in all sorts of different languages—from Spanish, French, and English to Russian, Polish, Italian, and German. Sometimes the authors identified themselves by their full names; others used only first names (Adam, Ilja, Fred) or initials (E. B. and H. G.)
or preferred to remain anonymous. Among the better-known writers who contributed to his collection were Edwin Rolfe, who befriended Hughes while the latter was in Spain, and the German Communists Erich Weinert, Hans Marchwitza, and Ludwig Detsinyi, as well as the Italian Giorgio Braccialarghe.

Compared with the fleeting contacts Hughes made at the International Writers Congress in Paris, which he attended right before setting out for Spain in 1935, the interactions he had with major modernists from both Europe and other parts of the world in Barcelona, Valencia, and especially Madrid were far more intense and sustained. Yet these connections have spurred surprisingly scant comparative scholarship. What little work there is on Hughes’s time in Spain has concentrated either on Hughes and García Lorca, whom Hughes had never met face to face, or on Hughes’s contact with the International Brigades. If Hughes’s collaborations with Alberti and other members of the Generation of ’27 were productive, his associations with the Hispanic American writers he also encountered in Spain proved even more so. In addition to Neruda, Paz, and Carpentier, Hughes also met the Argentine poet Raúl González Tuñón, who had arrived in Spain in 1935 and published La rosa blindada to great acclaim the same year García Lorca was executed. Although Hughes himself does not mention Tuñón, Guillén does, and Tuñón himself remembers Hughes. The Argentine occupies an important place in my critical narrative on the reception of Hughes’s writing in Buenos Aires later on in this chapter. Although Tuñón never translated Hughes, at least as far as I know, the chapter epigraph indicates that he had read Hughes’s poetry even before traveling to Spain. Indeed, as I argue, the two were kindred spirits in many ways: two modernist globetrotter-poets on the fringes of their respective countries.

I noted previously that some of Hughes’s later poems, especially Montage of a Dream Deferred and ASK YOUR MAMA, are now being discussed within literary modernist frameworks. With few exceptions, however, the poems from The Weary Blues and Fine Clothes to the Jew continue to languish in the critical limbo of ethno-poetry, while the poems and poetry collections from the 1930s, such as A New Song, have been largely dismissed as too political to qualify as lyric poetry. The poems that fall outside both categories—many of them imagist poems—have typically been consigned to silence. In this chapter, I pick up the threads of my argument from chapter 1 in connection with Anita Patterson’s contention that “even [the] simplest, most documentary and most historically engaged [of Hughes’s] poems evince a characteristically modernist preoccupation with the figurative implications of form.” Rather than focus on poems that place Hughes in the context of transatlantic modernisms, as both Edwards and Patterson do, I continue to situate his verse in the hemispheric context of the Hispanic Americas. My focus in what follows is on Argentina, where the majority of the Spanish translations of Hughes’s writings were published. Extending
my discussion beyond historically engaged poems to Hughes’s politically engaged verse, I argue that not all modernist writers separated the aesthetics of language art from their political convictions. Such partitioning, which Newcomb rightly identifies as “subterranean formalism,” occurred far more frequently on the part of their readers. Is it only out of sheer neglect that, until quite recently, the politics of fascism in Anglo-American modernism have been tacitly swept under the rug of formalist poetics? How is Eliot’s notorious anti-Semitism, preserved in published drafts of The Waste Land, any less a form of political engagement than Hughes’s antilynching or pro-socialist poems? It is Guillén who reminds us of these disjunctions within modernism in his 1967 eulogy for Hughes:

¿Por qué no recordar que este siglo es también el de Proust o el de Joyce? ¿Por qué no va a ocupar el artista negro un sitio en la cultura americana y universal, abandonando o reduciendo las fuentes del arte nacional y folklórico? Ni digo que no…. Pero difícilmente hubiera podido ese artista—y no ya en los días en que Hughes surgió, sino ahora mismo—escrito algo como Ulises o En busca del tiempo perdido, dos obras maestras de la literatura universal, es cierto, mientras los negros eran asados vivos en el Sur, no sé si por lectores de Proust o de Joyce, pero sin duda por salvajes de la peor naturaleza, que había—que hay—que exterminar a balazos tanto como a poemas.

[Why not remember that this is also the century of Proust and Joyce? Why won’t the black artist occupy a place in the culture of America and the world after abandoning or exhausting the founts of national art and folklore? I am not saying that he won’t…. But only with great difficulty could such that artist—and not just when Hughes grew up but also today—have written anything on the order of Ulysses or Remembrance of Things Past, surely two masterpieces of world literature, while blacks were burned alive in the South not, I suppose, by readers of Proust or of Joyce but no doubt by low-life savages that had to be wiped out with bullets and poems; they still do.]12

Guillén points here to the continued necessity for poetry as a weapon against antiblack racism in a register that anticipates the political rhetoric of the Black Arts movement, notably in the poetry of Amiri Baraka. His remarks also imply that societal exigencies and political engagements might have compromised the status of black artists’ work in relation to the so-called masterpieces of world literature. There is no question that this has been the case. Academic scholarship, certainly in the USA, has almost always greeted politically committed literature with disdain. The division of modernisms into high and low, which is a symptom and a measure of this scorn, is indicative of two kinds of problematic innovations. The first one is topical. Socially and politically committed modernist poets turned to spaces located outside of the walls of what Nietzsche once disparagingly called
“the garden of knowledge.” These modernist fringe spaces are distinctly urban, populated by individuals and groups whom our varied societies have preferred to consign to invisibility and even criminalize. They have been called “low-down,” in Hughes’s words, or Harlem, arrabales (suburbs or barrios), baldios (wastelands), or hampas (underworlds). In the 1920s and especially the 1930s, modernist poets such as Hughes insisted that such public spaces were distinctive cultural settings, not sites bereft of any form of culture, as they were for Eliot and other elite modernists. The second, equally troubling novelty was that poets themselves were turning away from privileged spaces, among them lyrical interiority, and toward what one might call public intervention. They were actively looking for new ways in which poetry might address audiences beyond the intellectual elite. Poetry was written to be recited, read out loud, and circulated in the form of pamphlets and leaflets or in inexpensive editions. Beatriz Sarlo has called the increasing public role of literature one of the most vital cultural phenomena of this period: “La función de la poesía es pública de un modo desconocido hasta entonces” (Poetry’s function was public in a manner heretofore unknown).

MODERNISMS HIGH AND LOW, NORTH AND SOUTH

Modernist studies have been dominated by formalist methodologies since their inception. This scholarly bias has resulted in the wholesale marginalization of those poets—black, white, and anything in between—whose writings combine aesthetics with social or political critique. Most of the Harlem Renaissance writers have thus been an uncomfortable fit for studies of literary modernism. Until quite recently, Hughes’s work was no exception. In the last two decades, there have only been a handful of book-length studies that place Harlem Renaissance writers alongside USAmerican modernists of other ethnicities. Most notable among them are Michael North’s The Dialect of Modernism (1994), George Hutchinson’s The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (1995), Charles Scruggs and Lee Vandemarr’s Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History (1998), and Anita Patterson’s Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernisms (2008). Hutchinson not only rejects the black / white divide within modernist studies but also emphasizes that Anglo-American modernists did not exactly constitute an aesthetically and ideologically unified group, a point that is often neglected.
intimately related... One reason for the superficial appeal of assertions of a radical disjunction between black and white modernisms is that traditional definitions of modernism that have excluded African American artists have also excluded the white artists with whom they associated. By and large, African Americanists have taken Eurocentric conceptions of modernism as representative for so-called Anglo-American modernists generally.... Indeed, since the late 1930s the institutionalization of “high” and “lost generation” brands of literary modernism has done much to obscure the affiliations between white American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.19

Racial difference was by no means the only, and perhaps not even the most significant, dividing line among USAmerican modernists in the interwar years. Eliot, Pound, Stein, and other “high” modernists did indeed inhabit spaces that were quite unlike those in which we find Hughes, Waldo Frank, John Dos Passos, and Edwin Rolfe. The difference was not just a matter of geography—Paris and London versus Manhattan, Moscow, or Madrid, for instance. There was obviously some overlap, since Hughes and other not-so-high USAmerican modernists also visited Paris. The different travel routes were also closely linked to personal political beliefs and commitments, notably to international socialism, then called Communism, which—and this is not a coincidence—virtually none of the canonical Anglo-American modernists shared.

The same apprehensions that have created and maintained color lines in literary and cultural studies seem to extend to the idea of hemispheric modernisms and the kinds of forays it would prompt into more unfamiliar linguistic and cultural territory. As I show in my previous chapter, this has not always been so, and there is no good reason why it should continue to be so. Studies of USAmerican modernism that cross color lines may well create momentum in the direction of exploring how race functions in modernist writing from across the Americas.20 What obstacles there are to such hemispheric comparisons are today mainly the results of inflexible disciplinary organization and bias. Foremost among these hindrances are sometimes bewildering variations in terminology and periodization. Contrary to what some of the contributors to the Cambridge History of Latin American Literature suggest, modernismo does not unproblematically translate as literary modernism, certainly not of the Anglo-American variety. In fact, modernismo is in many ways a false cognate.21 Typically placed between 1880 and 1916, Hispanic America’s modernismo predates the modernisms that emerged in Europe and the United States of America. Although many Hispanic American modernistas were of the same generation as the now-canonical proponents of Anglo-American high modernism, their major writings barely reached beyond the first decade of the twentieth century. By the time Eliot published “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in 1917 and “The Waste Land” in 1922, few of the canonical modernista
poets—among them Cuba’s José Martí (1853–1895), Nicaragua’s Rubén Dario (1867–1916), Argentina’s Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938), and Uruguay’s Julio Herrera y Reissig (1875–1910) and Delmira Agustini (1886–1914)—were still alive. While one might work around this chronological disjunction by dividing modernista writing into early and late phases, it is quite clear that the Hispanic American writers who are most comparable to the Anglo-American modernists and their formal concerns are those usually grouped together as a vanguardia, or avant-garde, that Hugo Verani plausibly situates between 1916 and 1935. The kinds of artistic and ideological transgressions that the English-speaking world places under the terminological umbrella “modernism” are all part of transatlantic networks that connect the Americas with Africa and Europe. Significantly, these networks also connect the various parts of the Americas (north, south, central) and the Caribbean with each other, with and without routing such communications through Europe. While these avant-garde networks are global cultural formations, studying them historically does not produce universals. On the contrary, tracing continuities and discontinuities among the literary avant-gardes that came into being roughly during the first half of the twentieth century enables us to see how phenomena that might otherwise appear discrete and isolated—that is, merely local—are also the moving parts of a vast transnational topography. Borges and Guillén are as much part of this cultural landscape as Hughes, Hemingway, and Waldo Frank. Even though these writers did not always move in the same literary circles, events such as the Spanish Civil War drew them to the same place in their fight against fascism. And even if they never met in person, their writings—thanks to the efforts of fellow artists, scholars, translators, publicists, and publishers—circulated in and around cultural hubs such as Buenos Aires, Havana, Madrid, and New York.

What comes into sharper relief in comparative scholarship on transatlantic and hemispheric literary networks is that the Hispanic American vanguardia was no more unified than its counterparts in the USA or Europe. The proliferation of countless “isms” is hardly a surprise. What is astonishing, however, is the extent to which Hispanic American literary history has also been ghettoized along color and, implicitly, class lines. The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature is a recent example. Given perceptions and claims that the Hispanic Americas have not been torn apart by racial conflict and discrimination, or certainly not to the extent that the USA has and still is, one might not have expected to find similar practices of exclusion in both popular and academic settings. Yet in the Hispanic Americas, as in the USA, writing about the black diaspora in the 1920s and 1930s has shared the fringes with Communists and others concerned about sociopolitical issues. Scholars have rarely addressed racial and ethnic rifts that existed within the vanguardia, often in concert with political ones. If the persistent racial segregation of New World modernisms is the reason that “Jean Toomer [is] never
cited” in discussions of Anglo-American modernism, it is also the reason that Nicolás Guillén, Ildefonso Pereda Valdés, Pilar Barrios, Jorge Artel, and many others are quoted far less frequently in scholarly work on Hispanic American avant-garde poetry than Borges, Neruda, or Vicente Huidobro. If they are discussed at all, they tend to be pigeonholed (via Renato Poggioli) into what Hugo Verani calls the “sociopolitical Avant-Garde.” So-called indigenista writers—Tace Hedrick has called them “mestizo modernists”—have been similarly marginalized in literary histories. This ghettoization has left us with rather distorted perspectives on writers whose contacts with each other—through personal communications, translations, or both—have historically crossed the very lines that scholarship upholds. Take, for instance, the insistence that Guillén’s poemas-son most resemble Hughes’s blues poetry, which has hardened into an orthodoxy in Afro-Hispanic studies. Once Guillén’s poesía mulata, by sleight of translation, turns into “black poetry,” the presumably most natural point of comparison becomes the “Aframerican” poetry of the New Negro movement or, in the case of some of Guillén’s later poems on black subjects (such as the Elegías), the Black Arts movement. On the one hand, this critical narrative recognizes that Guillén was in conversation with New Negro artists, including of course Hughes. On the other hand, however, it has also had the effect of separating Guillén’s “Motivos de son” and Sóngoro cosongo not only from the verse of so-called negrista poets throughout the Hispanic Americas but also from the mainstream (or elite) vanguardistas. Why not, however, compare Guillén’s poetry with that of Borges and Neruda, or, crossing different boundaries, William Carlos Williams or Sherwood Anderson?

Historically, all these marginalized ethnic and political modernisms are interconnected. Points of contact between the historical avant-gardes and their writing in various parts of the New World are the moving parts of a larger phenomenon that takes shape from publications (books and, often more important, journals and newspapers) and personal papers and correspondence. As a discursive phenomenon, what we call modernism resides in a host of intertextualities, including translations. On the one hand, it is important to recognize that the New Negro Renaissance occurred more or less at the same time as the Afro-Antillean movement, Haitian indigenisme, and similar artistic phenomena throughout the Hispanic Americas. On the other hand, however, the precise nature of the ideological and aesthetic overlap that such simultaneity implies comes into full view only when those literary events are also connected with (now) more canonical modernist writing from across the Americas. How else, for instance, could one explain why Borges, not exactly a member of the African diaspora, translated Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”? The same holds true for the Mexican vanguardists Xavier Villarrutia, Rafael Lozano, and Salvador Novo, whose poetry is never placed in any proximity to the work of Afro-Hispanic American writers; yet they translated and published Hughes’s poems in their
literary journal, *Contemporáneos*. There are times when discussions of race and ethnicity in literature can be as profoundly limiting as ahistorical formalist readings, especially when the critical focus is solely on literary thematics amplified by biographical and phenotypical factors.

The close contact that authors such as Langston Hughes and Waldo Frank cultivated with a variety of Hispanic American authors is a case in point here. Another is the fact that Alfred A. Knopf, Hughes’s main publisher, was the first USAmerican press actively to seek out South American manuscripts. Until the 1960s, the sorts of translations that Knopf, which has been distributed by Random House since the 1950s and is now a division of the latter press, published were mainly from French, German, and Italian. Notable among these early translations were Oswald Spengler’s *The Hour of Decision* (1934) and Kafka’s *The Castle* (1956) and *The Trial* (1955). Knopf’s list at the time also included Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Hungarian authors. Blanche Knopf also made her first trip to South America in the early 1940s, and on November 30, 1950, Hughes wrote to her that “it is nice to read about the appreciation the Latin Americans have for what you have done for their literature there.” Translations from the Portuguese and Spanish began to appear from Knopf in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

**Waldo Frank and Sur**

Between the late 1920s and the 1950s, significant numbers of Hughes’s poems, along with his autobiographies, short stories, and a novel, circulated in the Hispanic Americas in translation. During that time, no fewer than seven volumes of Hughes’s poetry and prose were translated and published in Buenos Aires alone. It was in Argentina that both of his autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder As I Wander*, were published in Spanish translations in 1944 and 1959, along with his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* in 1945; a collection of short stories, *Laughing to Keep from Crying* in 1955; and a generous assortment of poems, *Poemas de Langston Hughes* in 1952. What makes this fact noteworthy is that Argentina—unlike Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and even Uruguay—had a relatively small population of African descent at that time, despite the fact that Buenos Aires had been one of the main ports for the transatlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century. That the Afro-Argentine population in Buenos Aires declined dramatically during the nineteenth century (though it grew in other parts of the country) may in part account for the absence of *poesía negra* and *poesía negrista* from Argentina during the 1920s and 1930s, despite immigration from the Cape Verde islands during the same period. Even today Argentine artists and intellectuals are not known for their interest in a part of the population that seems to have been either “forgotten” or “disappeared.”
What, then, might account for such plenitude of publications in the case of Hughes? After all, he never traveled to Argentina, and he appears to have had direct contact with only one of his Argentine translators, Julio Gáler. Interest in Hughes’s work seems to date from 1931, when Jorge Luis Borges published his translations of three Hughes poems in the second issue of the fledgling journal *Sur*. How did Borges come to translate Hughes? To be sure, there were certain affinities and, as Sergio Waisman has pointed out, translation is fundamental to Argentine literary history. As a poet, the younger Borges, who had not yet emerged as a major writer by the time these translations appeared, shared Hughes’s passion for Whitman and his interest in the poetic uses of colloquial language. Although Borges was involved in national politics in those days, sociopolitical themes did not find their way into his poetry, which, unlike Hughes’s, tended to be sentimental and nostalgic. How and when Borges would have come into contact with Hughes’s early poetry is unclear. I see two equally plausible possibilities. The first one is Waldo Frank, self-styled prophet of hemispheric cultural wholeness. The other is the Argentine poet Raúl González Tuñón, a contemporary and erstwhile friend of Borges’s, who had met Hughes in Spain.

Frank traveled to Argentina in the late 1920s, at about the same time that Hughes visited Cuba. He embarked on a lecture tour throughout Central and South America in 1929 and 1930 in the wake of President Herbert Hoover’s not-so-successful tour, delivering numerous well-attended lectures in Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, and Cuba. The following year, Frank, like Hughes, visited the Soviet Union. Some considered the author of *Our America* (1919) and *The Re-discovery of America* (1929) “the only serious North American author who exercised a direct influence” on Hispanic American letters in the 1920s. Indeed, both books were reviewed favorably by Hispanic American intellectuals, who saw in Frank a kindred spirit, and they were eventually translated into Spanish. Frank first arrived in Buenos Aires in September of 1929. Through Eduardo Mallea, literary editor of *La Nación* and a proponent of Frank’s belief that “America will be created by artists,” Frank met Victoria Ocampo, a member of Argentina’s social and cultural elite. Ocampo, already quite well known by the time Frank encountered her and “perfectly trilingual,” came from a prominent liberal aristocratic family that had considerable financial resources at its disposal. It was to his new friend that Frank, committed as he was to cultural union and spiritual harmony within the Americas, pitched the idea of a Pan-American literary review, “a cultural bridge between the Americas, a forum for the best thinkers of both continents.” In his history of *Sur*, John King quotes María Rosa Oliver, a close friend of Ocampo’s, to the effect that Frank wanted “algo totalmente distinto” (something completely different) from the literary journals that existed then, “algo más continental” (something more continental, or hemispheric). He argued that “o desentrañamos la América oculta por mentira,
mitos, lugares comunes y propagandas chillonas, o las relaciones entre nosotros se deterioran de más en más” (either we disembowel the lies, myth, commonplaces, and the shrill propaganda that obscure America or the relations among us will deteriorate further). The rhetoric of (re)discovery is unmistakable in Frank’s speeches and throughout his writing. Ocampo was quite taken with his idea of a “viaje de descubrimiento” (journey of discovery), a quest for what she, following Frank, called the “América del oculto tesoro” (America of secret treasures). She was intrigued enough to throw her personal fortune behind Sur, which was to become one of the leading literary journals in the Hispanic Americas for decades to come.

As King points out, Ocampo was an incorrigible Europhile, and it was clear from her editorial in the first issue in 1931 that Sur’s “dominant matrix would continue to be Europe.” As Ocampo explained at some length in her editorial, significantly entitled “A Letter to Waldo Frank,” one could hardly “volver la espalda a Europa” (turn one’s back on Europe); to do so would be, well, “ridículo.” At the same time, however, she saw Sur as “el lugar constante de nuestro encuentro…testimonía de mi admiración por esa obra, mi absoluta adhesión a lo que la inspiró. Seguirá en cuanto a su orientación un camino paralelo” (our shared meeting place…testimony to my admiration for your work, my absolute devotion to what it has inspired. The journal will follow a path parallel to that of your own work).

Frank continued to support Sur’s development, and not a few translations of his own work appeared in the journal during the 1930s. But he wistfully noted in his Memoirs that the “ideational” rift between Ocampo, Oliver, and Samuel Glusberg (aka Enrique Espinoza), who had organized his trip to Argentina, symbolized that “the ‘parts’ of America were not yet ready to grow together.” The “cultural union” Frank had envisioned between Ocampo and Glusberg, “the dynamic immigrant Jew with a Prophet’s American in his heart,” did not become a reality. “My concept of the magazine as an organism,” Frank wrote in his Memoirs, “meant nothing to Victoria for whom most of the American and Hispano-American authors, loved by Glusberg more for promise and intent than for complete achievement, also had no meaning. The elegant Sur published many a good piece, but it was remote from what I wanted and the hemisphere needed.”

I offer this radically abbreviated version of the founding of Sur for two reasons. First, Hughes could not possibly have wished for a more visible venue for some of the early Spanish translations of his poems. To become “a magazine for everyone with an interest in the Americas and [that] would serve as a bridge between America and Europe,” Sur published translations of those who were considered major European and North American writers at the time. In fact, translation was at the core of Sur, clearly a way for the editors to build cultural capital in a Europhile Argentina. It is quite likely that Borges’s translations of Hughes’s poems for Sur stimulated interest in Hughes’s other works in Argentina and elsewhere in the Hispanic
Americas. My second reason for talking about the (pre-)history of *Sur* is that it is quite conceivable—even if there is no hard-and-fast evidence—that it might well have been Waldo Frank who first brought Hughes's poems to Borges's attention, either directly or indirectly. Although Frank does not mention Borges in the context of his visits to Buenos Aires, it would have been highly unlikely that they did not meet, given how close Borges was to Ocampo and his involvement in *Sur* from the start. By 1942, when Frank was writing *South American Journey*, the account of his second “campaign” in the Hispanic Americas, he did include Borges among those whom he considered “the country’s leading writers.” The others were Lugones (whom Frank himself translated), Horacio Quiroga, Alfonsina Storni, Mallea, and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada. He seems to have done so somewhat grudgingly. True, Frank gave Borges his due as “his generation’s finest stylist.” But calling the Argentine, who had left his mark on the country’s literary scene by then, someone who “brazenly devotes his genius to a literature of fantasy and utter escape” does not suggest that he saw this literary genius, who “incidentally lift[ed] the detective story to a new height of literary excellence,” as much of visionary fellow traveler.50

When considered in the context of “the politics of cultural alliances” in the Americas, the publication of Hughes’s poems in *Sur* may well be called “paradigmatic.”51 Important here are not just Frank’s avowed Pan-American ideals but also his interest in African American culture. He supported New Negro writers, notably his friend Jean Toomer, while at the same time proving quite comfortable ignoring African Americans’ cultural contributions to the multitudinous hemispheric “Whole” he envisioned with Whitman’s help.52 Frank’s friendship with and influence on Jean Toomer is as well known as Toomer’s affair with Frank’s wife. By contrast, Frank’s relationship with Hughes was far more superficial and may not have extended much beyond their common interest in Communism. If Frank did indeed introduce Hughes’s poetry to his Argentine friends, he would likely have done so because Hughes’s early lyrics may have reminded him of what he valued about Toomer’s *Cane* (1923): that these were poems in which “a land…suddenly [rose] up into the eminence of song.”53 Frank, of course, was talking about the USAmerican South, where he had traveled, disguised as a Negro, in the company of Jean Toomer in 1921. The “Southland” is also the site of some of Hughes’s early poems, although Hughes hardly wrote in Toomer’s pastoral and Gothic key. Hughes was also far more fascinated by urban life, something he shared with Borges.54 Even in Hughes’s urban poems, Frank would at least have appreciated “the struggle” of so-called folk forms “toward literary expression.”55 And there is one thing that Hughes’s poems did that Toomer’s haunting lyrical prose did not: they spoke not just to the USA but to the Americas and, indeed, to the kind of hemispheric cosmopolitanism that Frank embraced and advocated. Frank’s idea of a New World that had yet to be discovered was probably what also
attracted Borges to Hughes’s verse. But, as his translations of Hughes show, Borges’s Americanism was far more abstract than Frank’s. It was an aesthetic concept rather than a political or religio-philosophical plan.

Given his proclivity for such abstractions and his aloofness from social issues, Borges’s interest in racial issues was predictably slight. In fact, in his only published statement about “la literatura negra” from 1937, Borges wrote that “[s]alvo a ciertos poemas de Countee Cullen, la literatura negra, hoy por hoy, adolece de una contradicción inevitable. El propósito de esa literatura es demostrar la insensatez de todos los prejuicios raciales, y sin embargo no hace otra cosa que repetir que es negra: es decir, que acentuar la diferencia que está negando” (except for certain poems by Countee Cullen, black literature today suffers from an inevitable contradiction. The goal of this literature is to show the senselessness of all racial prejudice, and yet it does nothing but repeat that it is black: that is, emphasize the very difference it is negating).\(^5\) Borges’s comments open a brief introductory note to Hughes’s poems in El Hogar, where, in February of 1937, he published a slightly revised translation of one of the three Hughes poems he had done for Sur six years earlier: “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” His remarks resonate with Waldo Frank’s sense that “the whole will and mind of the creator must go below the surface of race. And this has been an almost impossible condition for the American Negro to achieve, forced ever[y] moment of his life into a specific and superficial plane of consciousness.” What Frank was after was “direct and unafraid creation,” as he called it, not “sentimentalism, exoticism, polemic, ‘problem’ fiction, and moral melodrama.”\(^5\) Borges’s singling out some of Cullen’s poems of course raises the question of why he did not translate Cullen instead of Hughes. The answer, I believe, is that Cullen’s Keatsian poetry was ultimately too staid for Borges’s incipient Ultraist tastes, which is another way of saying that Cullen was not enough of a modern stylist for him.\(^5\) More significant, however, is that Borges, like Frank, would have heard in Hughes’s lyrics the cadences of Whitman, whose poetry Borges had loved since his youth. Borges would not, however, publish his translation of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass until 1969, despite the fact that he had already announced this translation as early as 1927.\(^5\) Borges would certainly not have shared the opinions of Rafael Lozano and Juan Felipe Toruño, to whom the “primitivism” and “vitalism” of Negro poetry, and particularly the rhythms of Hughes’s poems, provided a welcome relief from French symbolism and from “las estructuras que presentan otras, en las que se nota la preocupación por pulir, depurar, sutilizar, perfeccionar o aglomerar duples, triples o cuádruples figuras en metáforas que fusionan contenido y continente, como en el Ultraísmo. En la poesía negra compruébese lo contrario” (the structures we find in other modernist or ultramodernist movements, in which there is obsessive polishing, purifying, subtilizing, perfecting, and combining double, triple or quadruple figures into metaphors that fuse content and continent, as in Ultraísmo. In Negro poetry, it is just the opposite).\(^5\)
BORGES AS TRANSLATOR

Borges would quickly become the best-known and most prolific translator among Sur’s initial contributors. As André Waisman has noted in his study on Borges and translation, Borges “led his generation in renovating Argentina’s literature by effecting a series of dialogic crosses between local / criollo and cosmopolitan / international tendencies and by demonstrating that such intersections have always been at the core of Argentine literature. In the 1920’s and 30s, the local and the European [and, one might add, the USA]—intralingual and interlingual translation—coexisted in a tension that was experienced as deeply problematic, but also produced important cultural innovations.” Translation was at the heart of this formal and ideological tension and as a result was at the core of the literary innovations that Borges himself pursued and supported. For him, literary translation, like all literary writing, was “a matter of a displacement towards the margins,” which he claimed as a privileged site for innovation. Criticizing Lawrence Venuti, Waisman points out that “the ethics and aesthetics of translation are fundamentally different in the periphery than they are in the center. . . . Techniques that in the center contribute to projects of cultural imperialism can, in the periphery, function as a form of resistance, as a redrawing of political as well as literary maps.” On the one hand, then, Borges redrew Argentina’s literary map by translating European writers such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Franz Kafka, André Gide, and Paul Valéry, among others. Most of these translations were published by the Sur Press. On the other hand, Borges also furthered Frank’s hemispheric vision by translating USAmerican writers, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Among them were Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg, along with William Faulkner, E. E. Cummings, Hart Crane, and, of course, Hughes.

Borges’s theoretical writings on translation, especially “Las dos maneras de traducir” (1926), which date from around the same time that Walter Benjamin penned “The Task of the Translator” (1923), “present a complete reformulation of how the relationship between source and target texts and cultures is usually understood.” The Argentine modernist emphasized, well in advance of Roman Jakobson’s famous essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959), that intralingual translation obtains whenever post-(or neo-)colonial writers carve out for themselves a space for innovation based on their cultural differences, a space from which they can define their own writing in relation to dominant metropolitan traditions, be they European or USAmerican. For Borges, writing from the margins is always, inevitably, a form of translation that challenges the authoritative originality of metropolitan scripts from the secondary, merely mimetic position of postcolonial literatures. In such scenarios, postcolonial writers function as irreverent translators whose strategies of deliberate mistranslation generate
Buenos Aires Blues

an aesthetics of theft and infidelity, in which even a so-called original can betray its translation. What links writing and translation—indeed, what makes writing translation—is their analogous position in relation to source texts, be they originals or other literary precursors. Although a translation may seem to have only one source text, other texts always mediate the translational process and connect seemingly disparate cultural geographies in unexpected ways. For Borges, the original is always what he calls an “hecho móvil” (moving event), a phrase that I am inclined to translate as a “movable feast.” Borges’s emphasis on infidelity, his outright rejection of the idea of a privileged original, and his complication of the figure of the literary precursor as something that each text invents rather than inherits all stem from his realization that the spatiotemporal displacements that characterize translation similarly affect all other acts of writing and reading. For Borges, this made translation “an ideal metaphor for writing [and reading], as well as a perfect point of departure to consider issues of aesthetic value and cultural difference,” an idea he worked to the fullest in a story such as “Pierre Menard.”

In the early 1930s, Borges seems to have been more receptive to the politics of cultural difference than he was at later stages in his career, when he condemned literary realism and any type of social and political purpose for literature. Frank’s diatribe against “the vile current realistic novel [that] has spoiled all minds for the essential and pure lines of aesthetic form” would have struck a familiar chord in the later Borges. At this earlier point in his life, however, Borges “display[ed] a surprising number of influences and interests: the gauchesque tradition, the malevos of Buenos Aires…and even the condition of the suffering blacks.” The three Hughes poems that Borges chose for Sur were “I, Too” (on which I have already commented at length in the previous chapter), “Our Land,” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Sur printed the translations together with the English texts. Two of these poems were hardly unusual choices: along with “I, Too,” “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” from 1921 was among the most frequently translated Hughes poems in the Hispanic Americas. What is noteworthy about all three poems is that they do not exemplify the “lyric realism” that some have associated especially with Hughes’s early blues poetry. In fact, all three poems enact, at least to some extent, a familiar modernist break with historical referentiality, which is what would have made them appealing to Borges. This is most evident in Hughes’s “Our Land (Poem for a Decorative Panel)” from 1923, which opened the final section of The Weary Blues, also entitled “Our Land.”

We should have a land of sun,
Of gorgeous sun,
And a land of fragrant water
Where the twilight
Is a soft bandanna handkerchief
Of rose and gold,
And not this land where life is cold.

We should have a land of trees,
Of tall thick trees
Bowed down with chattering parrots,
Brilliant as the day,
And not this land where birds are grey.

Ah, we should have a land of joy,
Of love and joy and wine and song,
And not this land where joy is wrong.

(CP, 32–33)

In his introduction to the first edition of *The Weary Blues*, Carl Van Vechten remarked on Hughes’s “nostalgia for color and warmth and beauty,” which, he adds, “explains this boy’s nomadic instincts.” Van Vechten quoted lines from two poems to illustrate what Anita Patterson calls Hughes’s “poetics of migration.” “Our Land” is one of them. Any reading of this poem depends significantly on how one identifies the first-person plural pronoun, which is far from unambiguous. The two lines Hughes added when he included the poem in *The Weary Blues* in 1926 take us back to one of his communities of migrants and the emotional bonds they share: “Ah, sweet away! / Ah, my beloved one, away!” (CP, 33, TWB, 99). We may say that these bonds are the product of outwardly directed movement away from a place, a “civilization,” whose frostiness suffocates. There is a close link—indeed, a formal and emotional symmetry—between “Our Land” and “Poem,” which is subtitled in a similar way: “For the portrait of an African boy after the manner of Gauguin” (CP, 32). The imagined painting in “Poem” has the same status as an objet trouvé as the decorative panel. The subtitles accentuate each poem’s status as a representation of a representation, which locates their exoticism outside any external reality. “Poem” is also part of the same section in *The Weary Blues*; in the *Collected Poems*, which presents Hughes’s poem chronologically, “Poem” lands right before “Our Land” on the same page. Both poems eschew historical specificity to stage a clash of civilizations. Exotic imagery associated with the African jungle and related equatorial spaces collides with figure of frigidity, colorlessness (“grey”), and the general absence of pleasure and delight. Indeed, there is a moral injunction against them (“wrong”). In the case of “Our Land,” the entire poem contradicts the title, for what characterizes “this land” is that it is precisely not ours, that it is not home. Our land is thus a projection, a “sweet away,” an elsewhere that might be located in either the past or the future. This poem can thus be read in terms of exclusion, marginalization, and
“minority rhetoric” with respect both to race and sexuality. Nicholas Evans is right to suggest that “‘Our Land’ dramatizes the conflict between the desire to root in nationalist formations of identity (American, African American and even homosexual) and the need to disavow such formations and continue to roam in new routes of identification. The fact that this necessity derives from the exclusion of those with ‘vagrant’ desires manifests a bitter critique of USAmerican and African American nationalist formations—of their insufficiency to accommodate alternative subject positions like those of black homosexuals.”

The idea of vagrant desires and the critique of nationalism may both have resonated with Borges in 1930. His translation of “Our Land”—“Nuestra Tierra”—omits the last two lines and appears to be based on the first version of the poem Hughes published in World Tomorrow in 1923. Borges also drops the parenthetical subtitle, thus moving the poem both into closer ideological proximity to Nuestra América—José Martí’s essay and Waldo Frank’s journal—and, ironically, further away from modernist aesthetics.

Deberíamos tener una tierra de sol,
De lujoso sol,
Y una tierra de agua fragante
Donde la tarde es un pañuelo suave floreado
De rosa y de oro,
Y no esta tierra
Donde la vida es fría.

Deberíamos tener una tierra de árboles,
De alto, espesos árboles,
Agobiados de loros charlatanes
Brillantes como el día
Y no esta tierra donde son grises los pájaros.

Ah, tendríamos un país de alegría,
De amor y alegría y vino y canción,
Y no esta tierra donde la alegría está mal.

There are two other Spanish translations of this poem, one by Miguel Alejandro from 1936, the other by Ahumada from 1968 (see figure 5). In Yo también soy América, Ahumada’s collection of Hughes’s poems “en memoria de Martin Luther King,” “Nuestra tierra. Poema para un panel decorativo” is flanked by “Trabajadores en un camino de Florida” (“Florida Road Workers”) and “Orgullo” (“Militant”), both from 1930 (YT, 89–93). Their company renders the abstractions in the earlier poem more socially concrete, as well as situating them geographically in the USAmerican South. The bitter ironies of “Florida Road Workers” specify the absence of joy,
Figure 5. Cover of Herminio Ahumada’s *Yo también soy América*, 1968.
or better, its class-bound prohibition: “Sure, / the roads helps everybody. / Rich folks ride—/ And I get to see them ride” (CP, 159) (Sí, / un camino ayuda a todos! / Los ricos transitan / y yo alcanzo a verlos transitar.)

“Militant,” which Hughes had initially titled “Pride,” shows a response to a joyless existence that is rather at variance with the desire for getting away: “For honest dreams / Your spit is in my face / And so my fist is clenched / Today—/ To strike your face” (CP, 131) (Por mis honrados anhelos / me escupes en la cara, / y así, mi puño está cerrado / ahora, / para golpear tu rostro). Alejandro’s translation in Nueva Cultura has a comparable politicizing effect: a fragment of the poem appears right above “¡Buenos Días, Revolución!”

Perhaps more remarkable even than the varied company this poem keeps in its Spanish versions are the differences in imagery in the translations. Borges mixes the mundane (tarde instead of crepúsculo or alba) with splashes of extravagant metaphor. The land is one of “lujoso sol” (luxurious sun), where dazzling parrots “overwhelm” (agobiar) rather than just weigh down the trees. Borges intrepidly turns a dreary afternoon into a “pañuelo suave floreado / De rosa y de oro,” a soft scarf flowering resplendently in rose and gold. Ahumada’s simile, by contrast, is fairly conservative: “tan suave como un pañuelo de hierbas / De oro y rosa”—as soft as a scarf of leaves of gold and rose. Alejandro’s translation offers an even starker contrast to Borges’s by ignoring Hughes’s conditional tense and folding his metaphor into the overly precise entomological verb eclosar (to metamorphose). Just as oddly, the suggestive splendor of Hughes’s opening figure now yields to rather incongruous images of excess and exhaustion whose negative connotations blur the contrast the English poem sets up. Now life is no longer just cold but, to fit a rhyme scheme that Hughes eschews and echoing Eliot-like ennui in the process, also boring or dull (“aburrida”). Alejandro’s choices are all the more puzzling because he translated the poem in the politically charged context of the Spanish Civil War.

Precisamos nosotros un derroche de sol,
dele sol agotador
y aromas de flor.
Donde alba eclosa
en oro y rosa.
No este país, donde la vida
es fría y aburrida!

[We need a surfeit of sun, / of draining sun / and flowery fragrance. / Where dawn metamorphoses / into gold and rose. / Not this land where life / is cold and boring!]

There are also pronounced differences in how each translator interprets Hughes’s emphatic “where joy is wrong.” Ahumada turns it into “en que
la alegría es equívoca,” using the conjunction (“in which” rather than “where”) to accent the inventedness of a place that his tense choice locates in the future: “fuera tan suave,” “inclinaran,” will be as soft, will bend down (YT, 91). Ahumada makes the final lines Hughes added to the poem oddly inconsistent with the projected vision of a distant land by making the beloved distant instead: “Ah, sweet away! / Ah, my beloved one, away!” becomes “¡Oh, dulce, lejana! / ¡Oh mi amada lejana!,” that is, “O, sweet, away! O, my far-off [female] beloved!” Alejandro in his version prefers the religious register in “donde la alegría es pecado,” (where joy is a sin), while Borges’s line, “donde la alegría está mal” (where joy is evil) echoes Baudelaire. The allusion to Les Fleurs du Mal is fitting given Hughes’s own familiarity with Baudelaire on the one hand and Borges’s worries about the imminent rise of a political dictatorship on the other.82

The idea of (time) travel, to which the allusion to Baudelaire gives a transatlantic direction, links “Our Land” with “The Negro Sings of Rivers,” the second poem Borges translated. What is particularly interesting in the case of Borges’s “El Negro Habla de los Ríos” is that he published a second translation of this poem in El Hogar in 1937. The two versions are almost identical, except for the penultimate line, on which I comment below. In the following stanza, I have marked the differences between them by using brackets. For additional comparisons, notes 83–85 provide two other versions of each stanza, one by Gáler, the other by Lozano.

He conocido ríos...
He conocido ríos antiguos como el
mundo y más antiguos que la
Fluencia de sangre humana por las humanas venas.
Mi espíritu se ha ahondado como los ríos.83

Me he bañado en el Eufrates cuando las albas eran jóvenes.
He armado mi cabaña cerca del Congo
y me ha arrullado el sueño,
He tendido la vista sobre el Nilo y he levantado
las pirámides en lo alto.

He escuchando el cantar del Mississippi
cuando [Abe] Lincoln bajo hasta Nueva Orleans,
Y he visto su barroso pecho dorarse todo con la puesta del sol.84

He conocido ríos:
Ríos envejecidos, morenos. [Ríos inmemoriales, oscuros]
Mi espíritu se ha ahondado como los ríos.85
Hughes opens his poem, published in *The Crisis* in 1921 and subsequently placed as the title poem of the third section of *The Weary Blues*, with one of his many ungendered voices. In Spanish, the poem’s speaker is male almost by default: *el negro*. Hughes’s speaker contemplates the past from his or her position in the present: “I’ve known rivers:” / “I’ve known rivers as ancient as the world and older than the / Flow of human blood in human veins” (*CP*, 23). Hughes’s simile shifts in the third line from body to soul to introduce depth as another dimension: “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” Hughes repeats this and the first line at the end of the poem, varying only the middle line:

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(*CP*, 23)

Following Hughes’s figurative conjoining of age, experience, and blackness, Borges initially translates “ancient, dusky rivers” as “ríos envejecidos, morenos.” The dark or brown rivers have grown old much like the soul has grown deep. Six years later, he would change the line to “ríos inmemoriables, oscuros.” Unlike *envejecer*, which emphasizes the passing of time in relation to a human life, the adjective *inmemorial* places the rivers in the poem beyond human time and memory: “ancient” and “deep” are no longer a function of human experience but are metaphysical qualities whose presence in Borges’s second translation minimizes the historical dimensions Hughes implies. By the time we reach Abraham Lincoln and the Mississippi in Hughes’s poem, we have traversed the distance from what appear to be signs of faraway time to the more proximate memory of specific historical situations—lynchings and race riots—that prompted Hughes to write this poem in 1919.86 The point is that rivers are vehicles for or induce memory.

Hughes recounts in *The Big Sea* that he formulated his first ideas for “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” as his train to Mexico was crossing the Mississippi. What results is a poem about travel and translation, in which dislocation represents the mnemonic process and functions as what Stephanides thinks of as “an agent for reshaping tradition.”87 Crossing the river in St. Louis, Missouri, “slowly, over a long bridge” (*BS*, 55), the young poet is literally suspended over the Mississippi. As the sound of the train’s wheels on the bridge is in his ears and the train’s rhythm involuntarily becomes part of his own body, Hughes imagines himself on the edge of two worlds. The rhythms of poetry render the movements of train and body *in time*, repeating them with a difference. Hughes’s autobiographical journey from east to west becomes a movement not just across different geographies but also into a collective past.88 The poem’s rhythmic repetitions synchronize all these different locations, making them available to the reader at the same time.
and in the same space: that of the poem itself. To have known rivers, then, is to have felt that synchronizing rhythm. This feeling is an intellectual and emotional understanding of origins, historical experiences, and the gaps in one’s own memory. It is best called cultural memory, with all its imperfections. As the poem plumbs the depths of intellect and emotion, history comes closer to home, as it were, and audible. The “singing of the Mississippi” is of course the remembered sound of slave songs. It is also an echo of Handy’s famous “St. Louis Blues.”

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep,
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it,
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
Went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
Bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

(CP, 23)

Hughes’s autobiographical retelling of the poem in The Big Sea should not, however, tempt us into thinking that Hughes himself is the poem’s speaker. The poem represents someone else’s speech: that of the titular “Negro,” whose oral incantations are distant, depersonalized utterances. Far from being a transcription of those utterances, which belong to a different semiotic system, the poem seeks to appropriate that very system and its codes for its own purposes: to create a collective voice as a vehicle for cultural memory. But that voice, like the figure of the speaker, must remain an abstraction; though audible, it is intangible. As a poet, Hughes seeks emotional reassurance in an imaginative projection of cultural memories that are not altogether his own. He seeks to translate speech into writing that would communicate this quality of feeling as a vital part of knowledge of past survival and for future survival. What Hughes also shows, however, is that he cannot completely collapse the distance between himself and the Negro any more than he can fully translate speech into writing. Both orality and the figure of the Negro are part of the frame that leaves the poet as if on the outside looking in. We encounter an analogous situation in “The Weary Blues.” Since these are not his memories, Hughes must create a proxy through which to call up the resources of deeper cultural memory. It is precisely this gesture that makes the speaker a poetic persona.

Borges’s second translation of the poem hints at an awareness of the poet’s quandary in this lyric. Inmemorial poses the question of memory more directly, and more categorically, than Hughes’s “ancient” does, while oscuro, a racially less charged term than moreno, extends the line’s referential range beyond race. That Borges was aware of African American political and cultural history “up and down the Americas” is amply evident.
from “El espantoso redentor Lazarus Morell,” a 1933 short story known in English as “The Dread Redeemer Lazarus Morell.” The paradoxical appellations in the title of each of the stories that comprise Borges’s Histo- ria universal de la infamía (1935) (Universal History of Infamy), together with the brevity of the book, suggest that his chief purpose here is aesthetic rather than political. Borges has no interest in casting aspersions on Morell or any other of the odd crew of characters in this book; in fact, he seems rather to delight in stereotypes. His purpose here is not to moralize but to intertwine historical with fictional events and translate the fragments into what ultimately amounts to a travesty of realism. The opening paragraph of “Lazarus Morell” exemplifies this process of assembling fragments and can be read as a mise-en-abîme.

En 1517 el P. Bartolomé de las Casas tuvo mucha lástima de los indios que se extenuaban en los laboriosos infiernos de las minas de oro antillanas, y propuso al emperador Carlos V la importación de negros, que se extenuaran en los laboriosos infiernos de las minas de oro antillanas. A esa curiosa variación de un filántropo debemos infinitos hechos: los blues de Handy, el éxito logrado en Paris por el pintor doctor oriental D. Pedro Figari, la buena prosa cimarrona del también oriental D. Vicente Rossi, el tamaño mitológico de Abraham Lincoln, los quinientos mil muertos de la Guerra de Secesión, los tres mil trescientos millones gastados en pensiones militares, la estatua de imaginario Flucho, la admisión del verbo linchar en la decimotercera edición del Diccionario del Academia, el impetuoso film Aleluya, la fornida carga a la bayoneta llevada por Soler al frente de sus Pardos y Morenos en el Cerrito, la gracia de la señorita de Tal, el moreno que asesino Martín Fierro, la deplorable rumba El Manisero, el napoleonismo arrestado y encalabozado de Toussaint Louverture, la cruz y la serpiente en Haití, la sangre de las cabras degolladas por el machete del papaloi, la habanera madre del tango, el candombe.

[In 1517, the Spanish missionary Bartolomé de las Casas, taking great pity on the Indians who were languishing in the hellish workpits of Antillean gold mines, suggested to Charles V, king of Spain, a scheme for importing blacks, so that they might languish in the hellish workpits of Antillean gold mines. To this odd philanthropic twist we owe, all up and down the Americas, endless things—W.C. Handy’s blues; the Parisian success of the Uruguayan lawyer and painter of Negro genre, don Pedro Figari; the solid native prose of another Uruguayan, don Vicente Rossi, who traced the origin of the tango to Negroes; the mythological dimensions of Abraham Lincoln; the five hundred thousand dead of the Civil War and its three thousand three hundred million spent in military pensions; the entrance of the verb “to lynch” into the thirteenth edition of the dictionary of the Spanish Academy; King Vidor’s impetuous film Hallelujah; the lusty bayonet charge led by the Argentine captain Miguel Soler, at the head of his famous regiment of “Mulattoes and Blacks,” in the Uruguayan battle]
The Worlds of Langston Hughes

of Cerrito; the Negro killed by Martín Fierro; the deplorable Cuban rumba “The Peanut Vender”; the arrested, dungeon-ridden Napoleonism of Toussaint Louverture; the cross and the snake of Haitian voodoo rites and the blood of goats whose throats were slit by the papaloi’s machete; the habanero, mother of the tango; another old Negro dance, of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, the candombe.]

Borges’s references to Abraham Lincoln and especially W.C. Handy are clearly nods to Hughes. Borges was no doubt well aware that the arc of the African American musical tradition in the case of Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” spanned the distance from Africa via Spain to Cuba (the habanero) and to Argentina (the tango), then on to St. Louis. The story’s next section confirms that “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in particular is indeed an intertext for the travels of “Lazarus Morell,” especially for the story’s English version. So is “I, Too.” The Mississippi River, which plays a crucial role in the story’s setting, helps Borges connect North with South America so as to universalize his own distinctive location: “El Padre de las Aguas, el Mississippi, el río más extenso del mundo, ... es un infinito y oscuro hermano del Paraná, del Uruguay, del Amazonas y del Orinoco. Es un río de aguas mulatas” (The Father of Waters, the Mississippi, the largest river in the world an infinite and dusky brother of the Paraná, the Uruguay, the Amazonas, and the Orinoco. It is a river of muddy waters.). Anyone as aware of linguistic nuance as Borges was would not have employed these adjectives lightly. Calling the Mississippi an “oscuró hermano” echoes Hughes’s “darker brother” in the phrase that Borges had translated as “hermano oscuro” in 1931 (see chapter 2). “Oscuro hermano” also anticipates the “ríos inmemoriales, oscuros” in Borges’s revised 1937 translation of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” By rendering oscuro as “dusky” (rather than simply “dark”) in the English version of Borges’s story from 1979 and aguas mulatas as “muddy waters,” which echoes Hughes’s “muddy bosom,” the two translators close the circle. I am tempted to add the Mississippi blues musician Muddy Waters into the equation, for that reference would also have been available to Borges and his cotranslator, Norman di Giovanni, in the 1970s. Although Hughes’s poems stand at the chronological beginning of this sequence of translations and retranslations, the lines one might draw between originals and translations have now been, well, muddied.

Detecting in “Lazarus Morell” echoes of Borges’s earlier translations of Hughes’s poems does not necessarily make their relation one of literary influence. It does, however, point to a common literary ancestor: Walt Whitman. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” would have appealed to Borges precisely because it relies on repetition to build catalogs of fragments and uses visual mirror effects to achieve depth. For Borges, this would have recalled Whitman above anyone else. And Hughes does not inscribe one-sided ideological or even moral judgments in any of these poems, another element
that Borges would have appreciated. But, as we shall see, Borges’s Buenos Aires, however much of a cosmopolitan edge it has, does not in any way resemble Hughes’s Harlem or any of the other spaces to which Hughes carries pieces of Harlem during his travels.

**Harlem in Argentina**

In a series of interviews conducted in 1973, Raúl González Tuñón told fellow poet Horacio Salas that he had in his library a copy of *Luna de enfrente* (1925), which Borges had inscribed to him in his tiny (*chiquitita*) handwriting: “al otro poeta suburbano.” Although the inscription literally translates as “to the other suburban poet,” suburban has entirely different class inflections in English. The middle-class suburbs that began to encircle USAmerican cities after World War I did not have much in common with the *favelas* that grew at the outskirts of many metropoles elsewhere in the Americas, including South America and the Caribbean. It would be more precise, then, to tag Tuñón the poet of the other Buenos Aires, the one for which Borges himself had little literary use: the areas on the fringes of the port city that Tuñón labeled “los baldíos,” an expression best rendered, with a wary nod to Eliot, as wastelands. Tuñón opens his “Blues de los Baldíos” (Wasteland Blues), one of six blues poems in *Todos bailan* (They All Dance, 1935), with the following lines:

Solo allí los chiquillos recogíamos la influencia telúrica.
A la orilla
pasaba la ciudad como un circo.
Canto el fervor oculto de los baldíos, su clima universal,
su geográfica síntesis, el hilo de agua, los montículos, el
musgo y los gatos flacos y los papeles inútiles y los ruidos y
los ruidos.95

[It is only here that the kids would sense telluric power. / At the edge / the city wandered like a circus. / I sing the hidden passion of the wastelands, their universal climate, / their geographical synthesis, the filament of water, the heaps, the / moss and the emaciated cats and the useless papers and the clamor and / the racket.]

Tuñón was hardly alone in his obsession with the idea of borders and edges. The “orillas” (edges), as Borges called them, were not, however, the same for everyone. Tuñón’s *baldíos* are not the same well-lit neighborhood streets that Borges’s flâneur roams in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) and *Luna de enfrente*. This was not the Buenos Aires Borges had “felt” (*sentí*) upon his return from Europe: “Esta ciudad que yo creí mi pasado / es mi
porvenir, mi presente” (this city which I believe is my past / is my future, my present).⁹⁶

In neither case, however, are these urban perimeters anything other than invented literary spaces. Although related to specific urban geographies, they are not realistic representations of actual places. It is significant that before these places on the margins could become literary references whose value was at once aesthetic and ideological, they first had to be thought of as cultural spaces rather than as places devoid of culture. Invention, then, means to imagine a perspective from which these edges—which may or may not be on a city’s actual outskirts—can be seen, from which they become visible. Borges’s literary suburbia is at once local and universal, and it is a bohemian quarter that belongs to the intellectual elites.⁹⁷ By contrast, Tuñón’s Buenos Aires, especially in the poems he wrote after he broke with the vanguard group around the journal Martín Fierro (which also included Borges),⁹⁸ is perhaps best described as an alternate universe that is global in a very different sense: the characters, objects, and itineraries that define this space are associated with an entirely different class of people, that of an urban proletariat. Although Tuñón’s baldíos seem to occupy the same geographical place, in cultural terms they could not be any farther removed from the streets in Borges’s poems, “las calles desganadas del barrio, / casi invisibles de habituales” (the listless streets of the neighborhood, / almost empty).⁹⁹ In fact, the closest global neighborhood with which Tuñón’s baldíos intersect is Hughes’s Harlem, “the quarter of the Negroes,” as Hughes calls it in ASK YOUR MAMA (CP, 477).¹⁰⁰ Both are landscapes of dreams deferred. James DeJongh notes that with The Weary Blues, “Hughes initiated a commitment to the theme of Harlem as a landscape and dreamscape of the blues, a theme that for over half a century has been since the 1920s a principal force shaping the development of the Harlem motif among three generations of Africana poets…. [They produced] black identity delineated in the tensions and resonances in the trope of the Harlem landscape itself, and advanced beyond the kind of twoness characterized by Du Bois.”¹⁰¹ The only attribute that perhaps distinguishes the downtrodden, transient denizens of Tuñón’s calles sin nombre (nameless streets)¹⁰²—immigrants from different parts of the globe, prostitutes and pimps, drug addicts, sailors, tramps, and circus folk—from Hughes’s Harlemites is their skin color, and sometimes not even that:

Te acuerdas de María Celeste?
Pues hoy María Celeste es una
Prostituta.

Te acuerdas de Juan el Broncero?
Pues Juan el Broncero es hoy,
Un ladrón.

(“Blues de los pequeños deshollinadores”)¹⁰³
[Remember María Celeste? Well, she’s a prostitute now. . . . Remember Juan el Broncero? Well, today he is a thief.]

En las encrucijadas de ansias y de fracasos,
en los hoteles internacionales donde se encuentran rostros conocidos
de estafadores, prostitutas, prestidigitadores y judíos.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

En las tabernas cuando cantan los marineros
y en las mujeres canallas y en los sótanos fumadores.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Esperar, esperar en una esquina,
encender un cigarrillo
y escuchar con asombro, con miedo, con nostalgia
la música amontonada del mundo.

(“Recuerdo de A. O. Barnabooth”)104

[In the cracks between worry and disappointment, in the international boarding houses where one finds the familiar faces of con men, prostitutes, magicians, and Jews. . . . In the taverns where the sailors chant and in sleazy brothels and smoky basements. . . . To wait, to wait on a corner, to light a cigarette and listen with wonderment, with fear, with nostalgia to the piled-up music of the world.]

The proximity between the urban fringes that attract Hughes and Tuñón and compel their poetic attention is not a matter of simple surface resemblances. The Buenos Aires Tuñón re-creates is a multinational space made up of the mixed-up sounds of social and economic differences that we also find in Hughes’s Harlem, and what I would call his Harlemized spaces.105 Iain Chambers’s observations about the Mediterranean fit these urban spaces as well. “The history of place,” he points out, “is itself an archive of sound, a collection of musical accidents, an accumulation of historical notes, an orchestration of cultural traces.”106 What distinguishes these poetic spaces, associated as they are with such different locations in the Western Hemisphere, is not that they are ghettos or barrios but that they are de-provincialized: these are peripheral spaces made up of fragments of other cities. In the first epigraph to this chapter, the urban planner in Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco beautifully calls it “une culture-mosaïque” (a mosaic-culture), a “ville créole” (Creole City) with a grammar all its own.107 Such Harlemized spaces are all locally anchored global microcosms connected to vast systems of circulation and translation. Tuñón’s intense multilingual and multihistorical space is the stomping ground of Juancito Caminador, named after world-famous Johnny Walker, the persona of the traveler-magician from Todos bailan who comes straight from the circus to the modern city. Juancito Caminado is a magical alter ego that would stay with Tuñón for the rest of his literary career. A mock-epitaphic poem from 1941 ironically testifies to his longevity.
The Worlds of Langston Hughes

Juancito Caminador...
Murió en un lejano puerto
el prestidigitador.
Poca cosa deja el muerto.\textsuperscript{108}

[Juancito Caminador.../ he died in a faraway port / the magician. / The dead man left little behind.]

Although Tuñón’s poetic illusionist may be read as a counterpart to Borges’s flâneur, Juancito Caminador is much closer kin to García Lorca’s gypsies from \textit{Romancero gitano} (1928) and especially to the itinerant tricksters Hughes conjures up in his poems and autobiographies.

At the risk of reading biography back into poetry, it is worth mentioning that Hughes and Tuñón led somewhat parallel lives. They were roughly the same age (Tuñón was born in 1905, Hughes, like Guillén, in 1902), they were from similarly humble backgrounds, and they both wrote prize-winning poetry quite early in their careers as writers. In 1926 Tuñón’s first book of poems, \textit{El violín del diablo} (The Devil’s Violin), won first prize in the competition held by the publishing house Gleizer; the poet Alfonsina Storni was one of the three jurors. Two years later, \textit{Miércoles de ceniza} (Ash Wednesday) was awarded a Premio Municipal. The twenty-three-year-old Tuñón promptly used the prize money to travel to Europe. While Hughes was roaming the Caribbean, Tuñón spent 1929–30 in Paris. Both men visited the Soviet Union and Cuba, though at very different points in their lives. Tuñón did not travel to the USSR until 1953; he visited central Asia in 1958.\textsuperscript{109} And he did not go to Cuba until after the revolution, in 1963.

For Hughes and Tuñón, traveling is neither a pastime nor even an option. It is sheer necessity and, in fact, an ineluctable condition of modern life and literature. Theirs are different kinds of voyages to similar kinds of places. The gritty neighborhoods of the Buenos Aires that Tuñón’s poet frequents seem closer to Hughes’s not-so-affluent Harlem, as distinct, for instance, from the more proper, respectably middle-class Harlem whose cultural and political institutions James Weldon Johnson chronicles in \textit{Black Manhattan} (1930) and also in \textit{Along this Way} (1933). Tuñón’s figures recall the cast of characters from Hughes’s early poetry: “Yellow girls” who become “workin’ girls,” like Ruby Brown and Clorinda; the “ruined gal” in “Beale Street Love”; booze hounds like Gin Mary. \textit{Fine Clothes to the Jew}, which might be read as a long poem,\textsuperscript{110} in particular features a motley array of characters with “low-down ways” (CP, 62), many modeled on blues women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, whose performances were quite unabashedly (homo)sexual. There are characters who let white boys look at their legs (“Red Silk Stockings”) and sometimes
even wield knives and stereotypical razors to fend off their “bad, bad” men, characters like “Do Dirty” who beat and cut them. For one reason or another, all of them are “deep in trouble.” Like Juancito Caminador with his “[t]ruco mágico, ilusión, / canción, barja y paloma” (magic trick, illusion, song, deck of cards, and dove), they are “dream singers,” as Hughes writes in “Laughers”:

Rounders,
Number writers,
Comedians in vaudeville,
And band-men in circuses—
Dream-singers all,—
My people.

(Striking also is Tuñón’s preference for the blues, at least in *Todos bailan*, although he also offers the occasional *poetango*, a poetic form reminiscent of Nicolás Guillén’s *poemas-son* (see chapter 4). This choice, combined with the direct mention of Hughes in the lines from “Ku Klux Klan” in the second epigraph to this chapter, leaves little doubt that *Todos bailan* is (also) an homage to the USAmerican poet, whom Tuñón would not meet in person until several years after the collection appeared in print. Another unexpected reference to “Langston” appears in “Nuestra rosa, rosa de América,” a long poem Tuñón first published in 1953. In that poem, in which the *rosa* of Borges’s early verse is proudly wearing a full metal jacket, Tuñón characterizes the USA as the land of “los imperialismos mordiendo el Continente / y a su cabeza el yanqui biznieto del pirata /—no la tierra de Lincoln, de Whitman y de Langston [sic]” (the imperialisms chewing up the Continent/ and at their head the Yankee great-grandson of the pirate /—not the land of Lincoln, Whitman, and Langston). What resonates here as well is Hughes’s “Our Land” but minus the mythological slant that Borges gave it in his translation. Tuñón’s American roses, like Hughes’s, grow quite well in political manure.

Geographical and linguistic differences notwithstanding, Hughes’s interest in what one might call socioaesthetics provides more fruitful grounds for comparing his poetry to Tuñón’s verse than to Borges’s and even to the work of Tuñón’s close friend and fellow Communist Pablo Neruda, with whom he collaborated in Chile in the early 1940s. By the same token, the pioneering aesthetics of Hughes’s poetry—even before he wrote “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria,” which some have oddly taken to mark the beginning of his career as a “political” poet—have much less in common with the lyrics of Countee Cullen, who shared Johnson’s sense of public propriety, and even with those of the more combative Claude McKay. That the shared themes of blackness and race relations may be enough to establish singular lines of cultural descent to the exclusion of a host of others must neither be...
underestimated nor undervalued. The same applies to the political expediency of doing so during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts movement in the USA. Those shared topoi do not, however, justify cordonning off political and aesthetic affinities that existed both across the color line in the USA and well beyond national boundaries. In fact, I use the term “socio-aesthetics” to signal the impossibility of separating politics from aesthetics when analyzing the poetry of the avant-gardes to which both Hughes and Tuñón chose to belong. These avant-gardes were critical of socioeconomic divisions and the institutions—be they literary, political, or religious—that either tacitly reinforced or openly policed those lines of separations. Race and color were obviously not secondary concerns for Hughes. How could they be? At least through the 1930s, Hughes was also not worried about propriety in either political or aesthetic terms. Had he been, he would never have written and published the poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* or *Scottsboro Limited* or, for that matter, any of the controversial verse he penned during the 1930s. I suspect that he probably never would have written anything worth reading. We should take to heart Hughes’s reply to the reviewers who sneered at *Fine Clothes*. “My poems are indelicate,” he retorted. “But so is life” (*Essays*, 39).

For Hughes to write about blues singers and their African American audiences, both of which were perceived as lower-class by the Negro elite in the 1920s, was no less a conscious act of transgression than it was for Tuñón to write about prostitutes and opium addicts in Buenos Aires’s less respectable neighborhoods. Both men were and created a new type of writer who was at once traveler and witness. And unlike Borges and his attentive idler, their poetic personae not only observed and invented, as Sarlo notes; they also cast judgments and shook things up. Although the respective political climates in which Hughes and Tuñón wrote were ones in which anarchists, socialists, Communists, and other “writers on the left”—as Daniel Aaron would call them in his classic study—were accepted in intellectual circles, their poems pushed the limits not just of good taste but of what lyric poetry might sustain when written in a social and political key. Creating what Beatriz Sarlo called a “nuevo pintoresquismo, diferente de los costumbristas y de la mitología urbana que Borges esta inventando” (new picturesque different from the costumbristas and the urban mythology that Borges invented), they rescued politics from the generic realism of so-called social literature and brought it into the previously safe aesthetic spaces of the lyric.

Consider the issue of propriety in Hughes’s “Ma Man” (*initially* “My Man”), one of the poems he modified for inclusion in *Fine Clothes*, in a way translating it from standardized English into an African American vernacular. If we follow Lawrence Venuti in assuming that translations “involve the inscription of domestic values in the foreign text,” we find that “Ma Man” works with a very different notion of the “domestic” from what Venuti has in mind. Here is the opening stanza of this blues poem:
When ma man looks at me
He knocks me off ma feet.
When ma man looks at me
He knocks me off ma feet.
He’s got those ’lectric-shockin’ eyes an
De way he shocks me sho is sweet.

(CP, 66)

If dialect in English, as Venuti argues, “exposes the hierarchical values in Anglo-American culture,” African American vernacular in Hughes’s poems also brings to the fore salient class differences among USAmerican Negroes. If we posit a reader who does not readily identify with this language and the class position it denotes, which would have been true of many of Hughes’s readers in the 1920s regardless of their race and color, we can see how the vernacular actually renders the text less rather than more familiar. This estrangement effect would also work with a different set of readers, those more apt to listen to the blues than read it on the page, for Hughes transforms the lyrics and musical structure of the blues into a poetic performance related to the musical performance but not identical with it. Either way, this poem does not position any reader in familiar “domestic intelligibilities.” Instead, Hughes makes his readers uncomfortably aware of their distance from the poem’s language and the situation the poem represents, which is anything but domestic. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The poem’s persona is a female blues singer who confronts readers with an unabashedly sexualized, public account of her man’s prowess as a banjo player—“he plays good when he’s sober / An’ better, better, better when he’s drunk and a lover”—and as the “eagle-rockin’” lover to whom her seductive voice calls out in the final stanza. The combination of raunchy sex and alcohol would have carried distinct lower-class inflections, and the poem, unframed and thus uncensored by a distant poetic voice, flaunts them quite unapologetically.

The figure of the blues singer in “Ma Man,” like that of the prostitute in other poems, also functions as a fragment of the domestic relations in which black vernaculars emerged. The originators of these mother tongues were not just mothers but also slaves who, in the antebellum Americas, took over the socializing and educational function of biological mothers while, especially in the USA, remaining on the outside of the white families they served. In the domestic sphere, slavery combined with racial oppression produced a structure of simultaneous closeness and distance that compromised the integrity of dominant languages in the same way that the historical realities of miscegenation compromised purportedly white lineages. Both compounded the problem of accessing intergenerational memories, including linguistic memories, that had begun with ruptures in African families caused by the slave trade. The persistence of racial oppression well after emancipation
caused additional ruptures in African American families. We should not assume that this situation was limited to the USA. Set adrift by racist and economic pressures, the prostitutes in Hughes’s poems represent the displacement of the black family. Like Hughes’s female blues singers, these whores are potential maternal figures recovered from the morass of sexual and racial taboos in which African American womanhood was mired in the early twentieth century. As maternal figures, they are purveyors of a lost or displaced mother tongue but one stripped of all nostalgia. Their language is fiercely sexual in its insistence on having a body rather than being a body that can be used and abused. “Ma Man” is transgressive, then, not just because it represents underworld characters but also because it flouts the injunction against literary representations of black sexuality, female and male. There is, after all, no compelling reason to read the ungendered persona in this poem only as female, especially if we place “Ma Man” in the context of poems such as “Dream” and “Desire” from *Fields of Wonder* (1939):

```
Desire to us
Was like a double death
Swift dying
of our mingled breath
Evaporation
Of an unknown strange perfume
between us quickly
In a naked room.
```

“Ma Man” is but one example of how Hughes’s first books of poetry, like Tuñón’s, functioned as “un verdadero laboratorio de transformaciones ideológico-literaria donde se verifica el impacto productivo de los grandes temas sociales sobre los mundos referenciales de la literatura…. El thesaurus del poeta se amplia incorporando nuevas referencias culturales que se cruzan con las referencias anteriores” (a veritable laboratory for ideological-literary transformations where the productive impact of the great social themes on the referential worlds of literature could be validated…. The poet’s thesaurus becomes more extensive, incorporating new cultural references that cut across and mingle with older references). Sarlo regards the changes that began during the 1920s in Argentina and the USA as two-pronged: on the one hand, writers who themselves came from the socioeconomic margins entered the intellectual arena; on the other, they thematized the fringe in their writings. In literature, these combined factors set in motion “un proceso de expansión tópica que se traducirá también en un sistema nuevo de cruces formales entre diferentes niveles de lengua y diferentes estéticas” (a process of thematic expansion that also translated into a new system of formal crossings between different levels of language and different aesthetics). The result
is not poetry that thematically strains against expected aesthetic enclosures and interior subjectivity—as it does, for instance, in Claude McKay’s sonnets—but poetry that explodes those frames into many swirling atoms that can then recombine with each other into unexpected and highly unstable shapes. Here thematic crossings produce formal transgressions. An excellent example of how figures of miscegenation assert multiple and conflicting origins is Hughes’s poem “Cross” from The Weary Blues (see CP, 58), which Rafael Lozano translated into Spanish as “Cruz” (1931) and Julio Gáler as “Mulato” (1959).

The reactions to Hughes’s and Tuñón’s respective transgressions of political and literary pieties were immediate and unforgiving. Most reviewers of Fine Clothes were aghast and quick to demote Hughes from the poet laureate to “poet low-rate.” Some even called him a “sewer dweller.” If the tenor of Tuñón’s poetry from the 1920s could be encapsulated in the lines “[a] la mentira de arriba / prefiero la cruel verdad de abajo” (to the mendacity of high-up / I prefer the brutal truth of the down-low), his tone sharpened even more in the 1930s, known in Argentina as the Infamous Decade. Tuñón was “el testigo de la Década Infame” (the witness of the Infamous Decade) in more ways than one. In his work as a war correspondent for Crítica, the journal edited by his older brother Enrique, he reported on the horrors of the war between Bolivia and Paraguay (or, effectively, Standard Oil and Shell) for control of the Chaco Boreal. In his poetry, he chronicled the devastating effects of authoritarian politics and economic depression in what was then known as “the City of Hunger.” “Las brigadas de choque” (The Shock Brigades) marked a point of unbearable pain and frustration at which his lyric poetry becomes a cry for solidarity and revolutionary action. Through innovation, poetry itself becomes a form of public resistance, not just a tool for it. Tuñón published his lengthy “antipoema” in 1933 in the journal Contra, which he had founded earlier that same year. Lines such as the following excerpts of this twelve-part poem did not endear Tuñón to the Argentine authorities.

Formemos nosotros, cerca ya del Alba motinera,
las Brigadas de Choque de la Poesía.
Demos a la dialéctica materialista el vuelo lírico de nuestra fantasía.
¡Especialicémonos en el romanticismo de la Revolución!

Contra

Contra las putas espías de Orden Político.

¡Abajo la inteligencia burguesa!
Es tiempo de ocuparse del hombre.
Hablemos de esta ciudad sucia como su río.
Aquí todo está prohibido.
.
¡Yo arrojo este poema violento y quebrado
contra el rostro de la burguesía!125

[Already close to the mutinous Dawn, let us set up / the Shock Brigades of
Poetry. / Let us give dialectic materialism the lyric flights of our fantasy.
/ Let us specialize in the romanticism of Revolution! / .../ Against / Against
/ Against the fucking spies of the Political Order. / .../ Down with the bourgeois
intelligentsia! / It is time to attend to human beings. / .../ Let us talk about this
city as dirty as its river. / Here everything is forbidden. / .../ I hurl this violent
and blazing poem / into the face of the bourgeoisie!]

This poem can easily be read as a harsher version of Hughes’s “Our Land,”
in which the response to tyranny and injustice is now not flight but fight.
“Las brigadas de choque” earned Tuñón instant detention and made him
subject to legal proceedings in which he was charged with inciting public
unrest and rebellion. The trial concluded with a verdict of a two-year prison
sentence with “juratary caution,” meaning that his freedom was conditional
on the promise that he would abstain from the very conduct that had led to
his arrest in the first place.126 After being released on his own recognizance,
Tuñón departed for Spain, where he would spend the better part of four years
(1935–39) exercising a right he did not have in Argentina: freedom of speech.
Upon his arrival he became something of a cause célèbre for the Spanish and
Hispanic American writers there. In June of 1935, they issued a public pro-
test against the sentence Tuñón had received in Buenos Aires. Among the
signatories were García Lorca, Neruda, Felipe, and Hernández.127 Ironically,
especially given the assassination of García Lorca, it was in civil-war Spain
that Tuñón wrote some of his best poems, including Todos bailan.

To readers of Hughes, the sentiments in “Las brigadas de choque” are
not unfamiliar. Tuñón’s poem echoes many of the poems Hughes wrote and
published between 1932 and 1935, after he had returned from the Soviet
Union. Most notable in this context are “Wait,” “Revolution,” “Always
the Same,” “Chant for Tom Mooney,” “Letter to the Academy,” “Song
of a Revolution,” “A New Song,” “Open Letter to the South,” “Good
Morning, Revolution,” “One more ‘S’ in the U.S.A,” and the poems of
Scottsboro Limited. Tuñón would also evoke the Scottsboro trials in his
“Los negros de Scottsboro,” a poem that disturbingly captures how the
animalistic brutality of the lynch mob is transferred to the bodies of the
incarcerated.

Oh como relucen los Nueve Negros de Scottsboro.
Los Nueve Negros de Scottsboro
Buenos Aires Blues

aúllan esperando la muerte,
aúllan y muerden las rejas
los Nueve Negros de Scottsboro.

Ya nunca nos olvidaremos
de los Nueve Negros de Scottsboro. 128

[Oh, how the Nine Scottsboro Negroes glow. / The Nine Scottsboro Negroes,/ they howl waiting for death, / they howl and bite the prison bars / the Nine Scottsboro Negroes. /.../ Now we will never forget / the Nine Scottsboro Negroes.]

Among 1930s socialist intellectuals, such remembrances functioned as fuses for social and political action, whereas in 2010 they have become popular entertainment: The Scottsboro Boys, a Broadway musical—of all things! 129 As the following excerpts from Hughes’s poetry show, revolution, for Hughes as for Tuñón, was the very basis of literature’s political, moral, and aesthetic value.

Better that my blood makes one with the blood
Of all the struggling workers in the world—

Until the Red Armies of the International Proletariat
Their faces, black, white, olive, yellow, brown,
Unite to raise the blood-red flag that
will never come down!

(“Always the Same,” CP, 165–66)

Speak about the Revolution—where the
flesh triumphs (as well as the spirit) and the
hungry belly eats, and there are no best people...

(“Letter to the Academy,” CP, 169)

Revolt! Arise!
The Black
And White World
Shall be one!
The Worker’s World!

The past is done!
A new dream flames
Against the
Sun!

(“A New Song,” CP, 171–72) 130
The function of poetry in these passages is to project the spectacle of public solidarity, not to contemplate the predicaments of solitary subjects. The poet here is not a lyric “I” that observes and chronicles from the outside but a fractal consciousness dispersed into the active verbs that perform public acts of collective defiance.

Like Tuñón, Hughes would be accused of spreading Communist propaganda but not until almost twenty years later (see chapter 5). It is not that external circumstances and key experiences in the lives of Hughes and Tuñón transformed their poetry into political propaganda during the 1930s. Rather, both, along with a host of other writers who came together in Spain because of what quite literally was a state of emergency, felt the need to write poetry that circulated in public spaces—as something to be read out loud, recited, sung—and that could insert itself into public discourses more directly than most printed books of poetry could. The places where this avant-garde poetry was read and heard were the same liminal spaces that had spawned it: the fringes of the world’s great cities, in this case Madrid, New York City, and Buenos Aires. In other, related, contexts, they have been called contact zones (Pratt) or borderlands (Anzaldúa), but those terms have lost their initial precision. Taken together, these diverse quarters and wastelands constitute global regions: “Baldíos de las cosas—recuerdos, voces, gestos, escenas, despedidas—, ayer, hoy y mañana” (debris or trash heaps of stuff—memories, voices, gestures, scenes [flashbacks?], farewells—yesterday, today, and tomorrow).

The metaphor Tuñón develops in these lines from “El mercado de pulgas” (The Flea Market) connects quite effortlessly with the images of the many objects and remembered voices that are cast off, pulled out again, and ultimately recycled and revitalized in Hughes’s writings and, for that matter, in Chamoiseau’s Creole City. For Hughes and Tuñón, writing poetry was a process of continually sorting through what others had left behind. Likewise, picking up some part of Hughes’s work at this global flea market—a poem, a line, an image, or even just his name—and making it part of one’s own writing in some different part of the world is surely a form of literary translation, in all possible senses of that word.

**BEYOND BORGES**

Although Borges’s translations no doubt did their initial share to make Hughes known among Argentine intellectuals, his own literary interest in Hughes’s poetry was short-lived. So was his admiration for Raúl González Tuñón’s writing when politics proved too much of a dividing line to sustain their earlier friendship and collaboration. The interest in Hughes’s writing did, however, continue without Borges and most likely with the support of Tuñón, who returned to Buenos Aires in the 1940s. Even though he had
been away for years, first in Spain and later in Chile, where he teamed up with Neruda, Tuñón was at least as well connected in the Buenos Aires publishing scene as his former colleague at *Martín Fierro* and *Proa*. And Argentina’s publishing industry was booming in the 1930s and 1940s. Scores of new journals were launched, some short-lived, and exiles from Franco’s Spain moved publishing houses to Buenos Aires and founded new ones. Having just returned from Spain, Tuñón would have known, at least casually, the next generation of intellectuals who started to translate Hughes’s poetry and prose in the early 1940s.

In 1944, Editorial Lautaro, one of several small presses organized by Argentina’s Communist Party to disseminate translations from Russian and other languages, published *El inmenso mar*, Luisa Rivaud’s version of *The Big Sea*. Ildefonso Pereda Valdés, whose name Hughes had sent to Blanche Knopf in 1940, likely paved the way for this book, and I strongly suspect that Guillén was the one who arranged to have *El inmenso mar* reprinted in Cuba in 1967. The following year, 1941, Editorial Futuro published *Pero con risas*, Nestor R. Ortíz Oderigo’s translation of the novel *Not Without Laughter*. In 1952, Lautaro still had an interest in Hughes and also put into print Julio Gáler’s *Poemas de Langston Hughes*, while Fabril issued Gáler’s translation of Hughes’s second autobiography under the title *Yo viajo por un mundo encantado* in 1956. In the intervening years, Quetzal and Siglo Veinte had printed Gáler’s versions of Hughes’s play *Mulatto* (1954) and *Riendo por no llorar* (1955), a translation of Hughes’s story collection *Laughing to Keep from Crying*. Then as now, translations were frequently negotiated through literary agents and publishers with little involvement by the authors. As a result, Hughes appears to have had no direct contact with Argentine translators and presses until after the publication of *El inmenso mar*, for which Hughes received a contract in 1945. That same year, he sent *The Ways of White Folks* to Lautaro, along with a copy of *Not Without Laughter*. They liked the stories but argued, rather unconvincingly given the success of Borges’s stories, that their readers “prefiere[n] siempre la novela al cuento” (always prefer novels to short stories). Admittedly, given the racial emphasis of the topics and the unsettling tenor of the stories themselves, *The Ways of White Folks* would likely have been a tough sell in Argentina. In the end, Lautaro did not take the novel either, but Futuro did. The founding director of Futuro was Raúl Larra, a militant member of the Communist Party who knew Raúl González Tuñón well. Hughes hoped that Futuro would also publish his stories, but it politely declined. Then, in June of 1948, Hughes asked Knopf to send a number of his books to one Julio Gáler in Argentina. The request seems to have come out of the blue but was evidently in response to Gáler’s having sent Hughes drafts of several poems in translation.

Who were these new translators? The anthropologist, ethnomusicologist, and folklorist Nestor Ortíz Oderigo stands out among Hughes’s Argentine
translators for being the only one with a sustained personal interest in African American culture—in his case African American music from the United States, where his earlier work was reviewed regularly in *Phylon* and the *Journal of Negro History*. Ortiz Oderigo, who is described as *mestizo*, also worked on and had connections to Ildefonso Pereda Valdés in Montevideo and thus indirectly to Hughes himself. There is no evidence that Hughes ever met Ortiz Oderigo or, for that matter, Rivaud or Gáler.

Given their shared political and literary interests, it is difficult to imagine that Abraham Julio Gáler, who shortened his name to Julio Gáler in his publications, did not cross paths with Raúl González Tuñón. Gáler had studied languages and literatures at the National University of Córdoba, Argentina, from which he graduated in 1943. In addition to being a founding member of Fabril in 1958, Gáler, a committed Communist, had worked as senior editor at Jacobo Muchnik in Buenos Aires. In those days he also contributed to the Marxist journal *Cuadernos de Cultura*. Although he produced an impressive list of translations from English, French, German, and Russian—in addition to Hughes, Gáler translated works by Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Carl Sandburg, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, among others—Gáler is now better known for his work with the International Labor Organization (ILO), which he joined in 1959 as a member of the editorial and translation division. There is no information about any connections between Gáler and Rivaud. What we do know, however, is that they were both Jewish and moved in the same literary and political circles. Rivaud’s given name was Lucie Lipschutz. Born in Paris of Russian Jewish parents who relocated to Spain and fled to Argentina, she published most of her translations under the pen name Luisa Rivaud. What might have attracted both Gáler and Lipschutz to Hughes’s writing was their own sense of otherness, exacerbated in Lipschutz’s case by exile and persecution. It was hardly a coincidence that Lipschutz adopted a different professional name upon moving to Argentina in 1939, the year Hitler’s troops invaded Poland. Lipschutz was most prolific as a translator in Buenos Aires during the 1940s and 1950s, when she published Spanish versions of writings by J. B. Priestley, Marian Anderson, Eddie Rickenbacker, and Upton Sinclair with some of the same publishing houses as Gáler, notably Muchnik, Fabril, Lautaro, and Losada.

While Hughes apparently did not meet either Lipschutz or Gáler, Nicolás Guillén most likely did during his political exile in Buenos Aires in the late 1950s. Nor are there any specifics in Hughes’s papers about how the connection with Gáler came about. It is most plausible that either Lautaro’s editor—Sara Maglione de Jorge, who was close to Gáler (as well as to María Rosa Oliver and Victoria Ocampo)—or Gregorio Weinberg—the press’s director, who was also a friend of Gáler’s—would have suggested Gáler as a possible translator to Blanche Knopf. Gáler himself recalls that he went to Buenos Aires in 1949 to offer his friends at Lautaro his translation of
Hughes’s poems. Gáler had started translating Hughes’s poems early in 1948. Beginning in June of that year, he published a number of these translations in several relatively short-lived literary journals in Buenos Aires and Córdoba. Almost all of the typed drafts Gáler had sent Hughes a month earlier were of poems that had never been translated into Spanish: “Jazz Band en un cabaret de París” (“Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret”), “Luna Nueva” (New Moon”), “Deseo” (“Desire”), “Sueños” (“Dreams”), “Hombre” (“Man”), “Silencio” (“Silence”), and “Mulato” (“Mulatto”). The same is true of the poems Gáler had already published in Cabalgata, Tiempo Vivo, and Continente: “Canconcillo” (“Little Song”) and “Uno” (“One”), “Amor que pasa” (“Passing Love”), “Alegria” (“Joy”), and “Canción de la lluvia abrilínea” (“April Rain Song”). He sent those to Hughes in 1949 (see LHP, 443:9945 and 9946). Although there are gaps in their correspondence, we can surmise that by April 1952, Hughes had authorized Gáler’s book, and its title page carries the note “Antología autorizada y aprobada por el autor” (anthology authorized and approved by the author). On June 19 of that same year, Hughes finally received his first copy of Poemas de Langston Hughes from Gáler himself.

Even compared with more recent volumes of Spanish anthologies of Hughes’s verse by Ahumada (Mexico, 1968) and Cruzado and Hricko (Spain, 2004), Gáler’s Poemas remains by far the most comprehensive collection of Hughes’s poetry in Spanish. Its eighty-three poems include selections from The Weary Blues, Fine Clothes to the Jew, The Dream Keeper (1932), Fields of Wonder (1939), Shakespeare in Harlem (1942), One-Way Ticket (1949), Montage for [sic] a Dream Deferred (1952), and eight poems published elsewhere, among them “Christ in Alabama” (“Cristo en Alabama”) and a fragment of “Advertisement for the Waldorf Astoria” (“Un Aviso para el Waldorf Astoria”). Gáler celebrates the latter poem, together with the epic “El Tren de la Libertad” (“Freedom Train”), as “uno de los más finos líricos norteamericanos de su generación. Arna Bontemps dice de él que es los más aproximado a un Shelley americano” (one of the finest North American lyrics of his generation. Arna Bontemps says that Hughes most resembles an American Shelley) (Poemas, 9).

Gáler’s volume opens with a fairly lengthy introduction, in which he details Hughes’s biography and the historical context of the Harlem Renaissance, “el Renacimiento Negro” or “Movimiento de los Nuevos Negros” (Poemas, 14−15). The image of Hughes he projects is unequivocally that of a poet of the people. What Gáler does seem to equivocate about, however, is exactly who Hughes’s people are. He claims that it was the publication of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in The Weary Blues that “le hizo de inmediato un lugar en la poética norteamericano y lo identifico como el primer poeta de su pueblo” (immediately earned Hughes a place in North American poetry and identified him as the foremost poet of his people):
Desde su poema inicial, “El Negro,” pasando por las dulces baladas de Harlem, hasta el reciente “Tren de la Libertad,” Langston Hughes es *un poeta de su pueblo*, de sus pocos alegrías y sus muchos dolores, de sus luchas, sus desazones, su brillante esperanza. Y precisamente su *distintivo carácter nacional*, por paradójico que ello resulte, lo que da a este poeta carácter y validez universal.

*Poemas, 7, my emphasis*

[From his first poem, “Negro,” to the sweet ballads of Harlem to the recent “Freedom Train,” Langston Hughes has been *a poet of his people*, of their few joys and many woes, of their struggles, their worries, their bright and shining hope. And it is precisely, and paradoxically, *his distinctive nationalist character* that gives this poet his universal character and meaning.] (*Poemas, 11, my emphasis*)

Gáler’s notion of the national dimensions of Hughes’s poetry is perhaps less confusing when we think of it more specifically as *cultural* nationalism, even though Gáler’s reference below to the USA as “Norteamérica” does make one wonder if he is intentionally blurring the line between black and white North Americans—the two worlds that Hughes struggled to reconcile with each other.

Langston Hughes buscó la síntesis de esos dos mundos, y la hallo en la poesía. La hallo en los poemas exuberantes de Carl Sandburg, el trovador de Chicago, el cantor de las grandes y las miserias de la América imperialista, el más genuino heredero del gran Viejo de Manhattán en la Norteamérica de hoy….Pero no fue este su único maestro. También incidió en él la herencia telúrica de Paul Laurence Dunbar, prácticamente el primero de los poetas negros de los EE.UU., el que incorporó al lenguaje poético el dialecto quebrado de los negros en las plantaciones. Ellos fueron sus primeros maestros. Puede decirse que de Dunbar derivo su sentido nacional y de Sandburg su tono social y protesta. (*Poemas, 9*)

[Langston Hughes was searching for a synthesis of these two worlds, and he found it in poetry. He found it in the exuberant poems of Carl Sandburg, the troubadour of Chicago, the singer of the greatness and the misery of imperialist America, the most authentic heir to the great Gray Poet of Manhattan [Whitman] in today’s North America….But Sandburg was not his only teacher. He was also influenced by the telluric heritage of Paul Laurence Dunbar, virtually the first of the Negro poets in the United States to incorporate into his poetry the broken dialect of the plantation blacks. These were Hughes’s principal teachers. One might say that he derives his nationalism from Dunbar and his tone of social protest from Sandburg.]

While Gáler does mention Hughes’s translations of Jacques Roumain’s novel, Guillén’s verse, and García Lorca’s poems, he says nothing at all either about his contact with Hughes or about his own translations (*Poemas, 18*). This lack of self-reflectiveness on the part of a literary translator is not
untypical for the times. In fact, neither Hughes’s translators in the Hispanic Americas nor, for that matter, Hughes himself commented on the actual process of translation.

What is remarkable about Gáler’s anthology is, first of all, the breadth of his selections, which clearly attempt to give readers as varied an impression of Hughes’s poetry as possible—more varied, in fact, than Gáler’s own introduction suggests. In this respect, Gáler was much more thorough than, for instance, Ahumada would be in his 1968 collection, which does not strive for such broad coverage and includes about one-third fewer poems than Gáler’s. In both Poemas and Yo también soy América, roughly half of the translated poems are drawn from Hughes’s early verse, an unsurprising choice on the part of either translator, given that Hughes’s reputation in the Hispanic Americas (and elsewhere) rested mainly on The Weary Blues and, to a lesser extent, Fine Clothes to the Jew. What is perhaps unexpected is that Gáler’s selection went well beyond what one might consider the usual suspects in these two volumes, such as “I, Too,” “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Negro,” “Brass Spittoons,” “Po’ Boy Blues,” or even “The Weary Blues” itself, even though he was actually the first to translate Hughes’s famous title poem. Gáler included a total of twenty-two of the sixty-one poems in The Weary Blues and only nine from Fine Clothes. Of these twenty-two, sixteen were the first (and thus far the only) translations into Spanish. Although Gáler left intact the original frame of The Weary Blues, opening his selections with “El Negro” (“Negro” or “Proem”) and ending with “Yo también” (the “Epilogue” to Hughes’s volume), he changed the order in which Hughes had placed the poems. As a result, “Fantasy in Purple,” for instance, which Hughes had placed in the section “Dream Variations,” now appears face to face with “Caribbean Sunset” (from “Water Front Streets”), and “March Moon” (also from “Dream Variations”) sits side by side with “Suicide’s Note” (from “Shadows in the Sun”). This makes for stark but often productive contrasts.

The grouping of “Fantasy in Purple” and “Caribbean Sunset,” for instance, which Julio Gáler translated as “Fantasía en Purpúrea” and “Atardecer en el Caribe,” respectively, is one of those contrasts. Both the translations themselves and the placement of these two very unlike poems point to similarities that might otherwise have remained more veiled. In Gáler’s “Fantasía en Purpúrea,” Hughes’s “drums of tragedy”—“Beat the drums of tragedy for me. / Beat the drums of tragedy and death”—become “los tambores del drama,” generalizing Hughes’s generic reference and enhancing the poem’s performative qualities. The choir, whose “stormy song” is to drown out the death rattle, seems to have multiplied: “Canten los coros canciones de tormenta / Para ahogar con su ruido mi estertor” (Poemas, 48). Amid the tempestuous songs of the now plural choirs, the individualizing trumpet sound stands out even more. At Gáler’s hands, the “one blaring trumpet note of sun” turns into a veritable stroke of lightning that transports rather just
accompanies the dying speaker. In fact, Gáler’s rendering of “note of sun” as “nota de luz” connects with his choice of “rayo de luz,” a redundant and thereby emphatic way of expressing “stroke of lightning,” in his translation of Hughes’s imagistic poem “Birth” (“Alumbramiento”).

Like a stroke  
Of lightning  
In the night  
Some mark  
To make  
Some word to tell.  

(CP, 323)

Como un rayo de luz  
En las tinieblas,  
Para trazar un signo  
Decir una palabra.  

(Poemas, 75)

Jahan Ramazani singles out “Fantasy in Purple” as the one poem among Hughes’s usually “compressed death lyrics” that “makes room for Keatsian abundance”—such as extravagant colors and lavish sound. To readers of Hughes’s short story “Home” from The Ways of White Folks, the appearance of the “white violins” in “Fantasy in Purple” would be more startling, and unsettling, than the “one blaring trumpet note of sun” because the violins resonate cruelly with the ending Hughes would fashion for that story. In Gáler’s translation, the “whir” of Hughes’s “white violins” in the second stanza is no longer just “thin and slow” but also shaky, tremulous—“Toquen los blancos violines sus notas aguadas y trémulas.” Like most of its companion pieces in The Ways of White Folks, “Home” is a death story with a distinctly Gothic flavor. More specifically, it is a story about a lynching: “And when the white folks left his [Roy’s] brown body, stark naked, strung from a tree at the edge of town, it hung there all night, like a violin for the wind to play.” The eerie whir of the white violins haunts the story, as it does the poem, with the specter of categorically inconsolable racial violence. The real tragedy, we come to understand, is not just the speaker’s dying, which is horrific enough, but the brutal deaths of so many before him. “Caribbean Sunset” focalizes the same racial violence in the figure of internal bleeding externalized, that is, of coughing up the blood of the Middle Passage and spewing it across a tourist’s postcard image of the darkening sea.

Es Dios que ha tenido una hemorragia  
Y está escupiendo sangre por el Cielo,
Manchando de rojo el mar oscuro.
Es, un atardecer en el Caribe.

(Goemas, 49)

God having a hemorrhage,
Blood coughed across the sky,
Staining the dark sea red,
That is sunset in the Caribbean.

(CP, 98)

Shifting to the imperfect past tense in the opening line, Gáler’s translation places the visual spectacle at more of a distance than Hughes’s present participle does. Still, when placed next to “Fantasy in Purple,” the minimalist “Caribbean Sunset” makes the “undertones” and “overtones” of violence more audible in what appears to be a fairly conventional elegy at first glance. What makes this poem a rather unusual elegy, however, is that it foreshadows rather than commemorates. In this respect, “Fantasy in Purple” is not so far removed from the self-epitaphic “Suicide’s Note,” which returns us to the space of river and from there to “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”"160 Hughes’s odd prolepsis finds further resonances in the combination of sunset with wondering in “Hey!,” whose poetic rhythms Gáler renders quite effectively in his standardized Spanish version. Spanish also allows Gáler to incorporate the audience—“les cantaré” (I will sing to them)—while retaining Hughes’s brevity:

Sun’s a settin’,
This is what I’m gonna sing.
Sun’s a settin’,
This is what I’m gonna sing:
I feels de blues comin’,
Wonder what de blues’ll bring.

(CP, 112)

El sol se pone,
y de eso les cantaré.
El sol se pone,
Y de eso les cantaré.
Y siento llegar los blues,
Qué me traerán esta vez?

(Poemas, 54)

Remarkable about Gáler’s overall choices in Poemas, especially when they are compared with what we find in the earlier anthologies and journals I discuss in the previous chapter, is that he translated many of the poems
that have since fallen through the cracks of Hughes scholarship and have
not been considered representative of Hughes’s (early) poetry. “Fantasy in
Purple” and “Suicide’s Note” are among them.¹⁶¹ Such choices of course
raise the question of which poems are to be regarded as representative of
Hughes’s verse and poetics. The varied plenitude of poetic and nonliter-
ary forms and possible generic affiliations throughout Hughes’s poetry and
even in The Weary Blues alone—ranging as they do from odes, sonnets, and
elegies to epistolary fragments, fliers, statistics, and snippets of conversa-
tions—makes this a difficult question to answer. If there is any one constant
in Hughes’s writing, it is that of mixing genres and discourses.¹⁶² In this
regard, connections between the poems Gáler selected and links with other
lyrics come into view when we place them in the context of my earlier dis-
cussion of socioaesthetics and urban fringe spaces. Both categories easily ac-
commodate poems such as “Negro Dancers” (“Bailarines Negros”), “Ruby
Brown,” and “The Cat and the Saxophone” (“El Gato y el Saxofón”), all of
which are micronarratives of subcity life. Other poems that fall into this cat-
egory are “Lenox Avenue” (“Avenida Lenox: Medianoche”), “Parisian Beg-
gar Woman” (“Mendiga de París”), “Vagabonds” (“Vagabundos”), “The
Jester” (“El Juglar”), “Suicide’s Note” (“Nota de una suicida”), “Desire”
(“Deseo”), and even “Youth” (“Juventud”) and “April Rain Song” (“Can-
ción de la lluvia abrileña”). All take us back to the very same Harlemized
quarters on which I remark above in connection with Raúl González Tuñón.

One poem that stands out from the rest of Gáler’s translations is “Árbol”
(Tree), not because of any formal or thematic oddities but because it seems
to have no counterpart in English:

Tengo miedo
de ese árbol
sin hojas
en la noche
contra el cielo.

Quiero llorar.

(Poemas, 135)

[I am afraid/ of that tree/without leaves/in the night/against the sky./I want
to cry.]

As far as I was able to ascertain, Hughes himself never wrote a poem by
this title, or if he did, it no longer exists. Nor are these lines a fragment of
another poem. The only lyric that has similar ingredients is “Afraid,” first
published in The Crisis in 1924 and translated by José Antonio Fernández
de Castro as “Miedo” (“Fear”) in 1930.¹⁶³
We cry among the skyscrapers  
As our ancestors  
Cried among the palms in Africa  
Because we are alone,  
It is night,  
And we’re afraid.

(CP, 41)

Had “Árbol” been loosely based on Hughes’s “Afraid,” Gáler would have included it in the section on *The Weary Blues*, which he did not. It appears, then, that the English source text of “Árbol” is indeed lost. Given its absence, it is tempting to argue that this is an instance of a translator’s inventing his source poem, which would be the ultimate affront to the presumed primacy of an original or literary precursor—and the ultimate Borgesian gesture. In Hughes’s own words, we might take this orphaned translation as an uncanny example in which the poet runs into himself as a character in someone else’s book, a fate Hughes would then share most prominently, and quite appropriately, with Don Quixote. As Hughes writes in “Final Curve,” a short poem from *One-Way Ticket* (1949) that Gáler also translated,

When you turn the corner  
And you run into *yourself*  
Then you know that you have turned  
All the corners that are left.

(CP, 368)

Cuando al doblar una esquina  
Te encuentres a ti mismo,  
Sabrás que ya no quedan  
Esquinas por doblar.

(“Curva final,” *Poemas*, 100)

The very existence of Gáler’s “Árbol” instantly disproves what Hughes’s own poem seems to suggest: that there is an end, a final curve. This, however, is not the case for a writer. Once you run out of corners, there are always more pages to turn.