CHAPTER FOUR

HAVANA VERNACULARS

The Cuba Libre Project

I enjoy translating but . . . it is much more difficult than writing original material. Unfortunately too, it does not pay as well.

—Langston Hughes to Bernard Perry at Indiana University Press

Coge tu pan, pero no lo pidas;
coge tu luz, coge tu esperanza cierta
como un caballo por las bridas.
Plántate en medio de la puerta,
pero no con la mano abierta . . . .

[Take your bread, but do not beg for it; / take your light, take your firm hope / as a horse by the reins. / Stand in the middle of the doorway, / But not with an open hand . . . .]

—Nicolás Guillén, “Sabás” (1934),
dedicated to Langston Hughes

After Spain, Nicolás Guillén stuck with Hughes in more ways than one. In December of 1948 the Ward Ritchie Press of Los Angeles released Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén in a limited edition of 250 copies. This magnificently produced book consisted of fifty poems in translations by Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers; it was the first book-length edition of Guillén’s poetry in English.¹ The story of how Cuba Libre evolved over the course of almost two decades is a key chapter in the history of hemispheric cultural relations, testifying to the continued exchanges between Hispanic Caribbean and USAmerican intellectuals that had begun early in the nineteenth century. Handsome though it was, this folio volume did not popularize Guillén in the USA as much as Hughes had initially hoped.² What it did accomplish, however, was provide readers with a lens through which to reexamine the interactions of two internationally acclaimed figures, both with each other and with those who mediated what I call, more broadly, the Cuba Libre project. Among those mediators were the Cuban journalist José Antonio Fernández de Castro, his fellow countryman and editor Gustavo E. Urrutia, the Howard professor Ben Carruthers,
the publishers Blanche and Alfred Knopf, John Farrar (of Farrar Straus), and Caroline Anderson, the head of the Ward Ritchie Press. As the project began to take shape, Hughes made pointed decisions about translation, editing, and marketing that, like his relations with these friends and acquaintances, can be traced in his personal correspondence and in his revisions of drafts. The choices Hughes made as the project went on—which poems to translate, how to divide them up between himself and Carruthers, how to translate them, which English versions to publish and in what order—reflect his growing sense of being politically embattled. As we shall see in the next chapter, he had good reasons for feeling that way.

Rather than revive arguments for or against influence relations between Hughes and Guillén, I take analytical stock here of what gets lost and added in this important example of intercultural translational commerce between Cuba and the USA during the first half of the twentieth century. One of my principal concerns in doing so is to scrutinize the effects of cultural homogeneity that English-language translations of African diasporic texts published in the USA have tended to create. Some of Hughes’s own translations of Guillén’s poetry follow this tendency, but others decidedly do not. The poems at the center of this chapter come from *Cuba Libre* and also *The Poetry of the Negro 1746–1949*, a hemispheric anthology on which Hughes started to work with Arna Bontemps in early 1947 and which I consider an offshoot of the *Cuba Libre* project. This anthology, which went to press in late 1948 just as *Cuba Libre* was on the verge of being launched, was to be the first of its kind in English, because “las otras son solamente de poetas de la raza Negro” (all the others include only poets of the black race). The first edition of this anthology, which Doubleday published in 1949, devoted no less than 75 of its 386 pages to poets from the francophone and Hispanic Caribbean. My readings show that even a writer who had been hailed as a literary innovator would embrace a rather guarded approach to translation when it came to the work of writers of color from the south of the USAmerican South. The choices Hughes made as translator and editor provide useful insights into how and why he came to value certain cultural differences over others.

Hughes’s friendship with Nicolás Guillén, which continued almost until Hughes’s death, has occupied a prominent place in critical studies. Hughes had first met Guillén during a much-popularized second visit to Havana in March of 1930, and the two poets had spent a good deal of time together in Spain in late 1937 (see chapter 3). Although Hughes and Guillén met in person only on a handful of occasions between 1930 and 1949, face-to-face encounters are not an adequate measure of a friendship that unfolded mostly in letters. Hughes’s second trip to Cuba also marked the beginning of his career as a translator. As early as July 1930, Guillén had expressed his enthusiasm about the possibility of Hughes’s translating some of his poems: “Me encanta la idea de que traduzcas algunos de los ‘sones.’ Ellos
ganarían mucho en tus manos” (I am enchanted by the idea that you might translate some of the “sones.” They would gain much indeed from your touch). Indeed, just a few months after he returned from Cuba, Hughes published his first translation of a poem by Guillén in *Opportunity*, the National Urban League’s journal: “Black Woman” (“Mujer negra”). Around the same time, Spanish translations of Hughes’s own poems were appearing in Havana’s *El Diario de la Marina* (see chapter 2).

According to Hughes, *Cuba Libre* collected “the best and most famous of the Guillén verses,” and this volume may well be regarded as the literary culmination of the two poets’ long-standing and cordial friendship. *Cuba Libre* includes English versions of poems originally written in Afro-Cuban literary vernacular and extends Hughes’s efforts at creating a literary vernacular in his earlier poetry. Although *Cuba Libre* includes poems from later Guillén volumes as well, up to the collection *El son entero* (1947), Guillén’s “Motivos de son” (*Son Motifs*), published on April 20, 1930 on the *Diario*’s “Ideales de una Raza” page, occupy a special place of interest: they were the only poems written in Afro-Cuban vernacular—Guillén calls it *criollo*—and based on a distinctively Cuban musical form. A critical analysis of these poems and their translations in *Cuba Libre*, however, does not support claims that Hughes and Guillén shared a cultural poetics. José Antonio Fernández de Castro and Gustavo E. Urrutia were the first to suggest that they did in 1930 when they had explained to Hughes that these poems written in Cuba’s “very popular slang”—that is, Guillén’s “Motivos”—“are the exact equivalent of your ‘blues.’” Soon after, they started calling Guillén “the Cuban Langston Hughes.” Later scholars have too readily embraced this analogy without sufficiently examining its terms, implications, and limitations.

The translations on which Hughes worked for *Cuba Libre*, especially unpublished drafts and previously printed versions revised for inclusion in this volume, deserve more than passing attention. For one thing, the drafts show how very different Hughes’s approach to translation was from his academic collaborator’s. Unlike Ben Carruthers, Hughes seems to have understood and appreciated the Cuban texts’ irreducible strangeness, and he sensed how tenuous it might be to make claims about a shared African American poetics when faced with textual situations in which even negro did not comfortably translate as either “black” or “Negro.” Add to this the fact that Hughes’s grasp of Afro-Cuban vernacular was limited. For another, Hughes’s awareness of how foreign Guillén’s poetry might be to USAmerican audiences was much keener in the 1940s, after his youthful enthusiasm about his friend’s lyrics had given way to the realization of just how difficult it was to publish literary translations in a country that was too focused on inventing its postwar identity as a nation to be paying much attention to foreign authors. New Directions had published Dudley Fitts’s hefty bilingual anthology of Hispanic American poetry in 1942, and
the press’s editor, James McLaughlin, had included Lloyd Mallan’s “Little Anthology of Afro-Cuban Poetry” in *New Directions 1944*, the press’s “Annual Exhibition Gallery of Divergent Literary Trends.” Hughes was therefore fairly confident that *Cuba Libre* could similarly be placed with a major publishing house.¹⁵

**MARKETING TRANSLATIONS**

Between 1930 and 1960, Hughes also hatched several other translation projects. By the mid-1940s, his fame in the Hispanic Americas rested not only on his poetry but also on his efforts to promote work by Afro-Hispanic American and other writers in the USA. Although it is beyond the scope of this book to discuss all of the projects with equal care, let me at least mention them. Best known are Hughes’s translations of Jacques Roumain’s *Les gouverneurs de la rosée* as *Masters of the Dew*, a collaboration with Mercer Cook, and of poems by Federico García Lorca. His translations of verse by the Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral, contracted by Indiana University Press, was virtually buried.¹⁶ But not all his translation projects found a publisher; some of them never did. Knopf, Hughes’s main publisher since the 1920s, showed little interest in any of his translations. On March 1, 1937, for instance, Hughes wrote to Blanche Knopf: “If we ever did a new book of poems, they could include my translations of several poets somewhat known in this country, but whose poetry has appeared only in magazines where my translations of the work has [sic] been printed: Louis Aragon, Regino Pedrozo and Nicolás Guillén of Cuba,…as well as a number of Mexican poems, that I translated down there last year.” He also mentioned “some thirty Mexican and Cuban short stories that have appeared in magazines” such as *Esquire, Pacific Weekly*, and *New Masses* and available for publication in book form. In her reply of March 5, 1937, Mrs. Knopf did not think “that the short stories are a good idea either for sales or for your reputation at the moment” (LHP, 97:1825).¹⁷ Even ten years later, Knopf still had no real interest in Hughes’s translations and turned down his English version of Lorca’s *Romancero gitano*.¹⁸ Blanche Knopf hemmed and hawed about *The Poetry of the Negro* anthology until Hughes went with a contract from Doubleday instead.¹⁹

Hughes had clearly overestimated his own clout as a translator. At the same time, he had also miscalculated existing interest in Hispanic American writing, which was brought home to him when Farrar Straus, Knopf, Putnam, and other major houses all rejected his proposals for translation projects. Herbert Weinstock, senior editor at Knopf, summed up the situation in 1952, when he turned down yet another one of Hughes’s translation projects: “I have come to believe that the sad fact is that for most people in this country, Latin America and its history simply do not exist.”²⁰
Weinstock’s pessimism, however, should not be taken as an exact barometer of audience interests and publishing trends at the time, for a good number of early-twentieth-century Hispanic American works were actually available in English translations from both academic and commercial USAmerican publishers by the 1950s.\(^{21}\) It is no coincidence that literary translations, including the publishing and marketing of such translations, had picked up intellectual and commercial momentum in the USA during the first half of the twentieth century. Along with transatlantic modernism’s fascination with certain non-Western languages and cultures went a growing interest in modernist work in other languages, mostly French and German, which USAmerican publishers fueled by making translations of major works more widely available. The problem may not have been that USAmerican readers were categorically not interested in things Hispanic American but that this was not an especially good time to promote stories of black revolutionaries, including Cuba’s celebrated General Maceo. More than anything else, Weinberg’s response to Hughes reflected the tense political climate of the incipient McCarthy witch hunts.

What further complicates any discussion of Hughes’s role in fashioning *Cuba Libre* is that he occupied a dual position in relation to this “public object.” On the one hand, he was a translator; on the other, however, he was an editor-anthologizer—positions in the literary field that, according to Pierre Bourdieu, are “structurally contradictory” to the extent that “the makers and marketers of works of art are adversaries in collusion.”\(^{22}\) Particularly in the case of *Cuba Libre*, the lines between making and marketing were often blurred. Because he ended up dealing with a small press, one that specialized more in graphic arts than in avant-garde poetry, Hughes’s role as editor-anthologizer of *Cuba Libre* involved him much more directly in marketing decisions than would have been the case with a larger publisher such as Knopf.\(^{23}\) This was not unfamiliar territory for Hughes, who, as Karen Ford has shown, was a “relentless marketer of his own poetry” with “the good business sense to understand that a poem could be ‘used in many ways.’”\(^{24}\) His business sense attuned him to all factors that would affect literary reputations, the ability to publish, and, of course, book sales. Even though the sales of *Cuba Libre* do not reflect this, Hughes actually worked very hard to promote the book.\(^{25}\) Concerns with literary legitimacy were an inevitable part of his work as editor-marketer of *Cuba Libre*, which led him to minimize the poems’ foreignness and that of their authors to make them more appealing to the educated African American readers Hughes imagined for this book (see next section). Pitching *Cuba Libre* to this audience meant creating the impression of shared racial codes and taxonomies by limiting the dissonant impact of distinctively Cuban locutions on USAmerican English. More broadly, it also meant leaving unexamined the Cuban republic’s prerevolutionary political status as a de facto US-American protectorate even after the 1901 Platt Amendment establishing
this status was repealed in 1934. The vehicle for creating the impression, or effect, of shared racial codes was black vernacular represented as Negro dialect but only to a limited extent. As we shall see, it is in the handful of poems in Cuba Libre that are rendered in variations on this vernacular mode that the conflict between the positions of translator and editor-marketer becomes most pronounced.

**That Afro-Cuban Feeling**

Originally written in what Nicolás Guillén called _criollo_—“la forma en que todavía hablan—piensan—muchos de nuestros negros (y no pocos blancos también)” (the idiom in which many of our blacks [and not a few whites] still talk—and think)—these short poems known as the “Motivos de son” posed a formidable challenge to any translator. In fact, most translators at the time stayed away from so-called dialect poetry, Afro-Cuban and other. To translate the “Motivos” would have been a particularly tricky task for Hughes, whose mastery of Cuban Spanish was less than perfect, as Guillén noted half-jokingly but insistently—not by any means as limited as Guillén’s own English but tenuous nonetheless. The poems’ linguistic difficulty notwithstanding, Hughes, wearing his editorial hat, insisted on including most of the “Motivos” that had first appeared in the “página negra” of Havana’s Diario de la Marina in April 1930, about a month after Hughes’s second visit to Cuba (see figure 6). Guillén had sent Hughes a copy of the pamphlet, the form in which the “Motivos” were disseminated prior to being included in the 1931 collection Sóngoro cosongo. And not only did Hughes include these poems; he decided to open Cuba Libre with them. This gesture is particularly striking in the case of a poem on whose English versions I comment in detail below: “Ayé me dijeron negro,” one of the poems Hughes especially admired. It was published in English as “Last Night Someone Called Me Darky.” Although this _poema-son_ had disappeared from Guillén’s collections by the late 1940s, Hughes still kept it in Cuba Libre, presumably as a representative example of Guillén’s poems.

A more theoretical reason for my interest in the translations of these particular poems is that the literary modes of both so-called Negro dialect and black vernacular are probably the most pronounced instances of what Guido Podestá (pace Roland Barthes) calls “ethnic effects.” Until fairly recently, ethnic effects in texts by African American authors were still read as markers of racial “authenticity” incompatible with literary experimentation, unless we follow José María Rodríguez Garcia’s definition of “authenticity” as “the condition of a representation that never hides the fractures, collusions, and erasures that have gone into its own construction.” Such readings, combined with a preference for an aesthetics based on high-modernist standards of literary innovation, presumably justified excluding
Motivos de Son

por Nicolás Guillén

A José Antonio Pemán de Castre

Negro Bendito

¿Por qué es negro tu pelo?
Porque es negro el cielo.

Bendito el que tenga
La casa de mi contra.

Mi Chiquita

La chiquita que me llama
La chiquita que me llama.

Ódio Plano

Amor, amor, amor,
Amor, amor, amor,

Ayé me dijeron Negro

Aquí no hay amor, amor,
Aquí no hay amor, amor,

Espigando en

...
New Negro literature from accounts of USAmerican modernism. Because of their assumed association with “primitivism,” Podestá argues, African American writers in the USA—including Jean Toomer, who was touted as the most experimental of the Harlem Renaissance writers—“were not allowed to enter into the realm of modernism since they were supposed to respond only to ethnic paradigms.” “‘Primitives’ were not allowed to go primitive,” so they went “ethnic.” They “were encouraged or instructed (among others, by patrons and publishers) to play the role assigned to them by...ethnopoetics,” which Podestá describes as “a hermeneutics specialized in the conceptualization of artifacts whose magnified ethnic component constrained any academic exegesis and displaced artistic judgments.”

In literary texts associated with racialized cultural differences by way of either subject matter or authors’ perceived ethnic or racial identities, the pioneering aspects of vernacular writing have tended to go unrecognized. The fact that so-called Negro dialect as represented in poetry and fiction is clearly a hyperstylized discourse has not prevented it from being systematically naturalized as an authentic index of racial otherness. Even though literary representations of black vernacular are orthographically less conspicuous on the page, they have suffered similar misreadings. There are, for instance, no compelling aesthetic reasons why Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha,” Toomer’s Cane, and Hughes’s blues poems, to give but a few prominent examples, ought not to be read either as equally ethnic or as equally experimental or, indeed, as both. The same is true of the poesía negrista that characterized much of the so-called Afro-Antillean movement, of which Guillén is often called the unwitting founder (see CL, ix).

The translations of Guillén’s criollo poems that Hughes chose to include in Cuba Libre are telling examples of how modernist experimentation—Guillén calls it “un modo de estar en la ‘avanzada’” (a way of being in the “vanguard”)—is pressed into the mold of ethnographic realism in order to confirm dominant literary values and thereby satisfy certain audience expectations. Hughes’s worry in the 1940s about how his political reputation as a former (?) “Communist sympathizer” (in the infelicitous language of McCarthyism) might affect his literary reputation was an additional reason that he opted for this sort of assimilation when he prepared the first editions of Poetry of the Negro and Cuba Libre. When Hughes was not beset by such worries, which impinged on his editorial activities in countless ways, he also seemed more willing to take risks as a translator. His earlier versions of Guillén’s poems, including unpublished drafts, often concede—whether intentionally or not cannot always be ascertained—the limitations of USAmerican dialects, standard and nonstandard, in rendering discourses on race that fell outside the purview of USAmerican domestic ethnocentrism. Hughes was far more prepared to test linguistic and political limits in his drafts than he was in his published work.
Starting in the early 1940s, Hughes’s anxiety about audiences, reputation, and political acceptance made him decidedly more wary. One immediately senses his caution in the short introduction to *Cuba Libre*, and it comes in fuller view when compared to Carruthers’s initial, lengthy draft entitled “Nicolás Guillén, Proconsul of Cuban Poetry.” Caroline Anderson had requested that Hughes either write a new introduction or condense the existing introduction to “no more than one page.” Commenting on the fact that Carruthers’s original draft had been written in 1945, she also worried that some of the material in it might have been printed elsewhere, which was not the case. Hughes cut and edited the draft, keeping Carruthers’s name as author of the introduction. The changes Hughes did not make are as revealing as the ones that he did. Most surprisingly, he left intact Carruthers’s opening paragraph. It begins as follows:

*Cuba Libre* was originally a cry for freedom and in these poems it still is. Since the days of the Cuban struggle for independence, however, we *yanquis* have come to know it as a delightful drink concocted from the best of light Cuban rum, a dash of *limón* (lime to you) and cola poured over ice. Cuba’s rum is the symbol of its fiery passion, its lifeblood, its livelihood. In these poems it must represent the white blood in the veins of our mulatto poet, Nicolás Guillén. As in the perfect *CUBA LIBRE*, it is fused with the dark cola which for us is the symbol of his African heritage. (*CL*, ix)

Here, Carruthers situates the book’s title by referencing the revolutionary pedigree of that popular mixture of rum and Coke known as a Cuba Libre, which, legend has it, was born when the USA entered the Spanish-American War after the sinking of the battleship *USS Maine* in February 1898. Once a marker of the cause of political liberation shared between Cuba and the USA, the phrase “Cuba Libre,” as Carruthers reimagines it, comes to stand for cross-cultural contact well beyond USA-Cuban good-neighborliness. By racializing the drink’s brownish hue, Carruthers makes Cuba Libre signify *mulatez*, the racial mixture to which he appeals to characterize both Guillén the person and the hybrid essence of his poetry. Since the cocktail’s color results from adding Coca-Cola to light, not dark, rum, Carruthers’s logic is that if light rum represents “white blood” (because of the historical connection between sugarcane cultivation and slavery?), then Coca-Cola would have to stand for Cuba’s African heritage. This makes about as much sense as saying that drinking Coke darkens one’s skin. Carruthers’s odd analogy between brown Coke and black skin founders even further as he goes on to conflate Africaness with USAmerican corporate capitalism, of whose global successes Coca Cola, first introduced in 1886 in Atlanta, is surely one
of the premier examples. The effect of this conflation is not a racialization of Coke, although its production, like that of rum, required sugar that probably came from Cuba, at least before sugar beets, high-fructose corn syrup, economic embargoes, and Diet Coke. Carruthers’s vexing rhetoric implicitly pegs Guillén’s and his poetry’s Africanness as a product of the USA’s economy. Ironically, this is true enough, given the history of USAmerican imperialism in the Caribbean and the production of Cuban “blackness” in northern academic discourses.

The rest of the introduction, however, makes it hard to read this irony as deliberate. This might have been less so had Hughes not edited out what follows as Carruthers’s draft developed. “Strangely enough,” Carruthers wrote,

Nicolás Guillén’s favorite drink is not the CUBA LIBRE. He prefers the exquisite mojito (literally: little moisture) which is the ingenious combination of light rum, lime and mint with a dash of sugar.

On one occasion in Havana my young son and I heard Nicolás protest when the café waiter served a mojito which had a pink color.

“Don’t you know how to make a mojito?” Nicolás demanded curtly.

“Well,” replied the waiter, “that’s the only mojito we know about.”

“On the side, old boy,” said Nicolás with finality, and with that he dashed behind the bar to make his own mojito as it should be made. (LHP, 424:9438).

Carruthers went on to explain the significance of this anecdote: “This is typical of Guillén. He will never accept a substitute when he knows what the real thing is. I have heard him denounce with unprintable profanity the phony night-club rumbas dished up in Havana for the tourist trade. He considers them an affront to the dignity of the Cuban Negro and, indeed, to the nation’s folklore.” The implication is of course that, like the mojito, Guillén’s verse is the real thing, not something dished up for Yankee tourists. In cutting the anecdote, Hughes removed any incoherence from the titular metaphor and left unquestioned its ability to cast Cuban-USA relations in anything other than an amicable light. Hughes’s promotional description of Cuba Libre as “an ideal Christmas gift for all lovers of poetry, of Spanish, or of our good Neighbors to the South” (my emphasis) resonates loudly here. Such editing constructs for readers of Cuba Libre a fiction of easy access to another nation’s culture, grounded in the assumption that Cuba libre meant the same thing to both Cubans and Yankees. The mojito, even more than limón, would have disrupted that fiction by asserting its “ingenious,” and indigenous, foreignness, thus blocking the mildly exotic familiarity and the symbolic possibilities that the more familiar cocktail offered the volume’s readers.

Another notable effect of Carruthers’s strained homologies—some are almost surreal in their disjunctions—is the virtual disappearance of the
“African heritage” as an active ingredient in the mixture that the Cuba Libre, and Cuba Libre, represents. This erasure would have encouraged US-American readers to disconnect cultural hybridity from racial mixing—that is, mestizaje or transculturación (in Fernando Ortiz’s coinage) from what was still officially known as miscegenation under more northern skies. Literary mestizaje, it seems, did not need to remind readers of actual practices of racial mixing. It is well worth remembering here that the category of “mulatto” was removed from the USAmerican census in 1910, so the “mulatto millions” for whom Guillén was appointed spokesman in the introduction to Cuba Libre were quite invisible at the time. That they continued to be hidden away until the 2000 USAmerican census—which, once again, made it possible to affirm one’s racially mixed origins officially—is a measure of the political anxiety that images of racial amalgamation could still generate in the 1940s. Hughes’s revisions of the introduction tried to defuse such anxieties and social phobias among his Euro- and African American readers alike by safely separating Guillén’s literary mulattoness, with its “pronounced rhythms of Africa,” from his supposed “mestizo parentage.” This is no less of a rhetorical sleight of hand than Guillén’s “dabbling in politics” (CL, ix–x). Hughes adds to the confusion by using the adjectives “mulatto” and “mestizo” interchangeably when connecting Guillén with the legacy of José Martí: “The spirit of Cuba is, like that of most of Latin America, mestizo. And as one famous Cuban put it, ‘The Negro is Cuba’s Indian.’ From the mulatto spirit comes the future skin color of the island. Such is Guillén’s conviction. ‘Some day,’ says he, ‘there will be such a thing as a Cuban color. I’d like my poems to help this along.’” The complex process of substitutions that characterizes the relation between mulatez and mestizaje, based on the problematical transformation of the African slave into the (disappeared) Caribbean native, is all but obscured here. This is especially so since in other Hispanic American countries such as Mexico or Nicaragua, mestizo decidedly does not signify residual Africanness. Having spent considerable time in Mexico, Hughes was surely aware of the difference.

Hughes’s oddly erroneous dating of Guillén’s birth may qualify as a related avoidance of the lingering realities of past associations. Guillén was born not in 1904, “virtually with the republic itself,” but in 1902, precisely the year of the creation of the Cuban republic and the same year as Hughes himself. This is an odd mistake to make, given the symbolic possibilities of such a coincidence. In the end, Hughes probably would have been better off had he incorporated into the book’s introduction a portion of the marketing prospectus he had written for Anderson earlier in 1948.

Nicolás Guillén is not only famous throughout Latin America as Cuba’s greatest living poet, but he is one of the few poets in any country whose verses have caught the popular fancy of his compatriots and who is more than a “literary figure.” Nicolás Guillén is a popular poet whose poems are widely recited and
sung by the ordinary people of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, not appreciated only by the intelligentsia, but loved by the masses. Perhaps this entry into the people’s consciousness has been achieved because Guillén often employs in his poems the rhythms of the *rumbas* and *sones* of the Cuban popular song, and because the subject matter of his work is close to the everyday problems and perplexities of the people.  

Either way, Hughes’s image of Guillén as “citizen of the world and the champion of its inarticulate masses” blots out potentially troubling local color and smoothes rough political edges. Such messy details also include Guillén’s comments about racial politics in Cuba, which Carruthers paraphrased: “Guillén, himself, has said that many of his verses are mulatto verses which he maintains are typical of Cuba although many Cubans disdain to admit it. He is especially scornful of those who would quiet the claim of the Cuban Negro to recognition in the field of art. These persons, says Guillén, for the most part are those who reached the aristocracy through the kitchen…and are now afraid of the sight of a soup-pan.” The paragraphs that Hughes cut—in which Carruthers situates Guillén’s poetry within Iberian and Hispanic American literary history—would have been more appropriate for the scholarly edition Hughes had envisioned at some point. The overall effect of Hughes’s shortened introduction is a conspicuous depoliticization of Guillén, his poetry, and Cuban-USA relations, so conspicuous that it is jarring. Hughes’s evasive euphemism is “popular,” an adjective that also helps him move Guillén closer to Whitman in readers’ imaginations. On the whole, it is easy to read the noncommittal, noncontroversial tone of this circular as a sign of Hughes’s acquiescence to Cold War politics in the USA.

*The Vagaries of Negro Dialect*

The translations in *Cuba Libre* continue Hughes’s editorial efforts to guard against the domestic specter of racial mixing. This is precisely why the opening poems stand out in the volume. They comprise a section titled “Cuban Blues” rather than “Mulatto Poems,” a subtitle reserved for a group of non-criollo poems rendered in more standard USAmerican English dialect. Hughes had initially named the section “Blue Notes,” which he crossed out and changed to “Cuban Blues” on July 26, 1945 (LHP, 424:9430). In addition to seven of the eight original “Motivos,” “Cuban Blues” also includes the poems “Curujey” and “Me bendo caro” from Ramón Güírao’s anthology *Orbita de la poesía afrocubana* (1938). Although it may be tempting to read the choice of a black vernacular evocative of Negro dialect for these poems—there are nine of them in all—as an exoticizing pitch to a predominantly white readership, we know from Hughes’s letters that his target audience for *Cuba Libre* was the African American intelligentsia in
the USA, inside and outside academia, especially after the project had failed
to excite the interest of larger publishing houses that did not believe there
was anything in it for them. It is also significant that Carruthers at the time taught at Howard Uni-
versity, one of the historic centers of the black elites in the USA, where he
would have had his hand on the pulse of prevailing academic tastes. Educ-
ated African Americans in the 1940s would surely have looked askance at
the Negro dialect of the plantation tradition as a suitable literary vehicle for
representing their own lives and views. In that, their response would have
been no different in kind from the disdain with which Havana’s colored
elite had greeted what editor Urrutia called Guillén’s “real negro poetry”
two decades earlier. Commenting rather patronizingly “on the language and
feelings of our dear negroes made most noble by the love and talent of our
own poets,” Urrutia wrote to Hughes in 1930:

I am only sorry that you will be unable to translate and even understand what
these poems mean, but you must know that the spirit of them is [the] same as
the blues; some ones are sad, some are ironical, others are sociological, viz Ayé
Me Dijeron Negro. This is the first time that we have real negro poetry and
they have [sic] a big hit with the public. Of course there is a bunch of high-life
negros which condemns this kind of literature, same as in the states.

Urrutia, himself a mulato and part of Havana’s professional elite, was rather
unkindly alluding to the members of Havana’s Club Atenas. Many of them
were troubled by Guillén’s portraits of Havana’s blacks, which they read as
embarrassing racial stereotypes. Guillén himself wrote a letter addressed to
“mi querido Langston” the day after the “Motivos” had initially appeared,
 remarking happily “que los poemas de son han gustado extraordinaria-
mente, y han formado un verdadero escándalo, por tratarse de un género
completamente nuevo en nuestra literatura” (that the son-poems have been
extraordinarily well received, and that they have caused a veritable scandal
for having been written in a genre entirely new to our literature). Guillén
also knew that for many of Havana’s lighter-skinned elite, his poems repre-
sented “una deshonra ‘para la raza’” (a dishonor for the race), as he wrote
in “Sones y soneros,” his satirical piece about the bourgeois “enemigos del
son” (enemies of the son).

When Hughes selected the poems for Cuba Libre, he was no doubt aware
that a response of this sort might be a problem in the USA. Despite the
success of Sterling Brown’s Southern Road (1932), Negro dialect poetry
had never quite recovered from the blow that James Weldon Johnson and
Countee Cullen had dealt it in the early 1920s when they shunned it as an
anachronism. Johnson in particular rejected the idea that Negro dialect
was part of a “living language,” defining it as a throwback to the plant-
tation tradition so embarrassingly represented by Paul Laurence Dunbar’s
popular poems and Charles Chesnutt’s short stories. Hughes did not see the world quite that way. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” for instance, he lamented that “[t]he fine novels of Chesnutt go out of print with neither race noticing their passing. The quaint charm and humor of Dunbar’s dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a sideshow freak (A colored man writing poetry! How odd!) or a clown (How amusing!)” (Essays, 34). That, however, had been twenty-odd years earlier. In the 1950s, Hughes, who actually never wrote dialect verse à la Dunbar, would even be careful to excise most of his own vernacular poems in his Selected Poems (1959). With Guillén’s poemas, however, he was caught in a bind. Not turning these poemas into vernacular verse might have made them too alien to African American readers from the USA, while using a mode reminiscent of Negro dialect made them potentially all too familiar. Hughes no doubt speculated that if the black bourgeoisie and the black intelligentsia were hostile to USAmerican Negro dialect poetry because of its association with minstrelsy and even to vernacular poetry because of its class inflections, they might be more accepting of either mode when it was used to represent other parts of the African diaspora, especially those outside the USA. Such speculations would have been based on Hughes’s familiarity with the fact that anointed modernist poets such as Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Crane not infrequently used USAmerican racial idioms either as exotic markers or as a form of slumming.

Hughes was the one to make the final selections for Cuba Libre, and critics typically credit him with most of the translations as well. “No point would be served,” wrote William Harrison of the Boston Chronicle on February 12, 1949, “by enquiring about what was the actual division of the labor [of] translation. Mr. Carruthers will pardon the observation that there is a great deal of Hughes in the spirit and letter of these poems.” And he adds confidently, “Undoubtedly this circumstance arises from the strong kinship of feeling between the Negro American and Afro-Cuban artificers in choice of material and in the ability to use the idiom [sic] of the unsophisticated.” This may well be so, but the draft manuscripts show clearly that Hughes translated only half of the poems; he did, however, revise and edit Carruthers’s versions.

It is unclear exactly when and how Carruthers and Hughes met and how they decided to collaborate on Cuba Libre. Carruthers had written his doctoral thesis at the University of Illinois on the nineteenth-century Cuban poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, better known as Plácido. While at Illinois he had also “endeavored to interpret Guillén in public gatherings and over the radio—station W.I.L.L. the University of Illinois’ station.” Carruthers himself offers the following account of the collaboration: “Upon my return to Howard in 1941 I began my own translations and when I moved to New York in 1944 I met Langston again and began to compare notes. We found that a few but not many of our translations were of the same poem
but that there were many which I had finished which Langston thought good enough to stand as they were and many others which Langston had completed without my having touched them. We collaborated completely on the final editing and polishing and Langston secured a publisher and the artist, Gar Bilbert [Gilbert]." This account is not entirely consistent with Carruthers’s correspondence with Hughes, according to which they decided to divide up work on the translations in October 1941. Having just returned to Washington, Carruthers wrote to Hughes: “I shall continue to work on the Guirao anthology ‘Orbita de la Poesía Afro-cubana’ (1938) if you prefer to work on ‘Cantos Para Soldados’ and ‘West Indies Ltd’ of Guillén.”

There is a gap in their correspondence between 1941 and 1947. By the time that Caroline Anderson, who had read the Guillén poems included in Dudley Fitts’s anthology, inquired about his translations, Hughes had not looked at the _Cuba Libre_ manuscript in two years.

It was Carruthers whose translations were most closely identified with Hughes’s “professional proletarian” poetic touch. Hughes himself focused on non-criollo poems from later volumes. He did, however, try his hand at a few of the _poemas-son_, such as “Mulata” and especially “Ayé mi dieron negro,” finally published as “Last Night Somebody Called Me Darky.” Most of Hughes’s drafts are fragments, and none of them made it into the final manuscript. In the case of “Mulata,” which Carruthers translated as “High Brown,” Hughes changed Carruthers’s version only slightly. For instance, the lines “Yo’ mouf’ is awful big fo’ me, / an’ yo’ naps is short an’ red” (CL, 6) became “Yo’ mouf is mighty big fo’ me, / An’ yo’ hair is short an’ red” in Hughes’s revision. John Matheus, himself a translator, claimed that Hughes translated Guillén’s poetry into the “Negro folk idiom,” whereas Carruthers rendered it in “American Negro dialect.” Although Matheus does not elaborate on how these two might differ, he implies that dialect features more frequent elisions and changes of consonants, while folk idiom is closer to more standardized forms of English, as in “hair” instead of “naps.” Matheus’s argument, however, rests on shaky foundations, and not only because it is meant to apply to the entirety of _Cuba Libre_ rather than just the first section. More important, Hughes was interested in the evolving urban vernaculars, not in the folk idioms associated with the more rural areas of the USAmerican South. Furthermore, Matheus clearly did not know who in fact translated what, who revised whom, and which translations were not included at all. He simply assumed that Carruthers had translated only the poems in “Cuban Blues,” which is incorrect.

Perhaps more significant yet, drawing a distinction between dialect and folk modes, which are not analogous to Negro dialect and black vernacular, bypasses the larger questions that the translations of the _poemas-son_ raise: what are the relative positions of Negro dialect and Cuban criollo as nonstandard languages both vis-à-vis the dominant lects of their respective major languages and vis-à-vis each other? A (now) marginalized source
language such as Spanish does not, in cases where the target language is USAmerican English, occupy the same position in relation to the standard lect of that English as do “minoritized” sociolects such as Negro dialect and black vernacular and their literary representations. Nor does the position of nonstandard versions of American Spanish, such as Afro-Cuban criollo, correspond exactly to either Negro dialect or black vernacular in the USA. That each is marginalized in relation to one or more ethnocenters does not mean that one is therefore like the other. This is precisely the sort of false comparison that has tempted not a few critics and translators to regard the transfer of poetry and fiction written in Afro-Hispanic idioms into various representations of black USAmerican English as a self-evident, supposedly natural process somehow exempt from the multilayered mediations that affect translation in other, nonracialized, situations.

It may be useful to think of African American vernaculars in English as “peculiar English-language remainder(s)” that “expose the hierarchical values in Anglo-American culture.” A caveat must be added: Negro dialect and black vernacular can function in this way only in historically specific situations when readers either embrace or explicitly discredit them as literary vehicles. As mediums for translation, such modes can expose inequalities in non-English-speaking cultures only through distorting analogies: criollo is to Cuba as Negro dialect (or vernacular) is to the USA. In relation to Cuban criollo, Negro dialect functions much like a false cognate would: negro does not equal Negro. Unlike Negro dialect as a written form, the linguistic practice of what Guillén calls criollo and its literary renditions both are and represent an acknowledgment of racial mixing, and the social and linguistic uncertainties it produces, as an inescapable historical reality at the very core of Cuban culture. In the postwar USA, a cultural and political environment still steeped in racial binarisms and anxieties about intermarriage—this is still well before the last antimiscegenation law was repealed in Virginia—the very idea of conceding, let alone celebrating, the impact of racial mixing on the national culture would have been anathema to prevailing sensibilities on both sides of the color line. To include in Cuba Libre prominently placed translations in USAmerican Negro vernacular was a compromise as much designed to alleviate domestic anxieties about unpalatable racial politics as intended to dispel fears of foreign threats. Whatever black vernacular infused with Negro dialect signified to different groups of domestic readers, it was something eminently recognizable to all of them, for better or worse.

In the case of Cuban criollo, there is no one (standard) source language, and a translator has to negotiate the often troublesome interplay of multiple source languages. Carruthers’s choice of a Negro dialect in the plantation tradition severely limits this interplay, in part because this form of literary language would have represented blackness, not mulattoness, to USAmerican readers. In fact, because it was coded as black, and only as black, Negro dialect modes could simply not signify the processes of racial and
cultural mixing so integral to the concept of Cubanness. At best, Negro dialect could be used to signal some sort of premodern otherness that would relegate Cuba to the outer margins even of African America, at least in the USA. In this scenario, Guillén’s poems, and his poemas-son in particular, could be classified as late-modernist primitivist artifacts, precious objects of aesthetic appreciation that existed outside history, especially the history of USAmerican neocolonialism in Cuba. The relatively pricey limited edition in which Cuba Libre was issued—it retailed for up to $5.00, double the price of some of Hughes’s own poetry books—amplified this sense of timelessness by linking value to beauty in formal design. More than one reviewer commented on this discrepancy between content and format. The Boston Chronicle writer William Harrison observed on February 12, 1949, that the volume’s typography and expensive paper “may create the erroneous impression that Guillén’s poetry is the property of aesthetes.” “It is a contradiction not easily understood,” we read in the Daily Worker from 1948, “that these poems which bristle with anti-imperialist sentiment, set to African, Spanish and calypso (?) rhythms, should be read by a literary elite. I am certain after reading the poems that Nicolás Guillén has been done a disservice by thus limiting his audience…. Cuba Libre contains songs which should be published on leaflets and spoken at mass meetings.” The literary elite, and not specifically the black intelligentsia, was certainly the audience Caroline Anderson had in mind when she asked if Hughes had “access to [the mailing lists] of ‘New Directions’ or any groups interested in contemporary poetry.”

**NOT CALLING THE KETTLE BLACK**

To explore in more detail the profoundly dehistoricizing effect of residual Negro dialect in the translations of Guillén’s “Motivos,” I first turn to “Ayé me dijeron negro,” a poem that was part of the eight original “Motivos de son” and which the same Daily Worker reviewer singled out to comment on the difficulties of “transcribing Cuban Spanish accents into Negro American English accents.” I am quoting Guillén’s poem in its entirety from its first printing in the Diario de la Marina from April 20, 1930 (see figure 6 above), which was most likely the basis for its English versions.

Ayé me dijeron negro
pa que me fajara yo;
pero e’que me lo desía
era un negro como yo.
Tan blanco como te bé
y tu abuela sé quién é.
Sácala de la cosina,
sácala de la cosina,
Mamá Iné.
Mamá Iné, tú bien lo sabe,
Mamá Iné, yo bien lo sé,
Mamá Iné te llama nieto,
Mamá Iné.

Here, as elsewhere in this chapter, my own English versions of Guillén’s poems are mainly intended as a crutch for non-Spanish speakers. I have inflected the language as little as possible to maintain a distance between this prop and the translations by Hughes and Carruthers.

Yesterday someone called me a darky just to get me into a fight,
but the one who said this to me is just as dark as I.
As white as you look,
and your grandmother knows who you are.
Call her out of the kitchen,
call her out of the kitchen,
Mamá Iné, you know very well.
Mamá Iné, I know very well.
Mamá Iné calls you grandson,
Mamá Iné.

Like Guillén’s other poemas-son, this short poem is a minidrama set in Havana and played out across the antiphonal rhythms of the Cuban son. Within this frame unfold metatheatrical performances of identity in which the relations between cultural origins, skin color, and social class shift. A nameless speaker recounts a scene familiar to readers of nineteenth-century Cuban antislavery novels, notably Cirilo Villaverde’s Cecilia Valdés: one mulato calling another negro. As in most of the other “Motivos,” the speaker is unambiguously gendered as male and visible only through his account of the other: “era un negro como yo” (my emphasis). The speaker’s informal tone signals that he is addressing a social equal, an insider. The poem’s representation of his diction features an orthography brimming with elided consonants and other shifts in which ayer becomes ayé, ves turns into bé, and cocina into cosina. The insulting party is initially obscured behind a plural—dijeron, “they called me”—but assumes greater individuality with the introduction of the personal pronoun e’ (él, he). If e’ is indeed like the speaker, he would have to be of mixed race and fair skin, someone who crosses color and class lines with impunity, for what makes the insult possible in the first place is the gap between physical appearance—“epidermalized” being, in Charles Johnson’s phrase—and descent. The
speaker seeks to redress the wrong done to him—that is, the other’s verbal misidentification with him on the basis of race—by reminding his white-looking assaulter of his family. He taunts his insulter and challenges him to bring out of the kitchen and into the light of day “Mama Iné,” that prototypical signifier of African slavery in Hispanic Caribbean cultures. Typically, this grandmother is hidden when company comes.

In the poem’s opening stanza, then, the speaker frames his verbal attack on his (now absent?) opponent by addressing a familiar audience of bystanders, whom he presumes to be sympathetic to his complaint. In the stanzas that follow, the line “Mamá Iné” functions as an estribillo, or refrain, in which speaker and bystanders join as they engage in the verbal ritual of putting the offender back in his place. This estribillo has the effect of creating a bond between speaker and audience, as well as, in another layer, the poem’s Cuban readers, in the construction of a cultural community for whom Mamá Iné is more than an irritating allusion to the history of slavery. For them, Mamá Iné is not just an individual. The phrase also, or more specifically, refers to Cuba’s history of aesthetic production represented here by the popular guaracha from 1868 known as “Mama Iné.” The original song’s theme is the sugarcane harvest:

Aquí etán todo lo Negro
que benimo a sabé
si no consede pemmiso
pa ponenno a molé,
¡Ay, Mama Iné!…

These lines may be translated as “Here are all the Blacks; / we’ve come to find out / whether you’ll give us permission / to start milling the cane.” The song’s second stanza moves into the singers’ complaint about having been cheated by the “mayorá” (overseer), and one might, not unreasonably, link this to the topic of deceit in Guillén’s poem. Yet the orthographic and structural resemblances between the song lyric and “Ayé mi dijeron negro” are far more pronounced, and far more important, than any thematic overlap. What these resemblances imply, however, is not a conception of either criollo or Cuban music as a timeless vessel of cultural kinship. Rather, Guillén’s poem uses both criollo and antiphonal song as historical references that call attention to similarities and differences. The guaracha’s rural cane cutters are precisely not the same as the urban mulatos in Guillén’s poem; each group exists in a discrete geographical and temporal location. What connects them is not a shared origin—synecdochically evoked by tonic stresses imitating drumbeats—but elements of different languages and musical forms woven into a dynamic, ever-evolving system. This underlying movement in Guillén’s poem is what prevents criollo from hardening into a surface crust of racial stereotypes and biases.
The point in Guillén’s poem is that neither the speaker nor his detractor, both of whose bodies are invisible to the reader, are reliably identifiable in racial terms, that is, by their skin color. What racially marks the poem’s speaker is not physical appearance but the single word “negro,” whose meaning, as the poem goes on to show, is highly unstable. It can no more confer a social identity than skin color or phenotype can. (This, incidentally, has nothing to do with the word’s lack of capitalization in the body of the poem.) The poem’s written representation of spoken criollo does serve to identify the speaker to the extent that his linguistic performance makes him audible to us, identifying him as Cuban without giving any dependable clues as to his race—unless, of course, we want to read Cuban as equaling black. For Guillén, however, to be Cuban meant to be mulato/a, which signifies a state of cultural hybridity that denotes color without being reducible to race. This idea of cultural mixing would have been—and still is—exceedingly difficult to articulate in a USAmerican language environment with its historical insistence on imagining the color line as virtually impermeable and on conflating cultural with racial identities. That negro, in Cuban usage, can function both as a class insult and as a term of endearment, as in mi negro, further enhances the choteo-like ironies in Guillén’s poem. Because it can generate such layered ironies in the poem, the seemingly uncomplicated word negro causes the poem’s translators the most trouble.

That “Ayé me dijeron negro” is the only one of Guillén’s poemas-son that Hughes actually translated in its entirety is a good measure of the trouble these poems caused him. As a result, we have two full translations of this poem, one published, the other a manuscript version. First, there is Carruthers’s translation, which was printed in Cuba Libre; second, there are two drafts by Hughes, one handwritten and dated July 26, 1945, the other typed, corrected, and marked as “Omitted” in his handwriting. Each translator offers a very different approach to the intricate relations of race, culture, and class that converge in the irksome word negro. As far as we know, neither translator even entertained the notion of translating the Cuban negro as “nigger,” which, at least in the context of this poem, might have been the closest approximation of its social sting in a USAmerican context. Carruthers opted for “darky” in the poem’s opening stanza, but he apparently shied away from using the noun in the poem’s title, resorting instead to “Last Night Somebody Called Me Negro.”

Last night somebody called me darky
jes’ to make me fight,
but de one who said it to me
is a darky, too, all right.

(CL, 4)

This is hardly the affected diction we find in the dialect poetry of a Paul Laurence Dunbar or even a Sterling Brown. Carruthers employs the conventions
of Negro dialect writing much more sparingly than they do, creating the
effect of a speaker who code-shifts in midsentence without the poem’s sup-
plying any motivation for why he would do so. This haphazard switching
appears to be the product of the Cuban interfering with English, resulting
in the impression that the poem cannot comfortably settle down into either
standard or nonstandard modes of USAmerican English. We see the same
sorts of inconsistencies in Carruthers’s other Negro dialect translations in
_Cuba Libre_, for instance in “Thick-Lipped Cullud Boy” (“Negro bembón”):

> How come you jumps salty,
> When they calls you thick-lipped boy,
> If yo’ mouf’s so sweet,
> Thick-lipped cullud boy?
> Thick-lipped as you is
> You got everything.
> Charity’s payin’ yo’ keep.
> She’s givin’ you all you need.

(CL, 5)

Compare these two stanzas with the draft version of the poem “Thick-
Lipped Cullud Bo’” that Carruthers had sent to Hughes, along with a hand-
ful of other translations, before they embarked on their collaboration:

> Why fo’ ack so tuf
> Wen dey calls yo ‘thick-lips,’ bo’?
> Ef yo mouf’s so sweet,
> Thick-lipped cullud bo’?
> Thick-lipped as yo’ is
> Yo git it all;
> Sis’ Charity’s payin’ yo keep,
> She gives yo’ ‘tall.74

This earlier version is an extreme example of the extent of Carruthers’s
attempt to make the diction in Guillén’s poems conform to USAmerican
expectations, turning them into something they were not. This was by no
means as terrible as translational taming could get. The “Little Anthology
of Afro-Cuban Poetry” that Lloyd Mallan edited for an issue of New Di-
rections was to bring together “the most promising non-conformists and
experimenters,” and included several of Guillén’s “Motivos” in transla-
tions by Mallan himself.75 Even the titles he chose suggest the direction
of his translations: “Muh Price’s High” (“Me bendo caro”) “If’n Yo On’y
Knew” (“Si tu supiera”) “High Yellow Stuff” (“Mulata”), “Satchel Mouf”
(“Negro bembón”), “Muh Chick Sticks” (“Mi Chiquita”), and “Dig for
the Dough” (“Búcate plata”).76 Compared with these versions, Carruthers’s
choices—“Thick-Lipped Cullud Boy” for “Negro bembón,” “My Gal” for
Even though Carruthers makes more limited use of Negro dialect in his later drafts, his translations for *Cuba Libre* still insist on restoring precisely the sorts of unambiguous racial markers that Guillén’s poem subjects to destabilizing irony. In the company of “jes’” and “de,” the almost archaic “darky,” resonant with half-affectionate echoes of antebellum racism and blackface minstrelsy, defaces Guillén’s Cuban *negro* beyond all recognition. The only hint at dissonance here is the somewhat jarring difference between the title’s use of “Negro” and the first line’s “darky.” But that, too, disappeared when Hughes, who had initially changed Carruthers’s “Negro” to “black,” settled on “darky” for the poem’s final title. While Carruthers, in this case, stayed away from Negro dialect’s typically dehistoricizing verb forms—“call” instead of “called” and “say” instead of “said”—he still ends up situating his speaker’s language in an atemporal present when he changes Guillén’s past tense in *era* (was) to “is.” In Guillén’s poem, the part of the poem in which *negro* still signifies racially is located in the past; it is a grammatically completed action whose present usage the rest of the poem challenges. Carruthers’s unexpected injection of the present tense erases this important distinction along with the visual separation of the first stanza from the following verses. The alternating end rhymes and the fairly regular meter that places tonal stresses at the end of each line both aid in Carruthers’s attempt at creating a formally unified poem—the better to block out any foreign noise between the lines. The verbal exclamation point “all right” at the end of what is now a quatrain confirms the extent to which Guillén’s relational uncertainties have been displaced by the translator’s desire to assert absolutes: the speaker is no longer a “darky” in *relation to* his interlocutor. Their being “darkies” has become far less contingent.

Hughes, by contrast, steered clear of this sort of Negro dialect altogether. His vernacular version of this poem is much more literal, and thus less controlling, even to the point of rendering *ayé* as “yesterday” instead of “last night,” which is strictly Carruthers’s interpretation. Hughes’s revisions show that he changed his mind about the present tense, following Guillén’s poem more closely in how it uses grammar to structure, and comment on, the characters’ interactions.

Yesterday somebody called me black  
Just to make me mad—  
But the one who said it  
Was is just as black as me. *(LHP, 424:9430)*

The diction of Hughes’s speaker seems virtually uninflected here. At first there appears to be no evidence of conflicting languages or codes. While the adjective “black” does not deface and domesticate Guillén’s *negro* as...
irretrievably as the noun “darky” does in Carruthers’s version, it also does not help create a sense of referential instability or irony. What comes across as a weak translation, however, is really an example of failed assimilation into USAmerican English. Once we consider what these lines signify, we arrive at the conclusion that for one Negro to insult another by calling him black actually makes little sense in the USA. This is what signals the presence of a foreign text that pushes Hughes’s English version of this stanza to the limits of a USAmerican reader’s comprehension. That the language in this stanza resembles the more dominant or standardized (“white”) dialect of USAmerican English makes it no less foreign to itself. The language looks as though it ought to be meaningful, but it is in fact not readable solely within the conventions of the standardized dialect. This radical unreadability may explain why Hughes, in the end, decided to go with Carruthers’s version instead of his own, with the difference of placing “darky” in the body and the title of the poem and despite the fact that he was uneasy about using a term that might strike an all-too-familiar servile chord for certain readers.

Hughes’s discomfort is plain from a letter to Caroline Anderson, in which he addresses changes that the press had made in the order of the poems in *Cuba Libre*. These changes, Anderson explains, “were entirely typographical. We are trying to get title lengths of a sameness.”

I notice that you have changed the order of the poems about in the CUBAN BLUES section, which is O.K.—except that I would not start the book with, “Last Night Somebody Called Me Darky.” Some colored people (especially “intellectuals”) are often over-sensitive about the word “darky,” and since I would expect this book to have a certain sales appeal to Negro colleges and libraries, I don’t believe it would be wise to start the volume right off the bat with this particular poem. In fact, I request you, PLEASE DON’T…. (I have gone through this minority sensitiveness with my own poetry and know it can affect sales if not tactfully handled.).

Unlike Guillén, Hughes clearly did not thrive on the sorts of scandals that the “Motivos de son” had set off in Havana. Anderson obliged without argument and moved “Don’ Know No English,” on which I comment in detail below, back to the volume’s beginning.

Because “Ayé me dijeron negro” itself is concerned with the interactive dynamics between speaker and audience, Hughes’s attention to audience was not limited to marketing issues. It also had literary dimensions. While all of Guillén’s “Motivos” are dramas performed for the benefit of an internal audience, “Ayé me dijeron negro” is the only one of these poems in which an audience of cultural insiders becomes an actual part of the performance by joining the speaker in his appeal to “Mama Iné” to settle the mock dispute. Both Carruthers’s and Hughes’s respective translations are
conspicuously at variance with Guillén’s poem, first in how they position the figure of the abuela in relation to the speaker and second in how closely they attend to the audience’s role in the poem. Carruthers continues in modified Negro dialect mode, which even includes the requisite verb forms, with the typical added “s” in the first personal singular.

Can’t fool me, dat white face of yours
’cause I knows who your grandma is.
Call her out de kitchen,
call her out de kitchen,
Mamá Inez, you knows all about it.
Mamá Inez, I knows, too.
Mamá Inez calls you grandson,
Mamá Inez.

Hughes’s translation also remains consistent in extending the uninflected voice he uses in his opening stanza to the rest of the poem.

As white as you look,
I know who who’s your grandma-I is.
Bring her on out of the kitchen,
Bring her on out of the kitchen,
Mamá Iné!
Mamá Iné, you know her all right!
Mamá Iné, I know her, too. Sure do!
Mamá Iné, call you grandchild says you’re her grandchild—
Mamá Iné!

“Y tu abuela sé quién é” might be understood either as “and your grandmother, I know who she is” or “your grandmother knows who you are.” Changing the structure of this sentence in English creates a subtle but crucial difference. It puts the speaker in a position of authority that he does not quite have in Guillén’s lyric, where the emphasis remains on tu abuela by virtue of her being positioned prominently at the beginning of the line. This position is reinforced by the absence of the personal pronoun yo, which, though not needed in Spanish, does efface the knowing subject. It is as if knowledge of an other renders the speaker invisible, and his own invisibility enables an implicit pronouncement about that other’s phenotype and associated racial identity by contrast with the insulter’s own apparent whiteness (“As white as you look”). In the Cuban poem, the contrast between them is more immediate because of the proximity between te bé and tu abuela. In both translations, the pronoun “I” more explicitly mediates the contrast than it does in the Spanish version. The poem’s speaker is presumptuous in both linguistic situations. In Guillén’s poem, by contrast, the speaker does
not claim to know that “Mamá Iné knows” and what she is in racial terms. He does not necessarily presume to know what she knows beyond what her physical appearance suggests to him. Guillén’s speaker still defers to Mamá Iné’s authority as the keeper of historical knowledge: she knows “it” (lo), and “it” includes the insulter’s secret.

By placing the speaker’s “I” emphatically at the beginning of both the sentence and the line instead of taking a cue from Guillén’s syntax, both translators cast the grandmother as more of a knowable, and known, object that now more closely resembles the stereotype of the Southern plantation Mammy who is perpetually frozen in a posture of domestic loyalty. Although Carruthers translates lo more properly as “it,” rather than “her” (an eccentric choice on Hughes’s part on which I comment below), his choices in the earlier line have notable implications for how we read the partly anglicized figure of Mamá Inez. Carruthers’s emphasis on what his speaker knows directs the reader away from the confounding incongruity of the accent and the added “z” (instead of the expected “s”) to the question of race—“it,” which now represents both what the grandmother knows and what she is. Race is knowable to the extent that it becomes visible on the female body once she steps out of her domestic enclosure into the light of public scrutiny.

Carruthers’s language implies that phenotype renders cultural history readable in racial terms and that such a reading is unequivocal. Perhaps he takes his cue from the poem “High Brown,” where another male speaker employs clearly racialized language to describe a female body (CL, 6). More likely, however, he remembered a version of this very stanza from Juan José Arrom’s introduction in Mallan’s “Little Anthology of Afro-Cuban Poetry,” to which Carruthers himself had contributed. This rather free dialect translation, which leaves little to the reader’s imagination, is likely Mallan’s translation of Arrom; the source poem is not identified.

O take her outen de kitchen,
Take her offen de stove,
Mama Inay,
Old Mama Inay,
You know darn well,
Ah knows it’s true,
Mama Inay, she call you gran’son,
An’ dis sho ’nough makes you a niggah too.81

Although Carruthers does not resort to adding a line to render the poem’s racial implications crassly explicit, his approach to representing blackness is still not that different from Mallan’s. While the old lady is not a “niggah” in Carruthers’s translation of this stanza, his version nonetheless suggests that race is all there is to know about “grandma,” a familiarizing appellation that
strips Mamá Inez of the complex referential dimensions she has in Guillén’s poem and leaves her in the simple garb of stereotype. Carruthers assumes that Mamá Inez actually emerges from her kitchen when the speaker shifts his address to her, so that being called out is tantamount to being called black. It is as if hers is the black body that belongs to the deceptively white face. The speaker knows what grandma knows (“I knows, too”) because he can see her (although we cannot). This interpretation avoids the fact that there is nothing in the Cuban poem to suggest that the relationship between seeing, knowing, and being, which Guillén’s encodes in his end rhymes, is anything other than precariously asymmetrical. That bé (ves, from ver, to see) resonates both with sé (from saber, to know) and with é (es, from ser, to be) does not establish a causal relationship between these actions; thus Carruthers’s “because,” which replaces Guillén’s y (and), is unwarranted. In “Ayé me dijeron negro,” seeing does not equal knowing, and the kind of knowledge achieved in the act of perception is not a dependable ground for social being. Carruthers picks up on this momentarily through his verb choice in the lines “Can’t fool me, / dat white face of yours” (my emphasis), which signals the fickleness of physical appearance. At the same time, however, his translation continues to elide relative states of existence, turning race, in this case whiteness, into much more of an absolute category than Guillén’s own formulation would support: “tan blanco como te bé” means literally “as white as you look”—to yourself? to others?

Hughes’s version seeks diligently to avoid the pitfalls of such causalities and racial absolutes. I have found no conclusive evidence that Hughes had read Carruthers’s version before embarking on his own, but I suspect from certain coincident phrasing that he had. Hughes also adds an intriguing twist to the poem by translating the neuter pronoun lo as “her,” which changes the speaker-audience dynamics of the poem’s last four lines. Hughes’s willful mistranslation—and it is much too willful to qualify as a mere error—enables an alternate reading in which the speaker, having called out to Mamá Iné, now turns to an audience, “you,” “who know her all right!” The fact that the English pronoun “you,” unlike tú, does double duty as both singular and plural separates “you” from “her,” another ambiguous pronoun whose antecedent is either Mamá Iné or, possibly, the speaker’s nemesis. In the former reading, the speaker addresses an audience with whom he shares a particular knowledge of Mamá Iné. What exactly speaker and audience know about her remains unspoken. Yet the fact that Mamá Iné stays invisible throughout this poem implies that that knowledge goes beyond race and racialized bodies. With the line “I know her, too. Sure do!” the speaker emphatically identifies himself as part of a community formed around that unspoken cultural knowledge: what they know is that Mamá Iné refers at once to a (mythical) progenitress and to a song, to a cultural genealogy and to a history of aesthetic production. Compared with this, the question of racial identity becomes secondary. No translation can make these multiple
local cultural references available to a monolingual English-speaking readership. Hughes at least draws attention to their existence by retaining the name Mamá Iné in its unaltered form. His fourth line, then, constitutes a joint effort in which speaker and audience together remind the prodigal insulter that “Mamá Iné says you’re her grandchild,” and the final line confirms both that statement and the fact that speaker and audience have now merged into a collective voice (note the added exclamation marks). This joining of knowing voices serves as a final homage to the female ancestor’s cultural authority, which also limits the speaker’s earlier claims to knowledge.

Hughes’s prominently placed dash, which may be read as a representation of collective convergence or consensus, also guards against the sort of closure that this image of unified voices might suggest. Not everything is resolved at the end of his poem. Most conspicuous among the remaining loose ends is Hughes’s rendering nieto as “grandchild” rather than as the more precisely gendered “grandson.” The gender-neutral noun has the advantage of being acceptable to multiple cultural constituencies without sharing the exact same meaning for each. In the context of USAmerican black vernacular, “child” would signal a specific cultural kinship rather than referring to biological descent. Along different lines, “grandchild” also invites a reading of the poem’s earlier feminine pronoun, which unsettles the masculine identity of the insulter in Guillén’s poem, and, by implication, that of the speaker. Hughes’s choice resonates with his loose translation of Guillén’s masculine pronoun e’ as “the one” (“de one” in Carruthers), and he appears to take this looseness as an opportunity subtly to worry the fixity of gender identities at the very point that readers might finally feel reassured of the characters’ racial makeups. Whatever Hughes’s intent, the effect is a reminder that race cannot be fixed in the eyes of a beholder any more unfailingly than gender can. By not corroborating the masculinity of Guillén’s characters, which Carruthers underlines in his preference for the verb “fight,” Hughes creates a different kind of speaker. His speaker’s verbal “madness”— “Just to make me mad”—displaces masculinized physical aggression by conjuring up familiar associations of femininity and madness. That “mad” does not serve here indirectly to endorse popular concepts of racial pathology is clear from Hughes’s tinny rhyme of “mad” with “black” which dissociates the two words. What it does do is show that blackness is as much of a construct, something that is made, as feminized madness. However minor they may seem, Hughes’s interpretative adjustments significantly change the way in which racial and national identity is typically imagined in Guillén’s poetry, and in Cuban literature more broadly: as a symbolic transaction among and between men, and only men. Hughes’s feminine pronoun belongs to a context in which national culture is constructed very differently.

Hughes’s translation of “Ayé me dijeron negro” carries across a strong sense of the uncertainties and turbulences that Cuban literary criollo creates
when brought together with USAmerican English, at the linguistic and conceptual levels. This effect, though artificially enhanced by the revision in the lines I have quoted, distinguishes Hughes’s from Carruthers’s translations in most cases. Unlike his academic collaborator, Hughes was not a translator skilled, or even interested, in dominating another idiom. As we have seen in his autobiographies, Hughes’s attitude toward foreign languages and cultures was rather one of humility and respect. In the case of Guillén’s *criollo* poems, Hughes’s typical modus operandi was compounded by his imperfect knowledge of Afro-Cuban Spanish, although, all things considered, that idiom would have been considerably less alien to him than Russian or Turcoman. Still, even some lack of familiarity would have made Guillén’s “Motivos” more radically strange linguistic constructs to him than to Carruthers, who had spend far more time in Cuba and other parts of the Hispanic Americas. Guillén’s Afro-Cuban poems pushed even Hughes’s solid written comprehension to its limits, as Guillén and others reminded their budding North American colleague and friend on various occasions. Guillén, for one, wrote in his “Conversación con Langston Hughes” on March 9, 1930, “Hughes’s Spanish is not the best, but he makes marvelous use of it.” When Gustavo Urrutia wrote to Hughes about Guillén’s “Motivos,” he interjected: “I am only sorry that you will be unable to translate and even understand what these poems mean.” Guillén struck a similar note when he sent Hughes a copy of the poems:

> Por más que me temo que a usted le cueste un poco de trabajo entender estos versos: están escritos en nuestro lenguaje *criollo*, y muchos giros, locuciones y frases escapan a su conocimiento actual—creo yo—del castellano. De todos modos, me parece que allá debe haber alguna persona que conoce bien a Cuba y que, además, domine el inglés para que se los explique.

[But I fear that it will be a bit of work for you to understand those poems: they are written in our Creole language, and many turns, locutions and phrases will—I believe—escape your actual knowledge of Spanish. In any case, it seems to me that there has to be someone who knows Cuba well and who also is fluent enough in English to be able to explain them to you.]

He closes by urging Hughes, “¡Aprenda a hablar criollo!” (Learn to speak Cuban!). While Hughes apparently did not learn *criollo*, he responded to Guillén on July 17, 1930, that he had found a young Cuban in Washington, D.C., to help him translate the “Motivos.”

Between 1930 and 1940, when Hughes began to work seriously on *Cuba Libre*, he did not spend more than a few weeks in Cuba, even though Guillén always encouraged him to return for longer periods of time and “git some cash”—as Carruthers would later translate the line “Búcate plata” from one of the *poemas-son*. That Hughes was sensitive to the difficulties
these poems posed for non-Cuban speakers, including him, is evident from his reply to Caroline Anderson’s request to omit the Spanish titles of each poem in *Cuba Libre*, “since we are not offering the Spanish translation of the poems.” “Certainly, you may leave out the Spanish titles of the poems, if you choose,” Hughes responded. “We were originally thinking of a university press as a possible publishers [sic], so I reckon we put them [the Spanish titles of the poems] there for academic purposes to help students find the originals quickly (in case their Spanish was only school-bookish and the couldn’t otherwise identify the poems in the original language).”

In light of this remark, it is somewhat surprising that Hughes never seemed to have considered a bilingual volume, especially given that Dudley Fitts’s bilingual anthology of Hispanic American poetry, to which Hughes contributed a handful of translations, had been published by a major press in 1942. It is reasonable to assume, however, that doubling the size of the book in this manner would have been far too costly for a small press such as Ward Ritchie.

For his part, Guillén faced a similar linguistic predicament in reverse. Although Guillén professed much admiration for Hughes’s talents as a poet, he also readily admitted that he could not read the poems in English. On July 11, 1930, Guillén, for the first time addressing Langston informally as “tú,” writes in a somewhat different vein and without the earlier apprehensions about Hughes’s access to Cuban Spanish:

> Me satisface extraordinariamente que te hayan gustado tanto los poemas míos. Tu sabes mucho de estas cosas y, además, conoces lo suficiente la mentalidad cubana para interpretarlos. Tomaría yo estar en las mismas condiciones respecto de las cosas tuyas y de tus compatriotas. Pero pienso muy pronto saber bastante “english” y leer en tu propia lengua tus bellísimos poemas. Recibí oportunamente la traducción de algunos de mis versos, que te agradezco sinceramente, pues eso es un gran honor para mi. Creo que todas están muy bien, como hechas por tí. Urrutia me las estuvo leyendo y me dio su opinión favorable.  

[I am absolutely delighted that you liked all my poems. You know much about these things and also know enough about the Cuban mentality in order to interpret them. I wish I were in the same position vis-à-vis your work and that of your compatriots. But I think that very soon I will know enough “English” to read your beautiful poems in your own language. I received the translations of some of my poems, and I thank you with all my heart, for it is a great honor for me. I believe that they are very good, since you did them. Urrutia read them to me and gave me a very favorable opinion of them.]
Fernández de Castro, to translate what Hughes sent him.⁹⁰ “I hope,” he wrote to Hughes in September 1930, “que tan pronto aparezca tu novela me enviaras un ejemplar. En ella voy a practicar bastante inglés” (that as soon as your novel [Not Without Laughter] appears you will send me a copy so I can practice enough English).⁹¹ Guillén, however, seems to have practiced his English about as much as Hughes did his criollo.

It remains unclear exactly how much English Guillén did understand and speak at this or any later point. Fernández de Castro, for one, claimed in 1930 that Guillén is “alleging that he is not able to understand English,” and there is a curious bilingual postscript in Guillén’s hand to one of Urrutia’s letters to Hughes: “I will write you cuando tenga time. Recibí your letter que me alegro mucho….⁹² This is the closest Guillén ever comes to writing a letter in English. Even as late as early 1949, when he thanks Hughes for having sent copies of Cuba Libre, Guillén regrets that he still does not know enough English to judge the quality of the translations:

Es una edición espléndida: un alarde de primor tipográfico, que me llena de alegría y orgullo. Les pongo aquí un fuerte abrazo, con mi más viva gratitud. Pero lamento no conocer el suficiente inglés para juzgar las traducciones: pero siendo ustedes los responsables, estoy seguro de que ellas han seriados los originales míos. Además, muchos amigos me dicen que son muy buenas.⁹³

[This is a splendid edition: the typography is just exquisite, which fills me with joy and pride. I give you both a big hug, with my deepest gratitude. But I regret that I don’t know enough English to judge the translations: but since I know that you both are responsible for them, I rest assured that they follow my originals closely. Also, many friends tell me that they are really fine.]

Was Guillén just being politely evasive? Was he possibly hiding his disappointment at Cuba Libre’s failure to improve his economic situation behind his “precario inglés”? We will never know. What we do know, however, is that, unlike Jacques Roumain, whose novel Hughes also cotranslated, Guillén never wrote a poem in tribute of his friend.⁹⁴ Exactly why Guillén dedicated “Sabás” to Hughes remains an open question, at least to me.

**Translating Cuban Baseball**

In contrast to Hughes, Carruthers preferred assimilating the source language of Guillén’s poem as much as possible into the conceptual and linguistic structures of USAmerican Negro dialect. While the results are often disappointing, there is one noteworthy instance in which Carruthers’s translation achieves perhaps inadvertent transculturation. This instance is his version of Guillén’s poem “Tú no sabes inglés,” in which Carruthers
succeeds in expanding and deepening his own language though the foreign medium, registering the difference of Afro-Cuban culture in the English translation. The reason for this may well be that Cuban-USA cultural relations are already very much at the core of this short poem which, like the “Ayé me dijeron negro,” paints a deft dialogic portrait of two Cuban men. Once again, the scene is specific to a place and time: not just Cuba but a black neighborhood in 1920s Havana.

Con tanto inglé que tú sabía,
Bito Manué,
con tanto inglé, no sabe ahora
desí ye.

La mericana te buca,
y tú le tienes que huir:
tu inglés era de etrái guan,
de etrái guan y guan tu tri.

Bito Manué, tú no sabe inglés,
tú no sabe inglés,
tú no sabe inglés.

No te enamore más nunca,
Bito Manué,
si no sabe inglés,
si no sabe inglés.95

[With all that English you used to know, / Bito Manué, / With all that English, now you can’t even / Say yes. // The American comes looking for you / And you just flee: / Your English was just strike one! / Strike one and one, two, three. // Bito Manué, you don’t know any English, / You don’t know any English. / You don’t know any English! // Don’t fall in love anymore, / Bito Manué, / If you don’t know any English, / if you don’t know any English.]

Like all of Guillén’s “Motivos,” this poem is a dramatic monologue written in a dialect or vernacular—criollo—that immediately identifies the speaker as an Afro-Cuban with little formal education. If we regard vernaculars as specific cultural inflections rather than simply substandard uses of a standardized language—in this case, Spanish—then translation is at issue in this poem in more ways than one, and not only because the poem thematizes the knowledge, or lack thereof, of another language: English. Jean-Jacques Lecercle notes that “when we speak of ‘English’”—and, one might add, any other major language—“we speak of a multiplicity of dialects, registers, and styles, of the sedimentation of past conjunctures, of the
inscription of social antagonisms as discursive antagonisms, of the coexistence and contradiction of various collective arrangements of utterance, of the interpalliation of subjects within apparatuses embodied in linguistic practices (schools, the media).”  

It follows, then, that translation occurs in both interlingual and intralingual settings, in which different discourses or linguistic registers function much as “natural” languages do. Translation not only moves across the linguistic borders associated with nations but also crosses discursive boundaries located inside those very borders. One might term the latter movements interdiscursive.

Like translations that dwell at the intersections of so-called major languages, European and otherwise, their interdiscursive counterparts are cross-cultural in that they move across the boundaries defined by racial, sexual, and class differences within the space of a single nation-state supposedly founded on a shared language. What marks these cultural differences linguistically are vernaculars represented as dialects and sociolects, which we find in abundance throughout Hughes’s work. In Hughes’s vernacular poetry, for instance, the perplexities and possibilities of translation within what is commonly perceived as a single language alert us to the cultural multiplicities into which that language breaks down upon closer scrutiny. Consider, for example, the effect of spontaneity, for which many have praised Hughes’s early verse, and his desire to erase the line between a written literary language and the spoken common (or vulgar) tongue. Such spontaneity is not a marker of cultural or racial authenticity, of speech or singing brought effortlessly to the written page. Unlike most of his contemporary reviewers, Hughes was well aware of this. Rather, such seeming artlessness is a literary effect achieved through translations that move within the same language but between cultural layers or fields whose differences are defined by race, sexuality, and economics. These cultures are variously identified with either written or oral expressions, and they may share neither inflections nor meanings. Yet literary and other situations in which cultural differences do not align neatly with linguistic differences are frequently misrecognized as not in need of translation. Here, it is the existence not just of a dominant language but of a dominant discourse—a set of assumptions about how language affects cultural identity—that masks cultural differences by recoding them as linguistic and cultural similarities. As a result, interdiscursive situations often appear monolingual, despite the fact that translation occurs whenever and wherever meanings and usages are not culturally shared but are simply assumed to be shared.

The word “vernacular” describes more than relations between different language situations. Its historically accrued meanings suggest the imbrications of linguistic with sociocultural relations. Vernacular, especially when transferred from an oral to a literary setting, already implies translation to the extent that a vernacular is “not a language as such, but a relation between one language situation and another.” Derived from the Latin
*vernacularis* (of a slave), the term describes a local language or style “often associated (negatively or positively) with the vulgar, the provincial, the rustic, the rudimentary, the natural, or the carnal, and sometimes more specifically with a social underclass, or with women.”\(^\text{101}\) It is the dynamic layering of social relations—be they inflected by race, gender, sexuality, or economics—that makes vernacular writing so tricky to render in another language. In literature, vernaculars typically function as ethnographic intertexts. As presumably realist representations of others’ spoken (or sung) words, they represent a “condition of *vernacularity*” that “a national language aspires to transcend, whether by standardizing and codifying its phonology, morphology, and spelling or by generating a literature worthy to stand comparison with the classics.”\(^\text{102}\) While “Tú no sabe inglés” itself is not ethnography, ethnographic discourse is what mediates the relation between this poem and its readers and inserts itself between reader and speaker. The poem itself reflects on this mediation. While the poem’s direct interlocutor, the silent Bito Manué, is presumably like the speaker, the implied reader is situated at a significant distance from both. Consistent with the conventions of ethnography, this distance identifies both speaker and Bito Manué as linguistically, though not necessarily culturally, other in relation to the reader. This distinction between language and culture is vital to the poem.

Let us first consider what happens on the surface of this poem. The speaker himself probably knows as little or even less English than the object of his mockery, whose linguistic and romantic forays he playfully mocks. *Sabía*, a past tense of *saber*, to know, refers more to a boastful claim on Bito Manué’s part than to something he actually knew and has somehow forgotten. This is consistent with the fact that his lack of English did not prevent him from *enamorarse* with the *mericana*, that is, falling for an American girl or woman who, it is safe to assume, does not speak a word of Spanish, let alone Cuban. Apparently, the specialized idiom of USAmerican baseball, with which Bito Manué apparently is familiar—“strike one, and one, two, three”—does not lend itself to romance. We can barely even recognize his Cubanized English in the poem: “etrái guan, de extrái guan y guan tu tri.” In fact, there is no English at all in this poem. What is identified as “inglé” is already broken or transculturated—in short, it is Cubanized.\(^\text{103}\) In a gesture that might also be read as refusal or even resistance to foreign incursions, Bito Manué takes flight, from the nightclub where he probably met the attractive female visitor from the USA, back to his neighborhood on the fringes of Havana, the *hampa afrocubana*, or Afro-Cuban underworld.\(^\text{104}\)

The verb Guillén’s speaker employs here, *huí* (a shortened version of *huir*, to flee or escape), derails the poem’s narrative. It makes relatively little sense that this Cuban Don Juan would flee when the only issue is that he does not know how to say yes to the woman’s advances. Why would he suddenly be afraid? What produces a break in the logic of the poem’s romantic narrative is the presence of a different mediating discourse: ethnography gives way to
political history, meaning both slavery and more contemporary USA-Cuban affairs. The verb *huir* supplies a metaphoric connection to Cuban slavery by invoking the heroic figure of the runaway slave, or *cimarrón*. Guillén uses the same verb elsewhere, notably in “El abuelo” (“The Grandfather”), a translation of which is also included in *Cuba Libre* (*CL*, 83). This allusion in turn prepares the ground for a heavy-handed allegory about USA-Cuban relations, in which Bito Manué represents Afro-Cuba and the “mericana” a larger-than-life Anglo mistress who recalls Lady Liberty. Both figures are allegorically overdetermined so that the poem can now also, and perhaps mainly, provide an ironic commentary on how the USA “liberated” Cuba in 1898. At the same time, it can aestheticize Cuba’s resistance to a history of political and cultural encroachments by its northern neighbor. Guillén’s poetic adaptation of the Cuban *son* is an important part of this resistance, which introduces yet another intertext, this one specifically cultural. The Cuban *son* is the quintessential (musical) form of transculturación, the *son*’s cultural parentage being African, European, and Arawak/Taíno. In “Tu no sabe inglés,” this marker of transculturación facilitates the poem’s passage from cultural nationalism (Afro-Cuban) to political nationalism (Cuba as *mulato* nation). Guillén himself describes his *poemas-son* as *poemas mulatos*, mulatto poems.

While the history of USA-Cuban relations, including of course slavery, is no doubt significant to “Tú no sabe inglés,” Guillén makes readers jump to the allegorical level too quickly, short-circuiting more complicated readings of the interpersonal, interlingual, and intercultural relations in this poem. Most notably, an allegorical reading does not include the speaker, whom we can only conflate with Bito Manué or with Guillén himself in a symbolically simplified scenario. Yet it is the speaker whose language mediates both Bito Manué’s relationship with the *mericana* and the reader’s perception of that relationship. This speaker also offers up what might be understood as a moral to the story, which, though different from the one in “Ayé me dijeron negro,” still has to do with racial mixing and its consequences. Specifically, he issues a warning about likely intercultural misapprehensions by appealing to language differences: if you don’t know any English, don’t fall in love (anymore). While the conditional “if” allows for the possibility that linguistic differences might be bridged, intercultural and especially interracial differences are quite a different matter. Though no doubt appropriate, the speaker’s advice is also quite limited: Bito Manué’s problem is not that he does not know enough English but that his linguistic competence, his Cubanized baseball English, does not confer any broader cultural knowledge about the divergent meanings of race in other parts of the Americas.

In the poem’s English version, the speaker’s warning is much stronger, and it focuses less on linguistic differences. This in part results from the fact that *any* translation of this poem into English, *any* English idiom, has to change the source poem’s premises fundamentally. That is, in order for the poem to work as a dramatic monologue in English, it requires a speaker
who knows English and who also knows what Bito Manué does not know, which is more than just English. Through the (inevitable) use of English and the necessary knowledge of a different cultural and, in this case, historical context, the translator has no choice but to force the original poem into a “structural lie.” Here is “Don’t Know No English,” which I regard as Carruthers’s most successful translation of a Guillén poem, in part because he resists pushing criollo into some of the more egregious orthographic contortions of Negro dialect.

All dat English you used to know,
Li’l Manuel,
All dat English, now can’t even
Say: Yes.

‘Merican gal comes lookin’ fo’ you
An’ you jes’ runs away.
Yo’ English is jes’ strike one!
Strike one and one-two-three.

Li’l Manuel, you don’t know no English
You jes don’t know!
You jes’ don’t know!

Don’t fall in love no mo’,
Li’l Manuel,
’cause you don’t know no English,
Don’t know no English.

(CL, 3)

Like the Cuban text, this poem is a dramatic monologue. In contrast to Guillén’s poem, however, Carruthers’s translation is rhythmically quite clunky. Clearly, English-language meter and rhyme schemes are not a good fit for the son. The resulting clumsiness is a first indication of a linguistic context in conflict with the source poem’s Cuba. Another sign of conflict is the notable difference between what are now two USAmerican idioms, one standard (the baseball lingo in italics), the other not. In the translation, this difference creates a shift from intercultural to intracultural concerns. Both forms of English are set off against what little Spanish remains in Bito Manué’s modified name: Li’l Manuel, although Bito is actually short for Victor. The poem plays on these differences, creating a dense web of social and cultural relationships inside and beyond the text. Because both speaker and addressee are visible to us only through representations of their voices, as in “Ayé me dijeron negro,” how they speak and are spoken about determines how we perceive their respective cultural positions and identities, in
the translation no less than in Guillén’s poem. How different cultural identities and sensibilities play off each other in the translation is, however, rather different from how they do in the source poem, which uses allegorical representations of Cubanness to set one national community against another rather than imagining a different sort of community altogether.

Carruthers’s speaker, who chuckles at the foundering romance between Li’l Manuel and the “’merican gal” and chides Li’l Manuel for not having enough English to know what he has let himself in for, is unambiguously marked as lower-class African American, and the poem’s setting has now moved to somewhere in the USAmerican South. The speaker’s voice has all the familiar trappings of literary representations of the vernacular I have called USAmerican Negro dialect, but it is less emphatic and insistent than in “Ayé me dijeron negro” and other Carruthers translations in a similar vein. The hushed interlocutor is no doubt Hispanic, but there is nothing to identify Li’l Manuel as Cuban, except perhaps his knowledge of baseball (although he could easily be Dominican, too). His name retains a hint of foreignness, but he is otherwise assimilated into the poem’s vernacular environment—except, of course, for what little English Li’l Manuel does speak, which is now represented in standard orthography. The effect is an almost comical correctness that masks, rather than reveals, Li’l Manuel’s cultural identity. This strategic withholding of identity invites readers to imagine the character(s) in different ways.

One way to picture the Li’l Manuel in Carruthers’s translation is as a young Cuban baseball player in the USA during the 1940s, a mulato or negro who is being pursued by and finds himself attracted to a white American “gal.” It is easy to imagine Li’l Manuel along the lines of the pitcher Ramón Bragaña, aka El Profesor, whom Roberto González Echevarría describes as “a six-foot, bronze colored mulatto, who weighed 195 pounds in his prime.” Or perhaps he was more like the darker-complexioned Oréstes Miñoso, who was signed by the Cleveland Indians in 1947 (he was twenty-four at the time) and was “the best known of the black Cuban players whose careers began in the early to middle forties.” They likely faced similar dangerous temptations in a country where the last antimiscegenation state law was not repealed until 1967.

But Cubans’ cultural sensibilities were different on that count. Although they were certainly color conscious when it came to social contact, Cubans were far less phobic about racial mixing—in literature and in life. Although realities in Cuba hardly conformed to the image of the racial paradise that it had acquired among black USAmericans during the nineteenth century, race relations in Cuba did differ from those in the USA: “There was no random racist terror to speak of, and although the elite in Cuba remained separate and white, race-based segregation among the lower classes was rare. Interracial dating, while not encouraged by whites, did happen, and it was almost never the cause for murder. African American soldiers, baseball
players, artists, and activists visited Cuba and maintained that blacks were
better off there." While historical realities do not entirely square with
such perceptions, in the poem, Li'l Manuel is cautioned not to assume that
the "'merican gal" shares his cultural sensibilities. It is not by coincidence
that Guillén's poem invokes baseball. As an "expression of Cuban nation-
alty," both "a means to nationhood and a metaphor for action," Cuban
baseball ties directly into Guillén's cultural nationalism. In many respects,
baseball brought Cuban and USAmericans, especially African Americans,
closer. "By the time of Jackie Robinson's 'integration' of baseball in
1947, hundreds of rural and working-class players and tens of thousands of
African-American and Cuban fans had come to know each other through
baseball." This was the first time that Cuban and other Caribbeans of
color could play in the major leagues without passing for white.

Clearly, baseball is played according to the same rules in Cuba and the
USA, and players from different countries and cultures shared the game's
special idiom, all that English Li'l Manuel "used to know." There were also
salient differences. While Cuban baseball had no color line, the USAmeric-
ian leagues were very much segregated, and darker-complexioned Afro-
Caribbean players were relegated to the Negro leagues until 1947, when
the previously all-white major league was opened up to black players. Yet
in those days, according to one Ossie Bluege from the Washington Senators,
"all Cuba ball players were called niggers"—even players who were (or
looked) white. As an anonymous USAmerican ballplayer put it to Preston
Gomez in 1944, "You may be Cuban, but you're a nigger sonuvabitch to
me." Effectively, then, "as young Cuban men—black, mixed race, and
white—ventured into American baseball, they shared not only in the black
community's pride but also in its struggle against the indignities of racism
and segregation." They played in small, often very white towns off season,
in Arkansas and other southern states, "where they slept on cramped buses,
ate crackers and sardines, were often forbidden to use bath and toilet facili-
ties, and might be threatened or attacked if they happened to beat the local
white team." The 2008 film *Sugar* recalls some of these settings, albeit
in a more contemporary context and with reference to Dominican play-
ners whose experiences in the USA were similar to Cubans'. Filmed in two
small towns in Iowa, the movie follows the short-lived career of Dominican
Miguel "Sugar" Santos, played by Algenis Pérez Soto, himself an amateur
baseball player. This character, who lands a job with a USAmerican minor
league team after attending the baseball academy in the Dominican Repub-
lic, is a more modern incarnation of Li'l Manuel as Carruthers seems to
have imagined him: handsome and dark-complexioned, unquestionably a
*negro* and one who barely speaks English. Miguel is depicted as exotic to
small-town Iowans, who are perfectly cordial and supportive of him as a
ballplayer for the local team. The film also makes clear that his hosts, the
pious Higgenses, are opposed to any closer relations between Miguel and
their daughter Anne (played by Ellary Porterfield), who is attracted to the young Dominican.¹¹⁵

That the color line in the pre-civil rights USAmerican South would have been very much on the mind of Ben Carruthers, a middle-class African American living in Washington, D.C., is beyond doubt. In “Don’t Know No English,” the situation the translation creates might initially be envisioned as a contest of sorts, not about who speaks or doesn’t speak English or whose English is better but about who can or cannot have the “‘meri- can gal”—really, the white girl—and why. The lack of an explicit reference to her whiteness is quite unusual for an African American speaker in this USAmerican context. Let us posit, then, as I think we must, that Manuel’s English is good enough to explain his predicament to the speaker. What creates the intercultural bond that would make such an intimate conversation possible is a particular relational perception of racial differences. Even in her absence, the invocation of the “white” American woman makes both speaker and interlocutor “black”—meaning not American—in relation to her. The speaker’s advice in this imaginary conversation, then, might go something like this: “If you think that you can go after white women in this country, think again. I’m a black USAmerican citizen who can’t even so much as look at a white woman without risking my hide. You’re a foreigner, or at least foreign enough, and even if you are light-skinned, you’re still black here. You can play baseball in the USA, but you can’t play that kind of ball here, no matter what language you speak.”

The speaker’s shift from “you don’t know no English” to the emphatically repeated “You jes don’t know!” is tellingly at variance with Guillén’s poem. What Li’l Manuel could not have known is that the same dark-skinned ball players who could be part of the major leagues after 1947 might also be brutally murdered for even so much as whistling at a white woman. This is precisely what happened to Emmett Till in 1953 in Mississippi, one of the states with antimiscegenation statutes. Also worth mentioning is the case of the Martinsville Seven in Virginia in 1949, which is likely less remembered because the actual crime of sexual assault and rape was not in question. Each of the seven young men, six of them barely out of their teens, was sentenced to death. Despite growing protests and the fact that no white man had ever received the death penalty for rape, they were executed in 1951. The Supreme Court repeatedly refused to hear the case.¹¹⁶ What seems to have been on Carruthers’s mind in this translation is not language difference but the construction (indeed imposition) of a cultural identity through assumptions about race based on skin color, regardless of language. The change Carruthers makes in the poem’s final stanza points to a logic quite different from Guillén’s: “Don’t fall in love no mo’…’cause you don’t know no English,” rather than “if you don’t know no English,” as Guillén has it. Language difference is a red herring, then; it makes, as it were, no difference to the existing social order. Color lines are as firmly drawn as ever, even at a time when
certain institutions in the USA were being desegregated. What applied to major league baseball had not yet happened in other areas, such as education. In 1947, the Orval Faubuses of this world were quite active in many southern states, and the Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education that declared segregated public schools unconstitutional was still seven years away.

I mentioned in my discussion of “Ayé me dijeron negro” that Guillén shapes his “Motivos” as the literary equivalent of the transculturated musical form of the Cuban son. This is relevant here because the son represents a community that is (linguistically?) distinct but whose origins, like those of the son itself, are a cultural and racial mixture of Spanish, Arawak/Taíno, and African elements. The blues has often been taken as the closest US-American counterpart to the son. In fact, as we have seen, Hughes pushes this comparison by giving the title “Cuban Blues” to the section that Carruthers’s translation opens. Like “Last Night Someone Called Me Darky,” “Don’t Know No English” is far from being a blues poem, even though the latter poem does offer an ironic twist of the “my (wo)man left me” theme of many blues lyrics. Its mood, however, is comical rather than dejected. Nevertheless, Hughes used his editorial frame to appeal to the blues, likely as a way of containing the specter of interracial romance for a USAmerican readership. Unlike “Don’t Know No English” and its companion pieces, traditional blues lyrics tended to steer clear of interracial topics.

Carruthers’s translation eschews Guillén’s static transnational allegory—Cuba vs. the USA—and its penchant for symbolic caricature. Instead, he represent humans beings in the process of figuring out how to live together by negotiating their cultural and racial differences. This scenario is quite reminiscent of the kinds of provisional communities Hughes himself creates in his autobiographies and many of his poems. In “Don’t Know No English,” we hear how the speaker and Li’l Manuel negotiate their differences to create common ground. In Guillén’s poem, by contrast, common ground between speaker and addressee is assumed: they are familiars, possibly even kin. Most importantly for Guillén, they are both Cuban, part of an imperiled national community that has to be protected from outsiders. What makes Carruthers’s translation so intriguing, and perhaps surprising for its time, is that here common ground does not yet exist; it has to be gained. We see in this poem how community results from the willingness of two relative strangers to take risks: they are not part of the same national, racial, or linguistic group, yet they choose to trust each other enough to seek advice and care enough to give it. In doing so, they create a transcultural and transnational space in which they can test out the limits of their differences and how best to live with them. The translation, more so than the source text, is an imaginative testing ground for knowledge about and for living together in peace and difference. It is hardly an overstatement to say that this kind of knowledge is crucial for human survival in the USA and elsewhere in the world, and now perhaps more than ever.
Human communities, even provisional ones, always seem to be founded on exclusions. There is one figure that both poems equally exclude: the female American, who is both a shared reference point and a shared source of anxiety. Whatever her specific racial and cultural attributes in each situation, intimacy with her is perceived as perilous and potentially fatal; at best, it is stereotypically unproductive. Her exclusion in both Guillén’s and Carruthers’s respective poems shows up the limitations of the gendered, racialized, and nationalistic communities that both texts either assume or construct. The woman is an object of desire in both poems. In “Tu no sabe inglés,” she stands for another language, USAmerican English, knowledge of which would presumably make her (more) accessible to Bito Manué, or so he wrongly assumes. The solution to the amorous misadventure in Guillén’s poem is for the speaker to redirect Bito Manué’s desire. He points him away from the foreigner and toward a different sort of communion, and community, one that already exists or at least is posited: the Cuban nation. In Carruthers’s translation, the woman stands for something that is desired by and inaccessible to all, including the reader. The respective reasons for that desire, however, and the simultaneous lack of access differ. What she represents is decidedly not English or any form of linguistic competence. The translation is, after all, written in English, different versions of it, and speaker, interlocutor, and reader all have access to English in some measure. To the extent that the “’merican gal” stands for a nation, America, romancing her would represent a desire for assimilation. Yet as the poem makes clear in no uncertain terms, Li’l Manuel’s desire to assimilate into a setting that marks him as a racial, not just a linguistic, other is fraught with considerable peril. At least in the translation’s historical context, the promise of a community called “’merican” is uncertain at best, for both the speaker and Li’l Manuel. Being “’merican” does not confer a national identity on any of these characters. The “’merican gal” is an object of desire whose specific attributes remain undefined. While the diminutive prevents her from representing Lady Liberty in any conventional manner, she still embodies a version of the American dream, much as Daisy Buchanan, another white “gal,” does for Jay Gatsby. The truncation “’merican,” which Carruthers chose to retain, unsettles a strictly binary view of racial categories by offering a glimpse of the Cuban source text. It is the continued interaction with that text that deforms and defamiliarizes “American” as a guarantor of a national identity in ways that Guillén’s poem does not.

Intentionally or not, “Don’t Know No English” breaks down the original poem’s (trans)national allegory by making available to the reader additional knowledge about matters that the source poem simplifies. What the mericana represents in Guillén’s poem (the USA) is not, in the translation, a culturally or even politically unified place but encompasses a multiplicity of languages and perspectives. Carruthers calls attention to this multiplicity by using black vernacular, through which the speaker signals that he both does
and does not fully belong to that America. His perspective is one already located between at least two worlds that exist in the space of a nation, even before he comes into contact with Li’l Manuel’s Cuba. In other words, the speaker’s identity is effectively as multiple and as uncertain as Li’l Manuel’s. Through this uncertainty, which is a function of the “minority” discourse of USAmerican black vernacular, the translation makes available in the figure of the nation a space in which the characters can enact, though not necessarily resolve, their perplexities.  

The same might be true in Guillén’s poem, especially when we consider the formal dimensions of transculturation that the Cuban son and its literary equivalent represent. But Guillén’s poem arrests the movement of the transculturative process. Transculturation stands for Cuba alone; it is not a process that extends to the USA. Because using English forces Carruthers and his readers into a structural lie, his translation puts the lie, as it were, to the original’s (trans)national allegory. The fact that his translation opens up possibilities for interpretation that had not been thought of in Guillén’s poem implicitly challenges the reader’s desire for the original, which Goethe posits when he writes: “Übersetzer sind als geschäftige Kuppler anzusehen, die uns die halbverschleierte Schöne also höchst liebenswürdig anpreisen: sie erregen eine unwiderstehliche Neigung nach dem Original” (Translators must be regarded as busy matchmakers who offer us a beautiful semiveiled woman as the loveliest of them all; they create an irresistible desire for the original). Goethe’s metaphor of the veiled woman both feminizes and orientalizes the original-as-other. The metaphor returns critical discourse on translation to an ethnographic register that eschews precisely the possibility for developing transcultural perspectives. By taking for granted that readers have a quasi-erotic desire for an unreachable original, translation studies based on Goethe’s precepts—most notably among them the Benjaminian strain—curtail an important potential that translations hold: the potential for encouraging readings that imagine a multitude of possible relations between selves and others and between one text and another. In “Don’t Know No English,” Carruthers realizes this potential. Compared with the Cuban poem, Carruthers’s poem has no one place but moves between places, not just between languages. The translation sets the Cuban poem in motion variedly and in doing so opens up its intra- and interlinguistic play to other hemispheric contexts, such as the USA and the Caribbean. This does not mean that the context of late 1920s Cuba is suddenly irrelevant, just that it is not the only possible and plausible context for the English translations. In this play of possibilities, the Cuban poem is but one text. It is not the privileged original, just the first version whose referentiality the translation changes and extends. To be sure, Carruthers’s translation brings out an element already latent in Guillén’s poem. But this aspect is overshadowed by Carruthers’s insistence on creating what he perceives as a distinctly Cuban poetic sound from the voices of
a marginalized group. Critical readers have too often shared his insistence on the poem’s Cubanness.

**The Politics of Translation**

My discussion implies that Carruther’s “Don’t Know No English” is more successful than his translation of “Ayé me dijeron negro” in opening up interpretive possibilities not available in the Cuban poem. To make such a value judgment is useful, however, only to the extent that it draws attention to the gap that opens up between aesthetic and ethical criteria in attempts at evaluating translations. On the one hand, Carruther’s “Last Night Someone Called Me Darky” may be a more satisfying poem in formal terms. On the other hand, it may also be offensive to certain readers’ political sensibilities. Hughes’s draft, while more appealing to me because it does not erase the source poem, employing subtly experimental “textual features that frustrate immediate intelligibility, empathic response, interpretive mastery,” might be judged as weaker when it comes to conventional poetic values such as meter, rhyme, and structural symmetry. My reading, however, also runs the risk of imposing on the text of the translation a narrative of modernist resistance to literary convention that it, unlike some of Hughes’s own poems, cannot finally sustain. Depending, then, on which set of criteria I favor, I might deem one or the other poem either good or ethical but, oddly, not both at the same time.

In a gesture that has considerable theoretical appeal, Lawrence Venuti has tried to bring together both sets of values by proposing good translation to mean ethical translation—the kind of translation, in other words, that “manifests in its own language the foreignness of the foreign text. This manifestation can occur through the selection of a text whose form and theme deviate from domestic literary canons. The most decisive occurrence, however, depends on introducing variations that alienate the domestic language and, since they are domestic, reveal the translation to be in fact a translation, distinct from the text it replaces.” What underlies the idea of “alienating the domestic language” is hardly new. In fact, Venuti’s call for “registering the foreignness of foreign cultures in translation” echoes Benjamin, who quotes Goethe to the effect that the translator “muss seine Sprache durch die Fremde erweitern und vertiefen” (must expand and deepen his own language through the foreign medium). If one reads Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” through the lens of postcolonial theory, which would bring out the dual contexts of Goethe’s intellectually expansive orientalism and Oswald Spengler’s theories of the West’s decay and of global cultural cycles, it is not difficult to see how ethics might enter the study of translation, even if it does not for Benjamin himself. It is also easy to understand why ethics would readily attach itself to discussions of USA-Caribbean-Hispanic
American relations, cultural and otherwise. Yet it nevertheless strikes me as incautious to embrace uncritically the values that ethics represent in such discussions, which is what Venuti does when he formulates a moral imperative akin to a professional code of conduct for translators. He insists that translation should register foreignness in ethical ways so as to correct the effects of international colonial and neocolonial domination. The danger here is that the category of ethics, unless carefully calibrated to specific historical settings, may too easily become just one more imposition of contemporary identity politics on the work of earlier translators.124 This unidirectional imperative also has the serious disadvantage of not being applicable to the practice of translators who work in languages other than English. Venuti largely ignores this issue, despite the fact that the largest number of literary translations are into languages other than English.125

It is, then, not simply evasive to propose that both Carruthers and Hughes were conservative translators with different ideological agendas that, at least in part, influenced the decisions they made in their respective translations. Carruthers’s use of a nonstandard American vernacular (Negro dialect) only appears to violate the literary values of his time, which were based on the elitist exclusion of dialect writing from the realm of the literary. It actually reinforces those very values. The translations that result conform to ethnopoetic standards, through which external cultural differences, in this case between Cuba and the USA, are rendered as internal divergences between black and white USAmericans. Such divergences fall under the ideological governance of what we now know as multiculturalism. In a so-called multiculturalist atmosphere ethnopoetry can, as Podestá demonstrates, exist quite comfortably alongside modernist poetry as long as each remains in its own separate sphere. Carruthers’s Negro dialect translations of Guillén’s verse do register cultural diversity only along racial lines. By conflating cultural differences at the margins—that is, between USAmerican Negroes and Cuban negros or mulatos—Carruthers’s translations tend to guarantee the margins’ cultural and political separateness from imagined centers. This at least holds true in “Last Night Someone Called Me Darky.” As I have shown, it is rather a different story in “Don’t Know No English.”

While Hughes escaped the trap of ethnopoetry by refusing Negro dialect, he fell right into another one by using what looks like a more standardized vernacular, making his translation seem transparent and univocal. We may say that whenever he employs the vernacular in his own poems and in these translations, Hughes translates a displaced and marginalized “native” language—the vernacular mother tongue—back into the standardized lect of what is, for all intents and purposes, a dominant “foreign” language: English. As a result, the dominant version of English is made to “function in another register.”126 Hughes’s translations tend to give even less of an impression of discursive heterogeneity than Carruthers’s. Still, as I have argued, appearances are deceptive in both cases. Whatever foreignizing
techniques Hughes adopts in his draft are smuggled in under the cover of prevailing linguistic transparency. It is true that Hughes gestures in the direction of cross-culturation but never to the point of open dissidence with multiculturalist, or cultural pluralist, doctrine.127

What commends Hughes’s translations is that they, unlike most of Carruthers’s, cannot reasonably exist without Guillén’s original. They are, in the end, not successful poems in their own right, certainly not by the standards of a revered translator such as Dudley Fitts, who held that “the translation of a poem should be a poem, viable as a poem and, as a poem, weighable.”128 Ironically, Fitts was enough of a cultural elitist not to have approved of Carruthers’s translations precisely because of Carruthers’s use of a substandard idiom. Hughes’s own draft of “Last Night” could in no way be confused with, or take the place of, the Guillén poem, and it would have worked well in a bilingual edition. The same holds true for Carruthers’s “Don’t Know No English,” which Hughes approved without any changes. As testimony to the ultimate untranslatability of Guillén’s *poemas-son* into any register of USAmerican English, both of these poems are revealing guides to the intricacies of the process of translation in a neo-colonial setting.

Even if Hughes’s subject matter in *Cuba Libre* was controversial for his time, his approach to translating poetry was in step with the political conservatism of midcentury Anglo-American literary culture. As we have seen from his decision not to use his own version of Guillén’s “Ayé me dijo negro,” Hughes, in the mid- to late 1940s, became increasingly less willing to test linguistic and political limits in his published writings, including his translations. This reluctance is even more pronounced in other translations of his that he did include in *Cuba Libre*. Earlier versions of four poems from other sections of the book had been published in Fitts’s 1942 *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry/Antología de la poesía americana contemporánea*, and Hughes revised each substantially for inclusion either in *The Poetry of the Negro* or *Cuba Libre* and in some cases both.129 These four poems are “Fusilamiento” (“Execution”), “Soldado muerto” (“Dead Soldier”), “Velorio de Papá Montero” (“Wake for Papa Montero”), and “Cataliso en un bar,” a poem that Hughes first titled “Cantaliso in a Bar” and then modified to “Song in a Havana Bar.”130 The earlier texts show some of the same kinds of linguistic disturbances that we encounter in Hughes’s unpublished drafts. The later ones, by contrast, exhibit a distinct preference for the fluency of colloquialisms and less jarring metaphors. Compare, for instance, the 1942 and 1948 versions of the following stanza from Hughes’s “Wake for Papa Montero”:

> But brighter than the candles
> is the red shirt
that lighted your songs,
*the dark salt of your music,*
your glossy straight hair.\(^{131}\)

But the red shirt
that once lit up your songs
*and the brownskin laughter of your music*
*and your gleaming straightened hair,*
make more light for you now
than any candles.

\(^{(CL, 119)}\)

¡Y aún te alumbran, más que velas,
la camisa colorada
que iluminó sus canciones,
*la prieta sal de tus sones*
y tu melena planchada!\(^{132}\)

While the discrepancies between the two English stanzas are hardly as pronounced as the differences between Carruthers’s and Hughes’s respective translations of “Ayé me dijeron Negro,” Hughes’s revisions are still telling. Here it is the second version that seems more literal. This is in part because Hughes tones down and streamlines his diction, as he does throughout that version of the poem, turning, for instance, “tenement” into “flat” and “brawl” into “fight.” In the excerpts above, I have italicized the two lines that seem to have given Hughes the most trouble. He revised them several times, changing “your glossy straight hair” first to “your black, gleaming hair” and then to “your gleaming straightened hair.”\(^{133}\) Similarly, “the dark salt of your music” first turned into “the dark flavor of your music” and subsequently became “the brownskin laughter of your music.” “The dark salt of your music” is far more effective in conveying the presence of another language than the phrase on which Hughes settled, which takes recourse to the cliché of the “happy negro” instead of offering a more daring metaphor with a less obvious appeal to familiar racialized diction. For purposes of contrast, I offer Lloyd Mallan’s Negro dialect version of the beginning of the same poem.

An’ today, Papa Montero,
Dat ol’ moon dawned right back my house
An’ slah de ground eif her dagger-edge
An’ quiver awhile an’ jist stick there.
Some black kids come along an’ pick it up;
Dey shine it till it bright, an’ now
Ah brings it t’lay it like a pillow
Under you sorry head tonight!
Mallan adds a footnote that encapsulates his approach to translating these poems without really explaining anything: “The translator to maintain the true Afro-Cuban feeling in English felt it necessary to translate the poem into dialect in spite of its having been written in pure Spanish.”

Hughes’s own translations are also excellent examples of how a translator’s desire for greater linguistic transparency may extend to structural considerations. The fluid syntax in Hughes’s final version, evened out with the help of parataxis (“and...and”), calls much less attention to itself than it does in the first version. There the grammatical relation between the last two lines, and between them and the rest of the stanza, is ambiguous. The reason for this is that Hughes chose not to include the y (and) that identifies the verb *alumbran* (they illuminate) as the antecedent of all three lines, not just of one. Hughes’s second version produces precisely the “illusory effect of transparency” that, according to Venuti, “the popular aesthetic of translation” requires: “this means adhering to the current standard dialect while avoiding any dialect, register, or style that calls attention to words as words and therefore preempts the reader’s identification.”

We can see similar principles of absorption at work when we compare “Cantaliso in a Bar,” again from Fitts’s anthology, to “Song in an [sic] Havana Bar” from *Cuba Libre*. The alternative closing stanzas serve as my final example of how Hughes’s values as a poet-translator diverged from his interests and politics as literary editor.

I’ll give them my hand,
and I’ll sing with them,
because the song they know
is the same that I know.

I can shake hands
with poor folks
and sing with them swell—
for the same song they know,
I know as well!

A ellos les daré la mano,
y con ellos cantaré,
porque el canto que ellos saben
es el mismo que yo sé.

More than anything else in these two examples, the jarring adverb “swell” asserts Hughes’s different priorities as editor in *The Poetry of the Negro* anthology and *Cuba Libre*. “Swell” can be read as a Lecerclean “remainder” that announces, rather than conceals, an imposing overlay of a USAmerican
colloquial idiom.\textsuperscript{138} By being a minor variable of the dominant dialect, the word testifies to the existence of heterogeneity within that linguistic setting. To most readers in the USA at that time, “swell” would not have registered as a minor but as a dominant mode, much like the noun “gal” in Carruthers’s “Don’t Know No English.” Neither word belongs strictly to an African American vernacular, which works to create uncertainty in Carruthers’s case. In Hughes’s translation, however, which is more in keeping with his editorial commitment to assimilating Guillén’s work to the cultural conventions of USAmerican English, “swell” sounds hackneyed.

In Hughes’s systematic revisions of already published poems, we can see even more clearly than in the differences between his unpublished drafts and Carruthers’s versions how distinct political priorities assert themselves and begin to take precedence over other concerns. The conflict in these versions is not between different personal aesthetics, which is one way to read the divergences between Hughes’s and Carruthers’s translations. Instead, the clash, to use Bourdieu’s language, is between the “field of cultural production” and a larger “field of power.” In the field of cultural production, Hughes and Carruthers occupied notably different positions. Hughes himself even occupied contradictory positions at the same time. The field of power exerted steady but uneven pressure on these cultural producers to participate in the construction of a national political consensus, especially with respect to race.

The shifting alignments of these fields become even more evident when one compares translations by the same author but from different points in time. It is not that Hughes’s approach to translation changed radically, certainly not within a few years. But it, like his politics, became increasingly more cautious, to the point of affecting his choice of subjects. Hughes’s decision, in 1956, to translate “cradle songs” and other politically innocuous poems by the Chilean Nobel Prize winner Gabriela Mistral for Indiana University Press is an apt example of his growing political expediency.\textsuperscript{139} And he chose the poems for the Mistral volume very carefully. Not a single one even implicitly addressed racial or any other politically controversial topics. Nor did his brief introduction.

It also was more important to Hughes in the late 1940s than it had been earlier that his translations not challenge the ways and the terms in which African American audiences in the USA tended to think about race in relation to national culture. In a political climate of increasing anti-Communist retrenchment, things foreign were all too readily equated with things un-American. That Hughes, wearing his editorial hat, settled for Carruthers’s Negro dialect versions of some of Guillén’s “Motivos” shows a notable preference for linguistic and literary conventions that favored a maximum overlap between race and culture in the construction of “literary blackness.” Such overlap was also more compatible with the linguistic and referential transparency that literary realism required even from poetry. Hughes’s
concern was, I suspect, with not worrying the racial divisions that dominant cultural institutions such as publishing houses and universities upheld rather rigidly for middlebrow literary consumers, such as the black bourgeoisie, and more elite readerships such as the black intelligentsia. It was one thing to show continuity among African American cultures across the Americas by highlighting literature’s function as a vehicle for authentic folk resources. It was quite another to associate black literature with political and formal innovation and as result with dissidence.

In inviting readers, notably African American audiences, to approach Guillén’s “Motivos” primarily as ethnopoetry, Hughes implicitly adopted the high-modernist attitude toward poetry written in nonstandard vernacular as mere ethnography.\textsuperscript{140} Even if suppressing much of Guillén’s distinctive Afro-Cubanness was probably less of a conscious choice on Hughes’s (and on Carruthers’s) part and more of a reflexive alliance with Cold War cultural politics, the Negro dialect translations insistently cover cultural specificity with a veneer of worn ethnic formulas. These formulas are little different in their effect from the tropicalizing shacks, palm trees, and sugarcane stalks in the accompanying line drawings by Gar Gilbert. There are eight drawings in all in \textit{Cuba Libre}, one at the beginning of each section (see figure 7).\textsuperscript{141} Almost inevitably, this resolute foregrounding of ethnic effects all but erased the avant-garde qualities of Guillén’s \textit{poemas-son}. For instance, in its orthographic stylization, his Cuban \textit{criollo} is at least as akin to César Vallejo’s modernist inventions in \textit{Trilce} (1922) as it is to the onomatopoeic Africanism, or \textit{jitanjáfora}, other Antillean poets favored at the time.\textsuperscript{142} But avant-gardes, as Bourdieu notes, have a short half-life. It would have been quite impossible to convince literary critics that an African American poet availing himself of nonstandard vernacular forms was offering anything radical or new in 1948, even though Ezra Pound won the Bollingen Prize for his \textit{Pisan Cantos} that same year. What poets such as Sterling Brown and Guillén himself had done with nonstandard vernaculars in the early 1930s did not excite much interest nearly two decades later, certainly not among academic readers. Even Guillén was no longer writing \textit{poemas-son} then.

In \textit{Cuba Libre}, literary and visual iconographies work together to forge a sense of shared political purpose in an emblematic synecdoche of liberatory struggle: a pair of rope-bound hands raised in a gesture of (impotent?) defiance is featured at the very center of the title page (see figure 8). Miniatures of the same image trace diagonal columns across the volume’s chocolate-brown cloth covers. Much as the translations in \textit{Cuba Libre} employ American Negro dialect in an attempt to make Cuba part of a racialized cultural geography, the visual image of struggle seeks to synchronize two very different political environments by erasing their discordant histories. What the volume’s packaging accentuates is that Hughes in fact mistimed \textit{Cuba Libre}. For one thing, Guillén’s poems, especially the \textit{poemas-son}, would likely have had a very different impact in the USA even fifteen years earlier,
Don't Know No English

All dat English you used to know,
Lil' Manuel,
all dat English, now can't even
say: Yes.

'Merican gal comes lookin' fo' you
an' you jes' runs away.
Yo' English is jes' strike one!
strike one and one-two-three.

Lil' Manuel, you don't know no English
you jes' don't know!
You jes' don't know!

Don't fall in love no mo',
Lil' Manuel,
'cause you don't know no English,
don't know no English.
Cuba Libre
Poems by Nicolás Guillén

Translated from the Spanish by
Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers
Illustrated by Gar Gilbert

Anderson & Ritchie: The Ward Ritchie Press
Los Angeles, California: 1948

Figure 8. Title page of Cuba Libre, 1948. From the author’s collection.
in the immediate wake of the blues poems by Sterling Brown and Hughes himself. For another, Guillén’s membership in the Communist Party might have been a selling point rather than an embarrassment in the 1930s, when European and USAmerican intellectuals, in step with prominent modernist artists, were still looking to Soviet Russia, as well as to Africa and the Hispanic Americas, as energizing repositories of cultural and political values. *Cuba Libre* came too late to ride this wave. And it came too early to benefit from the renewed interest in the southern Americas after the USAmerican military response to the Cuban revolution put the lie to the rhetoric of good neighbors with common political causes.

**The Economics of Translation**

All things considered, *Cuba Libre* probably did better than expected, though compared with the sales of Hughes’s own poetry, its success was unremarkable. And even the sales of Hughes’s books were relatively unremarkable when compared with those of Knopf’s other authors, including Willa Cather and Kahlil Gibran. By May 15, 1950, *Cuba Libre* had sold a mere 273 copies, and Anderson wrote Hughes in early 1960 that she still had copies on hand. The sales figures for some of Hughes’s own books (by 1938) are *The Weary Blues*, 4,356 copies; *The Ways of White Folks*, 2,483 copies, and *Not Without Laughter*, 6,113 copies.

*Cuba Libre* did, however, win a prestigious award, though not a literary one, and the prize did not seem to affect sales much. Encouraged by Hughes’s repeated compliments—“CUBA LIBRE is one of the most beautiful books I have ever seen and I am delighted with it”—Anderson entered the book in the American Institute of Graphic Arts contest. She reported proudly to Hughes on January 25, 1949, that *Cuba Libre* had been selected as one of the institute’s fifty Books of the Year, which would be exhibited in several cities, starting with New York “sometime in February at the A.I.G.A. headquarters 115 W 40th.” Barely a week later, Hughes sent Guillén copies of *Cuba Libre* and his own anthology and told him about the prize. He also asked Guillén to write a letter to Mrs. Anderson, “telling her how much you like the book.” Meanwhile, Hughes wrote to Anderson, who was understandably anxious to hear Guillén’s response, that he had known Guillén “for about fifteen years and [had] not received more than a dozen lines from him in all of that time.” While Hughes was trying to console Anderson in advance should she not hear from Guillén, both statements are odd: at that point, Hughes had known Guillén for close to two decades, during which time Guillén had written him regularly.

When he did write, Guillén frequently complained to Hughes that, because of the worsening economic situation, “en Cuba nadie compra libros de poemas . . . ni ninguna otra clase” (nobody in Cuba buys books of poems...nor
any other books, for that matter).\textsuperscript{150} Having one’s writings translated into English and published in the USA was an attractive source of revenue for Hispanic American writers even if, as Hughes knew from his dealings with Editorial Lautaro in Argentina, financial transactions between the USA and many Hispanic American countries were often difficult and perplexing.\textsuperscript{151} Cuba was an exception, at least until 1960, and so Guillén did not have any trouble receiving a wire transfer for his share of the royalties for 	extit{Cuba Libre} in 1951. It amounted to $64.50.\textsuperscript{152} By comparison, Hughes’s annual royalties with Knopf on December 31, 1936, totaled $126.28, which did not even cover the cost of the books he had ordered from the press that year. In 1949 the amount had risen to a whopping $970.73!\textsuperscript{153} As Caroline Anderson emphasized repeatedly in those of her letters to Hughes that concern royalty arrangements for 	extit{Cuba Libre}, “no one ever gets rich on poetry!”\textsuperscript{154} On one occasion, when there was some confusion about the initial agreement with Guillén, which stated that he was to receive 50 percent of the royalties after the cost of the book had been covered, Hughes explained to her that

\begin{quote}
[t]he reason for the Cuban agreement being that way is in Latin America (with the possible exception of Rio and Buenos Aires) writers usually have to pay for the printing of their own books. Or if they are VERY famous, maybe a publisher (or printer) might put the book out on the basis mentioned in the Guillén agreement—no money to the author until the cost of publication is paid back! But I know Guillén (in fact his representative so assured me when here last year) will be very pleased with our royalty arrangement. He is a very amiable fellow who does not expect to make a living from poetry anyhow.
\end{quote}

And Hughes adds, “Neither do I.”\textsuperscript{155} Hughes’s final remark must strike one as somewhat disingenuous given that Hughes was one of very few Negro poets—very few USAmerican poets, for that matter—who did manage to eke out a living from writing poetry.\textsuperscript{156} Hughes had recognized quite early “that promoting his poetry involved handling both the product and the consumer.”\textsuperscript{157} He applied to the production and marketing of 	extit{Cuba Libre} the lessons he had learned when organizing his poetry reading tour in the USAmerican South almost twenty years earlier. The difference was that this book had an entirely different purpose. In the late 1940s, Hughes no longer made as much of “an effort to reach the great masses of the colored people” as he had in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{158}