

Cuban Blacks, Browns, and Blues:

Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes

by Beatriz Rivera-Barnes

Had it not been for Mexico City earthquakes, we could very well be reading Langston Hughes in Spanish today, because he would have been a Mexican poet. He would probably never have gone to Cuba in search of a Black composer to write an opera with him. So he would never have met the young Nicolás Guillén. Those two would never have become friends, and perhaps Guillén would not have found his voice.

Hughes traveled to Cuba during the 1920s in an effort to establish a rapprochement between Harlem and Havana. When Hughes and Guillén met in 1930, very little had occurred in Havana. In any case, what Ian Smart calls the “soul-searching creativity” (33) had not yet surfaced. There was perhaps racial protest; the poetry of the Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos had already had an impact on Guillén, but there was no pride and no authentic voice up until the Guillén-Hughes encounter. Moreover, before his encounter with Hughes, Guillén was uncomfortable with the influence that Palés Matos had had on light-skinned Cubans. For the latter had “gone into an almost frenzied state of creativity, producing exotic, erotic verses in which the black female persona of generously proportioned hips and *nalgas* (posterior) literally held sway, exuding earthy, sultry sensuality” (Smart, 33).

His encounter with Hughes allowed Guillén to leave that frenzied state behind and find his voice by turning to the *son*, a type of dance song developed by Africans in the Caribbean (Smart, 34).

For Langston Hughes, Manhattan’s Black Renaissance began with “*Shuffle Along, Running Wild, and the Charleston*” (Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 223). In other words, it began with music. One of the final chapters of *The Big Sea*, entitled “Not Primitive,” begins with the phrase, “That winter I had been in Cuba looking for a Negro composer to write an opera with me, using genuinely racial motifs” (Sea, 324). Although he was to return to New York with no “Negro composer,” it was during this trip to Cuba that he met Guillén. However, not until his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, does he mention Guillén by name.

As to Guillén, he had been anxiously awaiting Hughes’s

arrival in Havana. This was an event, and a great moment in Guillén’s life, for he was to meet the Black man’s poet face to face. What he was expecting was an older man, practically white, tall, heavysset, aloof, distant, with superior airs. As it turned out, and to Guillén’s great surprise, the person whom he encountered was a 27-year-old man who had already found his voice and quite a bit of notoriety, but who looked like “*un mulatico Cubano*.”¹ How could this be? How could such a celebrated poet look just like a little Cuban mulatto?

His complexion and small size could have immediately taken away from Hughes’s authority. The Mexicans have a term for this that the Cubans do not, and it is *Malinchismo*. It has to do with feeling that your own are inferior, and that only the Other, or the foreigner, is to be respected.

In any case, this person who looked like a *mulatico Cubano* instantly changed Guillén’s life. For Guillén had not found his poetic voice until Hughes suggested to him that he turn to the *son* for inspiration, just as he himself had turned to the blues. Arnold Rampersad writes, “Although Guillén had previously shown a strong sense of outrage against racism and economic imperialism, he had not yet done so in language inspired by native, Afro-Cuban speech, song and dance; and he had been far more concerned with protesting racism than with affirming the power and beauty of Cuban blackness” (Volume I, 181).

The word *son* comes from *sonido*, or sound. Alejo Carpentier points out that in sixteenth-century Cuba the musical professions rejected racial and gender discrimination because of the scarcity of skilled performers. One of these performers, the liberated slave Teodora Ginés, was famous for her songs; her “*Son de la Ma Teodora*” has made it all the way to the present day. According to Carpentier, her *son* is the oldest example of this African-Hispanic form of expression.

*¿Dónde está la Ma Teodora?
Rajando la leña está.
¿Con su palo y su bandola?
Rajando la leña está.*

¿Dónde está que no la veo?

Rajando la leña está.

Rajando la leña está. [ad libitum] (Carpentier, 86)

[Where's Ma Teodora? She's out chopping wood. With her stick and her mandolin? She's out chopping wood. Where is she that I can't see her? Out chopping wood. Out chopping wood . . .] (my translation)

Carpentier explains that the final repetition to the point of saturation is still present in the *sones* that are called *montunos*. He adds that it is important to analyze this original son because it reveals that at the origin of Cuban music there is a fusion of two cultures, the Spanish and the African: "If examining the 'Son de la Ma Teodora' is extremely interesting, it is because it reveals, as a starting point for Cuban music, a process of transculturation destined to amalgamate meters, melodies, Hispanic instruments, with clear traces of old African traditions" (88). He then adds that the repetition and the call-and-response are particularly African.

In this call-and-response pattern, which Guillén was to integrate into his poetry, different voices take turns to express different life situations having to do with

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friendship, marital infidelity, slavery, love, patriotism, being mulatto, beauty, ugliness, desire, and unrequited love, to name just a few. In itself, the call-and-response is reminiscent of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls heteroglossia or dialogized heteroglossia.

The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance. (272)

The voices take turns, respond, interrupt, mock, laugh, cry, and even remain silent when they have to. Just when they start fusing into one, they go their separate ways, divide, sound discordant, cry each other out. Just when they appear chaotic and Babel-like, they fuse back into one—one sound, one melody.

According to Samuel Feijoo, the linguistic elements of the *son* are derived from the Spanish tradition, whereas

the rhythmic ones are African. The lyrics, in turn, come from both the Spanish and the African dance music. As to the instruments, some, such as the guitar and the *tres*², are Spanish; others are indigenous, or Cuban-created; and still others are African-derived. The *palitos* are an example of an instrument created in Havana. These are two cylindrical hardwood sticks—a resonator and a striker. The *guiro*, made from the gourd of a climbing plant, and the *maracas*, a pair of rattling gourds, were both used by the indigenous people of Cuba. The *botijuela*, an earthenware jug filled with water and blown through a lateral opening, is of African origin. Other instruments used in the *son* are the bongos and the *marímbula* (a thumb piano), both of African origin, and the *cencerro*, a Cuban cowbell.

In an interview with the Cuban poet Nancy Morejón, Guillén mentioned that the noted *son* group Matamoros Trio heavily influenced his *Motivos de Son*. As to Langston Hughes, immediately upon his arrival in Cuba, he found similarities between the *son* and the blues, since they were both based on the call-and-response structure of African music. According to Rampersad, Hughes saw the possibilities of the *son* as an organic base for formal poetry. Rampersad concludes that it was Hughes who recommended that Guillén make the rhythms of the *son* central to his poetry.

Smart writes that within three months of his meeting with Hughes, Guillén discovered his voice and decided to create poems with the verbal rhythms of the *son*. The eight original *son* poems Guillén wrote three months after his encounter with Hughes were "Tú no sabe inglés," "Ayé me dijeron negro . . .," "Negro Bembón," "Mulata," "Búcate Plata," "Si tu supiera," "Sigue," and "Mi Chiquita." Angel Augier writes that these were vibrant vignettes presenting the everyday life of poor Blacks in Havana. Each one of the poems was presented "*con un sentido definido de afirmación racial: se establecía el orgullo de ser negro, frente a la postura vergonzante o deprimente de saber darse su lugar y de tener a menos el color y el origen como una especie de estigma*" (Augier, 86) [with a definite sense of racial affirmation: What was established here was black pride, as opposed to the shameful or depressing stance of remembering one's place and of considering color and origin as a type of stigma. (my translation)].

Although "Negro Bembón" was the first *son* poem that Guillén wrote, I listed the original eight according to the order Hughes gave them in his translation. Hughes did, however, omit "Si tú supiera," and replaced it with "Me bendo caro" ("High Priced Now"). He also included "Curujey" in the "Cuban Blues" section of the translation. Both "Me bendo caro" and "Curujey" were published approximately three months after the original eight and ultimately eliminated by Guillén from his definitive version of *Motivos de Son*. It would be interesting to know why Hughes and co-translator Ben Frederic Caruthers chose the nine poems they did to put under the rubric "Cuban Blues."

It is important to point out that Hughes chose to translate the word *son*, instead of leaving it as is. Thus, Guillén's *Motivos de Son* becomes *Cuban Blues*. It does not go the other way, for "blues" has never been translated as "U.S. Sones."

As to the individual poems, Hughes's translations of seven of the original eight titles are as follows: "Don't Know No English," "Last Night Somebody Called Me Darky," "Thick-Lipped Cullud Boy," "High Brown," "No Sirrie!" "Pass on By," and "My Gal."

Hughes's translation of the first of the *son* poems, "Negro Bembón," is "Thick-Lipped Cullud Boy," whereas Smart's is "Liverlip Black Man." This is a relatively short poem (4 stanzas, 20 lines) that addresses a black man who is angry because someone called him a thick-lipped *negro*. The voice addressing him is the voice of the people, a chorus of sorts, reminiscent of the chorus in Greek theater. This chorus begins by asking him why he's so angry, since he's got it all—money, a spotless suit, two-toned shoes.

Smart's translation seems more suitable, since the character is in fact a lazy gigolo living off his woman, Caridad, who is being addressed in this poem. This is no child, though Hughes's choice of "boy" to denote a Black man reflects its use in the southern United States. I would also like to point out that Hughes preferred to use the word "cullud" instead of "black" or "negro." At times it seems that Hughes and Carruthers are holding

lips take on a life of their own. It is the sound of a drum. And this is precisely what happened to Guillén when he set out to write this poem.

At a conference at the Lyceum-Lawn Tennis Club of Havana at the end of 1945, Guillén vividly described for the first time in public his experience with the word "bembón." He recalled that one night in April 1930, he had gone to bed and was about to fall asleep when he heard the words "negro-bembón."³ What was that? He couldn't answer his own question and he couldn't sleep. The two words resonated in his head for the rest of the night—negro-bembón, negro-bembón. The following morning he got out of bed and began to write, not as if he were creating something, but as if he were reminiscing. He continued writing all day, and by that evening he had a handful of poems (Augier, 85–86).

So it all began with the sound "bembón." Not necessarily a nice sound, not necessarily a nice word, for it is in fact a racial slur. Up to that moment, Guillén had been protesting against racism; now he is going into the heart of racism and turning racial mockery and disparagement into poetry, music, a feeling. The poetic voice, which has now become the voice of the trickster, is urging the "negro-bembón" not to feel so bad about this mockery since it is thanks to this holy mouth ("boca santa") of his that he is living the way he is. Why be ashamed of the mouth that is allowing him to live like a king? And if he is so upset because he is being called

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back in this translation, or making every effort not to offend anyone. This may have to do with political and financial challenges in Hughes's life. In 1944, when Guillén authorized Hughes and Carruthers to translate a selection of his poems, Hughes's life was just beginning to take a turn for the better. According to Rampersad, although the big break that would give him financial security still eluded him, "[Hughes] had carefully restored himself and was ready to capitalize on such opportunities as peace would bring" (107). Rampersad is referring to Hughes's health and professional setbacks of 1941, which had forced him to repudiate one of his poems, "Goodbye Christ."

Before going into the publication issues having to do with Hughes and Carruthers's translation, I would like to focus on a few of the poems themselves.

In keeping with the word *son*, sound plays a mayor role in Guillén's *son* poems. First there is the sound of the Spanish—"Negro Bembón," for example. In itself, it already has a rhythm and vibration of its own, the vowel sounds are e-o, twice. Then there are the two b's and the m and the n in "bembón" that make this a thick bilabial word. If we repeat bembón-bembón-bembón, our

"negro-bembón," the best way to rid him of this feeling of anger and shame is to repeat the insult until it loses its force. So the word bembón is repeated nine times, like an incantation, or a purge, perhaps enough times for it to stop hurting. Thus we are taken from shame to pride in 20 lines. Smart writes, "By inspiring the black man to acknowledge and laugh at the ridiculous black self-image . . . Guillén can start disarming the myth and will ultimately destroy the cancerous, utterly false, genocidal assumptions" (75).

Now the question is how a poem such as this one is based on the *son*. First of all, there is the sound of "negro-bembón" that I mentioned before, and the repetition of this sound, especially in the third stanza where it is repeated four times, or every other line. This repetition gives the poem its rhythm and melody. If we are to make parallels between it and the *son*, then the eight-line stanza would be the *montuno* part, the refrain, whereas the first, second, and fourth stanzas are the *lar-go*, sung by one voice.

The first poem in Hughes's translation is "Don't Know No English" ("Tú no sabe inglés"). In an unpublished letter that Hughes sent to Guillén to praise *Motivos de Son*,

Hughes writes in Spanish, “*Qué risa me da Tú no sabe inglés con su ‘etrai guan’! Negro bembón también. Quién sabe cuál me gusta más. Me gustan todos. Ayé me dijeron negro es precioso. Si tú supiera también, pero no comprendo el ‘sóngoro cosongo, songo bé (ni el Cubano en Washington tampoco). Explicámelo*” (Augier, 95).⁴ [How “Don’t Know No English” makes me laugh with its etrai guan [strike one]! “Negro bembón” as well. Who knows which one I prefer. I like them all. “Last Night Somebody Called Me Darcy” is wonderful. So is “Si tú supiera,” but I don’t understand the ‘sóngoro cosongo, songo bé (The Cuban in Washington who helped me translate them doesn’t either). Explain it to me. (my translation)]

Victor Manuel, better known as Bito Manué, whom Hughes calls Li’l Manuel, is another character from the world that Guillén created in a day. The fact that Guillén created this world does not take away from the reality of these characters. They were there, and if Guillén did the creating, it was because he gave them a rhythm, a presence, and a voice. They stopped being invisible. Bito Manué is quite different from the gigolo Negro Bembón, for he falls in love and has a broken heart. “Don’t Know No English” is a four-stanza, 16-line poem portraying Bito Manué, who sets out to court a “‘Merican gal” with the only English he knows, “etrai guan y guan tu tri” [strike one and one two three].⁵

Ian Smart believes that it was with good reason that Hughes found this poem so humorous, “for it is a clear example of signifying, the same kind of signifying that he engaged in himself. Undoubtedly, Victor will go through life bearing the sign of this act of foolhardiness. . . . Perhaps he already has the nickname Manué Bembón. From now on, however, he will surely be called something like ‘Mr. Etrái Guan,’ and this additional moniker will outlast both his and the community’s recollection of its origin” (Smart, 78).

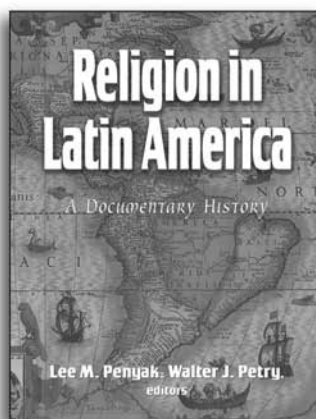
In this poem, the first two stanzas are the largo, in which a single voice is taunting Victor Manuel, reminding him of all that English he used to know, and now he can’t even say “ye.” The “‘Merican gal” is looking for him and he had to flee, because all he knows it strike one, and one, two three. The *montuno* follows in the next two stanzas with the repetition of “Don’t know no English,” “Tú no sabe inglés, tú no sabe ingle . . .”

The second poem in Hughes and Carruthers’s translation is “Ayé me dijeron negro,” “Last Night Somebody Called Me Darcy.” Augier reminds us that this poem

was later eliminated from Guillén’s works but does not explain why (88).

What we have in “Ayé” is a rebellion of sorts. There is the Negro Bembón who is angry because he is called Negro Bembón; there is an embarrassed Bito Manué; and here, there is a poetic voice with no name remembering that last night someone called him a “*negro*” (I’m quoting the Spanish word *negro*), urging him to fight. Instead of cowering or fighting, what this voice does is answer back, and does it from the first stanza: “*pero el que me lo decía/era un negro como yo.*” Hughes’s translation of these two lines is: “but de one who said it to me/is a darcy, too, all right.” Once again, Hughes and Carruthers seem to be searching for a compromise; the word “darcy” can

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be relatively harmless, as opposed to some other words.

As a matter of fact, the word “darky” could very well attenuate what we have in this poem—an example of what I would call “internal racism.” Suddenly, it is not the white man who is the racist; it is a black man who is calling another black man “*un negro*” with contempt. Once again, it is a pity that there is no Cuban, or Puerto Rican or Dominican term for *Malinchismo*, for the awkward situation expressed in this poem is clearly an instance of *Malinchismo*.

The word comes from Malinche, the name attributed to Hernán Cortés’s mistress and translator during the conquest of Mexico. Many believe that had it not been for La Malinche or Marina, Cortés would never have been capable of conquering the Aztec Empire. History has it that Malinche sided with the foreigner, the enemy, and betrayed her own people. But she is also known as the Mexican Eve, the mother of a new race, so the vision of her is quite complex and dual. In any case, a *Malinchista* is someone who puts his own down, someone with an inferiority complex who believes that what is not his or her own is automatically better. Guillén’s poem is a clear example of this. Here is one black man calling another one “*un negro*” and the slighted one retorting, “Can’t fool me, dat white face of yours/’cause I know who your grandma is.”⁶

The *montuno* section of this poem urges the offender to bring his grandma out of the kitchen, and the words repeated to saturation are “Mamá Iné” (the grandmother’s name).

Similar in tone is the poem that Hughes translates as “High Brown”—the fourth poem in the translation, “Thick-Lipped Cullud Boy” being the third. In “High Brown” (“*Mulata*” in the original Spanish), a black man addresses a *mulata* and berates her for having said that he has a nose “*como nudo de cobbata*” (“like a tie-knot flattened down”; Hughes’s translation). Once again, perhaps she’s making fun of him, but she has not taken a good look at herself. “Yo’ mouf’ is awful big fo’ me./ an yo’ naps is short an’ red.” But this time the conflict of colors does not stop there. It’s not just insult for insult. The offended black man has something to add: “If you jes’ knew the truf./Mis High Brown,/I loves my coal black gal/and don’t need you hangin’ round.” This is a cry of racial pride.

By illustrating the smoothness and vigor in the language of a poem like “*Mulata*,” Smart demonstrates how it is based on the *son*. “It is a smooth jerkiness, injecting a sharply defined contrasting element that fits harmoniously into the total scheme, a vigorous, vital whole” (47).

In “*Búcate Plata*,” Caridad, Negro Bembón’s woman, could very well be the one doing the talking. She’s had enough and is urging him to get some cash, “’cause I ain’t takin’ another step./Rice and crackers all I get” (Hughes’s translation). Not only is her man not helping her financially or easing the daily task of having to go out there in search of food and money, but he has

new shoes, jewelry, and finery. Augier points out that she comes to the philosophical conclusion that hunger and love are incompatible (87).

Guillén’s poems were not always well received in Cuba. Some argued that no one really talked like that, and, according to Smart, the black community “accused him of complicity in the perpetuation of the racial discrimination that was then firmly in force” (73–74). The translation, in turn, was turned down in 1947 by Blanche Knopf with the usual publisher’s rebuff: She did not believe the poems of Nicolás Guillén were right for Knopf. A few months later, in 1948, the publishing firm of Anderson and Ritchie agreed to publish a limited edition (500 copies), to Hughes’s great disappointment.

My initial intention was to point out that little attention has been paid to Hughes’s translation of Guillén’s poetry—a translation that has long been out of print—and to the African-American writer’s intimate relationship with the Hispanic world. What I discovered was that geographically the Harlem Renaissance did not stop at 125th Street; it went much farther south, all the way to Havana, for it was Hughes who showed Guillén the way. I also discovered that we know very little about this translation. Apparently Carruthers had translated many poems that Hughes thought good enough to stand as they were, and vice versa (Rampersad, 154). So

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we will perhaps never know which poems can be attributed to which one of the translators, or why they opted for words such as “cullud” instead of “negro” or “black,” or why Hughes even felt he needed a co-translator in the first place. Could it have had something to do with his Spanish? Was it because Carruthers was a professor at Howard University? Or was it simply because Hughes didn’t have the time to translate the entire selection of poetry? It could very well be that Hughes’s personal circumstances and social constraints in the United States in the 1940s did not allow him to cross certain lines when translating these poems, so at times he translated them with kid gloves, instead of Kid Chocolate gloves.⁷ But perhaps next week, or next month, some Latino rap artist unmindful of Senate Committee hearings will pick up *Motivos de Son* and find the right words in English, for they exist. Those words may be unacceptable or politically incorrect, but they are still permitted—a window of opportunity before it once again it becomes too late.

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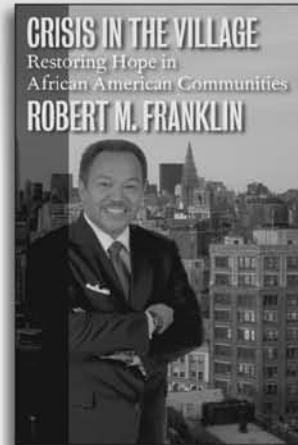
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Endnotes

- ¹ Guillén wrote his impressions in an article titled "Conversación con Langston Hughes," which appeared in "Diario de la Marina" on March 9, 1930, two months after their first encounter.
- ² The tres is a guitar with three sets of tripled strings.
- ³ Carpentier quotes the first two verses of a mid-nineteenth-century quatrain that could have been written by Guillén. "Tú eres in negro bembón/y yo soy mejor que tú" (78).
- ⁴ Augier mentions in a footnote that this July 1931 letter forms part of a scrapbook that Guillén gave Hughes when the latter announced that he wished to undertake an in-depth study of Guillén's works.
- ⁵ All the quotes from Guillén's poems are taken from his *Sóngoro Cosongo*. See works cited.
- ⁶ This is Langston Hughes's translation.
- ⁷ Kid Chocolate was the fighting name of a Cuban boxer to whom Guillén wrote an ode, "Pequeña Oda a un Negro Boxeador Cubano" in 1929.
- ⁸ It wasn't until 1953 that Hughes was brought before the Senate Committee, but everything in the decade of the forties suggested that he should be mindful of what he said and how he said it.

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