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Son for Everybody: Exploring Afro Cuban and African American Relations through Langston Hughes' Translations of Nicolas Guillén's Poetry

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

SON FOR EVERYBODY: EXPLORING AFRO CUBAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN
RELATIONS THROUGH LANGSTON HUGHES' TRANSLATIONS OF NICOLAS
GUILLÉN'S POETRY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Hayley R. Fernandez

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Hayley Fernandez, and entitled Son for Everybody: Exploring Afro Cuban and African American Relations Through Langston Hughes' Translations of Nicolas Guillén's Poetry, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Shawn Christian

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Nathaniel Cadle, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 10, 2021

The thesis of Hayley Fernandez is approved.

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Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2021

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Florida International University, 2021

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Professor Nathaniel Cadle, Major Professor

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the translation decisions made in “Cuba Libre, Translated from the Spanish By Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers”, and to explore the contemporary image of Nicolás Guillén as expressed in recent projects regarding his work and legacy. Particular attention was paid to the historical and social frameworks Guillén employed in his own work and the same frameworks he and his poetry have been associated with in recent years. The larger importance of this piece was to look at how international Blackness existed and was worked with in literature at the time of Guillén’s own work being published, during the 1920s and 1930s, and at the time of “Cuba Libre”’s publication in 1948.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GUILLÉN AND HUGHES	8
III. KEY TRANSLATIONS IN CUBA LIBRE	14
IV. RECEPTION OF CUBA LIBRE	25
V. WORK ON GUILLÉN POST-1948.....	27
VI. CONCLUSION	30
REFERENCES	31

Introduction

Cuba Libre, Translated from the Spanish By Langston Hughes and Ben Frederic Carruthers, published in 1948, was a product of years of relationship between Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén. The prominent Black authors shared a relationship spanning over many decades until Hughes's death. Guillén never traveled to America, but Hughes went to Cuba enough times to maintain their relationship, and the two traveled to Spain to chronicle the Spanish Civil War. Hughes was highly regarded as a successful poet and author in Cuba, and his visits were often announced with one of his pieces being published in various newspapers like *Diario de la Marina*, which also published Guillén's poems and articles. Some of Guillén's articles would, pleasantly, be about Hughes and his developing thoughts of him as their relationship grew (Digital Library of the Caribbean). One popular example of this was Guillén's op-ed about his interview of Hughes, which is discussed later in this thesis. Professionally and personally, Hughes regarded Cuba and the Caribbean at large as a promising image of alternative, positive living for Black people. He was amazed by what he understood to be evidence of spaces in which Black people had opportunities their American counterparts did not. The reality of this ideal was disrupted by the presence of segregated beaches and establishments, he notes, were by the hand of Americans and tourism. Hughes experienced these things first-hand while visiting Cuba as shared in his autobiography (Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 45-49). Guillén, despite having faith and pride in his nation and its ability to work with all its people, felt that Hughes only saw a part of Cuba and did not fully understand the way that Black people were still struggling outside of Havana and other major cities.

Still, Guillén would view Hughes as a respectable colleague and writer and would welcome the translation project that became *Cuba Libre* with open arms.

A considerable portion of Hughes's career involved translation work, but this project would prove to be difficult for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, Hughes was dealing with the residue of the Red Scare of 1917-1921, which procured a sense of fear of far-left extremism. Although Cuba was not yet a Communist nation, there were dozens of uprisings and coups during the first two decades of the 20th century that suggested that leftist ideals were developing. This would impact his ability to find funding and a place that was willing to publish this Cuba-based and inspired project. Secondly, Hughes and Carruthers, an editor and writer who completed his dissertation on the nineteenth century Cuban writer Diego Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) and therefore had a distinct idea of Cuba and Cuban literature, had differing views on how to translate Guillén's ideas, both literally and figuratively, to attract their desired audience of US Black middle-class and elite readers. While there is no identification of which pieces were translated by whom, editing notes reveal the distinctly different understandings each author had about Cuba, the message of the poems, and how to best frame it all for their new audience (Kutzinski, *The Worlds of Langston Hughes*). The translated title names, punctuation changes, and framing of subjects in the pieces reveal the decisions Hughes and Carruthers made in their editing process.

Cuba Libre was not a collection already released in Spanish, but rather poems pulled from Guillén's anthology that the two editors thought worked well together. The poems were organized under the following sections: "Cuban Blues," "Habaneros," "West Indies," "Songs for Soldiers," "Federico," "Mulatto Poems," and "Propositions". The

subjects of Guillén's work— music, mestizaje and race, gender, and the image of the mulatta woman—are all things Hughes and Carruthers had to keep in mind while translating and editing the collection of poems they had organized. Guillén's work was mostly preoccupied with thinking through the representation of race, his experiences as a black man, and what Cuba could be if recognized as a land of mestizaje. In using the structure of the music genre *son*, Guillén found a way to balance the presence of Africa and his contemporary, blended Cuba consistently. *Son* is a genre of music and dance that originates from Africa and is known for its strong percussion section. When speaking about his choice to use *son*, Guillén states that his “*son*-poems help him regain the only thing left that is really ours” (Cobb 105).

There were a few challenges Hughes and Carruthers had to confront with this project. The first one, and perhaps the most obvious, was language. The two editors were balancing a consideration for the Spanish language and the Cuban dialect, as well as the English dialect of African Americans. The issue of untranslatables is one that they no doubt had to face and wager with. The term “untranslatables” is used here as defined by Emily Apter in her work *Against World Literature*. In the book, Apter argues that caution should be risen against translation that is limited by or practiced for the sake of “reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence” or “toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities’” (11). Thus, an untranslatable is a word that is so particular to its geographic, ethnic, or cultural origin that it cannot be effectively translated. When it is translated, it is molded to hold a “cultural equivalence” for the new language and culture as it does in the original. This is done throughout *Cuba Libre*, but in some poems, it is more pronounced

and thus impacts its success as a translation according to my rubric. Additionally, in looking at the translations of *Cuba Libre*, we will see instances in which decisions seem to coincide with American-developed ideals of Cuba rather than Guillén's own experiences or ideals. Other aspects of the untranslatable that exist in this work include the "lost in translation," the mis-translated, and the unreliable translation as listed by Apter (16). Another translation theory that was considered while working with these translations comes from Martin Heidegger. As stated in Anthony Pym's *Exploring Translation*, Heidegger "postulates that words convey knowledge in their own language, and that etymology conceals that knowledge" (94). This position is not only useful when looking at Hughes's and Carruthers's translations, but also when considering my position as a 21st century reader with my personal background. There are instances in Guillén's poetry in which there is no good English translation for a specific word or phrase, and the attempt to find one inherently damages the meaning present in the original text. Heidegger valued the "productive conflict of differences" over "family likenesses," and as we will see in the translation section of this thesis there are times in which forcing an equivalence in vernacular or vocabulary (choosing family likeness) negatively impacts the success of the translation. This is true in the cases of "Caña" and "Mulata."

A second challenge is aligned with translation but focuses on the musicality of Guillén's poetry. *Son*, which Guillén would use for the rhythm of some of his poems, is a music genre that originates from Oriente, the most eastern province of Cuba where many slaves entered the island from and where many AfroCubans lived after slavery was abolished. The genre relies on strong percussions that originate from Africa, and it is considered a direct link between the island and its African roots. *Son* was used by Guillén

to bring Africanness to the forefront, and to show his readers that to be AfroCuban was to have an undeniable link to Africa that was closer than their society allowed them to believe. Gustavo Urrutia, a contemporary of Guillén and Hughes and the editor of *Diario de la Marina*, would make the (what I argue to be) regretful synonymity between blues and *son* to Hughes (Leary 134). The discrepancy in this claim is the proximity between the two diasporic groups and Africa, in which Guillén's Cuba is much closer to Africa because *son* is coming directly from there rather than being inspired by it. The blues and *son* do the work of examining and expressing the Black experience, but the worldviews are different enough that Urrutia's claim is shaky at best. Looking at a historical timeline also reveals the discrepancy, as the gap between America and Africa is far wider than the gap between Cuba and Africa at the time of these conversations and this project. While America stopped legal slave trade in 1808 and abolished slavery in 1865, Cuba did not stop its slave trade until 1886. This means that at the time of Guillén writing these poems, the 1920s-1930s, there would have been individuals from Cuba who were either brought over from Africa through the slave trade or who may have been only first or second-generation Cubans with direct relation to Africa. An example of this possibility can be seen in "Reyita, sencillamente: Testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria," (Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century) published in 1996, where the woman telling the story shares how her own grandmother was a slave and how this proximity to Africa impacted her life. It is important to note that while this may have been the reality for a larger population of Cubans, it does not mean that this generational proximity to Africa was exclusive to just the nation. One must mention AfricaTown, USA, in Alabama where residents had a first- or second-generation connection to Africa.

Situated in Mobile, Alabama, AfricaTown marks where the “last cargo of Africans landed in 1860” (Library of Congress).

A third challenge for Hughes and Carruthers would be understanding and maintaining Guillén’s historical frameworks in their translations. Guillén had three historical frameworks in mind when working: colonial Cuba, Cuba as a neo-colony, and sovereign Cuba. These historical periods reveal the way in which Guillén was distinctly aware of not only the complexities of race in Cuba, but also the ways in which both the white and black communities of the island played an active role in the nation’s attempt to become a blended union. I argue that if Hughes and Carruthers were able to keep these frameworks in mind and make them apparent in their translation, it makes up for the other shortcomings in the translations and still does the work of successfully presenting and expressing Guillén’s Cuba to their desired audience.

The fourth and final challenge this paper will explore is the idea of the *mestizaje*. *Mestizaje*, or a cultural and biological racial mixing that occurred as a result of European and Black or Indigenous relations, played a prominent role in the development of Cuba as a nation and continues to be a topic of both unification and separation in Cuba and other Latin American countries. While the nineteenth century would have an attitude of “condemnation of *mestizaje*”, the twentieth century would see it as a “positive, even providential, phenomenon” as presented in Marilyn Grace Miller’s *The Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race* (3). As the century developed, so did the idea of the *mestizaje*, and notions such as a “mestizo soul” would be shared by many thinkers including Salvador de Madariaga, Basave Benítez, and Antonio Cornejo-Polar. Cornejo-Polar wrote that the *mestizaje* “was a ‘conciliatory and comforting utopia that seems to gather into one unique

torrent the many rivers that converged in this physical and spiritual geography we call Latin America''' (3). This potential power that Cornejo-Polar saw in the *mestizaje* relates to Guillén's own ideas on the concept. Guillén's hope for Cuba was that it would learn to overcome the hierarchical battle between the different races in its population and would transition to a blended state. There was no equivalent concept in America in so much that it was recognized and promoted by the government as in Cuba, and so the challenge lies in maintaining the *mestizaje* discourse and imagery in the translations and still making it something an American audience could digest and toy with. There was indeed an acknowledged population of mix-raced individuals in America, but they were not viewed as a solution the way that they were in Cuba. Despite Hughes's familiarity with Latin America, I believe that his own identity and experiences as a black man in America made it difficult for him to conceptualize *mestizaje* as an ideology, a demographic in Cuba, and as a concept to translate for his American audience. One poem, *Mulatta*, would show exactly how Hughes and Carruthers worked with this extremely foreign concept.

My thesis strives to work through and affirm two major ideas: that *Cuba Libre* works as a microcosm of the American understanding of AfroCuba as written by Guillén, and that contemporary interactions with Guillén's work further this understanding and go beyond it. In identifying *Cuba Libre* as a text that functions as this microcosm, I am looking at the success of the translations themselves. Hughes, Carruthers, and the contemporary authors who contributed to the *CLR James Journal* 2015 special issue about Guillén that I focus on for the second part of my thesis, all take a shot at translating Guillén's articulation of Cuba into something interactive and relatable to their American audience. Contemporary works go a step farther than Hughes and credit Guillén as a

figure in the international Black experience and fight for liberation from colonialism. These claims are presented through analyzing *Cuba Libre* via the challenges listed prior, which work as a rubric for the poetry analysis, and through a close read of the *CLR James Journal* pieces that vary in genre.

The Relationship Between Guillén and Hughes

There is much evidence to suggest that there was a relationship between the two writers, and that it gave way to this translation project. The camaraderie between the writer and editor here is important and worthy of attention when dissecting and critiquing *Cuba Libre*. It suggests that there was a level of intimacy to this project and therefore makes the product have higher stakes in regard to its success as a translation. Hughes's exposure to and affinity for Latin America and the Caribbean were a product of his father's migration to Mexico and the many trips Hughes would take as a young adult. He regularly journaled about his travels, the use of different languages, and the way Blackness in these different spaces influenced his own identity and his ideas about identity.

At 28, Hughes traveled to Haiti to "puzzle out how [he], a *Negro*, could make a living in America from writing" (*I Wonder as I Wander*, 40). This trip, and the stop in Cuba along the way there, were cataloged in his collected autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*. In his notes about Cuba, Hughes would note the way Blackness was understood even by white Cubans and how dark-skinned AfroCubans in high positions were the exception and not the rule. These revelations would create a complex yet celebrated idea of Cuba for Hughes, as it provided a space in which the racial divide was not as explicit

as in America and where he could interact with AfroCuban culture as both an audience member and a participant. One comment about race in Cuba that Hughes made was important not only for his understanding of the nation but also in our understanding of what image of Cuba was in mind during the editing process of *Cuba Libre*:

Occasionally a very dark Negro occupies a very high position in Cuba. That is what misleads many visitors from the US—particularly colored visitors who are looking anxiously for a country where they can say there is *no color line*—for Cuba's color line is much more flexible than that of the US, and much more subtle. There are, of course, no Jim Crow bars in Cuba, and at official state gathering and less official carnivals and celebrations, citizens of all colors meet and mingle. But there are definite social divisions based on color—and the darker a man is, the richer and more celebrated he has to be to crash those divisions. (46, original emphasis)

The experiences Hughes had in Cuba are indicative of the Cuban perception of both Blackness and Americanness. This perception was one that included undeniable colorism but that was arguably less racist than in America. Club Atena would host Hughes despite its leadership and membership being for the upper echelon, lighter-skinned individuals of the AfroCuban community because he was an American author. They also hosted Marcus Garvey a few years prior, but only because they perceived him to be American before they perceived him as a Black man and were perhaps unaware of his Jamaican citizenship. In the case that they were aware of his Jamaican origin, his international image no doubt made him a desirable enough guest for the society group to ignore it. This reveals the way that America was generally regarded as an admirable or

respectable place, at least for those of a higher social status. Hughes also spent time in public spaces, interacting with everyday AfroCubans and witnessing their cultural and personal expression.

After the pit stop to Cuba, Hughes would spend some time in Haiti. The experiences in Haiti would be a harsh parallel to that of Cuba, in which Hughes was regularly corrected for his desire to interact with the most impoverished in the area. Of this, Hughes noted that it was in Haiti where he “first realized how class lines cut across color lines within race, and how dark people of the same nationality may scorn those below him” (*I Wonder as I Wander*, 61). Hughes’s experiences in these two countries alongside his writing and other ideas about Blackness and race relations would become a topic of reflection for Guillén.

There would regularly be announcements of Hughes’s upcoming visit to Cuba in a popular newspaper called *Diario de la Marina*. Prior to one upcoming visit would be an announcement of his visit published on April 27, 1930. In it would include a portrait of Hughes and translations of 3 of his poems: “I, too, sing America/Yo Tambien,” “The White Ones/Los Blancos,” and “Soledad.” The section on Hughes would label him as “*el famoso poeta negro*” and “*el primer poeta de su raza in America*” (“the famous black poet” and “the premiere poet of his race in America”). To the left of it would be a letter to Guillén regarding his recently released 8-poem project *Motivos de Son* (Figure 1). Before this, however, would be the interview between them hosted by Guillén in 1929. The article that detailed this interview revealed Guillén’s presuppositions of Hughes’s appearance and personality. An excerpt from John Patrick Leary’s article “Havana Reads the Harlem Renaissance” details Guillén’s reflection:

Guillén introduces the interview with a long anecdote about a false description of Hughes he was given before he met him at the Havana docks. The description bears no resemblance to the fist-fighting aviator of Urrutia's account: as he waits for Hughes to disembark, Guillén says he expects to meet a forty-five-year-old man, "extremely fat," almost white in color, with an "English moustache decorating his fine and embittered lips..." As he finds out, far from being a corpulent, mustachioed Europhilic modernist, Hughes is a thin, affable, almost comically eager *jovencito* of twenty-six, recognizable to Guillén as a plebeian Cuban type. (141)

The rest of Guillén's article reveals the way the poets both differed and were unified in their preoccupations about race. Hughes shared that he had "no more ambition than to be the poet of the negroes," to which Guillén responded affirmatively. Guillén commented on Hughes's (perhaps ill-placed) obsession with race in Cuba, saying that he should instead be more focused on racism in America. The sense one gets from this article is that Guillén is perhaps the wiser, older counterpart in this duo. There is a sense of controlled confidence and knowing that comes from Guillén versus the youthful urgency of Hughes to know more about Blackness, to interact more with Blackness, and to be more Black than he was. Hughes was, however, Guillén's senior by a year and a half, but this air between them would show itself in their correspondence many years after this interview.



(Figure 1) An *Ideales de Una Raza* publication dated April 27, 1930. In the center is a portrait of Langston Hughes followed by translations of 3 of his poems: “I, too, sing America,” “The White Ones” and “Soledad.” To the bottom right is a letter addressed to Guillén sharing a positive review of the recently released *Motivos de Son* (courtesy of Digital Library of the Caribbean).

Correspondence between the two authors provides great insight about Hughes’ interest in Guillén’s work. A collection of poems sent by Hughes to Guillén was included in a 1985 edition of *The Black Scholar*. *The Black Scholar* is one of the oldest American journals centered around Black culture and political thought and remains one of the primary sources for exploration and discourse of the American and international Black experience. In one letter from 1939, Hughes shared positive remarks about select poems including “Negro Bembon” and “Tu no sabe inglé,” and that he did not understand one called “Songoro cosongo, songo be” (*The Black Scholar* 1985, 56). In this letter Hughes also shared a side note about his “sweetheart” returning home after a visit to New York, perhaps suggesting that he and Guillén spoke about their personal lives as well as their work. Alongside these comments are mention of translating other poems that were given to him in Havana during a previous visit. One can speculate that these exercises of

translation nine years prior to the publication of *Cuba Libre* could have been the inklings of the larger translation project. Hughes' comments reveal what stood out to him and what he struggled to understand, all of which are clues in trying to understand the project of *Cuba Libre* and the mystery behind its editing process. A second letter, sent in 1948, mentions another publication Hughes was involved in that included Guillén translations (57). This project, *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949), is an anthology he edited with Arna Bontemps that included both black authors and poetry by white authors concerning the theme of blackness. A fifth letter reveals a sign of success for *Cuba Libre* through an award for being one of the "50 Most Beautiful Books of the Year" from the American Institute of Graphic Arts (59). The frequency of Hughes' correspondence with Guillén and the youthful and endearing language used speak towards the regard Hughes had for his peer, and the understanding he had about Guillén's excellence as a writer and the demand for his work to be shared outside of Cuba. The lack of responses from Guillén to Hughes in this source does not suggest that this relationship was one-sided, especially because there are known writings by Guillén with Hughes as the subject that were published in Cuba. The two would also spend time together when Hughes was in Cuba, and the two worked as correspondents during the Spanish Civil War (Figure 2)



(Figure 2)
Hughes, Mikhail
Koltsov, Ernest
Hemingway, and
Guillén in
Madrid, 1937.
Hemingway
Photograph
Collection, John
F. Kennedy
Presidential
Library and
Museum, Boston.
Public Domain.

Key Translations in *Cuba Libre*

This portion of the thesis will focus on select poems from *Cuba Libre*. These poems, written in the 1920s and mostly published in *Motivos de son* (1930) and *Songoro cosongo y otra poemas* (1931), were chosen because of their thematic concerns, imagery, historical framework, and presence of musicality. They exist in a space that allows Guillén to explore and wrestle with issues of race, colorism, hypocrisy, love, and other social forces known intimately by himself and his audiences. Guillén's ability to confront these issues critically but with a sense of intimate authority reveal how ingrained these issues were in his daily life and society, and how strong of an impact they had on both. These specific poems also reveal how certain translation choices, or the presence of an untranslatable, impact the way these components of the poem read in English.

Components of the translations that consistently raise concern are the title choices, the verb choices, and the inability to maintain some emotion and sentiment that

is made clear through Guillén's word choice. A tool that both works to create a successful translation and contributes to a less successful translation is the use of dialect, particularly by Carruthers, that is so specific to the African American community that it does not work well with Guillén's own use of specific dialect or use of general Spanish. Vera Kutzinski reveals the pitfall of using dialects in *The Worlds of Langston Hughes*, saying, "As mediums for translation, such modes can expose inequalities in non-English-speaking cultures only through distorting analogies. In relation to Cuban *criollo*, Negro dialect functions much like a false cognate would: negro does not equal Negro" (147). I review these components of word choice, grammar choice, and presence of dialect with Heidegger's ideas of translation, as discussed earlier in this work, in mind. My status as a native speaker and reader of both English and Spanish, and being a first-generation Cuban-American in Miami, provides a feeling of confidence and knowingness with both versions of the poems, but also develops a conflict when the English translation does not capture imagery or emotion that I pull from the original Spanish. Heidegger's defense of difference over family-likeness establishes space in my rubric and space to challenge the instinct to not view these translations as successful when they in fact generally are. Additionally, it provides a theoretical backing for both Kutzinski and I's apprehension towards some uses of dialect found in the translations. Upon considering all these elements, I will discuss whether I believe that Hughes and Carruthers successfully or unsuccessfully presented Guillén's work to their audience. Each poem will be presented side-by-side with the Spanish version italicized as done in other works centered around this publication including that of Martha Cobb and Vera Kutzinski. Following the dual

presentation of the poem will be my analysis of the translation, focusing on each relevant aspect of the work as previously explained.

The first poem that will be analyzed is “Caña,” translated to “Cane” by Hughes and Carruthers. This short yet loaded poem explores the geographic and social-political terrain of Cuba’s sugar cane industry. Being that this is a shared historical experience for both the writers and the audiences, there is much at stake when gauging the success of this translation.

Caña

*El negro
junto al cañaveral.*

*El yanqui
sobre el cañaveral.*

*La tierra
bajo el cañaveral.*

*¡Sangre
que se nos va!*

Cane

Negro
in the cane fields.

White man
above the cane fields.

Earth
beneath the cane fields.

Blood
that flows from us.

As noted by William Scott in “‘Motivos’ of Translation: Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes,” neither poem is a reliable translation of the experience of working in the sugar cane field. Therefore, what is at stake for Guillén is the “movement itself that operates” in this lived experience produced by the racist order that existed in Cuba (44). Thus, in looking at the English translation, the key elements that are being considered include translation and imagery.

There are two translation decisions that must be discussed, as they impact not only the reading experience of the poem but also impact the imagery of the piece. The

first translation decision that stands out is the choice for the verbs in lines two and four. Hughes and Carruthers translate “*junto*” as “in”, which is an imperfect translation when working with Scott’s idea that Guillen is attempting to capture the movement of this lived experienced. A better translation for “*junto*” would be “together,” “with,” or “next to.” “Together” or “with” would paint the image of an inseparable link between the Black and the field he is working, which would make their movement one. This image of oneness between the Black individual and the field speaks to the historicity of the action, checking the box of capturing the social-political terrain of Cuba. Either word would also complement the translation of “*sobre*” as “above,” which is an appropriate word choice. With the Black individual being together with the sugarcane, and the white individual being above them, the image of the reality of fieldwork in Cuba becomes clear and loaded with a historical framework that would be familiar to both a Cuban and African American audience. The second translation decision to be discussed is the final stanza, “¡*Sangre que se nos va!* / Blood that flows from us.” While the literal translation isn’t incorrect, it loses the sentiment that exists in the Spanish form. “*Que se nos va*” presents more of a loss, a leaving, or taking away of the blood rather than a flow, which presents as more of a natural occurrence. Both versions complete the imagery of the poem, which details the way that the Black individual is tied to the sugarcane field through a system controlled by the white individual who is at a position away from the field that nonetheless confirms this control. This is an example of an imperfect translation because the emotion attached to the Spanish is lost but the technicality of the word choices are correct.

What is successfully translated by Hughes and Carruthers is the daily reality of the dynamic of the sugarcane field: the Black worker is tied to the field and the white individual is in a position of proximity that is removed from the actual experience of being in the field but very clearly in charge. What is unsuccessfully translated is the layered sentiment of this reality: AfroCubans who work in the sugarcane fields are inseparable from the field in their movement and in their history. White people are equally inseparable from this dynamic but are again in a position of power as presented by “*sobre*” / “above.” The poem, although short, is undoubtedly loaded and would be understood by an African American audience in an intimate way even without the sentiments being present in English. Guillén does not forego the layering of the poem because of this. This intimacy does not excuse the absence of emotion and relation between the Black individual and field in the Hughes-Carruthers translation that Guillén specifically places in the final stanza. For this reason, the translation is not entirely successful, but it is successful in presenting the theme of the piece and in showing the complexity behind translating and how it goes far beyond basic language switching.

The second poem, *Tu no sabe inglés* / “Don’t Know No English” is a punchy exploration of language and access that depends heavily on dialect to get its message across to both audiences.

Tu no sabe inglés

*Canto tanto inglés que tú sabía,
Bito Manué,
con tanto inglés, no sabe ahora
desí ye.*

*La mericana te buca
y tú le tiene que huí:
tu inglés era de etrái guan,*

Don’t Know No English

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!*

de etrái guan y guan tu tri.

strike one and one-two-three.

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

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

*No te enamore ma nunca
Bito Manué.
si no sabe inglés,
si no sabe inglés.*

Don't fall in love no mo',
Lil Manuel,
'cause you don't know no English,
don't know no English

Examining *Tu no sabe inglé* / “Don’t Know No English” presents a particular challenge when critiquing the success of the translation because both clearly and heavily use their appropriate dialect in their word choice which makes the task difficult to accomplish and track. Guillén’s word choice utilizes a more informal dialect that is more appropriate for everyday conversation. The dialect encourages faster-paced reading as it cuts out some pronunciation that can almost blend words together such as dropped the ‘s’ at the end of “*sabes*” and “*inglés*”, and the same can be said for the dialect used in the English translation. Both dialects also impact which words and ideas are emphasized, which is key in presenting important sentiments and other aspects of language that word choice alone cannot convey. The main idea here is that the shortening of words in both languages can create a challenge for either reader to understand what is being said because it requires a familiarity with the spoken language. Similarities aside, a new challenge arises that differs from the task of translating *Caña*: the issue of a language barrier between two individuals may not be an experience that the American audience can relate to on the level that a Spanish-speaking Cuban goes through, and so the

translation choices have higher stakes because language must convey what experience cannot.

The English translation of this poem is relatively accurate and synchronized, with even some dialect choices falling on the same words. For example, both versions share the decision of not fully pronouncing words in the second stanza. “*Busca*” is shortened to “*buca*” and “for” is shortened to “fo”, and both versions drop the A in American. Both of these decisions are not forced, holding true to the dialects being employed. The only discrepancy in translation comes in the final stanza where “*si no sabe inglé*” is translated to “’cause you don’t know no English.” The correct word choice would have been “if” in place of “’cause,” as the clause is conditional based on Manuel’s ability to speak English. Using “cause” does not correctly follow the first line of the stanza, which is accurately translated to “Don’t fall in love no mo’.” In Spanish, the stanza suggests more of a directive statement than a cause-and-effect statement. The closing statement in this poem is not as high-stakes or loaded as the one in *Caña*, so the translation decision still works towards telling the story accurately. In sum, I would characterize “Don’t Know No English” as a successful translation of Guillen’s *Tu no sabe inglé* regarding the story being understood and told efficiently, but not necessarily successful regarding the handling of untranslatables that exist because of the presence of dialect.

Our third poem, “*Ayé me dijeron negro*” tells of a hypocritical interaction the speaker has with someone who he knew personally through the antiphonal rhythms of *son*—rhythm that has two individuals or choirs singing alternate phrases (*The Worlds of Langston Hughes* 148). This response to the unrecorded exchange seems very clear at first glance, but there is nuance in the rhythms and repetitions that will be discussed.

Ayé me dijeron negro

*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.*

**Yesterday Somebody Called Me Darky/
Yesterday Somebody Called Me Negro**

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.

The speaker is called “*negro*” by someone who may be white-passing, but who has a “Mamá Iné” figure in their family that they’re hiding. Mamá Inés is a characterization of African slavery that is common to the Caribbean, made popular through a plantation song with the same name (Moore, 95). She is dark skinned, usually overweight, with her hair covered in a bandana and always wearing an apron and carrying a kitchen item such as a rolling pin or a basket of fruit. This imagery would have been understood by a Hispanic-Caribbean audience, and would have been familiar to an American audience because of the parallels between her and their own mammy figure. This poem speaks to the way that colorism is a strong contributor to the issue of race in Cuba, and how Guillén sees the hypocrisy behind it and the damage it may cause on an interpersonal level. It also speaks to how colorism is aimless in a place like Cuba, where the presence of *mestizaje* makes it

difficult for someone to accurately trace their ancestry or divide their race and ethnicity by percentages that would allow them to confidently pick one identity over another.

Editing notes for this translation reveal that the original title was going to include the word “darky,” but was exchanged for “negro.” The original word choice would have invoked an image and emotion specific to the African American experience. It would have invoked the idea of colorism that Guillén is exploring through an African American dialect, which would have made the poem cater towards a more general Black experience rather than an AfroCuban one. The decision to use “negro,” which was also used in America, is a truer translation that maintains a linguistic bridge between the two people groups. Another word choice decision that Hughes and Carruthers made was to drop the first “Mamá Iné” after line eight. A rhythm is lost as well as a grand reveal of who the grandmother was, which worked as a universal image for Guillén’s audience. It suggests that perhaps the translators were not familiar with the image in this setting or did not feel that their audience would benefit from the reveal like the Cuban audience did. If it served as a “gotcha” for Guillén’s audience, it may not have served the same purpose for Hughes’s.

What is most lost in translation here is the presence of hybridity through *mestizaje*. The contemporary audience of *Cuba Libre* would probably be aware of this concept or identity on a personal level, but the way in which a *mestizaje* identity was pushed for by the Cuban government is drastically different than the racial stance of the U.S. government, which primarily worked with the concept of a one-drop rule. American discourse on this topic was common during the time of the project’s development and publication. One prime example of popular discourse is Hughes’s own play *Mulatto*,

which one could confidently assume would be a familiar piece of work for the audience of *Cuba Libre*. The concept of the mulato/a (an identifying term for individuals who belong to the mestizaje community, and as an identifier for those of mixed race in America) as worked through and idealized by the Cuban government and people is at the core of this poem, and so even the decision to keep “negro” in the title only does so much to translate the different frameworks at play in “*Ayé me dijeron negro*.” This translation is not as successful as the ones previously analyzed, but solely because of the untranslatable framework of the *mestizaje* at this time.

In our final poem “*Mulata*,” Guillén challenges the preference for the mulata in Cuba. The framework for this poem is a preoccupation with the concept of the mestizaje, which is not a translatable concept for Americans at the time of this project.

Mulata

*Ya yo me enteré, mulata,
mulata, ya sé que dise
que lo tengo la narise
como nudo de cobbata.*

*Y fijate bien que tú
no ere tan adelantá,
poque tu boca e bien grande,
y tu pasa, colorá.*

*Tanto tren con tu cueppo,
tanto tren;
Tanto tren con tu boca,
tanto tren;
Tanto tren con tu sojo,
tanto tren;*

*Si tú supiera, mulata,
la veddá;
¡que yo con mi negra tengo,
y no te quiero pa na!*

High Brown

Yep, now I gets you, high brown!
High brown, I knows you likes to say
how wide my nose is anyway
like a tie-knot flattened down.

Well, look at yo’self an’ see
you ain’t no prize to wed.
Yo’ mouf is awful big fo’ me,
an’ yo naps is short an’ red.

So much switchin’ wid yo’ hips,
jes’ so hot!
So much twitchin’ wid yo’ lips,
jes’ so hot!
So much witchin’ wid yo’ eyes,
jes’ so hot!

If you jes’ knew de truf,
Miss High Brown,
I loves my coal black gal
and don’t need you hangin’ ‘round.

As mentioned earlier, America did not have a separate label designated by the government for people who were both white and Black because of the one-drop rule and other social rules and understandings. They did, however acknowledge mixed-race individuals, and also used the terms mulatto/a. Thus, what translates is the existence of someone whose skin color exposes their mixed race and the desirability for this demographic. This is perhaps the only translatable part of “*Mulata*,” as the heavy use of AfroCuban vernacular creates an almost untranslatable piece and the equally heavy African American vernacular makes it difficult to compare the two pieces in a clean fashion.

The presence of untranslatability begins with the titles, both of which use terminology specific to their desired audiences. It continues to the third stanza where Guillén uses a phrase that has no formal translation even in Spanish. The closest explanation for “*tanto tren*” would be a sentiment of flaunting the characteristics of the mulata that are highly regarded and sexualized. Her body, her mouth, and her eyes are fawned over by the mulata’s admirers and passersby. The experience is the same for the “high brown” American counterpart. The English translation uses the phrase “jus’ so hot” which does not encapsulate the same meaning. The words “switchin’,” “twitchin’,” and “witchin’,” are even farther from the explanation than “jus’ so hot” as they don’t share a sentiment of importance or elevation or attention that “jus’ so hot” distantly does. The final two lines of the last stanza are also poorly translated. The speaker in Guillén’s poem is dismissive like the speaker in the English translation, but there is a layer of aggression in the English translation that seems ill-placed. The final line changes the point of view

from the speaker interacting with the woman at a distance to the woman approaching or surrounding him, which is not present in Guillén's version. So, although the storyline is maintained and the concept is understood, this poem is an unsuccessful translation because of the complete mistranslation of the third stanza and the arguably incorrect shift at the end of the final stanza.

The four poems chosen for analysis show the difficulties of translation when there are such stark differences in vernacular and language, social constructs, and differences in reflection of shared racial experiences. The topics Guillén writes about are, at a certain level, universal for many Black people, but the way he writes about them is so intimate and specific to him and his audience as AfroCubans. Because of this, even when a translation is successful it still has imperfections, and when it is not so successful the imperfections are blinding. Still, *Cuba Libre* is significant in its attempt to build a bridge between AfroCubans and African Americans, and the decisions made by Hughes and Carruthers suggest that they at least found relatability in the poems they chose. Their decision to complete this project set the tone for finding similarities between groups through literature that is so specifically crafted for its original audience.

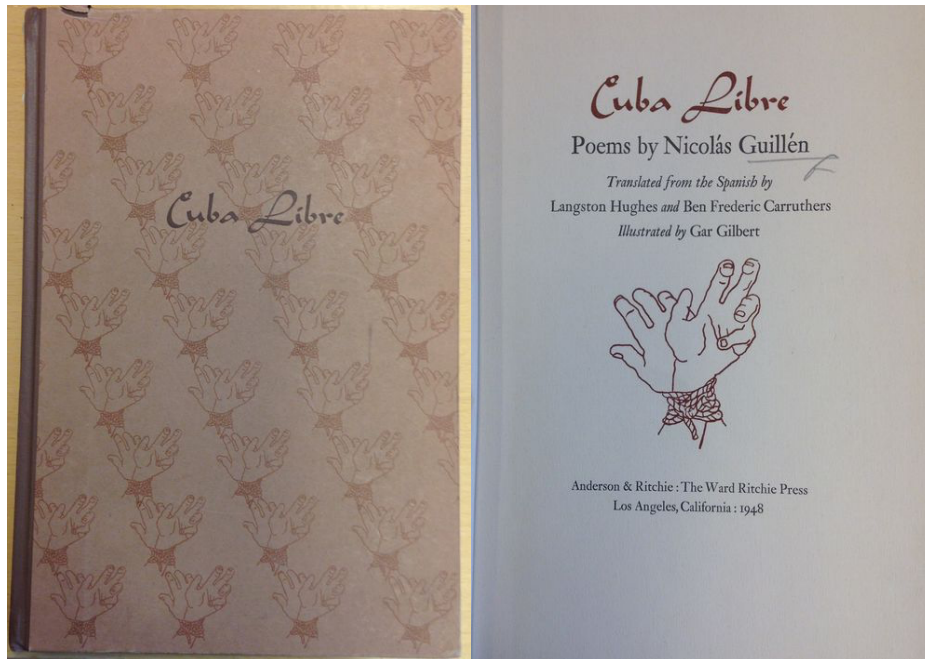
Reception of *Cuba Libre*

Cuba Libre was published by a small company, Ward Richie Press, as a limited edition with only 500 copies printed. It did not sell well and received very little attention. One possible reason for this is that the publishing company was on the west coast while Hughes and his audience were on the east coast, which could have resulted in financial limitations on the production and shipping process. One notable response to the book was

a prize for graphic design from the American Institute of Graphic Arts (Figure 3). Other attention that the book received was not positive, noting discrepancies in presentation and product and other elements that did not translate well. In 1949, the *Daily Worker* stated that:

It is a contradiction not easily understood 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 these 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 (Kutzinski, 148).

In response to the *Daily Worker* review, it is important to note that upon Guillén's return to Cuba after Spain's Civil War he joined the Communist party and was an ardent supporter of the revolution and Fidel Castro. However, this political affiliation and open association with Communism came after the publication of *Motivos de Son* and the other poems that were translated for *Cuba Libre* so it is incorrect to assume this was present in the work. His political affiliation would explain the *Daily Worker*'s interest in this small-scale project and give reason for their harsh critique, whether accurate or not.



Pictured above: The cover and title page of *Cuba Libre* (1948) which won a prize for graphic design.

Work on Guillén Post-1948

Nicolas Guillén has remained an internationally renowned writer even after *Cuba Libre* and his death four decades later. One such evidence of this is the *CLR James Journal*'s 2015 special issue on Guillén's work, which will be the focus for this final part of my thesis. The connections and conclusions made by the contributors of this issue are no doubt a product of the privilege of reflection, which wasn't necessarily a tool Hughes and Carruthers had because they and their project were contemporaries of Guillén and the poems chosen.

In one of the issue's articles, "Nuestro Nicolás Guillén: Un Canto in Two Acts," Clement White weaves in and out of highlighting Guillén's contribution towards the

international Black fight for freedom and the way that those who resonate with his words feel an ownership of him equal to that of Cuba. He says his voice is “resonating” and “remains unscathed by death’s arrogant finality,” and that his verses “still speak Truth” and have left the literary earth’s core shaken and “still vibrating”. He is called a “local poet with no geographical boundaries,” which illustrates the way he is undeniably Cuban but not exclusive to it. The canto ends with the proclamation that “the world all proudly claim you... Our Nicolás Guillén!” At the time of the publication of this piece, published in the *CLR James Journal* in 2015, Guillén had passed twenty-four years earlier. This piece speaks to the way that he is not only recognized by the literary world, but that there is a fervor and undying love for his work, what it stood for, and the way that the desired audience (and perhaps the unknown audience) found his work, clung to it, and continue to use it as fuel for the still ongoing fight against oppression and exploitation. It also speaks to the way that today’s writers and thinkers have made works of the past apply to issues of today that the author himself couldn’t have known about or claimed. Guillén’s idea of Blackness was informed by the international experience but still prioritized Cuba.

Another article in the *CLR James Journal*’s 2015 periodical, Delphine Gras’ “El Son De Los Preteridos y Los Olvidados: Reimagining Blackness in Nicolás Guillén's Early Poetry,” explores the world in which dangerous ideologies and theories about race existed alongside Guillén and his work. Guillén wrote while challenging social Darwinism and Eugenics and countering the romantic and exotic portrayal of Africans. These portrayals include those inspired by Carmen Miranda—a world-renowned performer who’s stage presence has inspired the common archetype of a Latina with fruit on her head and a sensuality credited to her ethnicity and culture—and the familiar

sexualization of Black men. His work utilizes oral traditions, namely *son*, but the method of writing works as an archive of his focus and goals. The oral traditions work with references to popular culture which legitimizes the oral tradition by giving it a point of relatability for the 20th century (and 21st) reader. This blend is an act of Cuba's hybridity in practice, as it is also composed of traditional identities that are nudged into modernity with the idea of blending through nationality and making that the identity of Cuba as a new, present nation. Gras rightfully states that "Guillén does not just invoke race as a pretext to call for Latin America unity or as an exotic flavor. He seeks to make AfroCaribbean culture visible, but not objectified or essentialized (21)." Guillén's work creates circumstances and images that *feel* true. From this writer's own experience of being of Cuban descent with ties to Oriente, the identities and conflicts he works with in poems like "Mulata" and "Tu no sabe inglé" sound like things my family would've thought, experienced, or talked about. These things aren't exotic although they are a product of a specific personal, social and racial experience. By demystifying the AfroCuban and taking a look at the conflict, hypocrisy, love, and loyalty within the whole community, it becomes too loud to ignore or mask with another name. Guillén's dreams for a working mestizaje, which was an imperfect perfect solution to Cuba's identity, does not neglect the AfroCuban experience but instead values it as personal, accessible, and real. This complex identity that Guillén works through in his poetry is a challenge to the American reader for many reasons. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, America was not seeking a hybrid identity or even a consideration of more than the white Anglo identity it wanted to preserve. Notions and comments celebrating Blackness in a U.S. framework exist despite identity politics, whereas Guillén's work

seems to push for and affirm a framework that embraces identity politics through a proper medium/perspective.

Conclusion

Guillén's poetry does the work of examining Cuba and its treatment of Blackness and Black people with a delicate but all-revealing lens. As expressed earlier in this thesis, Guillén was not ignorant to Cuba's poor management of race on a systemic and social level, but he believed in it, nonetheless. His support for both the nation and its AfroCuban population would follow him for the rest of his career and into post-mortem considerations of his work. Hughes's and Carruther's translations in *Cuba Libre* are not without imperfections, and some poems fall short of getting Guillén's purpose and perspective across, but the project is successful in presenting AfroCuba in a way that is relatable to their desired audience. I firmly believe that *Cuba Libre* created the literary bridge that made way for publications by *The Black Scholar*, *The CLR James Journal* and the various books that consider Guillén to be a staple in the international fight for the reclamation of a Black identity and for the fight of Black liberty in the face of continuing, active colonialism. I would not be surprised to see a resurgence in an interest in Guillén's life and work as we continue to confront and respond to racial inequalities and injustices happening in America and other dominating countries.

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