Motivos of Translation: Nicolas Guillen and Langston Hughes

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Motivos of Translation

Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes

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From almost the very beginning of their long friendship, Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes have often been taken together as representatives of a self-conscious Afro-Cuban/Afro-American poetico-political project.[1] Both poets' careers span the same period of time, roughly from the 1920s to the 1960s; both poets were held up as the voice of "the people" by their respective communities; and both, albeit in different ways and for different reasons, were emphatically radical in their political convictions. In short, both poets, at various times in their lives, considered themselves to be revolutionary poets of the masses, and thus, like Vladimir Mayakovsky in the U.S.S.R., internationalists in the scope of their respective poetic visions.

Yet precisely because of these similarities, the nature of their relation to each other has remained the subject of a continuing controversy—one which, unfortunately, has not yet moved beyond the task of finally determining, once and for all, which poet influenced whom. Thus, one line of critics, including Arnold Rampersad and Ian Smart, maintains that Hughes's transformative impact on Guillén was "immediate" (Rampersad

1986, 181) and "most transcendental" (Smart 1990, 23), pushing Guillén to the sudden poetic breakthrough he experienced with *Motivos de Son* and *Songoro Cosongo*. On the other hand, critics like Regino Boti have maintained that "there is nothing in common between a Yankee and a Cuban," and that furthermore, "Hughes's muse waits [while] Guillén's makes demands"(Boti cited in Ellis 1998, 131). Although Boti argued this point in 1932, Keith Ellis, as recently as 1998, has similarly insisted that "the limited variations of tone" of Hughes's poetry "reflect conditions that do not change and the absence of real belief that there will be change." In contrast to Hughes, Ellis claims that Guillén's poetry serves as "a model of harmony to which people may aspire in their social relations," and therefore, according to Ellis, Guillén's poetic achievement as a whole "gives way to harmony between happy music and the new achievements and possibilities in the period of the triumph of the revolution" (Ellis 1998, 156–57).

This essay seeks to reassess the relationship between Hughes and Guillén, focusing neither on the question of relative degrees of influence in one direction or the other, nor on the question of their respective revolutionary qualities and the degree to which these may or may not be present in their work (the latter question being nothing more, in fact, than a recasting of the former on the openly political, rather than strictly formal, level). Rather, the question I want to open up within the Guillén/Hughes friendship concerns the nature of that which one calls the "political" itself when this is seen as—necessarily—a question of poetry. The very fact of their friendship (Guillén: "Siempre fuimos muy buenos amigos" [We were always very good friends]) is enough to suggest a more complex, and perhaps even more productive, path of inquiry into their poetic achievement: namely, to see these writers as working in conversation with each other instead of as competitors, or as more or less revolutionary (i.e., successful) artists. By this, I do not mean to relegate politics to the margins of their friendship, but on the contrary, I want to ask what it would mean to think their specifically *translational* relationship toward each other as the very site of their politics. What is it, for example, about the relation—Hughes/Guillén—that allows one to imagine it as a site of linguistic "facilitation" (to use Gayatri Spivak's term)? In other words, could one speak of

the translational friendship between Hughes and Guillén in terms of them both "juggling the disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface [of two historical languages] in not necessarily connected ways, [such that] we feel the selvedges of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitations" (Spivak 1993, 180)? To this end, then, I want to read their poetry as staging various attempts at articulating both a politics of translation and a politics of what I will describe here as a kind of global correspondence—or, more concisely, a politics of global correspondence *as* a form of translation.

Along this line of inquiry, one might begin by noting Vera Kutzinski's observation that "while it is useful to compare aspects of North American blues poetry to Guillén's *poemas-son*, greater care has to be exercised in contextualizing such formal and thematic similarities so as not to elide social, historical, and ideological differences. One major difference is that Afro-Cubanism, unlike the Harlem Renaissance, was not supported, financially or otherwise, by a nascent African American middle class surrounded by a host of wealthy white patrons" (Kutzinski 1993, 152).[2] Kutzinski's remark calls attention to the need to first contextualize Hughes's blues poems and Guillén's *poemas-son* in their respective socioeconomic landscapes before drawing conclusions about their relative influence on each other. In full agreement with Kutzinski, I would like to take this a step further and ask: How can one begin to understand the nature of their friendship as one which is in part determined by, and thus revealed in, repeated acts of translation, in both the linguistic and the political sense of this term? What could it mean to speak of the Hughes/Guillén friendship as based, to a certain degree, upon the possibility of translating a motif (or *motivo*) of revolution, thereby opening a space for the possibility of something like a "revolutionary" notion of translation?

"The Task of the Translator" and *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*

If one attends to this motif of translation as it arises out of, and in turn shapes, the friendship between Hughes and Guillén, the reference to a third

figure, Walter Benjamin, could help to situate, or lend a provisional framework for, the particular notion of translation that I will focus on here. For Benjamin, a contemporary of Hughes and Guillén, acts of translation, and the interpretation of these acts, imply a conception of language that presupposes the reproducibility of meaning through the work of the translator. But Benjamin takes pains to show that such a conception misses what is really at stake in a translation: namely, the *expression*, not the reproduction, of "a specific significance inherent in the original [that] manifests itself in its translatability." This specific significance (*bestimmte Bedeutung*) is not reducible to the information conveyed in the meaning of individual words or sentences, but is rather an "essential quality" (*Wesentliches*) of the literary work and thus not directly communicable as such. Likewise, I propose that the poetry and translations of Hughes and Guillén were not concerned so much with realizing acts of communication or transmission—acts which assume that language is made up of images that adhere to a logic of representation—but with acts of expression of a specific sociopolitical significance that is not amenable to linguistic and discursive models of intelligibility. If, then, Benjamin's idea of translation serves as a useful point of departure, the poetry of Hughes and Guillén will eventually be seen to challenge this idea by demonstrating its necessary limits.

In his essay "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin observes that "the central kinship of languages . . . is marked by a distinctive convergence" [*jenes innerste Verhältnis der Sprachen ist aber das einer eigentümlichen Konvergenz*]; to this he adds that "Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express" (Benjamin 1969a, 72). I will follow Benjamin in arguing that the languages used by Hughes and Guillén were not strangers to one another, for both poets were indeed interrelated in what they wanted to express; yet, for both Hughes and Guillén, the nature of this interrelation was anything but a priori and ahistorical. According to Benjamin, such an a priori "suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language

[*die reine Sprache*]. . . . [all] foreign languages supplement one another in their intentions" (74). The source of this pure language is to be found nowhere else than in the totality of individual acts of translation: as translations occur, pure language is realized—without, however, achieving existential presence as such. Hence, Benjamin observes, in every single act of translation, "the great motif [*das große Motiv*] of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work . . . the languages themselves, supplemented and reconciled in their mode of signification, harmonize" (77). The thought of this "great motif" can serve as one possible point of entry for inquiring into the specific nature of that work of translation that one finds at the heart of the friendship between Hughes and Guillén; for their friendship was based upon a shared commitment to the liberation of the Afro-American peoples of their respective countries—a liberation not so much into "one true" people, but into something like the truth of history itself. Thus Hughes and Guillén, as poets and translators of each other's poetry, were both engaged in a certain reformulation of the "task of the translator"—a task which, in Benjamin's words, is precisely "to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation [*Umdichtung*] of that work" (80). If, taken together, Hughes's and Guillén's acts of liberation-as-translation constitute a rethinking, in historical terms, of the "great motif" of the "integration [of] many tongues into one true language," then what, for them, is this "one" language of history? And why, or in what terms, can one think of it as "true"?

Finally, in considering Benjamin together with Hughes and Guillén as offering varied but interrelated and contemporaneous ideas of translation, one more figure is especially useful to provide a sort of schema of the range of questions that concern these three. Pablo Neruda's long 1945 poem *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, a modernist production of representational containment par excellence, illustrates several key moments in the itinerary of questions I will ask about translation in the work of Guillén and Hughes. In short, Neruda's project strives toward an ideal of *incorporation*: of the past, of language itself (including various dead and unknown languages), of the writing of history, and, most significantly, of the actual, material

bodies of historical agents. *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* can therefore be read as a narrative of containment in the figure of a universal (and incarnate) Subject of history.

However, because representational containment in this poem is only possible as a result of a series of translations, Neruda must also be seen as engaged in the task of translating, and thus as presupposing a certain concept of translation as the foundation for his narrative. The rocks of the ancient Inca fortress of Macchu Picchu are figured by the poem as indexing the possibility of translation itself, most evident in the taxonomy of section 9 which details the "Geometría final, libro de piedra" [Final geometry, book of stone] of the fortress's ruins (Felstiner 1990, 227).[3] Further, the idea of a single pure language, reminiscent of Benjamin's, is first secured in section 2, where Neruda writes of the "cereal como una historia amarilla," which is "idéntica siempre, se desgrana en marfil / y lo que en el agua es patria transparente" [grain like a yellow history . . . identical always, what strips to ivory, / and what is clear native land welling up (204–05)]. With this transparent identity as his support, the poem's speaker can ascend the mountain to the fortress of Macchu Picchu and declare, upon reaching the ruins, that "Ésta fue la morada, éste es el sitio: / aquí los anchos granos del maíz ascendieron / y bajaron de nuevo como granizo rojo" [This was the dwelling, this is the place: / here the broad grains of maize rose up / and fell again like red hail] (214–15). By claiming the site, the speaker claims the right to speak of it and for it, signaled by the colon that announces and consolidates the speaking of a subject who commands over that which he sees and describes. Even the deaths of those who once inhabited the site can be gathered up into the identity of a single, unified, apocalyptic vision for the speaker: "Muertos de un solo abismo, sombras de una hondonada, . . . desplomasteis como en un otoño / en una sola muerte" [You dead of a single abyss, shadows of one ravine, . . . you plummeted as in autumn / to one sole death] (218–19).

If I refer to this identity as securing the possibility of translation, it is because by the time the poem reaches section 8, the speaker, confronting the question of linguistic intelligibility, is able to subsume the problem of different tongues into a figural ontology of unified silence. He asks the

mountains around him "qué idioma traes a la oreja apenas / desarraigada de tu espuma andina? . . . Qué dicen tus destellos acosados?" [what language do you bring to the ear / barely uprooted from your Andean foam? . . . What do your tormented flashings say?] (220–23). In response to these questions, he offers his own answer, one which contains and brackets the questions themselves in the "higher" sphere of a sublated intelligibility: "Ven a mi propio ser, al alba mía, / hasta las soledades coronadas. / / El reino muerto vive todavía" [Come to my very being, to my own dawn, / up to the crowning solitude. / / The dead realm lives on still] (224–25). Once this crowning solitude is itself established as the ground of translation, the speaker can simply tally up its results in section 9. The translations here seem to appear of their own force, out of the rocks, in turn restoring and unifying their potential in the figure of a sacred silence: "Cúpula del silencio, patria pura" [Dome of silence, purebred homeland] (228–29).

From this point on, everything in the poem follows as a matter of course from the translational logic of this containment. The speaker, assured of his right as the speaking-Subject and as master of the site of the ruins, can now order the ruins to reveal what they are incapable of speaking on their own behalf. His commands, in turn, appear to produce whatever they command to appear: "Devuélveme el esclavo que enterraste! / Sacude de las tierras el pan duro / del miserable, muéstrame los vestidos / del siervo y su ventana" [Give me back the slave you buried! / Shake from the earth the hard bread / of the poor, show me the servant's / clothes and his window] (230–33). Moreover, the speaker, having scaled the heights and reached the peak of sovereign subjectivity, not only can summon and appropriate whatever he wishes, but he can figure himself, his actual body, as the being-incarnate of an irretrievable (but no longer undecipherable) past: "y deja que en mi palpite, como un ave mil años / prisionera, / el viejo corazón del olvidado!" [and let there beat in me, like a bird a thousand years / imprisoned, / the old forgotten human heart!] (234–35). In his moment of glory, the speaking-Subject thus presses into service the ruins of the body of Macchu Picchu for the task of translating and transfiguring his own sovereign law into an embodied reality, a *lex animata* which is the final goal of every modern biopolitics: "Sube a nacer conmigo, hermano . . . traed a la copa de esta

nueva vida / vuestros viejos dolores enterrados. . . . Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta . . . como si yo estuviera con vosotros anclado, . . . Apegadme los cuerpos como imanes. / / Acudid a mis venas y a mi boca. / / Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre" [Rise to be born with me, brother. . . . bring all your age-old buried / griefs to the cup of this new life. . . . I come to speak through your dead mouth . . . as if I were anchored here with you, . . . Fasten your bodies to me like magnets. / / Hasten to my veins to my mouth. / / Speak through my words and my blood] (236–39).[4]

In what follows, my aim is not to evaluate the poetry of Hughes and Guillén to see how closely they approximate Neruda's model of the sovereign Subject of translation. Their work, rather, seeks to problematize any such totalizing figures of representational containment. However, it is essential to take account of Neruda's poem as an illustration of a certain modernist impulse to reformulate translation at the moment that its "proper" functioning seems most threatened—for instance, in an encounter with ruins or an interpretation of fragments. In its newly defined form, translation can then be redeployed—and often, as with Neruda, pushed to extreme limits—to serve a variety of politico-linguistic agendas. One needs to attend to these agendas, even where they are not immediately discernible, and interrogate their possible rationales within the broader context of modernist attempts to delimit and contain notions of pre- or nonlinguistic agency in the project of historical representation; for, as Gayatri Spivak reminds us, "without a sense of the rhetoricity of language, a species of neocolonialist construction of the non-Western scene is afoot" in just this brand of translation (Spivak 1993, 181). In particular, the apparent seamlessness of Neruda's operation must be all the more vigilantly attended to and borne in mind when, for Hughes and Guillén, it is a question of speaking in the place (or on behalf) of the other.[5]

Guillén's *Son* Motifs

Nicolás Guillén understood words to be a kind of prison. In the poem "Ansia," he observes that "La palabra es la cárcel de la idea" [The word is the prison of the idea] (my translation). Yet in poems such as "Caña"

("Sugar-Cane"), Guillén nevertheless uses words to sketch a certain geographical map of the political-economic relations in Cuba, thus liberating one to begin to imagine its revolutionary transformation: "El negro / junto al cañaveral. / El yanqui / sobre el cañaveral. / La tierra / bajo el cañaveral. / / Sangre / que se nos va!" [The black man / next to the canefield. / / The Yankee / over the canefield. / / The land / under the canefield. / / Blood / that goes out from us!] (trans. Ellis 1983, 79). Note that this poem maps a revolutionary terrain for the imagination precisely by translating geographical relations of space—the different relations of workers, landowners, and the earth to the canefield—into the antagonistic class relations of Cuba's political economy. As Keith Ellis describes it, "the syntactical base [of the poem] is also the economic base" (Guillén 1984, 61–62; Ellis 1983, 79).

But there is a particular, racially defined aspect to Cuba's political-economic terrain that Guillén seeks to translate into terms that would render it intelligible in its peculiar existential manifestations. Since, moreover, this is an aspect that had often been repressed from Cuban social politics (when it was not simply misrepresented), Guillén speaks of it as a lingering question in need of a voice to be articulate, as in the early *romance* poem "Gustavo E.": "va por el mundo Gustavo / siempre adelante, adelante, / diciéndonos lo que siente, / lo que piensa y lo que sabe / sobre esas viejas cuestiones / de los problemas raciales" [Gustavo goes through the world / always forward, forward, / telling us what he feels, / what he thinks and what he knows / about those old questions / concerning racial problems]. That these "old questions of racial problems" are always already repressed—and thus in need of acts of translation in order to be made recognizable—is attested to in Guillén's frequent use of chiasmus to figure the difficulty of representing the particular suffering that is produced by the silence that enshrouds them: "si canto, parece que lloro; / si lloro, parece que canto" [if I sing, I seem to be crying; / if I cry, I seem to be singing] (Ellis 1983, 60, 56). Where a crying seems immediately to translate into a singing, and vice versa, it is clear that neither the one nor the other is a reliable translation of the *experience itself*, which produces such a contradictory (and apparently self-canceling) form of expression. In bringing to light the hitherto repressed experience of the suffering

produced by a racist order, what is therefore at stake for Guillén is not so much the isolated representation of one or the other—either the crying or the singing—but the movement itself that operates between them as the motor force of their alternating articulations—a movement, precisely, of a translation which serves to indicate, without fully presenting as such, another level of lived experience that is not so easily captured in the discursivity of the poetic image.

This lived experience, insofar as it resists any kind of full representational disclosure, subsists on a level that one might consider analogous to that realm of mutually shared intentions that Benjamin calls "pure language," particularly because the proof of its actual existence is vouchsafed only in and as the ensemble of those acts of translation that strive to name or to represent it, however obliquely, in language. A language that might be commensurate with this experience is sometimes figured by Guillén as emanating from an ancestral memory of Africa, as in the poem "Llegada" ("Arrival"): "La palabra nos viene húmeda de los bosques," . . . "El grito se nos sale como una gota de oro virgin" . . . "Sabemos dónde nacen las aguas" [The word comes to us moist from the forest, . . . The shout escapes us like a drop of pure gold . . . We know where the waters are born]. This knowledge of the birthplace of ancestral waters allows Guillén (much like Hughes) to imagine a language in which he would be able to "hablar en negro de verdad" [to speak authentically, truly black] (Guillén 1972, 143, 54). So it is a question of liberating, in poetry, a language that would be commensurate with the actual lived—and thus strictly nonrepresentable—experience of the *Afro*-Cuban. Since, for Guillén, the word is the "prison" of the idea, it will be necessary to translate such an experience into another form of expression which can be indicated, or conjured, by means of words, but which itself remains irreducible to words alone. The traditional Afro-Cuban musical form of the *son*, whose central, lyrical voice is called the *motivo* or *letra*, serves Guillén as a means to express—and therefore not to represent, communicate, or reproduce—in language the presence of this lived experience of suffering that appears to resist being contained by representational language itself.[6] To quote again from the poem "Ansia" ("Anguish"): "Yo, en vez de la palabra, / quisiera, *para concretar mi duelo*, /

la queja musical de una guitarra. / Una de esas guitarras cuya música / dulce, sencilla, casta, / encuentra siempre para hacer su nido / algún rincón del alma . . ." [I, instead of the word, / want, *to represent* {literally: "concretize"} *my mourning*, / the musical moan of a guitar. / One of those guitars whose / sweet, simple, chaste music, / always finds for its haven / a corner of the soul . . .] (Ellis 1983, 56; my emphasis). Keith Ellis, the translator of this passage, has chosen to translate *concretar* as "represent." His choice is not insignificant, for, as one will soon see, Ellis's translations of the idea of "translation"—which he equates with two other (for him) synonymous terms, *express* and *represent*—are symptomatic of a resistance on his part toward the thought of a nonrepresentational expression that could threaten the exclusively *communicational* function that he wants to assign to Guillén's poetry.

In addition, Guillén's choice of the Afro-Cuban *son*—itself a suppressed cultural form—to convey the suppressed historical lineage of Cuba's *mulato* society is referenced even in those poems composed in traditional European forms, like the Alexandrine sonnet "El abuelo" ("The Grandfather"): "Esta mujer angélica de ojos septentrionales, / que vive atenta al ritmo de su sangre europea, / ignora que en lo hondo de ese ritmo golpea / un negro el parche duro de roncos atabales" [This angelic woman with Northern eyes, / who lives attentive to the rhythm of her European blood, / knows not that in the depths of that rhythm a black man / beats the hard heads of deep drums] (Ellis 1983, 89). But what is the relation here between rhythm, blood, and the racialized identity that Guillén claims the motif of the *son* makes legible?

According to Guillén's interpreters, these poems use the motif of the *son*, the drum itself, to lend a voice to and articulate the hidden truth of Cuba, namely that "En esta tierra mulata . . . siempre falta algún abuelo" [In this land, made mulatto . . . a grandfather is always missing] (Ellis 1983, 75). It is crucial to take account of this missing grandfather, the missing link, in every figure of the mulatto that appears in Guillén's poetry. Because it is itself more often than not forgotten, if not simply ignored, by Guillén's readers, the figure of the mulatto is usually taken as an emblem of Cuba's multiracial society, dialectically harmonized into a single, organic whole.

In reading Guillén, however, one must keep in mind that the missing grandfather entails the missing *sign* of the process of racialization in general. It thus functions not as a guarantee of a racial origin or of a multiracial Cuban telos, but as a trace, a sort of ghost, of the racialized inscription produced in that very writing of history—in this case, possibly an instance of rape—which seeks to efface its own effects by sublating them into a universal representation of "Cuba." Moreover, because it has the power to express this otherwise suppressed history of violence toward Afro-Cuban women, Guillén finds in the voice of the *son* an articulation of the future ideal of a Cuban society that, according to many of his readers, would apparently be neither black nor white, male nor female. Thus for Guillén and his readers, the *son*, and indeed the Afro-Cuban population itself, "abrió de un solo golpe el camino propio, permitiendo comprender que por la expresión de lo negro era posible llegar a la expresión de lo cubano; de lo cubano y sin matiz epidérmico, ni negro ni blanco, pero integrado por la atracción simpática de esas dos fuerzas fundamentales en la composición social isleña" [it opened up with one stroke our own path, allowing an understanding of the fact that through black expression it was possible to arrive at a Cuban expression; Cuban without regard to skin shade, neither black nor white, but integrated by the friendly attraction of those two fundamental forces in the social composition of the island] (Ellis 1998, 152–53). The musical figure is thus generally interpreted by Guillén's readers as a mechanism for translating, by embodying (as rhythm and dance) the desired ideal of national unity, expressed, for instance, in the progressive sublation of Cuba's black/white duality at the end of Guillén's poem "Balada de los dos abuelos" ("Ballad of the Two Grandfathers"). What begins here as a tormented and antagonistic relation between white and black men is, apparently, progressively reduced to—or better, gets translated into—a call to sing, together, as one voice: "los dos del mismo tamaño, / ansia negra y ansia blanca, / los dos del mismo tamaño, / gritan, sueñan, lloran, cantan. / Sueñan, lloran, cantan. / Lloran, cantan. / ¡Cantan!" [both of equal size, / a Black longing, a White longing, / both of equal size, / they scream, dream, weep, sing. / They dream, weep, sing. / They weep, sing. / Sing!] (Guillén 1972, 70–71).

However, it needs to be asked whether Guillén's poetry actually transcends the violence of Cuba's racialized history in such figures of harmony, or whether instead, the violence of historical inscription, in its dissimulation as "song," is thereby made more legible. If the latter were the case, then one would have to read the "missing" grandfather into the "song" of the two grandfathers; the insertion of his absence, then, would reconfigure the apparent equality of their struggle—"both of equal size, / a Black longing, a White longing, / both of equal size"—as the asymmetrical struggle of oppressor versus oppressed, or, put differently, as the practice of exclusion/repression which strives to *forget* what is already assumed to be missing.

Further, one must ask: if Guillén wishes to make legible—by translating—the experience of suffering of the Afro-Cuban population of his country into the musical form of the *son*, then how is one to understand the nature of this new, musical language? Could it be "pure," like Benjamin's pure language? Is it in some sense "a priori and apart from all historical relationships"? Up to this point, I have described it as that language which seemed to Guillén the most commensurate to the task of translating (i.e., expressing without representing) the historical experience of Cuban blacks; however, in itself, the music of the *son* that these poems name, *is not* language. The poetic voice of the *son* ("La canción del bongó," the song of the drum)—without itself being, or belonging to, language—approximates the function of language precisely by *naming* the incommensurability of language as such in relation to historical experience. In this sense, one can speak of the *son* as the proper name for the language of Afro-Cuban experience. And for Guillén, the question of the status of the proper name—that which, in the words of Geoffrey Bennington, "*belongs without belonging* to the language system" precisely because proper names are "necessary for a language which does not tolerate them as such" (Bennington 1993, 170–71)—is a means to articulate the question of the historically "missing" *Afro*-Cuban, as the poem "El apellido" ("My Last Name") suggests: "¿Es mi nombre, estáis ciertos? / ¿Tenéis todas mis señas? / ¿Ya conocéis mi sangre navegable, / mi geografía llena de oscuros montes, / de hondos y amargos valles / que no están en los mapas?" . . . "venid a ver mi nombre! / Mi nombre interminable, / hecho de interminables nombres; / el nombre mío,

ajeno, / libre y mío, ajeno y vuestro, / ajeno y libre como el aire" [Are you sure it is my name? / Have you got all my particulars? / Do you already know my navigable blood, / my geography full of dark mountains, / of deep and bitter valleys / that are not on the maps?" . . . "come look at my name! / My name without end, / made up of endless names; / My name, foreign, / free and mine, foreign and yours, / foreign and free as the air] (Guillén 1972, 72–79).

Guillén's poem critically interrogates this "truth" of the proper name (his own included): namely, because it both belongs and does not belong to language, it always depropriates itself *as* language. Like the music of the *son* that stirs in the repressed rhythms of "El abuelo" ("The Grandfather"), the proper name is that which is most proper to oneself only insofar as it is depropriated, becoming thereby the property, the commonly sung *son*, of all who are attentive to what it names: a "geography full of dark mountains, / of deep and bitter valleys / that are not on the maps."

Here, one can turn to a poem of Langston Hughes to see another instance of how proper names can be figured—in this case as the common property of those who are depropriated by the interests of U.S. imperialist expansion. The poem "Wait" is composed of a list of proper names that surround, in the margins of the page, the very voice of their oppressed condition, i.e., their silence: "I am the Silent One, / Saying nothing, / Knowing no words to write, / Feeling only the bullets / And the hunger / And the stench of gas / Dying. / And nobody knows my name / But someday, / I will raise my hand / And break the heads of you / Who starve me. / I will raise my hand / And smash the spines of you / Who shoot me" . . . "When that is done, / I will find words to speak / / Wait!" (Hughes 2000, 174). In writing such a poem, Hughes appears to name himself, like Guillén, the *translator* of the experience of oppressed blacks—a role that he references in a conversation with Guillén in 1930: "Yo comprendí que era necesario ser su amigo, su voz, su báculo: ser su poeta. Yo no tengo más ambición que la de ser el poeta de los negros. . . . Me duelen en la entraña los golpes que reciben y *canto* sus dolores, *traduzco* sus tristezas, echo a volar sus ansias" [I understood that it was necessary to be their friend, their voice, their support: to be their poet. I have no other ambition than to be the poet of the

Negroes" . . . "the blows they get hurt me to the core and I *sing* their sorrows, I *translate* their sadness, I put their anxieties to flight] (Guillén 1975, 17–18; my emphasis). Once again, it is important to note that Ellis translates Hughes's choice of the word "traduzco"—literally, "I translate"—with "express," as if a translation of sadness would be inadequate to convey the particular (African American) suffering that is at stake here. The question of the *son*—the question of a translation which translates nothing that could be said to belong to the sphere of representation—is here contained in Ellis's choice as a translator: a choice, namely, to reinscribe an impossible translation, that of actual suffering, into the sphere of representation by means of a notion of expression that lies beyond the range of linguistic alternatives. If Hughes *expresses* rather than translates the suffering of blacks in the United States, he can be said to be both outside the realm of language and still within, or at the threshold of, the sphere of the representable. In other words, following Ellis's choice, Hughes's "expression" can only function as a proper name because it cannot be seen as adhering to the logic of reproducible meaning which Ellis assumes belongs exclusively to translation.

But how, exactly, does Hughes's poetry come to be assigned the role of the proper name? And why must Ellis translate Hughes's statement—"traduzco" (I translate)—into a kind of expression? If Hughes's poetry (apparently by his own admission) functions as another instance of Guillén's "song of the drum," why must it be relocated, evacuated, out of language as such? To begin to approach these questions, one must look at a series of Hughes's poems that are explicitly concerned with redescribing the signifying potential of language so that, in turn, it can be used as a form of political expression that is no longer either linguistic or representational, but at a certain threshold between these that one might tentatively call "the real."

Regarding Hughes, Guillén observed that "El castellano de Mr. Hughes no es muy rico. Pero él lo aprovecha maravillosamente. Siempre consigue decir lo que desea. Y, sobre todo, siempre tiene algo que decir" [Mr. Hughes's Castilian is not very rich. But he uses it marvelously. He always manages to say what he wants. And, above all, he always has something to say] (Guillén 1975, 17). Guillén's point is worth pausing over, for it suggests

that what Hughes has to say—and he always has something—does not depend on the range of linguistic options at his disposal (a vocabulary), but rather on his ability to manipulate what few options he has in such a way as to convey a meaning not immediately implied by the words themselves. Guillén's observation echoes and replays the operation described by his own poem, "Sólo la flauta" ("Only the Flute"), which I cited earlier: "si canto, parece que lloro; / si lloro, parece que canto" [if I sing, I seem to be crying; / if I cry, I seem to be singing]. As neither the singing nor the crying seems to offer an adequate translation of the experience which has produced their incessant movement/transformation into and out of one another, Guillén likewise suggests that Hughes's individual utterances are neither necessary nor sufficient to serve as indices for the experience—or rather the "something" that is always there to be said—that lies behind them and manipulates them to its own advantage ("él lo aprovecha maravillosamente" can also be translated as "he profits/takes full advantage of it marvelously"). If this is so, perhaps it is because Guillén has already described Hughes as a poet "sin más preocupación que la de observar su gente para traducirla, darla a conocer y hacerla amar" [with no other concern than to observe his people in order to translate them, to give them to be known and to be loved] (Guillén 1975, 16). Given Guillén's insistence on using the term *traducir*, it is remarkable that Guillén's translator, Keith Ellis, insists on reading it, in Hughes's statement above, as "express." Might not Guillén in fact be adopting the term *traducir* from Hughes's own description of his poetic activity, thus reinforcing the somewhat counterintuitive idea of poetry as an act of translation rather than as "expression"?

One thing, at least, seems clear: for Guillén, Hughes's poetic work is to be understood as translation—specifically, as a translation that is the result of Hughes's *observation*, and thus as a translation which is to "give" his people to be known (*conocer*) and to be loved as such. It is a translation, in other words, of that which can be seen *into* that which can be known and loved; a translation understood in an epistemological sense—as a cognition and a recognition—and thus also in a mimetic sense, as the (re-)cognized (re-)presentation of that which has earlier been seen and can now be apprehended again—only now, as it were, to the second power ("known and

loved"). If Guillén is committed to a notion of poetry as translation rather than as expression, then, it would seem to be because he conceives translation as implying this double movement of mimetic sublation and idealization: the people are first seen as such, present only to themselves, in order then to be mimetically duplicated in the words of the poet, (re-)presented/(re-)cognized, and thus raised to the level of "the known" because they now partake of the idea of "themselves." Their sublation (or *Aufhebung*, a canceling and preservation) is effected in the words of the poet who translates them from the realm of the seen to the realm of the known. To express them, on the other hand, would not require this two-tiered cognitive model; indeed, expression does not necessarily imply any form of cognition, let alone a recognition in a representation. But again, one sees how Guillén's idealization of translation came to determine his friendly appropriation of Hughes's muse, pressing it into the service of a cross-cultural transliteration of African American experience whose achievement could not be guaranteed by a mere act of expression. The latter, by contrast, could only be functionally appropriated by the demands of this project in terms of a mimetic mirroring of the experience of the "other"—a mirroring which, à la Neruda, could only offer a specular reduction and self-directed reflection of "the same," "the one," which is here signified by Guillén's apparently self-identical figure of "Cuba." A translation, as opposed to an expression, would at least potentially preserve the material specificity of the experience that it seeks to name, or to approximate (asymptotically, catachrestically) in and through the name.

Translating "Africa"

So what is it that Hughes's poetry translates? And how is his translation recuperable, by Guillén, for the project of a transcultural poetics and politics? To begin to answer these questions, it might be helpful to consider them from a different perspective: What in Hughes's poetry resists or obstructs translation? And what, given this resistance, can be afforded the attempt to translate (political) resistance itself? One can initially approach the problem of resistance by reading the poem "Letter from Spain,

Addressed to Alabama" (Hughes 2000, 201–2), which Hughes wrote while fighting with the Lincoln Brigade in Spain in 1937:

Dear Brother at home:

We captured a wounded Moor today.
He was just as dark as me.
I said, Boy, what you been doin' here
Fightin' against the free?

He answered something in a language
I couldn't understand.
But somebody told me he was sayin'
They nabbed him in his land

And made him join the fascist army
And come across to Spain.
And he said he had a feelin'
He'd never get back home again.

He said he had a feelin'
This whole thing wasn't right.
He said he didn't know
The folks he had to fight.

And as he lay there dying
In a village we had taken,
I looked across to Africa
And seed foundations shakin'.

Cause if a free Spain wins this war,
The colonies, too, are free—
Then something wonderful'll happen
To them Moors as dark as me.

I said, I guess that's why old England
And I reckon Italy, too,
Is afraid to let a workers' Spain
Be too good to me and you—

Cause they got slaves in Africa—
And they don't want 'em to be free.
Listen, Moorish prisoner, hell!
Here, shake hands with me!

I knelt down there beside him,
And I took his hand—
But the wounded Moor was dyin'
And he didn't understand.

Salud,
Johnny

Before commenting on the body of the "Letter" itself, I want to note that it is framed with at least four points of reference: it is "Addressed to Alabama"; it is dated "Lincoln Battalion, International Brigades, November Something, 1937"; it begins "Dear Brother at home:"; and it is signed "Salud, Johnny." These markers function to situate the writing both as an occasional act of correspondence and as an index of a more global "correspondence"—that between the experience of a colonized Black Belt in Alabama and the colonized Moors (Moroccans) of North Africa.[7] The text of the correspondence (taken in both these senses) acquires meaning through its global and local contextualizations by referencing, or citing, the materio-historical frame through which its enunciation as a speech-act is made possible. Thus, it is within the parameters of this frame that the success or failure of translation is to be registered; the act of translation that the poem describes will be always already determined as a material, historical process, situated spatially as well as temporally. With this in mind, the poem's opening line—"We captured a

wounded Moor today"—serves further to frame the letter in the context of a wartime operation. "We," the collective pronoun, indicates that the social milieu of the translation that is about to take place acquires its own contours and identity by having "captured," and thus formed itself around, the body of the wounded Moor.

So what have they (or what do they think to have) captured? The expressive but untranslatable experience of the Moor himself? The speaker, Johnny, asks the Moor why he is there, fighting on the wrong side. But the Moor, says Johnny, "answered something in a language / I couldn't understand." One might ask: strictly speaking, how could an answer in an unknown language constitute an *answer* to a question that is asked in a language known only to the interlocutor? What, in fact, is the Moor answering? By answering—corresponding to and with—the limits of language itself, his answer marks, by citing, a site of resistance to (and from within) language. And this citation, in turn, is translated, captured, recuperated and (re-)signified by a member of the capturing forces: "But somebody told me he was sayin' / They nabbed him in his land." In other words, the Moor's initial capture "in his land" is itself captured in the translation offered by those who have captured him a second time. As if aware of being captured three times, and thus at a three-fold remove from his land, the Moor "said he had a feelin' / He'd never get back home again."

Homelessness, in the case of the Moor, is therefore the result of three historical acts of capture: involuntary colonial enlistment, military defeat, and linguistic translation. The task, then, is not to link these operations together as analogical or metaphorical equivalents, but to think them as distinct, yet mutually constituting, acts of historical violence that narrate an itinerary of colonial inscription. They are a series of relocations, or dislocations, whose topographical (existential) landscape is threatened with effacement by the marks of a cartographic law of intelligibility. As such, they are acts which both sever the Moor's tie to his homeland and make possible the reiteration and (re-)presentation of this severance in a linguistic appropriation. If the dying Moor will never more "belong" to his land, his unbelongingness as such belongs to a language that seeks to capture/translate him, to steal him away from his own lived experience of exile.

While the Moor is thus simultaneously dying and being translated (or sublated) as a dying *Moor*, the poem shifts registers to convey the speaker's perspective. Johnny says, "I looked across to Africa / And seed foundations shakin'." The next three stanzas describe Johnny's realization of the potentially liberatory effects of the war he is fighting, "Cause they got slaves in Africa— / And they don't want 'em to be free." What began as a confused assembly of brigade soldiers who were at once brought together around the Moor and perplexed by his mere presence among them, ends up, then, as a reflection on the geopolitical horizon that made such a moment possible in the first place. As Johnny looks across (across what?) to "Africa"—an Africa which can only be figured as the speaker's horizon of perspective, and thus as a kind of speculative horizon of figural possibility itself—he writes how he saw the "foundations shakin'," the foundations, one must assume, of the colonial condition that conscripted the Moor, effectively killing him by dislocating him thrice over. But what is so problematic in this moment of revolutionary insight is that the object of the speaker's gaze, "Africa," is itself figured not as an object but as a *horizon*: precisely, as a horizonal perspective that shakes the foundations of the historico-political context out of which Johnny perceives it. In other words, to look toward "Africa" here is to perceive the production of Africa as *both* a figure of colonial violence in general, and also the moment of this figure's undoing.

When, almost as an afterthought, Johnny says to the Moor, "Here, shake hands with me!" he then kneels down and takes the Moor's hand; "But the wounded Moor was dyin' / And he didn't understand." The poem ends, on this note of non-understanding, by affirming the futility of translation as a means of establishing contact with the Moor. The latter, whose suffering as a victim of transnational imperialist violence is itself a product of a certain kind of translation (a death by "remote control"),[8] is reduced to simply a hand to be taken and held; and yet, Johnny, in writing of this incident and addressing it "to Alabama," has managed to convey the irreducible materiality at the basis of this imperio-representationalist project. In writing to Alabama about the hand which he held, the speaker hopes to transcribe, in and as writing, the dying and untranslatable body of the Moor himself (one

who, recall, "didn't understand" the speaker's command to shake hands). Thus, by writing of the hand—of the hand which cannot itself understand, but which can be held by the hand of another at the moment that understanding fails—the speaker attempts to inscribe the experience of the Moor's suffering into the material and historical conditions of a worldview, the "flesh of the world"[9]—indexed by the horizon, "Africa"—that pertains equally to his "Brother" in the Black Belt.

Integrally involved in this overdetermined operation is a notion of translation that, from the very start, assumes the ultimate failure of linguistic intelligibility while insisting on the historical iterability, figured here as the material transliteration, of its intentional object: the dying body of the Moor. Further, the iterability of the Moor's hand indexes the iterability of the figure of "Africa" that the flesh of his hand ("just as dark as me") metonymically replaces. It would seem, then, that "Africa," operating as the figure of a prelinguistic iterability, is the positive condition of possibility for acts of translation in general. This figure of "Africa," one recalls, is summoned in Guillén's poem "Llegada" ("Arrival"): "La palabra nos viene húmeda de los bosques," . . . "El grito se nos sale como una gota de oro virgen" . . . "Sabemos dónde nacen las aguas" [The word comes to us moist from the forest, . . . The shout escapes us like a drop of pure gold . . . We know where the waters are born]. The question for Hughes, however, is whether such a self-identical "word" can even be spoken of; that is to say, whether any "thing"—a word, idea, or thought—comes to "us," the unitary and collectively understood subjects who thus "know where the waters are born." For Hughes, it appears rather that something like the thought of Africa both comes and goes in a single gesture: "I looked across to Africa / And seed foundations shakin'." As the speaker's gaze directs itself "across" to the object, the representational basis of that very object qua object dissolves; but the dissolution is quickly dissimulated, and its "object" apparently recuperated, in the speaker's grasp of the Moor's hand.

To illustrate another aspect of this double movement, one can examine an earlier figuring of Africa in Hughes's 1930 poem "Afro-American Fragment" (Hughes 2000, 129):

So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood—
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue—
So long,
So far away

Is Africa.

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums—and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face.

It is worth noting that Hughes repeats the phrase "So long, / So far away" three times in this poem, initially referring twice to Africa and then to "Africa's / Dark face." The problem of the fragment is one of locating it and circumscribing it *as* a fragment, since to do so presupposes a knowledge of some prior entity to which the fragment corresponds. Once again, then, the question of a kind of correspondence (in this case, of a part to a whole) is bound up with the effort to fix a spatio-temporal location, for evidently the

latter must be determined in order for the former to exercise its proper function. But this is just the point: can Africa function "properly"? That is, can it be figured in such a way as to allow for any claims to property, or the proper? Presuming that it can, would such a figure risk being appropriated in its turn, or, like the proper name, does it function instead to dislocate proprietary operations in general?

"Africa," here, is a figure of that which is lost to both time and space—"time-lost" and "Without a place"—and yet it is made to appear in three ways: as the disembodied memories "that history books create," as the "words sad-sung" accompanying the beating of bodies and drums, and as a "song of atavistic land." Its appearance is thus marked as a product of genealogical inscription (atavism), as the writing of history, and as the vocalized projection of a body or drum that is beaten, "Beat out of blood." Each of these operations for figuring "Africa" works only by reference to a notion of corporeality, including the dismembered memories "that history books create" to replace the "memories alive" that can only be found in the body. Taken together—as inscription, dismemberment, and corporal punishment—they collectively figure "some vast mist of race" through which penetrates the unintelligible song of "Africa" ("this song / I do not understand"). Like the speech of the Moor, the song of Africa requires a certain translation, but it is a translation of suffering that can only deliver the nonlocatable experience of the body-in-pain—figured first as "song," and finally as "Africa's / Dark face." In other words, a nonlocatable experience of this sort could never amount to a body existing in space and time, a "thing" one could point to and call "Africa."[10] Rather, "Africa," like Guillén's "missing grandfather," is the trace of a genetic inscription, or the iterability of an act of rape or punishment, or the violence committed by the act of a historical writing that separates (kills off, eliminates, excludes) bodies from the "memories alive" that they carry with them. In contrast to the "Letter from Spain," where Hughes considered as separate the three acts of successive capture/dislocation (involuntary colonial enlistment, military defeat, and linguistic translation), here the three moments of violent inscription are to be read as more or less equivalent or reducible to each other, for each produces the figure of "Africa" as a variation of "words

sad-sung." It would not be entirely appropriate to speak of a translation between these moments, for what is layered here is rather more like a morphology of the body-in-pain; or, to be exact, since the speaker decries the absence of a real, living body to stand witness to its suffering, the poem offers only a typology of disembodied memories (fragments) of pain. Thus the poem's final words, "Africa's / Dark face," signal the *type* (form, figure, gesture) of a body whose materiality has been beaten so deeply "into the blood" and so completely "out of the blood" that it is no longer recognizable as anything other than "song." Reconfigured as this type—the bloodless face of "Africa"—the song of the poem appears to fragment the body of Africa itself, fracturing and displacing its ostensibly singular point of reference into the globalized, and thus all the more unlocatable, experience of the "Afro-American." To this degree, the song, like the horizonal perspective of "Africa" in "Letter from Spain," offers a point of reference in a gesture that undermines the very structure of referentiality that would permit an object such as "Africa" to be intelligible qua object. Both poems thus simultaneously mimic and subvert the authoritarian gaze of the colonial-imperialist project of representing (i.e., containing) Africa as "its" other.[11]

If Africa is assigned such an indeterminate but disquieting role in Hughes's poetry, the question to ask is: what does this figure accomplish for Hughes, one who understands his poetic vocation as the *translation* of his people's suffering? Recall that Hughes described his work to Guillén in these words: "Yo no tengo más ambición que la de ser el poeta de los negros. . . . Me duelen en la entraña los golpes que reciben y *canto* sus dolores, *traduzco* sus tristezas, echo a volar sus ansias" [I have no other ambition than to be the poet of the Negroes . . . the blows they get hurt me to the core and I *sing* their sorrows, I *translate* their sadness, I put their anxieties to flight] (my emphases). If one reads this statement of Hughes in relation to the figures of Africa that appear in his "Letter from Spain" and "Afro-American Fragment," it would seem that what is at stake in his singing and translating is a reconfiguration of expression such that the experience of blacks is no longer *represented* (mimetically conjured, reflected, or reproduced) but instantiated, performed, or enacted as the experience of the undoing of representation itself. That is to say, Hughes wants to rethink

"expression" as a dismantling of representationality that is at the same time positively productive of the figure of "the Negro."

One final poem, Hughes's "A New Song" (1933/1938) offers a more specific idea of this figure of the Negro. The poem is unique in that it was substantially revised five years after its initial publication. The revised stanzas conclude the poem, whose first four stanzas recount the history of black oppression in the modern era, and are delivered by the poem's speaker who claims that he "speak[s] in the name of the black millions / Awakening to action." Thus, at the start of the poem, the speaker exclaims: "Let all others keep silent a moment. / I have this word to bring, / This thing to say, / This song to sing:" (Hughes 2000, 170–72). In relation to the silence the speaker calls for, he gives three characterizations of what will follow: a word will be brought, a thing will be said, and a song will be sung. Before looking more closely at what these entail, one might note that the first two make what appear to be counterintuitive claims: words are typically not so much brought as said, and things are typically not so much said as brought. It is as if Hughes wants to suggest their mutual translatability, a condition where words are more thing-like and things are more word-like, and where acts of saying and bringing change roles almost imperceptibly. The third characterization—a "song to sing"—would seem out of place in this typology, unless, of course, "song" and "singing" no longer mean what they are typically taken to mean. Hughes's addition of "this song to sing" to the first two acts does not resolve this question one way or the other, since, read in isolation, its meaning appears, precisely, to be taken for granted as understood. Yet as soon as it is added on to the first two acts as one more analogy in a chain of equivalents—i.e., as a translation—its meaning can in no way be taken for granted. Indeed, even the terms in which one might speculate about its significance are lacking, since the first two acts borrowed terms from each other reciprocally (this *word* to bring: this thing to *say*), thus making intelligible (or at least interpretable) their mutually effected redescriptions. A "song to sing," by contrast, only borrows from the first two characterizations by way of analogy: songs are *like* things as well as words, and singing is *like* both saying and bringing ("carrying" a tune). What would happen if one tried to extend the analogy? If, for Hughes,

words have become thing-like and things have become word-like, then perhaps songs have become a sort of index, or a narrative, of this very "becoming-other" of words and things. Are songs, here, what words and things have become when they can no longer be imagined as *either* things or words in any sense?

"A New Song" further specifies words and things in its closing stanzas, after the story of black oppression has been recounted in four stanzas, each linked by the words "That day is past." I will cite first the original 1933 lines, followed by their revision from 1938:

> For now,
> In many mouths—
> Dark mouths where red tongues burn
> And white teeth gleam—
> New words are formed,
> Bitter
> With the past
> And sweet
> with the dream.
> Tense, silent,
> Without a sound,
> They fall unuttered—
> Yet heard everywhere:
>
> Take care!
>
> Black world
> Against the wall,
> Open your eyes—
>
> The long white snake of greed has struck to kill!
>
> Be wary and
> Be wise!

Before
The darker world
The future lies.
(1933)

* * * * *

For now,
In many mouths—
Dark mouths where red tongues burn
And white teeth gleam—
New words are formed,
Bitter
With the past
But sweet
With the dream.
Tense,
Unyielding,
Strong and sure,
They sweep the earth—

Revolt! Arise!
The Black
And White World
Will be one!
The Worker's World!

The past is done!

A new dream flames
Against the
Sun!
(1938)

From the original to its revision, the function of words undergoes a transformation from a thing-like testament of the past to a weapon of revolt. In the first version, words are "Tense, silent, / Without a sound, / They fall unuttered— / Yet heard everywhere:," while in the revision they are "Tense, / Unyielding, / Strong and sure, / They sweep the earth—." In the original lines, the *silence* of words seems to be that which guarantees that they will be heard as things; in the second, it is instead their *strength* and integrity that are invoked as securing their use as weapons or tools to "sweep the earth." Where words in the original version are messianic ("Take care!" / "Be wary and be wise!"), in the revision they become commands ("Revolt! Arise!"). Further, accompanying this shift from messianism to militarism is a shift from the standpoint of "the black world" / "the darker world" to the standpoint of "The Black and White World" / "The Worker's World." And where the original speaks of the future—"Before the darker world the future lies"—the revision merely exclaims that "The past is done!"

Taken as an ensemble, these changes suggest that what is ultimately at stake for Hughes in the revised 1938 lines is a sense of history that is foreclosed by the struggle to achieve a black and white "Worker's World." For where the words of history, as in "Afro-American Fragment," are silent and "yet heard everywhere," the words of the Worker's World are sublated into a "new dream" that "flames against the sun," a dream that apparently transcends its origins in history so that the past can now be understood as "done," i.e., as no longer historical because no longer racially determined. In this change, Hughes approximates the ideal of that nonracialized Cuban "harmony" that Keith Ellis claimed to be the final (and evidently superior) goal of Guillén's poetry. Recall that, for Guillén, such an ideal was similarly figured, in "Balada de los dos abuelos" ("Ballad of the Two Grandfathers"), as the progressive sublation into a *song* of Cuba's black/white duality: "los dos del mismo tamaño, / ansia negra y ansia blanca, / los dos del mismo tamaño, / gritan, sueñan, lloran, cantan. / Sueñan, lloran, cantan. / Lloran, cantan. / ¡Cantan!" [both of equal size, / a Black longing, a White longing, / both of equal size, / they scream, dream, weep, sing. / They dream, weep, sing. / They weep, sing. / Sing!]. One by one, the screaming, dreaming, and

weeping of the grandfathers are excluded as possible expressions of their mutual longing. What remains is a song, but a "new" song that will render obsolete or meaningless the songs (and the screams, dreams, and weepings) of racialized suffering.

Fragments of History

Is this what comes of translation? Is such an outcome, like Benjamin's "pure language," beyond all historical determinations, "a priori and apart from all historical relationships"? Up to this point, I have tried to demonstrate that just the opposite is the case, for Hughes as well as for Guillén: namely, that the "songs" of Guillén's *son* and of Hughes's "Afro-American Fragment" and "A New Song" are figures, precisely, of an irreducibly *racialized* history that nonetheless disrupt the project of historical representation as such. In producing these figures, Hughes and Guillén draw on the notion of a history which is constituted by three acts of inscription: a geopolitical and biopolitical "atavism" (colonialism); the writing of history which excludes (by killing off) the very bodies that produce its possibility as writing; and the lashings, beatings, and bleedings which destroy these bodies while simultaneously creating them as embodied (materio-historical) agents. History-as-inscription, in this threefold sense, cannot be attenuated by any dialectical notion of racial "harmony" that would disavow the materiality of its operations. For it is only as the "flesh of the world" (namely the hand, the face, the "darkness" of the skin) that such an inscription operates; or rather, in this case, it is only in or as a kind of flesh that the "song"—neither word nor thing—can be heard. Far from suppressing the racialized effects of its constitutive acts of violence, inscription draws these forth by delimiting their juridico-legal, political, economic, and conceptual contours. In other words, "history" is productive of "race" because a necessarily racialized violence-as-inscription is mobilized from the start as that which sustains, legitimizes, and lends support to the project of historical representation as such.

To speak, in the language of Hughes and Guillén, of "translating" this history, then, requires a rethinking of translation that would no longer

reduce it to a notion of more or less equivalent exchange. Nor would it be possible to speak of a translation, in Benjamin's sense, between nonexchangeable but ultimately (albeit only collectively) signifying fragments of a "pure language."[12] Instead, the task would be to think a translation between fragments understood as the "new" songs, fragments that are neither strictly material nor ideal—neither word nor thing—and that cut across and exceed the very fabric of textuality that sustains these as possible units of exchange (that is, still fragments, because related to a "whole," but metonymically substitutable for the whole because the whole, here, can only be figured as the provisional delimitation of their substitutions). In short, one might imagine a translation of precisely that which translation (history) has always had to exclude in order to function in the service of reproducible meaning.[13]

At this point, it is useful to go back and insert the reading of "Letter from Spain" into the apparently closed circle of the dialectical sublation/effacement of racialized violence that is announced in the revised "A New Song" and Guillén's "Balada de los dos abuelos." For what occurs in the "Letter from Spain" is a kind of translation which disrupts the law of analogical equivalence, thus preventing an isomorphic layering that would subsume the poem's three acts of violence into a single figure that could then serve as a sort of turnstile to represent any one of them. The disruption, in this case, is an operation of spacing. The three separate geopolitical acts of violence described in "Letter from Spain" are spatially located, and hence distinct; yet because they each involve a similar practice of enforced dislocation, each act makes possible its successor. Thus, one can speak of their itinerary as temporally joined in a spatial configuration ("Africa"), but a configuration whose "foundations," for this very reason, are "shakin'." To illustrate this in a somewhat different language, one might compare it to Benjamin's description of the task of the historical critic: "The concept [*Vorstellung*] of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself" (Benjamin 1969b, 261).[14] Hughes, and, in a different way, Guillén, are both staging a critique

of the notion of historical time as "empty" and homogeneous: a neutral time in which events take their place, to be later gathered up, evaluated, and written as "history." Instead, both poets propose a notion of historical time that escapes those (colonial-imperialist) representational projects which are compelled to disavow the material conditions that underlie and support the temporal "objectivity" from which they draw their authority. Hughes's "Africa" and Guillén's musical *son*, "La canción del bongó" ("The Song of the Bongo"), offer translations of the heterogeneity of temporal experience as such. This heterogeneity is not derivative of some more homogeneous concept of time, but constitutes time itself through and as the inscription of a racializing violence. Thus, from their perspective, history is always and everywhere the history of "the darker world," to quote Hughes, and any attempt to gloss over or exclude this constitutive inscription—for instance, in history understood as an apparently homogeneous "Worker's World"—only works more insidiously to enforce its violence.

In closing, then, one might consider a final reflection by Benjamin, from his seventeenth thesis on the Philosophy of History:

> Materialistic historiography [*Geschichtsschreibung*, literally "the writing of history"], on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest [*Stillstellung*] as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast [*herausprengen*] a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved *in* this work and at the same time canceled [*aufgehoben*]; *in* the lifework, the era; and *in* the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time [*in ihrem* Innern; Benjamin's emphasis] as a precious but tasteless seed. (Benjamin 1969b, 262–63)

At this point, I want only to offer a cursory and somewhat reductive analysis of two aspects of this text that the poetry of Hughes and Guillén seems simultaneously to affirm and call into question. First, Benjamin here stresses the binary internal/external in order to situate the results of materialist historiography. The writer of history approaches his subject as a crystallized monad that interrupts the flowing of homogeneous time. In doing so, he is able to locate the "course" of history (*Geschichtsverlauf*) within the very representation that disrupts—by freezing—the movement of conceptual thought. This monad, however, results from the crystallization/suspension of *homogeneous* time, and thus does not mark its radical reconfiguration as such. In this regard, it functions like a "caesura of the speculative,"[15] a literal breaking-into the temporal structure of conceptual thinking; yet it does not displace this structure in any way that would question its ultimate authority or primacy. Thus, the disruption fails either to mark or to fundamentally challenge the racially exclusionary practice that is constitutive of the discipline of historiography.

Secondly, there is a translation that occurs in this passage where Benjamin writes: "In this structure [the historiographer] recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past." The phrase "put differently" is expressed in the original German as *anders gesagt*. It asks us to read what comes after it as a kind of translation of what preceded it. So one is to read "the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening" *as* (another way of saying) "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past." Benjamin, in short, is asking us to rethink the past as a cessation of that representational thinking which would reduce it to a "happening." In place of such a fetishization of happening, Benjamin offers a revolutionary fetishization of the very fetish of representation: namely, a messianic cessation—a *Stillstellung*, a putting to rest—of the temporal flow at the basis of representational containment. By capturing in this manner the historical "happening," the past is retrieved (or redeemed) from its erasure under the homogeneity of the concept.

But a question remains: could Benjamin—or, for that matter, could Hughes or Guillén—have proposed such a cessation without first *translating*

it into those representational terms that would render it as simultaneously both intelligible and oxymoronic? In other words, does this signal the *motivo*, "the great motif" (*das große Motiv*) of translation turning full circle, rounding itself off? Perhaps, as it seems, it is only the work of the *motivo* itself: a "new song," the song of the drum, or the song of "Africa" performing its revolutionary work by describing an *other* motor of history.

NOTES

1. For an articulate proponent of this view, see Cobb (1979).
2. For more on Guillén, see Kutzinski (1987).
3. All citations, Spanish and English, are taken from Felstiner (1990). My sincere thanks go to Alberto Moreiras (Duke University) for pointing me towards Neruda's text.
4. I use the term "biopolitics" in reference to Giorgio Agamben's analysis of sovereignty and the modern state (Agamben 1998). The term was originally coined by Michel Foucault (1978, 140–44). Homi K. Bhabha has elsewhere described this form of representational containment as "the 'play' in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power" (1994, 70–71).
5. This would entail, in Arnold Krupat's words, "a critical practice that seeks to undo its largely imperial history—its claim to speak for those who have no eloquent language of their own, its domination of the foreign figure of speech . . . by domesticating it, siting-by-citing it within one's own discourse" (1992, 198).
6. Like the limbo, the Afro-Cuban *son* is frequently considered as announcing "the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures" (Harris 1970, 10). There is a rich literature on the 300-year-old Afro-Cuban *son* that locates its sources in at least three cultural traditions: European, African, and indigenous Cuban/Caribbean. This literature, of which I list only a sample, indicates the extent of sociopolitical overdetermination attributed to the *son* in the history of Cuban culture. See especially Carpentier (1946, 220–54, 286–304); Ortiz (1974, 1984); Castellanos (1990, 309–429; 1994, 174–83, 277, 344–99); Guillén (1999); Echevarría (1980, 1987); Mullen (1998, 116–31).
7. That this "correspondence" is intended as both a local instance of communication by "Johnny" to his "brother," as well as a signal for a broader, global correspondence that touches upon the network of colonial imperialism, is stated clearly in *I Wonder as I Wander*, where Hughes describes the occasion for writing this poem: "The International Brigades were, of course, aware of the irony of the colonial Moors—victims themselves of oppression in North Africa—fighting against a Republic that had been seeking to work out a liberal policy toward Morocco. To try to express the feelings of

some of the Negro fighting men in this regard, I wrote these verses in the form of a letter from an American Negro in the Brigades to a relative in Dixie" (quoted in Hughes 2000, 647 n. 202).

8. The phrase was coined in a 1985 essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Socialized [globalized, multinational] capital kills by remote control" (Spivak 1996a, 69).
9. Aimé Césaire has a similar notion of the flesh in his poetic discussion of negritude: "my negritude is not a / stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day . . . / my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral / it takes root in the red flesh of the soil / it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky" (1983, 67, 69). With the phrase "flesh of the world," I am referencing the text of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968, 133–55).
10. Stuart Hall glosses the problem of Africa as "origin" when he observes: "The common history [of diasporic peoples of African descent]—transportation, slavery, colonisation—has been profoundly formative. For all these societies, unifying us across our differences. But it does not constitute a common origin, since it was, metaphorically as well as literally, a translation" (1996, 114).
11. This double gesture—at once mimicking and dismantling the colonialist gaze—has been more broadly articulated, by some critics, to characterize the entire Négritude movement (Parry 1994, 93–94).
12. Benjamin's notion of the fragments that are collected and reassembled in the form of a "greater [pure] language" in acts of translation is expressed in "The Task of the Translator" (1969a, 78). The Benjaminian fragment appears in another context, with a different but related function, in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in reference to the "Messianic time" that is revealed by the writing of the materialist historiographer: "Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with the chips of Messianic time" (Benjamin 1969b, 263).
13. I have in mind here Jacques Derrida's remarks on the exclusionary economy of metaphor in philosophical discourse: "Henceforth the entire teleology of meaning, which constructs the philosophical concept of metaphor, coordinates metaphor with the manifestation of truth, with the production of truth as presence without veil, with the reappropriation of a full language without syntax, with the vocation of a pure nomination: without differential syntax, or in any case without a properly unnamable articulation that is irreducible to the semantic relève or to dialectical interiorization" (1982, 270). Adding to this, I would emphasize the need for a rethinking of the "syntactical" such that any attempt to render it strictly distinguishable from the category of the "existential" would become necessarily problematic. The beginnings of such a rethinking might be found in the analysis of this exclusionary operation within the logic of the Marxian dialectic; see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value" (1996b, 117, 119).
14. Although I have chosen to leave intact the original translation of *Vorstellung* as "concept," one should bear in mind that this German term more accurately refers to "representation," while the German *Begriff* is usually translated as "concept." In the lexicon of classical German philosophy, beginning with Kant, representations and concepts have two quite different functions, the former designating an operation of

the faculties of intuition and understanding (*Anschauung* and *Verstand*), and the latter designating a product of the faculties of understanding and reason (*Vernunft*).

15. For an elaboration of this notion as it pertains to the aesthetic discourse of German Idealism, see Lacoue-Labarthe (1989).

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