

SOUL BROTHERS/HERMANOS DEL ALMA

Langston Hughes (1902-67) and Nicolás Guillén (1902-89)

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THE FORGING OF TWIN SOULS

Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén were born in 1902 just as the United States military occupation of Cuba after the Spanish American War ended.

Nicolás attended Law School in Havana before giving up his course of study for a writing career just as Hughes turned his back on Columbia University for the same reason.

Hughes and Guillén came from families committed to social change. Guillén's father had been a nationalist political leader and newspaper editor.

Hughes grandmother's first husband died with John Brown at Harper's Ferry, having already served with his wife as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, and his great-uncle was an outstanding abolitionist, legislator and academic.

Both men were of mixed race but identified with their African ancestry and extolled their blackness. In Guillén's March 2, 1930 interview of Hughes for an article in *El Diario de la Marina Conversación con Langston Hughes* Hughes said, "I live among my people; I love them; the blows they get hurt me to the core and I sing their sorrows, I express their sadness, I put their anxieties to flight. And I do all this the people's way, with the same simplicity with which the people do it... I should like to be black. Really black. Truly black!"

Guillén described himself in his essay *El camino de Harlem* (The Road From Harlem) a year earlier as "a light-skinned black with 'good' hair."

Both writers made the struggle for social justice for Negroes and the oppressed their guiding principle in life and the inspiration for their poetry.

In the 1920's Hughes and Mexican poet-Carlos Pellicer, were members of a tiny international advance guard of literary progressives that would eventually include Pablo

Neruda of Chile, Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, Leopold Sedes Senghor of Senegal, Jaques Roumain of Haiti, Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Nicolás Guillén of Cuba.

Langston made his second visit to Cuba in 1930. (His first brief visit was as a young seaman.) He was seeking (at the behest of a rich patron) a partner to write an opera rooted in Cuban exotic primitivism. He never found his partner, but he did find friends like Fernández de Castro, editor of *El Diario de la Marina* who introduced him to Nicolás Guillén, who was searching for his authentic voice and later became the twentieth century's most important Cuban poet. Langston had attained recognition in American literary circles with the publication of his poetry collections *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), whereas Guillén had published only individual poems in Cuban literary journals.

Guillén had published his sonnets *Al Margen De Mis Libros De Estudios* in 1922, an apologia for leaving Law School. In 1928 he began work with Gustavo Urrutia who edited the Special Negro Page, *Ideales de una Raza*, of *El Diario de la Marina*. This earned Guillén a reputation as a creative opponent to the dictator Gerard Machado.

By the time Langston Met Nicolás in Havana in 1930, according to his biographer, Arnold Rampersad in *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 1 (1902-1941), "Hughes was essentially past major influence as a poet, not so Guillén, who was himself thinking of Langston Hughes' work and its fearless racial aesthetic."

Langston was modest and unassuming but he personified the Harlem Renaissance, of which his poetry was quintessential. Langston was a hero to many young Caribbean blacks including Nicolás.

Hughes had one crucial recommendation for Guillén – that he should make the rhythm of the Afro-Cuban Son, the authentic music of the black masses, central to his poetry, as Hughes himself had done with Blues and Jazz.

Although Guillén had previously shown a strong sense of outrage against racism and economic imperialism, he had not yet done so in language inspired by native, Afro-Cuban speech and dance. He had been more concerned with protesting racism than with offering the power and beauty of Cuban blackness.

Within a few days of Langston's departure from Cuba Nicolás created a furor in Havana, "un verdadero escándalo, (a true scandal)" he told Langston with delight by publishing on the *Ideales de una Raza*, page of April 20th 1930 what Gustavo Urrutia called exultantly "eight formidable negro poems" entitled *Motivos de Son* (Son Motifs).

Mulata

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

Y fijate bien que tu
no ere tan adelanta,
poqqe tu boca e bien grande,
y tu pasa, colora.

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

Si tu supiera, mulata,
La vedda;
que yo con mi negra tengo,
Y no te quiero pa na!

Nicolás at Langston's urging had used the Son dance rhythm to capture the moods and features of the black Havana poor. Urrutia identified the verse as "The exact equivalent of your 'Blues!'" (*Between Race and Empire*, (BRE) edited by Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda, *Convergences and Divergences* by Keith Ellis pgs. 129-167).

Foremost among their parallel perceptions... was the aesthetic value of their respective peoples' musical heritage: Hughes's demonstrated view that popular black American musical rhythms, the blues and Jazz, were fitting themes for his poetry; and

Guillén's belief that the Cuban Son, the product of the blending of African rhythms and Spanish melodies that was popular among the masses, was the soul of Cuba and a natural basis for his unifying project. (BRE pg. 137)

When a Cuban critic denied a relationship between Hughes and Guillén's Afro-Cuban poetry, Guillén refuted him at once in *Sones y Soneros*, an essay published in *El País* on June 12th 1930.

In a letter dated July 17th 1930 Langston praises Guillén's *Motivos de Son* "Que formidable tus Motivos de Son! Son poemas muy cubanos y muy buenos. Me alegro que tú los has escrito y que han tenido tanto éxito." (Your *Motivos de Son* are stupendous! They are both very Cuban and very good. I am very happy that you have written them and that they have had so much success).

The friendship between the two poets was further strengthened with Hughes' next and final visit to Cuba in 1931. With Guillén and Urrutia, Langston worked on his translations of Cuban poets determined to secure an audience for them in the U.S. That spring, *Poetry Quarterly* of New York published three poems by Hughes, one by Guillén, *Madrigal* and Urrutia's poem *Students of Yesterday* was published in the journal *Crisis*.

A gesture from Hughes that contributed greatly to their deepening friendship was Hughes's writing in Havana his light hearted verse *Havana Dreams*:

The dream is a cocktail at Sloppy Joe's—
(Maybe—nobody knows.)

The dream is the road to Batabanó.
(But nobody knows if that is so.)

Perhaps the dream is only her face—
Perhaps it's a fan of silver lace—
Or maybe the dream's a Vedado rose—
(¿Quién sabe? Who really knows?)

Hughes's most outspoken and militant prose and poetry was written in the 1930's. Here is his anti-imperialist poem *To the Little Fort of San Lázaro on the Ocean Front*,

Havana, found in *Good Morning Revolution (GMR) Uncollected Social Protest Writings* by Langston Hughes edited by Faith Berry.

Watch tower once for pirates
That sailed the sun-bright seas—
Red pirates, great romantics,
 Drake
 De Plan
 El Grillo
Against such as these
Years and years ago
You served quite well—
When time and ships were slow.
 But now,
Against a pirate called
THE NATIONAL CITY BANK
What can you do alone?
Would it not be
Just as well you tumbled down,
Stone by helpless stone?

(*New Masses*, May 1931)

Guillén was thrilled to see coming from a U.S. poet views on the victimization of Cuba that coincided with those he himself had expressed in the same 1929 poem in which Hughes had been mentioned, *Pequeña oda a Kid Chocolate*:

De seguro que a ti
no te preocupa Waldo Frank,
ni Langston Hughes
[el de “I, too, Sing America.”]

Doubtless you
are not concerning yourself with Waldo Frank,
nor Langston Hughes
[he of “I, too, Sing America”].

and in his *Caña* (Cane), first published in June 1930:

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!

Hughes directly encountered racial discrimination in Cuba. He was brought before the courts for attempting to go to an American-controlled, white's only beach. He experienced the color line in Cuba that was the subject of Guillén's poem *El abuelo* (The Grandfather). Hughes saw that the color line spawned the pathos of those who futilely insisted that they were white because they had a drop of white blood in them.

"In spite of the fact that Cuba is distinctly a Negroid country, there exists there a sort of triple color line...At the bottom of the color scale are the pure-blooded Negroes, black or dark brown in color. In the middle are the mixed bloods, the light brown, mulattoes, golden yellows and near whites... The come the nearer whites, the octoroons, "meriney," (as American Negroes term that reddish blond border line between colored and white) and the pure white of skin...for Cuba's color line is much more flexible than that of

the United States, and much more subtle. There are no Jim Crow cars in Cuba... 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. The British Islands are the worst in this respect. The Latin Islands are more careless concerning racial matters.” (*I Wonder as I Wonder*, 1956, Langston Hughes pgs.10-15). (See *Cuban Color, 20 degrees of separation, from Negro-Azul/prieto to Albino/blanco*)

Hughes could feel the pernicious and pervasive influence of what Guillén called “The white man who makes of whiteness his anthem and flag.” Guillén had confronted two of these in the persons of a “Dr. Martinez and Gaston Mora in his 1929 essay *El blanco: he ahí el problema* and in his combative essay against Ramiro Cabrera, *Racismo y cubanidad* (Racism and Cubanness), published on June 15, 1937, in *Mediodía*, a journal edited by Guillén. The sociologist Cabrera had published in the newspaper *El Siglo* an article titled *Africanismo e hispanismo*, wherein he claims that blacks are impeding the progress of whites; and not content with the de facto segregation already in force in the materially privileged Catholic schools, he advocates separation of whites and blacks in the entire school system. (BRE pg. 143)

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Hughes and Guillén met in July of 1937 at the Paris session of the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture held in several Spanish cities and Paris.

Guillén's speech stressed the principal currents of his poetry from the *Oda a Kid Chocolate* of 1929 to *España: Poema en cuatro angustias y una esperanza*, which preceded the speech by two months, *Motivos de son* (1930), *Songoro cosongo* (1931), *West Indies Ltd.* (1934), *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas* (1937) (Songs for Soldiers and Sonets for Tourists) that reveal his themes of antiracism, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism and recognized the cohesive powers of popular Afro-Cuban culture.

"I was saying, besides, and now I want to affirm the statements, that the black Cuban is together with the white Cuban, an insuppressible component in the historical development of Cuba, to the extent that to try to segregate blacks, as fascism would like to do, would be to submerge the country in criminal chaos. Blacks, after all, form the majority of the working, slaving classes of Cuba, and they are therefore linked, painfully, to the whole shady economic process of that semi-colonial society, sacked by U.S. imperialism. How could they not feel in the depth of their own tragedy the tragedy of the Spanish people? They feel it, and they share with the white masses the same eagerness for liberation and struggle that touches deeply all the oppressed people of the earth, of no other race than the human race." (BRE pg. 146)

Hughes's 1937 speech at the Paris Congress was titled *Too much of Race* and was delivered three days after Guillén delivered his speech.

"Members of the Second International Writers Congress, comrades, and people of Paris: I come from a land whose democracy from the very beginning has been tainted with race prejudice born of slavery, and whose richness has been poured through the narrow channels of greed into the hands of the few. I come to the Second International Writers Congress representing my country, America, but most especially the Negro peoples of America, and the poor peoples of America—because I am both a Negro and poor. And that combination of color and of poverty gives me the right then to speak for the most oppressed group in America, that group that has known so little of American democracy, the fifteen million Negroes who dwell within our borders... We Negroes of America are tired of a world divided superficially on the basis of blood and color, but in reality on the basis of poverty and power—the rich over the poor, no matter what their color. We Negroes of

America are tired of a world in which it is possible for any group of people to say to another: 'You have no right to happiness, or freedom, or the joy of life.' We are tired of a world where forever we work for someone else and the profits are not ours. We are tired of a world where, when we raise our voices against oppression, we are immediately jailed, intimidated, beaten and sometimes lynched. Nicolás Guillén has been in prison in Cuba, Jacques Roumain, in Haiti, Angelo Herndon in the United States." (GMR pgs.97, 98)

Nicolás and Langston traveled together into Civil War Spain in July of 1937. Langston traveled with his typewriter and box of Jazz and Blues records, Nicolás with his infectious sense of humor and Cuban salsa.

Hughes had traveled widely before he went to Spain, sometimes as a seaman in the merchant marine, at other times to further his development as a writer and to educate himself on race relations outside the USA. He traveled extensively in the Soviet Union before his trip to Spain. Guillén's visit to France and Spain was his first trip outside Cuba. Guillén joined the Communist party formally while in Spain but had collaborated with it for several years previously.

Hughes in his *Song of Spain* beseeches workers to withhold their labor from the fascists and their allies who are destroying Spain. Guillén in his *España: Poema en cuatro angustias y una esperanza* (Spain: Poem in Four Anguishes and a Hope), displays his early antiracist, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist outlook and his belief in the unifying power of popular Afro-Cuban culture. (BRE pg. 144)

Yo,
hijo de América,
hijo de ti y de África,
esclavo ayer de mayorales blancos dueños de látigos
coléricos;
hoy esclavo de rojos yanquis azucareros y voraces;
yo chapoteando en la oscura sangre en que se mojan mis
Antillas;
ahogado en el humo agriverde de los cañaverales;
sepultado en el fango de todas las cárceles;
cercado día y noche por insaciables bayonetas;
perdido en las florestas ululantes de las islas
crucificadas en la cruz del Trópico;

yo, hijo de América,
corro hacia ti, muero por ti.

I,
a son of the Americas,
a son of Spain and Africa,
a slave yesterday of white overseers
and their choleric whips;
today a slave of red, sugary, voracious Yankees;
I, splashing about in the dark blood
in which my West Indies are soaked;
drowned in the bitter green smoke
of the cane fields;
buried in the mire of all the prisons;
encircled day and night
by insatiable bayonets
lost in the howling woodlands of the islands
crucified on the cross of the Tropics;
I, a son of the Americas,
run to you, I die for you.

Guillén's writing this from Civil War Spain reminds us of his international concerns and involvement which initiates his intense concern for the plight of blacks in the American South that he later displayed in his poems *Elegia a Jesus Menendez*, *Brindis*, *Little Rock*, which was included in his book *La paloma del vuelo popular* and in *Elegia a Emmet Till* (1956).

ahora un niño frágil
pequeña flor de tus riberas
no raíz todavía de tus árboles
no tronco de tus bosques,
no piedra de tu lecho
no caimán de tus aguas:
un niño apenas,
un niño muerto, asesinado y solo
negro.

now a fragile child
small flower of your shores
not yet a root of your trees
not a trunk in your forests
not a stone in your bed
not an alligator in your waters:
barely a child
a dead child, killed and only
black.

Un niño con su trompo
con sus amigos, con su barrio
con su camisa de domingo
con billete para cine,
con su pupitre y su pizarra,
con su pomo de tinta,
con su guante de béisbol,
con su programa de boxeo
con su retrato de Lincoln
con su bandera norteamericana,
negro.

A child with his spinning top
with his friends, with his
neighborhood
with his Sunday best shirt
with his ticket for the movies,
with his school desk and slate,
with his bottle of ink,
with his baseball glove,
with his boxing program
with his portrait of Lincoln
with his American flag,
black.

Un niño negro asesinado y solo
que una rosa de amor

arrojó al paso de una niña blanca.

A black child murdered and just
because of a rose of love
he threw in the path of a white girl

Hughes left Spain in December 1937. Guillén returned to Cuba in mid 1938. The experience of defending the Spanish Republic for Guillén and Hughes as for so many others who shared in that tragic struggle heightened their mutual appreciation and deepened their friendship. (BRE pg. 147)

The reactions of both Langston and Nicolás to the racist conditions of their respective societies for a long time created similarities in the themes of their poetry and strengthened the bonds between the two men.

Langston's most outspoken prose and poetry is from the 1930's. Langston composed hard-hitting poems with biting satire. He condemned the use of the judicial system to slaughter blacks as in *Christ in Alabama* (1931) and other poems dedicated to the Scottsboro case. He attacked the exploitation of black workers in *Air Raid over Harlem* (1935). He attacked imperialism in the scathing *Merry Christmas* (1930) and *To the Little Fort of San Lazaro on the ocean Front, Havana* (1931).

According to Arnold Rampersad, Hughes most insightful biographer, "In 1931, disgusted by Cuba's status as an imperialist football, Langston virtually called for an anti-imperialist revolution in Cuba on Marxist grounds." (The Life of Langston Hughes vol. 11: 1941-1967 *I Dream A World* by Arnold Rampersad pg. 323)

Writing in *Phylon* in 1947 about *My Adventures as a Social Poet*, Hughes states:

"Poets who write mostly about love, roses and moonlight, sunset and snow, must lead a very quiet life. Seldom, I imagine, does their poetry get them into difficulties... Unfortunately, having been born poor—and also colored— in Missouri, I was stuck in them mud from the beginning. Try as I might to float off into the clouds, poverty and Jim Crow would grab me by the heels, and right back on earth I would land." (GMR pg. 135)

Guillén's response to the obstacles to social justice for Afro-Cubans led to his view of poetry expressed in the poem *Guitarra* (1942) and *Arte poetica* (1958). The latter, especially, bears some resemblance to Hughes' statement in *Phylon* quoted above.

As a black American in white America Hughes were a "marginal" American and a second-class citizen. Hughes could not achieve the same sense of national identity as Guillén. His alienation is starkly set forth in his early poems *Let America Be America to me*:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.
(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.
(It never was America to me.)...

and *History* published in *A New Song*:

The past has been
A mint of blood and sorrow—
That must not be
True of tomorrow

Guillén too attacked the mountain of racism found in Cuba where racism was officially proscribed but like the Yankee north was widely practiced in all sectors of society. However Cuban society is smaller and still more fluid than North America especially when it comes to race relations. As a mulatto Guillén had greater social acceptability and mobility in Cuba than Negro Hughes had in North America.

As early as 1937 Guillén reflects on the different social/cultural dynamics affecting him and Hughes.

“That’s how it is in Cuba. So that when that exotic wave reached the island, it wasn’t a surprising novelty: rather 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...But the blacks would in their full reality, flayed by the whip; the blacks fused with the whites; the autochthonous substitutes of the Indians, and those who enslaved them. They formed an Afro-Spanish drama: the whole inerasable mulatto condition of the island.” (BRE pg153)

THE COLD WAR

Nicolás and Langston saw each other for the last time in 1949, when Nicolás attended a peace conference in New York.

In the 1950's and 1960's their approach to international affairs diverged in important ways. This had a great deal to do with the way they fared against hostile domestic forces.

Hughes found his reputation threatened and his career in jeopardy.

An event that provoked Guillén's indignation was the summoning of his friend, Langston, before Senator Joseph McCarthy's subcommittee on un-American activities in March 1953. As a result of the political stances taken earlier in Langston's career and reflected in his *Good Morning Revolution* poems, Hughes was a target of the "cold war" crusade against Communism and Communist's, real or imagined. This "witch hunt" known as McCarthyism characterized the 1950's and 1960's era of political paranoia.

Anyone who ever had expressed praise of the Soviet Union was branded a public enemy. Hughes was pressed to answer questions such as "Do you remember writing this: 'Good-morning, Revolution: You're the very best friend I ever had. We gonna pal around together from now on?' Did you write this, 'Put one more 'S' in the USA to make it Soviet. The USA when we take control will be the USSA then.' Yes sir, I wrote that."

Before the committee in Washington D.C., Langston concedes past mistakes as a radical but implicates no one else on the left. He is "exonerated" by the committee, but conservative attacks on him continue.

"Langston was never a member of the Communist party, though indeed he once had been sympathetic to it, a fact he did not deny (without apologizing) during the McCarthy hearings. The emergence of McCarthyism meant "black lists" in the publishing world, the power to destroy careers at apogee. As a result of the McCarthy hearings, for several years, Hughes's name was on a list of "un-American" authors whose books were also banned from the schools and libraries of certain states that passed anti-Communist laws. Many of his speaking engagements were canceled. His public appearances often were met with pickets carrying signs with the words "traitor," "red" and "Communist sympathizer." (GMR xiii)

Langston distanced himself from many of his social protest poems of the 1930's and not just *Goodbye Christ*, which had been troubling him for years, but other social/political poems like *Good Morning Revolution* and *Lenin*.

In the face of criticism from both his well-meaning friends and his political enemies Hughes called these poem's "out-dated examples of my work written in my youth."

By the fifties Hughes assiduously avoided radical politics. In 1960 during Fidel Castro's tumultuous stay at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, Langston denied false reports that he had dined with him. "In fact, just after the Newport Jazz Festival, Hughes had refused to join a group of black Americans on an all-expenses-paid tour of Cuba... (Another writer who made this visit to Cuba was LeRoi Jones, now known as Amiri Baraka. For him, it marked the beginning of the high road to radicalism." (*The Life of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 11: pg. 323)

Langston's writing and actions closely scrutinized by the red baiting U.S. Congress and press became so acceptable that he was sent on official tours of African countries by the U.S. State Department and President Lyndon Johnson appointed him official American representative to the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar Senegal.

Guillén understood his friend's plight and his indignation were directed at Hughes's accusers. He particularly targeted Hughes' main accuser in his poema *Pequeña letania grotesca en la muerte del senador McCarthy* (1958) (Little grotesque litany on the death of Senator McCarthy]. He continued his attack on McCarthyism five years later in the poema *Crecen altas las flores* (The flowers grow tall):

Murió McCarthy, dicen. (Yo mismo dije: "Es cierto, murió McCarthy...") Pero lo cierto es que no ha muerto.

McCarthy is dead, they say. (I myself said: "It is true, McCarthy is dead...") But the truth is that he is not dead.

Even after the dawn of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959 Guillén continued to rail against the rabid racism of the United States. His ironic *El gran zoo* (1972) (The Great Zoo) is caustic in its critique of Lynch (The Lynch Law).

Lynch de Alabama
Rabo en forma de látigo
y pezuñas terciarias.
Suele manifestarse
con una gran cruz en llamas.
Se alimenta de negros, sogas,
fuego, sangre, clavos
alquitrán.
Capturado
junto a una horca. Macho.
Castrado.

Lynch of Alabama
Tail in the shape of a whip
and tertiary hooves.
It usually appears
with a large flaming cross.
It feeds on blacks, ropes,
fire, blood, nails,
tar.
Captured
at a hanging. Male.
Castrated.)

Just as Langston was moderating his militancy in the 1950's and 60's and distancing himself from *Good Morning Revolution* and other radical poems written in the 1920's and 30's Nicolás was escalating his attacks on American racism by questioning nonviolent civil disobedience.

Langston passionately fought fascism in Europe and racism at home. In the early sixties Langston defended the moderate civil rights approach of the NAACP and the non violent civil disobedience approach of Martin Luther King against attacks by young militant blacks. He truly was a pacifist at heart.

While Guillén recognized that nonviolent civil disobedience in response to racism was *Esta Bien* (1963),” (All Is Very Well) he also called on U.S. blacks to consider the

possibility of combating violence with armed struggle. Interestingly, with this poem Guillén entered into the heated debate then taking place in the U.S. between the traditional nonviolent civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King and the black power advocates like Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown and the Black Panthers. (BRE, *Cuban Social Poetry and the Struggle against Two Racisms* by Carmen Gomez Garcia, pg. 246)

Bien tus sermones en los templos dinamitados,
bien tu insistencia heroica
en estar junto a los blancos,
porque la ley—la ley?—proclama
la igualdad de todos los americanos.

Bien
esta muy bien
Requetebién,

hermano negro del Sur crucificado.
Pero acuérdate de John Brown,
que no era negro y te defendió con un fusil en las manos.

Fusil: arma de fuego portátil
(es lo que dice el diccionario)
con que disparan los soldados
Hay que agregar: Fusil (en ingles “gun”)
arma también con que responden
los esclavos.

All very well your sermons in dynamited churches,
well your heroic insistence on
being together with the whites,
because the law—the law?—proclaims
the equality of all Americans.

Well
it is all well
it is all very well.

black brother of the crucified South.
But don't forget John Brown,
who was not black and who defended you fusil in hand.

Fusil: a portable firearm
[that's what the dictionary says]
with which soldiers shoot.
One should add: Fusil (in English "gun")
also a weapon
with which slaves respond.

In the 1950's Langston and Nicolás's careers went in dramatically different directions. Langston was castigated and punished for being too radical by a reactionary right wing Republican Congress. He suffered heartbreak and disappointment in his last years.

Guillén would have been disappointed to know of the deprived conditions of Hughes's fatal hospital stay in 1967. He had battled hard and long in a hostile environment; and by the 1960s, this sensitive man, joyful and free in his creativity, was battered and bruised. Although in the 1960's he received several honors including the NAACP's Spingarn Medal and he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in the spring of 1961. He also received several honorary university degrees and toured parts of Africa for the U.S. State Department.

The title of Langston's first book *The Weary Blues* (1926) could also characterize his middle years, captured in the refrain *America never was America to me* (1935). Langston's last poem, *Flotsam* (1968), published posthumously in *The Crisis*—the NAACP journal that published him in the beginning of his poetic career—is also a weary blues:

On the shoals of Nowhere,
Cast up—my boat,
Bow all broken
No longer afloat.

On the shoals of Nowhere,
Wasted my song—

Yet taken by the sea wind
And blown along.

In Nicolás's book *Tengo* (1960), one senses his satisfaction with his life and his work. A satisfaction not fully realized by Langston during his lifetime. Nicolás was much heralded after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In 1961 he became the president of the Union of Writers and Artists and Cuba's poet laureate until his death in 1989.

Tengo is a seven-stanza poem titled and beginning "Vine en un barco negrero. Me trajeron" (I came in a slave ship. They brought me). In this poem he traces Cuba's history through heroic black figures like Jose Antonio Aponte, the leader of a spirited slave rebellion. Antonio Maceo, the anti-colonial and anti-slavery fighter, and Jesus Menéndez, the assassinated leader of the national sugar workers' trade union in the Batista era and after alluding to the patriotic and unifying mission he had declared in *El camino de Harlem* (The Road to Harlem), he ends his poem with the lines:

Oh Cuba! Mi voz entrego.
En ti creo.
Mía la tierra que beso.
Mío el cielo

Libre estoy, vine de lejos.
Soy un negro.

Oh Cuba! I give you my voice.
I believe in you.
Mine is the land I kiss.
Mine is the sky.

I am free, I came from afar.
I am black.

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