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## Black Atlantic expression in the poetry of Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén

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## Abstract

As Paul Gilroy has argued, the Black Atlantic is a cultural and literary network that has emerged in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade. The concerns of the Black Atlantic are made visible in the poetry of African American Langston Hughes and Cuban Nicolás Guillén. Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic draws on W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of 'double consciousness' which describes the "doubleness" that blacks can experience when belonging to two groups at the same time which have been constructed as oppositional and exclusive in a society. One of Du Bois's main concerns is to highlight the troublesome situation of the African Americans in the time after the emancipation, and to advocate for the inclusion of black people's culture and identity into the U.S. national identity. Gilroy develops the idea of double consciousness to question national identities, notions of ethnicity, and the assumption that cultures always flow into congruent patterns with national borders; he further suggests that the Atlantic should be taken as a single, complex formation of black cultural expression. The analysis in this essay of the poems by Hughes and Guillén show that even though the poetry of these writers emerges in different contexts their poetry share essential similarities in their expressions of the Black Atlantic: the expression of a collective subject's experience of slavery and displacement, the experience of double consciousness, and the aspiration for a whole identity, which can either, or simultaneously, be a desire of belonging to a national identity or to a cosmopolitan identity. Furthermore the analysis displays that the poems express a belonging to a certain kind of 'rootless cosmopolitanism' in which the subject's experience of not belonging and the unification in the dispersion is fundamental; this rootless world identity is in itself a manifestation of the Black Atlantic culture which Gilroy describes.

**Keywords:** Langston Hughes, Nicolás Guillén, double consciousness, the Black Atlantic, national, cosmopolitan, identity, rootless.

## Introduction

The African American poet Langston Hughes and the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén share, as Leary has shown, several similarities in their work: both were influenced by modernist poetics, radical politics, and music—Hughes by blues while Guillén by the Cuban musical style *son*. As these similarities of their work have been studied in several academic discussions (Kaup, Kutzinski, Leary etc.) this is not the intention in this essay. Despite the mentioned parallels, Hughes' and Guillén's works are situated in different contexts, the United States and Cuba, and are written in different languages, English and Spanish; this is important when considering their work since some critics claim that Guillén's development as a writer is influenced by Hughes (Rampersad 179<sup>1</sup>). The basic fundament for these claims is the fact that the two poets met and corresponded with each other. Nevertheless, other critics claim that the work of Guillén is independent, and not influenced by Hughes, but rather by the movements in Cuba during this period: *vanguardismo* and *afrocubanismo* (Kaup 92, Leary 135). Guillén has, in other words, been a part of a larger movement towards *lo popular* ("the common") which took place during the beginning of the twentieth century.

Rather than focusing on interpersonal influences, however, Paul Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic may provide us with a larger and a more productive framework within which Hughes and Guillén can be compared. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double consciousness*, Gilroy argues that the memory of the Middle Passage and the trans-Atlantic slave trade has shaped an interconnected cultural community across the Atlantic. Within this context, it can be argued that the poems of these two writers display a characteristically ambiguous desire to belong both to a national and to a cosmopolitan community. As this essay will demonstrate, the latter desire for inclusion can be understood, as Gilroy has showed in his book, as a kind of 'rootless cosmopolitanism' in which the subject's experience of not fully belonging to the national identity constitutes a primary feature. By coining the term "the Black Atlantic" Gilroy attempts to address this contradictory experience that at the same time undergirds the connections of the diasporic communities that have emerged out of the Atlantic slave trade. These diasporic people form a literary and cultural network, a Black Atlantic culture, which goes beyond ethnicity and national borders; it is the *experience* of the Atlantic slave trade, and not the origin,

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<sup>1</sup> In Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes Volume 1 The Poems: 1921-1940*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001. Print.

which is the fundamental basis that unites the people of the Black Atlantic. Thus, Gilroy portrays a culture which is not African, American, Caribbean, or British, but a mixture of all these.

Gilroy's theorization is based on W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of 'double consciousness' which denotes the experience that, according to Du Bois, many African Americans had of a 'double self' as they belonged to two groups in society which were constructed as exclusive antagonisms; the separation of the two identities, the 'African', and the 'American', left the subject incomplete and only a merging of the two could construct a 'true self'. Du Bois's message was that the African identity had as much to offer to the American identity as the American to the African: "He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world of Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message to the world." (Du Bois 5). The message which Du Bois meant was of spirituality and humanity: "...all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness." (11,12). Du Bois's idea of the 'double self' and his criticism of American materialism, were together in fact a message to his readers of *Souls of Black Folk* that the American national identity had to be extended to include all Americans in spite of their ethnicity; in other words, this was the way for America to become a 'true America'. Booth and Mays come to the same conclusion in their description of the artistic black development in America during the beginning of the twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance: "America had to include the voices of black Americans in order to find its own full definition" (947). This questioning of a national identity which excludes people based on their 'race'/ethnicity is what Gilroy has developed in his critical discussion of the concept of ethnically homogenous nation states; Gilroy does not perceive the two identities or consciousnesses as a problem, only the ethnically absolutist discourses which create the two identities as oppositional and exclusive (Gilroy 2). The idea of an absolute sense of ethnic difference and the concept of ethnically homogenous nation states make it appear as if colonizing nations were stable and ethnically undifferentiated before the black people's arrival; this leads to the view of black people and black culture as an intrusion into "pure cultures" (7), and the result is consequently an exclusion from the national identity of those who occupy the place between the two identities. Gilroy's suggestion is that the whole Atlantic should be taken for study as a single, complex, network (15); this view on culture takes the focus away from national borders (4), and instead sees the transnational flow of black culture, in which the literary writings by Hughes and Guillén form a part. The very

existence of Hughes' and Guillén's works show the essence of this transnational culture: despite the writers' different national belonging, and, thus, the fact that they come from diverse contexts, they show expressions of the *same kind* of experiences and aspirations in their poetry. Both Hughes and Guillén also embody the central focus in the Black Atlantic concept – the journey, real and imagined—as they were travelers throughout their lives and displayed the theme of voyages in their poetry. These accounts of Hughes' and Guillén's reciprocity, and the earlier mentioned similarities in their poetry, support Gilroy's suggestion to take the Atlantic as one, single, complex formation of black cultural expression. To demonstrate this, the bulk of the present essay will be devoted to a close reading of selected poems by Hughes and Guillén, namely "Epilogue" (1932), "House in the World" (1931-1940), "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1926), and "Black Seed" (1930) by Hughes and "Vine en un barco negrero" ("I came on a slaveship", 1964), "Nocturno en los muelles" ("Night at the piers", 1934), and "El apellido" ("My Last Name", 1958) by Guillén. This is a small selection, which is of course debatable, but besides the space constraints of this essay, the resonances between the poems are sufficiently strong support to my main claim. Before the close readings, I will situate the two poets in their cultural context. After the readings, I will—in conclusion—expand my discussion of the double consciousness and the Black Atlantic with reference to my readings.

## Guillén, Hughes, and the artistic movements

Both Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes were born in 1902—the year of formal Cuban independence. Hughes' mother was a former government clerk, and his father a stenographer for a mining company, who later moved to Mexico (Rampersad xi). Guillén's father was editor of the paper *Las Dos Repúblicas* in Cuba (Augier 16<sup>2</sup>). Both writers travelled to many countries, which is, together with the thematic features in their poetry, typical of the Black Atlantic formation: the constant circulation of ideas, writers, and activists over the Atlantic creates this special transnational network. Some of the countries they visited were Cuba, Mexico, France, Spain, and the Soviet Union. Guillén also visited several countries in Latin America, and Hughes some in Africa (Augier 55-79, Rampersad xi-xvii). The travels led the two writers to meet in Cuba in 1930 and 1931, in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and in New York in 1949. Between these encounters and afterwards they had an ongoing exchange in which they discussed their works. In 1948

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<sup>2</sup> In Guillén, Nicolás. *Obra Poética 1920-1958*. Habana: Bolsilibros Unión, 1974 (1<sup>st</sup> edition: 1972). Print.

Hughes and Frederic Carruthers also translated some of Guillén's poems, which were published in a U.S. press (Kaup 93). The many connections that the writers had during their lives could indicate a possible bond between their poetic styles; as pointed out in the beginning of this essay their work did parallel each other in several ways: they simultaneously gave expression to black modernism in poetry during the 20s and 30s; Hughes in Harlem, and Guillén in Havana; both also used the vernacular speech of the black underworld and popular black music in their poetry. (Kaup 91, Leary 134). These connections have led to claims that Hughes had impact on Guillén's poetry: "According to Hughes' biographer, Arnold Rampersad, Hughes 'had one crucial recommendation for Guillén – that he should make the rhythms 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.'" (Kaup 92). Nevertheless, as Leary visibly shows in his article on the Hughes and Guillén connection, the concurrence of the two poets' use of black popular music and slang was part of a larger tendency towards the use of the popular in literature and art. According to Kaup, Guillén's and Hughes' achievements should be seen as complementary instead of mutually exclusive. Kaup also means that the controversy over the "Hughes prompt theory" (92) is not as significant as the Guillén and Hughes scholars have made it out to be. Even though Kaup is right that the conflict of "who came first" is not *as* important as it might have been treated in academic discussions, the assumption that Guillén has a possible debt to Hughes is indeed significant. It takes the credit away from his work and ignores the fact that it was *Guillén* who had expert knowledge over the black Cuban music and slang. As Kaup puts it, in this way it does not matter where the inspiration came from since it was Guillén who had the specific understanding of the Cuban culture. One should also remember, as Leary shows, that the poetic works of these writers did not exist in a vacuum unrelated to the surrounding world; the cultural and political relations between Harlem and Havana were not equal. In this way, as many of Guillén's Cuban colleagues perceived it, the assumption of the influence by Hughes can be seen as built on imperialistic thought in which America is perceived as a precursor and used as comparison for other societies: "Most English-language scholarship of Hughes' Cuban ventures rarely considers the unequal relations of cultural prestige and political power between Harlem, New York City, and Havana, Cuba – yet Guillén and his Cuban contemporaries were keenly attentive to these circumstances." (Leary 135). Furthermore, Guillén's journalistic writing expresses "a great deal of sometimes subtle, and often explicit, criticism of his American colleagues." (135).

As Guillén took part in both the *vanguardismo* and the *afrocubanismo* movements, Hughes was participating in the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement. *Vanguardismo* was the denomination of several new forms of expressions which came from different European artistic and literary tendencies. It was a group of young intellectuals with sympathies to the left, the *Grupo Minorista*, that introduced the *vanguardismo* in Cuba, and therefore the poetry of this movement also dealt with questions of injustice (Augier 23, 24). The *vanguardismo* for many Cuban poets was a way of transition to their own personal style which also led to recognition of the Cuban culture, and to the development of the *afrocubanismo* movement, 1928-1938. (Augier 24, Leary 147). *Afrocubanismo* can be understood as part of a discourse of *mestizaje*<sup>3</sup> (Kutzinski 1993), in which the writers, like Guillén, introduced a poetic expression which was genuinely Cuban: “Temas, ritmo, color, imagen, movimiento, atmósfera, lenguaje: todo arrancaba directamente del complejo nacional.” (“Themes, rhythm, colours, image, movement, atmosphere, language: everything originated directly from the national complex.”) (Augier 28). Guillén, however, named his poetry *poesía mulata*—‘mulatto poetry’—which he meant showed the essence of the Cuban culture (Augier 26, 27). In comparison, in America the increase of black migration to the north of the country led to a development in every sense: artistically, literary, socially, and, politically (Booth & Mays 950, Nixon 14); Nixon writes that in New York the neighborhood Harlem “experienced a cultural upsurge in the aftermath of black migration toward the inevitably unsteady promise of urban employment during an era of growing industrialization.” (14). Harlem became the center for black cultural expression; that is, the Harlem renaissance and the New Negro movement, in which, as Alain Locke<sup>4</sup> states, the “New Negro” was: “iconoclastic, independent, and ineradicably cosmopolitan; a figure, in every sense, on the move.” (16).

An important difference between the Cuban and the U.S. context is found in the distinction between the countries racial systems; Kutzinski states: “that African slavery was a New World practice does not justify that discourses on race, literary and otherwise, function in similar ways in different languages and social contexts across the Americas”

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<sup>3</sup> The translation of the word *mestizaje* has, according to the Real Academia Española, [www.rae.es](http://www.rae.es), three related meanings: 1. Crossing of different races, 2. The sum of the individuals that are of this kind of crossing, and 3. Mixture of different cultures that form a new culture.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Locke was a sociology professor at Howard University and an Oxford graduate as the first African American Rhodes Scholar; Locke’s famous work, the anthology *The New Negro* (1925) was a gathering of poems, fiction, essays and visual art by young and old, black and white to define what the “New Negro” was about (Booths & Mays 953).

(2004:113). In Cuba the tradition of José Martí's "Nuestra América mestiza" ("Our mixed America") and what Gilroy describes as the Black Atlantic culture are visible (Kaup88); whereas in the United States "Jim Crow"<sup>5</sup>—the segregation laws separating people based on their 'race'—had a long permanence in many parts of the country: "the multiracial nationalism typical of Cuban political rhetoric... differed from the politics of the United States where Jim Crow still ruled the south" (Leary 136). The Our Mixed America basically stands for the idea of a Cuba free of racial divisions; another term used to refer to the culture of racial mixture is *mestizaje*. The idea of *mestizaje* helped to unite Cubans of all colours in the struggle for independence from colonial Spain (Augier13, Walker 135): "in Cuba abolition was not a consequence, but a *condition* of independence" (Kaup88). The *mestizaje* can thus be seen as intrinsic in Cuban nationalism. Still, Kaup means that: "While the discourse of *mestizaje* and racial amalgamation nourishes Cuba's nationalism, and while the notion of *cubanidad* is built on the myth of racial synthesis, this symbolic reconciliation has repressed actual and continuing conflicts of race and their memory" (88). Kaup illustrates that the twentieth century Cuban history, culture, and literature express black voices which contradict the dominant *mestizaje* nationalism. She also means that the relationship of the cultural formations intersecting in Cuba—the Black Atlantic and Our America—is unstable; while Our America is the homecoming of Blacks in "the interracial nationalism of Martí's Latin America", the Black Atlantic stands for the "homelessness of Blacks in the Americas, and the memory of exile, displacement, and the violence of the Middle Passage" (88); thus, both the homecoming and the continuing homelessness are at once real in Cuba. Despite these contextual differences in which the two writers' poetry has emerged, the essence of the Black Atlantic community which Gilroy describes is visible in both writers' poetry. The following section's close readings of the poems will show similar findings in the poetry which support Gilroy's suggestion to take the Atlantic as one, complex matrix of black expression.

## Reading of poems

The aspiration for national identity and/or cosmopolitan identity is fundamental in all of the selected poems by Hughes and Guillén. In the poem "House in the World" by Hughes

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<sup>5</sup>"Jim Crow": the segregation laws in the United States during the post-Reconstruction era; 1876-1965(Hoelscher 657). The segregation laws separated 'white' people from 'coloured' people in all spheres of society: everything from education to waiting rooms at the train stations was, through legislation and attitudes in society, divided between the population based on their 'race'.



the basic theme is the speaker's desire for belonging *somewhere* in the world, while in the other Hughes poem "Epilogue" the speaker longs for belonging to the American identity. In both poems the use of domestic metaphors, such as 'house', 'brother', 'kitchen', and 'table', metonymically suggests that the speakers are searching for a home. The reason for this search is the exclusion from the society that privileges light-skinned people on the expense of the darker people:

### **Epilogue**

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll sit at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.

### **House in the World**

I'm looking for a house  
In the world  
Where the white shadows  
Will not fall.

*There is no such house,  
Dark brothers,  
No such house  
At all.*

When comparing these two poems one notices that there is a crucial difference in the speaker's *response* to the experience of injustice. If we first look at the poem "House in the World" we see that the tone of the poem expresses the feeling of dejection as the 'white shadows' are not to be escaped anywhere in the world. The symbolism of 'white shadows' suggests not only the discrimination of dark-skinned people but the constant presence of

normative white values. The metaphor 'white shadows' can further be seen in relation to Du Bois's description of the sensation of outsidership in a society that privileges light-skinned people: "Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine... Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all" (Du Bois 4, 5). Du Bois does in fact in this quote talk of the experience of 'double consciousness' that he describes as belonging to two separate realities at the same time which leaves one with the feeling of not belonging anywhere. The symbolism of Du Bois's 'shades of the prison-house' is similar to the implication of the 'white-shadows' that fall over each house in the world: Du Bois describes being caught in one's own home, whereas in Hughes' poem the speaker, addressing the "dark brothers", states that a home away from these white, haunting, ever-present shadows is not to be found. Both the 'shades' and the 'white shadows' can be read as expressions of a sensation of being caught in a reality in which one does not feel at home; as an experience of double consciousness that leaves the subject lost *in between* the two identities: the African and the American. The form of the poem moreover contributes to the sensation of a 'split' in the subject's identity as the second stanza is in italics; the sensation of double consciousness is materialized in the visual impression of the poem as the letters in the second stanza 'fall', just as the 'white shadows' fell on each house in the world. The search for a home in which none of the identities is oppressed ends in the sensation of a constant outsidership; the subject comes to belong to a world identity that embraces the homelessness and the constant exile, that is, a rootless cosmopolitan identity where the complexity of the subject's identity is not a problem to be overcome but a fundamental condition.

Just as the speaker in "House in the World" experiences a sense of double consciousness and outsidership, the speaker in "Epilogue" does too. The response, however, of the speaker in "Epilogue" is not to internalize the dichotomic and exclusive view on the two identities; instead the speaker includes itself completely into the American identity. What is also visible is that, as opposed to the dejected tone in "House in the World", in "Epilogue" the tone is challenging and vindictive, and comes to a climax as the subject's response to being pushed away is not to feel dejected, but to strengthen itself and have faith in the future: "But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong. / Tomorrow, / I'll sit at the table / When company comes, " The title of the poem, "Epilogue", also indicates that what is important in the poem is what happens to the subject *after* the resolution of the conflict, that is, that the subject becomes included into the national identity, which the last

line of the poem demonstrates: “I, too, am America.”. This ending line is identical with the first line of the poem with the small but significant change of verb: “I, too, sing America”. The difference between ‘sing’ and ‘am’ shows how the speaker goes from a *vision* of belonging to a *realization* of belonging to the national identity.

Another important feature which is similar in these two poems is the use of the subjective ‘I’ which stands for a collective subject rather than a specific person. Even though in both “House in the World” and “Epilogue” the speaker talks through the ‘I’ the speaker should not be perceived as one individual. The ‘I’ usually indicates the voice of one person and therefore it has the effect of expressing emotions, thoughts, and values with greater depth. When the subjective ‘I’ denotes a collective subject instead of an individual it achieves the same effect: it expresses feelings and experiences of a group in a more personal way. Yet another consequence of this usage of the ‘I’ is that the collective is seen as *one*: a unit. Therefore the usage of the subjective ‘I’ in these poems is crucial: it shows that the experiences are *shared* by those who belong to that group. To know if the subjective ‘I’ in a poem denotes an individual or a group one should look at the relation that the speaker has to the rest of the poem’s characters and to the context. In “House in the World” the relation between the subjective ‘I’ in the first stanza and the denomination ‘dark brothers’ in the second stanza suggests that the usage of the subjective ‘I’ in this poem stands for a whole group, the ‘dark brothers’, rather than a specific individual. In “Epilogue” the connection of the line ‘I am the darker brother’ with ‘America’, indicates that the ‘darker brother’, that is, the subjective ‘I’, represents a group in the U.S.A.: the African Americans. Thus, these poems show the experience of a whole group which is discriminated and pushed outside of society.

In the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Hughes the subjective ‘I’ is also used to denote a collective subject as the description of several historical events and the subject’s achievements in different epochs indicate that it is not a single person who achieved and lived through the various events; it is rather the history of a group of people; again, the *shared experience* of the black, diasporic people. The poem expresses both a belonging to a world identity, as in “House in the World”, and to a national identity, as in “Epilogue”. The two central symbols in the poem, the soul and the river, and the connections made between them, portray the black people’s history and identity as vital, endless, flexible, divided *and* unified:

**The Negro Speaks of Rivers**  
(To W.E.B. DuBois)

I've known rivers;  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.  
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.  
I've known rivers.  
Ancient, dusky rivers.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The repetition of the line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” and the connection which is made metaphorically between ‘the soul’ of the subject and the river demonstrate the importance of these two symbols and their relationship. The use of ‘soul’ could be read as an allusion made to Du Bois’s work *The Souls of Black Folks* and to the discussion which he made in this book (the dedication at the beginning of the poem also indicates such a connection: “(To W.E.B. DuBois)”). In this case, Du Bois’s ideas and perceptions of the black people’s souls are transferred *into* the poem. Hence, the poem does not talk entirely by itself; it talks *through* the discourse of *The Souls of Black Folks*. What Du Bois meant by the soul of black people is the identity or consciousness which is split into two halves, neither one whole by itself: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (Du Bois 5). Du Bois’s wish was that these two consciousnesses, or identities, could exist mutually in harmony, so that neither part had to be repressed for the individual to be accepted by society:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost... He simply wishes to make possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.” (5)

This desire is apparent not only in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, but in both “House in the World”, and “Epilogue”. Furthermore, what is important to notice in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is how Du Bois’s idea of a double self is illustrated in the relation between the poem’s title and the poem itself: in the title—“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”—‘the Negro’ is denominated with the third person singular and in a generic manner,

whereas throughout the poem the first person singular is used to give voice to the subject; this difference can be understood as the title externalizes and to some degree objectifies 'the Negro'. This relation of object/subject shows how black people see themselves from the inside and the outside; as Du Bois meant; the 'Negro' is "born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (5). Moreover, this poem can also be ascribed as expressing a rootless cosmopolitan identity as did "House in the World". In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" it is the connection of the symbolic 'soul' of the black people, that is their identity, to the symbol 'river' which shows that the subject in the poem belongs to a rootless, cosmopolitan identity; the stream of the rivers—vital, life-bringing, endless, divided but unified in the great sea; movement with no end and no beginning—all these are through the connection to 'soul' ascribed as the identity of the collective subject, that is, the black diasporic people of the Atlantic. The form of the poem contributes to this message as it illustrates the flow of the rivers: the first short line is followed by longer lines that end when the last three lines of the poem again are shorter; this form should be interpreted as the flow of the *separated* rivers through the landscape which become *unified* in the sea. The river symbolizes an endless, life-bringing, and, flexible identity which is diverse and unified at the same time. In the terms of the Black Atlantic this can be understood as the movement, be it voluntary or forced, of the black people around the world, and the unifying in the experience of displacement; indeed an expression of belonging to a endless and rootless world identity in which the subject is as much part of each location (the Euphrates—Western Asia, the Congo and the Nile—Africa, Mississippi—North America) as of the constant movement.

Yet another important aspect of the word 'soul', and how it metaphorically stands for the black people's identity, is that the word's connotations suggest spirituality and religiosity. The result is a kind of counterpoise to the dehumanization of black people which took place during the history of slavery in which they were treated as goods. Du Bois does in fact counterpoise this view and means that the African consciousness can offer spirituality to the cold and materialized society of the white world, and that the African consciousness is as important as the American one. This is also exactly what the poem displays: how the black people are *an intrinsic part* of the whole world, which is seen in the four lines that connect the black people's history to the four great rivers of the

world. In these lines the subject and the rivers are inseparable, which expresses the cosmopolitan identity of the subject, that is, of the black people.

Still, the poem mutually expresses inclusion in the national identity as is seen in the following line: “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset”. The line has an allusion to the abolishment of slavery in the United States in 1865 which the U.S. President Abraham Lincoln carried out, and also to the importance of the city New Orleans, which is an important center of black history. The speaker furthermore expresses how the personified American river Mississippi shows joy, ‘sings’, when the black people finally are included into the national identity. America has, in the words of Du Bois, become a ‘true America’, and no longer excluding.

In “Black Seed” by Hughes the same kind of unification in the displacement is found as in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, a rootless cosmopolitanism, although in this poem it is clear that the displacement is involuntary as the metaphorical description of the ‘dear dark faces’ which are ‘scattered like seed’ around the world suggests:

### **Black Seed**

World-wide dusk  
Of dear dark faces  
Driven before an alien wind,  
Scattered like seed  
From far-off places  
Growing in soil  
That’s strange and thin,  
Hybrid plants  
In another’s garden,  
Flowers  
In a land  
That’s not your own,  
Cut by the shears  
Of the white-faced gardeners –

Tell them to leave you alone!

In this poem we see how the Middle Passage and the slave trade are allegorically described in the imaginary of plantations. The extended and controlling metaphor of the poem, the image of the plantation, in which there is a symbolic language of seeds that grow and are reaped, is not only illustrating the exploitation of the slaves, but the hard life of the slaves working on plantations. Thus the title “Black Seed” stands for displacement and exploitation. However, the title also represents vitality as the seed is the core of life that becomes ‘hybrid plants’ and ‘flowers’. The imitative structure of the poem powerfully

contributes to this theme of plantation: short lines with the same length illustrate the *controlled* sow and growth of crop on the plantations (one by one the many seeds are sown into the soil). The diction of the poem, that is the choice of words, illustrates the sensation of seeds being spread by a wind as the usage of alliterations could be read as creating a rhythmic, rhyming, sonorant, and sibilant sound of the wind blowing: the alliteration and repetition of the voiced dentalalveolars /d/ and /ð/ (dusk, dear, dark, Driven, wind, scattered, seed, That's, Hybrid, garden, land, gardeners, them), the assonance of diphthongs (World-wide) and vowels /ɪ/ and /i:/ (Driven, alien, wind, seed, Growing, thin, leave), and the alliteration of the sibilant sounds /s/ and /ʃ/, and the fricatives /f/ and /θ/ (Of, dusk, faces, Scattered, seed, From, far-off, places, soil, That's, strange, thin, plants, another's, Flowers, That's, shears, Of, faced, gardeners). The usage of the technique 'enjambment' (running over from one line to the next without stop) moreover creates a 'flow' in the poem which strengthens the sensation of a movement by the wind. Thus, the theme of the poem is fundamentally inscribed in its form which shows the *controlled, involuntary movement* of the Middle Passage and the slave trade. The last line of the poem, however, breaks with the rest of the poem as it, like an echo in the wind, requests self-defense against the exploitation of the 'dear dark faces' made by the 'white-faced gardeners': "Tell them to leave you alone!". This break is not only a crisis, or a turning point, in which the conflict comes to a head and requires that the characters in the poem make a decision, that is, that they make the decision to defend themselves, the line's relation to the rest of the poem is also significant as it breaks the allegorical metaphor of seeds being sown and brings the metaphor into the light of reality; the 'dear dark faces' are no longer objects of description; they are spoken to directly: "Tell them to leave *you* alone!" (emphasis added). Thus, there is in this line a request for unification among the collective subject which in the rest of the poem has been described as stolen and lost in the forced displacement. This sensation can be seen as an expression of the Black Atlantic notion: "According to Gilroy, the Black Atlantic world of diasporic exile is symbolized in black expression by a persistent imagery of sea and ships, of distances measured between unidentified places, of destination and departure that leave the central subject lost, adrift in space and time" (Kaup 89). In this poem these features are visible as the forced movement of the 'black seeds' from 'far-off places' to 'a land that's not your own' show the journey from unidentified places, and the destination and departure that clearly leaves the subject lost: "Growing in soil / That's strange and thin, / Hybrid plants / In another's garden". All these features, together with the request for unification and self-defense, show how this

poem can be read as an expression of the rootless cosmopolitanism that has no beginning and no end, which several of the poems analyzed in this essay have given expression to.

As the analysis so far has shown the selected poems by Hughes demonstrate themes that connect them with each other, but, as we shall see, also with the selected poems by Guillén: the aspiration for national and cosmopolitan belonging, the expression of a collective experience of injustice, and the unification in the displacement which leads to inclusion in a kind of rootless identity. In “Vine en un barco negrero” (“I came on a slaveship”<sup>6</sup>) by Guillén the speaker expresses a belonging to a national identity as the painful history of the slavery is inscribed into the Cuban identity. The poem has a dramatic structure as each stanza present a scene which relates to a part in the Cuban history of slavery. The poem also shows clear features of an epic: the inclusion of several main figures from the Cuban history of slavery and emancipation, the historical moments that lead to the development of the independent Cuban nation and culture (which are described in a symbolic language), and the invocation of battle scenes.

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<sup>6</sup> English translation by R. Márquez and D. A. McMurray.



### Vine en un barco negrero...

Vine en un barco negrero.  
Me trajeron.  
Caña y látigo el ingenio.  
Sol de hierro.  
Sudor como caramelo.  
Pie en el sepo.

Aponte me habló sonriendo.  
Dije: – Quiero.  
¡Oh muerte! Después silencio.  
Sombra luego.  
¡Qué largo sueño violento!  
Duro sueño.  
La Yagruma  
de nieve y esmeralda  
bajo la luna.

O'Donnell. Su puño seco.  
Cuero y cuero.  
Los aguaciles y el miedo.  
cuero y cuero.  
De sangre y tinta mi cuerpo.  
Cuero y cuero.

Pasó a caballo Maceo.  
Yo en su séquito.  
Largo el aullido del viento.  
Alto el trueno.  
Un fulgor de macheteros.  
Yo con ellos.  
La Yagruma  
de nieve y esmeralda  
bajo la luna.

Tendido a Menéndez veo.  
Fijo, tenso.  
Borbota el pulmón abierto.  
Quema el pecho.  
Sus ojos ven, están viendo.  
Vive el muerto.

¡Oh Cuba! Mi voz entrego  
En tí creo.  
Mía la tierra que beso.  
Mío el cielo.  
Libre estoy, vine de lejos.  
Soy un negro.  
La Yagruma  
de nieve y esmeralda  
bajo la luna.

### I Came on a Slaveship

I came on a slaveship.  
They brought me.  
Cane, lash, and plantation.  
A sun of steel.  
Sweat like a caramel.  
Foot in the stocks.

Aponte, smiling, spoke to me.  
I said: "Count on me!"  
Oh death! Afterwards silence.  
Shadows after.  
A long violent sleep!  
A harsh sleep.  
The Yagruma  
of snow and emerald  
beneath the moon.

O'Donnell. His dry fist.  
Lash and more lash.  
The constables and the fear.  
Lash and more lash.  
My body blood and ink.  
Lash and more lash.

Maceo came on horseback.  
I was in his retinue.  
Long the howl of the wind.  
Loud the thunder.  
A splendor of *macheteros*.  
I was among them.  
The Yagruma  
of snow and emerald  
beneath the moon.

I see Menéndez stretched out.  
Immobile, tense.  
The open lung bubbles.  
The chest burns.  
His eyes see, are seeing.  
The corpse lives.

Oh Cuba! I give you my voice.  
I believe in you.  
The land I kiss is mine.  
Mine the sky.  
I am free, I came from far off.  
I am a Black man.  
The Yagruma  
of snow and emerald  
beneath the moon

From the second stanza and on several main figures of the history of slavery are incorporated:

Aponte (José Antonio Aponte) was a leader in the abolition movement in Cuba who led a conspiracy in 1811-1812 that ended in imprisonment and hanging of the participants

(Walker137); O'Donnell (Leopoldo O'Donnell), a Spanish general in Havanna, who is held responsible for the massacre of 1844, La Escalera (The Ladder), in which slaves and free coloured people were tortured and executed; the cause for this massacre was to eliminate the unity between African-descended people of all colours—the massacre came to be known as ‘Año de cuero’ (‘Year of the lash’), which is clearly illustrated in the third stanza with the three repetitions of the line “Cuero y cuero” (“Lash and more lash.”) (Walker 135); Maceo (Antonio Maceo Grajales) was general in the Cuban Army of Independence (the army which he lead used the *machete*, a weapon similar to a sword only shorter) (Zacair49); and Menéndez (Jesus Menéndez), Communist member of the House of Representatives and head of the Sugar Federation, was shot and killed by a Capitan of the army (Phillips 245). All these references to Cuban history of slavery and emancipation are connected to national identity in the last stanza where the speaker says: “¡Oh Cuba! Mi voz entrego. Mía la tierra que beso.” (“Oh Cuba! I give you my voice. I believe in you. The land I kiss is mine.”). Hence, the ending is as triumphant as in Epilogue: the collective subject, through struggle, comes to belong to the national identity.

The repetition of the stanza with the Yagruma, an extinct palm tree endemic in Cuba (Gutiérrez17) which had leaves that were green (“emerald”) above and silvery-white (“snow”) on the underside, follows the stanzas in which the emancipation struggle is present. The function of this stanza and the repetition of it seem to indicate the persistent hope which the freedom-fighters held also in the moments of defeat. The Yagruma tree with its two-sided leaves can be read as symbolizing the vision of Cuba as a nation of *mestizaje* where one side is as much part of the leaf and the tree as the other side: together they form a unit. Thus, the message of the poem is that all the people together, despite of their ethnicity, are a fundamental part of the Cuban identity. Furthermore, the moon shining on the Yagruma tree reinforces the symbolism of hope: it shines through the obscure night as the hope of freedom was ever present in the struggle for emancipation even in the dark moments of Cuban history of slavery.

As the slave trade was portrayed through the struggle for freedom in “Vine en un barco negrero”, in “Nocturno en los muelles” (“Night at the piers”)<sup>7</sup> by Guillén the memory of the slave trade is the central theme. Similarly as in “Vine en un barco negrero”, a symbol of light is used: in “Vine en un barco negrero” the moon stands for hope, and in “Nocturno en los muelles” the lighthouse shines through the darkness as a reminder of the painful history of the

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<sup>7</sup>Since I have not found any English translation of the poem this translation from Spanish to English is my own.

place by the seashore:

### Nocturno en los muelles

Bajo la noche tropical, el puerto.  
El agua lame la inocente orilla  
y el faro insulta al malecón desierto.

¡Qué calma tan robusta y tan sencilla!  
Pero sobre los muelles solitarios  
flota una tormentosa pesadilla.

Pena de cementerios y de osarios,  
que enseña en pizarrones angustiosos  
cómo un mismo dolor se parte en varios.

Es que aquí están los gritos silenciosos  
y el sudor hecho vidrio; las tremendas  
horas de muchos hombres musculosos

y débiles, sujetos por las riendas  
como potros. Voluntades en freno,  
y las heridas pálidas sin vendas.

La gran quietud se agita. En este seno  
de paz se mueve y anda un grupo enorme  
que come el pan untándolo en veneno.

Ellos duermen ahora en el informe  
lecho, sin descansar. Sueñan acaso,  
y aquí estalla el espíritu inconforme

que al alba duro tragará su vaso  
de sangre diaria en el cuartón oscuro,  
y a estrecho ritmo ha de ajustar el paso.

¡Oh puño fuerte, elemental y puro!  
¿Quién te sujeta el ademán abierto?  
Nadie responde en el dolor del puerto.  
El faro grita sobre el mar oscuro.

### Night at the piers

Under the tropical night, the harbor.  
The water laps the innocent shore  
and the lighthouse insults the deserted pier.

What a strong and simple calmness!  
But over the solitary piers  
a stormy nightmare floats.

Sorrow of cemeteries and ossuaries,  
that show on anguished chalkboards  
how one pain is divided into many.

Because here is where the silent screams are  
and the sweat made into glass; the dreadful  
hours of many muscled and

weak men, tied by the reins  
like colts. Restrained wills,  
and the unbandaged wounds pale.

The great stillness is shaking. In this womb  
of peace an enormous group moves and walks  
which eats bread with poison spread.

They now sleep in the shapeless  
bed, without rest. Maybe they dream,  
and here the unsatisfied spirit bursts

which, at the harsh dawn, will swallow the glass  
of daily blood in the dark, bleak room  
and to the narrow rhythm will have to adjust the steps.

Oh, strong fist, fundamental and pure!  
Who opens its hand for you?  
No one responds in the harbor's pain.  
The lighthouse cries over the dark sea.

Just as the majority of the other poems, “Nocturno en los muelles” expresses a rootless cosmopolitanism which is based on the shared painful experience of the slave trade and the Middle Passage; the sorrow of the cemeteries and ossuaries show “how one pain is divided into many” (“cómo un mismo dolor se parte en varios”). The figure of speech ‘oxymoron’, which is the usage of two contradictory ideas in order to describe a third one, is used to manifest this shared experience of pain: “Los gritos silenciosos” (“The silent screams”)—denote a pain which is deep and strong and cannot be expressed through words or actions; “el sudor hecho vidrio” (“the sweat made into glass”)—the men are so sore from the brutal slavery that even the sweat feels sharp as glass against their skin; “las tremendas horas de muchos hombres musculosos y débiles” (“the dreadful hours of many muscled and weak

men”)—the slave work which the men have been forced to do is so rough that even though they are strong they have become weak and exhausted. Oxymoron is further used when the tension in the night at this place by the shore is described: “la gran quietud se agita” (“the great stillness is shaking”)—the stillness is in fact not tranquility, but the sign of repressed frustration and pain, that is on its way to burst out like an explosion of memory and pain. The huge group of people (or souls) that move in this place (“En este seno de paz se mueve y anda un grupo enorme”) sleep without resting: “Ellos duermen ahora en el informe lecho, sin descansar”—this is again an oxymoron indicating that the sleep is not peaceful. As the water is the symbol of the Middle Passage and the slave trade, the image of the nightmare which floats over the pier metaphorically suggests that it is in the water where the victims lie, thus the water becomes the graveyard of the slaves: “Pena de cementerios y de osarios, que enseña en pizarrones angustiosos cómo un mismo dolor se parte en varios. Es que aquí están los gritos silenciosos” (“Sorrow of cemeteries and ossuaries, that show on anguished chalkboards how one pain is divided into many. This is where the silent screams are”). Thus, in the phrase “Ellos duermen ahora... sin descansar” (“They sleep now... without rest”) ‘sleep’ metaphorically means ‘death’, which suggests that the people in the water, the victims of the slave trade, are not resting in peace; the memory is still alive and aching. The lighthouse projects this memory of pain and disturbs the tranquility of the night, through metaphors in which it has gone through personification: “Nadie responde en el dolor del puerto. El faro grita sobre el mar oscuro” (“Nobody responds in the harbor’s pain. The lighthouse cries over the dark sea.”).

In “El apellido” (“The Last Name”<sup>8</sup>) by Guillén the recurrent theme in the majority of the poems, the search for identity, once again is present: in the poem the speaker’s unknown last name symbolizes the desire to know one’s ancestry. The form of this poem is long, and the choice of diction is colloquial; these features, together with the several repetitions of words and phrases, indicate that the poem is an interior monologue taking place only in the mind of the speaker; however, the poem can also be seen as a dramatic monologue since the speaker addresses silent auditors, that is, imaginary listeners within the work.

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<sup>8</sup> English translation by R. Márquez and D. A. McMurray.

## El apellido

Elegía familiar

I

Desde la escuela  
y aún antes... Desde el alba, cuando apenas  
era una brizna yo de sueño y llanto,  
desde entonces,  
me dijeron mi nombre. Un santo y seña  
para poder hablar con las estrellas.  
Tú te llamas, te llamarás...  
Y luego me entregaron  
esto que veis escrito en mi tarjeta,  
esto que pongo al pie de mis poemas:  
las trece letras  
que llevo a cuestras por la calle,  
que siempre van conmigo a todas partes.  
¿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?  
¿Acaso visitásteis mis abismos,  
mis galerías subterráneas  
con grandes piedras húmedas,  
islas sobresaliendo en negras charcas  
y donde un puro chorro  
siento de antiguas aguas  
caer desde mi alto corazón  
con fresco y hondo estrépito  
en un lugar lleno de ardientes árboles,  
monos equilibristas,  
loros legisladores y culebras?  
¿Toda mi piel (debí decir)  
toda mi piel viene de aquella estatua  
de mármol español? ¿También mi voz de espanto,  
el duro grito de mi garganta? ¿Viene de allá  
todos mis huesos? ¿Mis raíces y las raíces  
de mis raíces y además  
estas ramas oscuras movidas por los sueños  
y estas flores abiertas en mi frente  
y esta savia que amarga mi corteza?  
¿Estáis seguros?  
¿No hay nada más que eso que habéis escrito,  
que eso que habéis sellado  
con un sello de cólera?  
(¡Oh, debí haber preguntado!)

Y bien, ahora os pregunto:

¿no veis estos tambores en mis ojos?  
¿No veis estos tambores tensos y golpeados  
con dos lágrimas secas?  
¿No tengo acaso  
un abuelo nocturno  
con una gran marca negra  
(más negra todavía que la piel)  
una gran marca hecha de un latigazo?  
¿No tengo pues  
un abuelo mandinga, congo, dahomeyano?  
¿Cómo se llama? ¡Oh, sí decídmelo!

## My Last Name

A family elegy

I

Ever since school  
and even before... Since the dawn, when I was  
barely a patch of sleep and wailing,  
since then  
I have been told my name. A password  
that I might speak with stars.  
Your name is, you shall be called...  
And then they handed me  
this you see here written on my card,  
this I put at the foot of all poems:  
thirteen letters  
that I carry on my shoulders through the street,  
that are with me always, no matter where I go.  
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?  
Perhaps you have visited my chasms,  
my subterranean galleries  
with great moist rocks,  
islands jutting out of black puddles,  
where I feel the pure rush  
of ancient waters  
falling from my proud heart  
with a sound that's fresh and deep  
to a place of flaming trees,  
acrobatic monkeys,  
legislative parrots and snakes?  
Does all my skin (I should have said),  
Does all my skin come from that Spanish marble?  
My frightening voice too,  
the harsh cry in my throat?  
Are all my bones from there?  
My roots and the roots  
of my roots and also  
these dark branches swayed by dreams  
and these flowers blooming on my forehead  
and this sap embittering my bark?  
Are you certain?  
Is there nothing more than this that you have written,  
than this which you have stamped  
with the seal of anger?  
(Oh, I should have asked!)

Well then, I ask you now:

Don't you see these drums in my eyes?  
Don't you see these drums, tightened and  
beaten with two dried-up tears?  
Don't I have, perhaps,  
a nocturnal grandfather  
with a great black scar  
(darker still than his skin)  
a great scar made by a whip?  
Have I not, then,  
a grandfather who's Mandingo, Dahoman, Congolese?

¿Andrés? ¿Francisco? ¿Amable?  
 ¿Cómo decís Andrés en congo?  
 ¿Cómo habéis dicho siempre  
 Francisco en dahomeyano?  
 En mandinga ¿cómo se dice Amable?  
 ¿O no? ¿Eran, pues, otros nombres?  
 ¡El apellido, entonces!  
 ¿Sabéis mi otro apellido, el que me viene  
 de aquella tierra enorme, el apellido  
 sangriento y capturado, que pasó sobre el mar  
 entre cadenas, que pasó entre cadenas sobre el mar?

¡Ah, no podéis recordarlo!  
 Lo habéis disuelto en tinta inmemorial.  
 Lo habéis robado a un pobre negro indefenso.  
 Los escondisteis, creyendo  
 que iba a bajar los ojos yo de la vergüenza.  
 ¡Gracias!  
 ¡Os lo agradezco!  
 ¡Gentiles gentes, thank you!  
 Merci!  
 Merci bien!  
 Merci beaucoup!  
 Pero no... ¿Podéis creerlo? No.  
 Yo estoy limpio.  
 Brilla mi voz como un metal recién pulido.  
 Mirad mi escudo: tiene un baobab,  
 tiene un rinoceronte y una lanza.  
 Yo soy también el nieto,  
 biznieto,  
 tataranieto de un esclavo.  
 (Que se avergüence el amo).  
 ¿Seré Yelofe?  
 ¿Nicolás Yelofe, acaso?  
 ¿Tal vez Guillén Banguila?  
 ¿O Kumbá?  
 ¿Quizá Guillén Kumbá?  
 ¿O Kongué?  
 ¿Pudiera ser Guillén Kongué?  
 ¡Oh, quién lo sabe!  
 ¡Qué enigma entre las aguas!

## II

Siento la noche inmensa gravitar  
 sobre profundas bestias,  
 sobre inocentes almas castigadas;  
 pero también sobre voces en punta,  
 que despojan al cielo de sus soles,  
 los más duros,  
 para condecorar la sangre combatiente.  
 De algún país ardiente, perforado  
 por la gran fleche ecuatorial,  
 sé que vendrán lejanos primos,  
 remota angustia mía disparada en el viento;  
 sé que vendrán pedazos de mis venas,  
 sangre remota mía,  
 con duro pie aplastando las hierbas asustadas;  
 sé que vendrán hombres de vidas verdes,  
 remota selva mía,  
 con su dolor abierto en cruz y el pecho rojo en llamas.

What is his name? Oh, yes, give me his name!  
 Andrés? Francisco? Amable?  
 How do you say Andrés in Congolese?  
 How have you always said  
 Francisco in Dahoman?  
 In Mandingo, how do you say Amable?  
 No? Were they, then, other names?  
 The last name then!  
 Do you know my other last name, the one that comes  
 to me from that enormous land, the captured,  
 bloody last name, that came across the sea  
 in chains, which came in chains across the sea.

Ah, you can't remember it!  
 You have dissolved it in inmemorial ink.  
 You stole it from a poor, defenseless Black.  
 You hid it, thinking that I would  
 lower my eyes in shame.  
 Thank you!  
 I am grateful to you!  
 Noble people, thanks!  
*Merci!*  
*Merci bien!*  
*Merci beaucoup!*  
 But no... Can you believe it? No.  
 I am clean.  
 My voice sparkles like newly polished metal.  
 Look at my shield: it has a baobab,  
 it has a rhinoceros and a spear.  
 I am also the grandson,  
 great grandson,  
 great great grandson of a slave.  
 (Let the master be ashamed.)  
 Am I Yelofe?  
 Nicolás Yelofe, perhaps?  
 Or Nicolás Bokongo?  
 Maybe Guillén Banguila?  
 Or Kumbá?  
 Perhaps Guillén Kumbá?  
 Or Kongué?  
 Could I be Guillén Kongué?  
 Oh, who knows!  
 What a riddle in the waters!

## II

I feel the immense night fall  
 on profound beasts,  
 on innocent castigated souls;  
 but also on ready voices,  
 which steal suns from the sky,  
 the brightest suns,  
 to decorate combatant blood.  
 From some flaming land pierced through  
 by the great equatorial arrow,  
 I know there will come distant cousins,  
 my ancestral anguish cast upon the winds;  
 I know there will come portions of my veins,  
 my ancestral blood,  
 with calloused feet bending frightened grasses;  
 I know there will come men whose lives are green,

Sin conocernos nos reconoceremos en el hambre,  
 en la tuberculosis y en la sífilis,  
 en el sudor comprado en bolsa negra,  
 en los fragmentos de cadenas  
 adheridos todavía a la piel;  
 sin conocernos nos reconoceremos  
 en los ojos cargados de sueños  
 y hasta en los insultos como piedras  
 que nos escupen cada día  
 los cuadrumanos de la tinta y el papel.  
 ¿Qué ha de importar entonces  
 (¡qué ha de importar ahora!)  
 ¡ay! mi pequeño nombre  
 De trece letras blancas?  
 ¿Ni el mandinga, bantú,  
 yoruba, dahomeyano  
 nombre del triste abuelo ahogado  
 en tinta de notario?  
 ¿Qué importa, amigos puros?  
 ¡Oh sí, puros amigos,  
 venid a ver mi nombre!  
 Mi nombre interminable,  
 hecho de interminable nombres;  
 el nombre mío, ajeno,  
 libre y mío, ajeno y vuestro,  
 ajeno y libre como el aire.

my ancestral jungle,  
 with their pain open like a cross and their breasts red  
 with flames.  
 Having never met, we will know each other by the  
 hunger,  
 by the tuberculosis and the syphilis,  
 by the sweat bought in a black market,  
 by the fragments of chains  
 still clinging to the skin;  
 Having never met we will know each other  
 by the dream-full eyes  
 and even by the rock-hard insults  
 the quadrumanes of ink and paper  
 spit at us each day.  
 What can it matter, then.  
 (What can it matter now!)  
 ah, my little name  
 of thirteen letters?  
 Or the Mandingo, bantu,  
 Yoruba, Dahoman name  
 of the sad grandfather drowned  
 in notary's ink.  
 Good friends, what does it matter?  
 Oh, yes, good friends  
 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.

The line “A family elegy” (“Elegía familiar”) at the beginning of the poem also indicates strongly the central theme of the poem: the speaker’s grief over a lost and unknown origin; the speaker experiences a loss of a whole identity, and feels that the dominance of the Spanish heritage has left the African heritage in oblivion. The frustration over this unknown African origin leaves the speaker searching for the African last name, which the speaker does not find: “¡Oh, quién lo sabe! ¡Qué enigma entre las aguas!” (“Oh, who knows! What a riddle in the waters!”). However, it is then that the speaker expresses a belonging to a cosmopolitan identity in which it is the *experience* that unites the people, and not necessarily the specific national belonging: “De algún país ardiente, perforado por la gran flecha ecuatorial, sé que vendrán lejanos primos, remota angustia mía disparada en el viento” etc. (“From some flaming land pierced through by the great equatorial arrow, I know there will come distant cousins, my ancestral anguish cast upon the winds”) etc. ; “Sin conocernos nos reconoceremos en el hambre... en los fragmentos de cadenzas adheridos todavía a la piel” (“Having never met, we will know each other by the hunger... by the fragments of chain still clinging to the skin”). The speaker’s sensation of belonging to a cosmopolitan identity makes the significance of the exact origin less important: “¿Qué ha de importar entonces (!qué ha de importar ahora!) ¡ay! mi pequeño nombre de trece letras? ¿Ni el mandinga, bantú, yoruba, dahomeyano nombre del triste abuelo ahogado en tinta de notario?” (“What can it matter, then. (What does it matter now!) ah, my little name of thirteen letters? Or the Mandingo, Bantu, Yoruba, Dahoman name of the sad grandfather drowned in notary’s ink.”). The speaker finds that the Spanish name of thirteen letters, Nicolás Guillén, and the unknown African name merge together and come to symbolize his origin and identity, which is in fact a complex, rootless and endless world identity.

## The Black Atlantic and ‘double consciousness’

Paul Gilroy’s theorization of the Black Atlantic in many ways draws on Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness; therefore it is necessary to disentangle this term. According to Dickson D. Bruce Jr. “by double consciousness Du Bois referred most importantly to an internal conflict in the African American individual between what was ‘African’ and what was ‘American’ “(301). In other words, Du Bois’s intention was to describe the complications that can arise for an individual that belongs to two



different groups at the same time; two groups which have been constructed as exclusively oppositional categories in a society. This kind of experience of ‘doubleness’ in one’s identity have been expressed in the poems “House in the World”, “Epilogue”, and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Hughes and “Vine en un barco negrero”, and “El apellido” by Guillén. As Du Bois’s point of view was that the two consciousnesses had to be merged together for the individual to become whole he meant that the ‘African’ and the ‘American’ should not be seen as competitive options; they should be seen as complementary. In the mentioned poetry this aspiration for inclusion and merging of the two identities is expressed through the desire of belonging to a national and a cosmopolitan identity. One example is found in “Epilogue” in which the subject succeeds in the merging process of the two consciousnesses and simultaneously challenges another feature of the ‘double consciousness’—the ability of seeing oneself from the inside and the outside, that is, to measure oneself with the standard of others. Instead of accepting the surrounding world’s view of the subject, the speaker accepts the situation it finds itself in, and decides to choose its own perception of the self: that is, that the subject too is a part of the national identity. In this poem thus Du Bois’s thought that the American nation could not be ‘true’ if it excluded groups of its population is visible as the speaker in “Epilogue” expresses a convinced belief that the “darker brother” is also an important part of America not to be forgotten or pushed away.

By the time Du Bois used the idea of double consciousness in his essay, the term itself had already, as Dickson successfully shows, a long history both as a figurative product of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, and as a medical term in the field of psychology. There are many possible sources for the idea of double consciousness; one early is found in the work by Emerson which in an 1843 essay entitled “The Transcendentalist” developed the idea of a dichotomy between “the understanding” and “the soul” (Dickson 230). The connection of these kinds of earlier works and the work of Du Bois is clearly visible; the essential idea is that of a division between the world and the spirit. According to Dickson, Du Bois strategically used the term in his essay and book, well aware of the fact that the “background of meaning which the term evoked would have been familiar to many, if not most, of the educated middle- and upper class readers of the *Atlantic*, one of the foremost popular journals on letters of the day” (299). In other words, Du Bois used and modified the idea of double consciousness to his purpose: to strengthen his

argumentative discussion about the questions of race, identity, and society, and in order to make his text more comprehensible and more persuasive for his readers.

If we turn our attention to how Gilroy applies the term double consciousness in his analysis of the Black Atlantic it is noticeably similar to how Du Bois used it. The concept is, in fact, Gilroy's starting point in his book as he emphasizes, just as Du Bois did, that the two consciousnesses in themselves do not have to be problematic for the individual. However, the "ethnically absolutist discourses", which creates the two identities as oppositional and exclusive, makes the ones who occupy the space between the two identities appear as making a provocative political act. This is to say that the two consciousnesses are not a predicament per se, but that the attitude towards them can make them appear as a problem. Gilroy writes that probably "all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations." (Gilroy1). He continues stating that these cultural assemblages are connected symbolically with the colours black and white, and that these in turn are associated with the discourses of nationality, national belonging and ethnic identity. The central part in Gilroy's discussion is thus the questions of "race", culture, nationality, ethnicity and identity. What is especially critiqued in the book is "the fatal junction of the concept of nationality and the concept of culture" (2). In his critique Gilroy uses the term "cultural insiderism" to describe the idea of an absolute sense of ethnic difference which separates people from each other and is given priority over other factors of peoples social and historical experience, cultures, and identities. These ideas of ethnic difference are associated with the idea of national belonging or with the aspiration to nationality. The consequence of cultural insiderism is typically the construction of the nation as an ethnically homogeneous unit. This construction of the nation as ethnically consistent is also visible when Gilroy critiques the ethnocentrism and nationalism in the academic field of English cultural studies: "Understanding these difficulties might commence with a critical evaluation of the ways in which notions of ethnicity have been mobilized... or with the unthinking assumption that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states" (5). Thus, cultural studies have the power to institutionalize notions of ethnicity. Therefore the questions of whose cultures are being studied and which instruments are being used for the study are crucial. Gilroy further gives two reasons why the nationalistic ideas in cultural studies are

problematic: one reason is that the modern nation state no longer is a political, economic, nor cultural unit. The other reason has to do with the ideas of purity of cultures: “This has become the dominant view where black history and culture are perceived, like black settlers themselves, as an illegitimate intrusion into a vision of authentic British national life that, prior to their arrival, was as stable and as peaceful as it was ethnically undifferentiated” (7). In the connection that cultural studies has with modern European aesthetics one can trace the ethnically absolute and culturalism racism, which was partly generated by a move towards a political discourse that connected “race” with nationality, and which had focus on cultural differences rather than biological differences. This had the consequence, as Gilroy writes, that blackness and Englishness were perceived as oppositional; the basis for this perception was, as said, primarily built on ideas of cultural difference. In the poetry of Hughes and Guillén the expressions of exclusion (based on the subject’s ancestry and skin colour) and the aspiration for inclusion in a national identity demonstrate what Gilroy means when he says that the junction of ethnicity with nationality makes people appear as not belonging to the nation only because they do not live up to the normative white values.

What Gilroy presents as a more satisfying alternative to this kind of view of culture is the theory of the Black Atlantic: “cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15). This approach to culture would be “less intimidated by and respectful of the boundaries and integrity of modern nation states than either English or African-American cultural studies have so far been” (4). Gilroy suggests a chronotope, that is, a spatial-temporal matrix, which fits with the theory of the Black Atlantic: “The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (4) between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The ship is imperative since it symbolizes the Middle Passage, the return to an African homeland, and the circulation of ideas and activists between these different locations. The poems analyzed in this essay have not only shown similar features of this transatlantic culture, but they have given expression to a certain kind of ‘rootless cosmopolitanism’ in which the subject identifies itself with a world identity where the origin and the identity is in constant move; unidentified and endless. This ‘rootless cosmopolitan identity’ can be understood as the chronotope of the ship: a complex identity in movement from one

location to the other; leaving the subject as much part of each location as of the constant displacement.

## Concluding discussion

The selection of poems analyzed in this paper express several features of the Black Atlantic culture which Paul Gilroy describes. One of them is the shared memory of the Middle Passage and the slave trade which is seen in the poems “Black Seed”, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, “Vine en un barco negrero”, and “El apellido”. There is however one clear difference between Guillén’s and Hughes’ poems: Guillén’s expression is generally more concrete while Hughes’ uses more abstract images (although “Nocturno en los muelles” by Guillén is abstract as well). One example is “Black Seed” in which the plantation symbolizes the Middle Passage and the slave trade, meanwhile in “Vine en un barco negrero” the different parts of the slave trade are told with concrete descriptions of what actually happened. The poets’ choice to use abstract or concrete images is dependent on their individual style of writing; the result, however, is that the abstract descriptions are more reliant on the reader, while the concrete descriptions are more direct in their message.

Furthermore, Gilroy’s chronotope, the ship, which made the Middle Passage and the slave trade possible, but also the distribution of ideas and activists, is incorporated in many of the poems; either in a concrete way or symbolically as voyages and changes. In “Vine en un barco negrero” the title obviously represents the concrete ship and journey, while in, for example, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” the chronotope’s meaning is seen in the constant movement in the black people’s history. In “House in the World” and “Epilogue”, on the other hand, the theme of voyage is expressed through the search for identity and inclusion. “El apellido” does express both the concrete and the abstract aspects of the chronotope as the speaker is searching for its origin, but also retells parts of the ancestor’s history which include the slave trade and the Middle Passage.

It is clearly possible to connect Du Bois’s theoretical notion of double consciousness—which is central to Gilroy’s conceptualization of the Black Atlantic—to the thematic and expressive registers of the poems “House in the World”, “Epilogue”, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, and “El apellido”. In these poems the speakers experience two different realities or identities that they relate to. In “House

in the World” the subject cannot merge these two realities, and finds itself excluded from one of the identities. In “Epilogue” the subject has a similar experience of exclusion but manages to inscribe itself into the identity, and thus refuses the exclusive and oppositional view on the two identities; the subject in “Epilogue” manages thus to do what Du Bois talked for: the merging of the two consciousnesses. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” the double consciousness is seen as the title and the poem shows how blacks see themselves from the outside and the inside: as object in the title and as subject in the poem. The poem “El apellido” also shows the difficulties of belonging to two realities as one known identity exists on the expense of the unknown one.

In the poems the double consciousness functions as a kind of catalyst for the aspiration of belonging to a national and/or a cosmopolitan identity: it is the experience of a double self in which one of the selves is oppressed somehow that leads to the search for a complete identity. The majority of the poems show an aspiration for belonging to a world identity; the exceptions are “Vine en un barco negrero” and “Epilogue” which only show expressions of aspiration for inclusion in the national identity. In “House in the World”, “Black Seed”, “Nocturno en los muelles”, and “El apellido” the expressed cosmopolitanism is based on the shared experience of racial injustice, and thus the national belonging is insignificant. This cosmopolitanism is further built on the sensation of ‘not belonging’; of existing in a rootless identity in which the collective subject finds unification in the displacement. In the words of Paul Gilroy this world identity is the Black Atlantic culture: the expression of the same ideas and experiences by the diasporic black people across the Atlantic.

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