

LANGUAGE AS VERNACULAR CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN BLACK
COMMUNITIES IN CUBA AND THE USA

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ABSTRACT: This work examines the use of language as a method of fomenting a black cultural performance in literature of the Americas. Specifically, this article presents as a main focus the linguistic modalities of African descendants in Cuba and the United States and the formation of a black identity in literature through linguistic variance.

KEY WORDS: Nicolás Guillén; Zora Neale Hurston; cultural performance; language; Afro-descendant.

RESUMO: Este trabalho examina o uso da linguagem como um método de fortalecer um *performance* identidade cultural negra nas literaturas das Américas. Em particular, este artigo apresenta como enfoque principal as modalidades linguísticas dos afrodescendentes em Cuba e nos Estados Unidos e a formação de uma identidade negra na literatura através de variância linguística.

PALAVRAS CLAVES: Nicolás Guillén; Zora Neale Hurston; cultural performance; linguagem; afrodescendente.

“Language is a central feature of human identity. When we hear someone speak, we immediately make guesses about gender, education level, age, profession, and place of origin. Beyond this individual matter, a language is a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity.”

(Bernard

Spolsky)

Among most scholars, the accepted understanding of culture centers the experiences shared by a population of people who inhabit a common space and have

communal interactions that shape common experience. Additionally, most scholars are careful to not essentialize articulations of culture noting that there are variances among any set or group of people. However, within certain populations, be they national, ethnic, racial, gendered or age-groupings, there are common cultural performances that tend to differentiate communities in a manner that adds a unique identifier to commonly shared experiences and articulations. In as much, this analysis purposes to focus on a few shared experiences and articulation of Africa-descended populations in Southern Florida (USA) and in Havana (Cuba) by examining the use of language, in-group communicative norms, as a marker of self-expression and identity. The understanding is that the analyzed articulation of “a” normative cultural performance is one that can be found among other Africa-descendent communities in certain areas of the American South (USA) and in Cuba. This work strives to explore the use of popular vernacular found in literary texts that emerge as cultural artifacts or testaments to the manners in which populations mediate “official” discourses for in-group purposes.

For this undertaking, the work two seminal writers of African-descent will be analyzed comparatively: Nicolás Guillén (Cuba) and Zora Neale Hurston (USA). The selection of these two writers centers that the fact that they are common literary figures on the global literary front, and that their work is said to unveil the lived experiences of people inhabiting prescribed geographic spaces. Furthermore, these two literary contemporaries represent early 20th century figures that wrote against the dominant literary ideology regarding the representations of nation, identity and language as central to their trajectory is the presentation of an Africa-descended, or Black cultural reality in both Cuba and the United States.

Sociolinguist Bernard Spolsky in *Concise Encyclopedia of Educational Linguistics* eloquently expresses the notion of language as a signifier of cultural identity. For Spolsky, language is viewed as a powerful conduit by which expressions of cultural, ethnic and national identities come to be understood, expressed and located. Like Spolsky, numerous scholars have begun to extrapolate on the ideology of language as semiotic cultural signifier within African Diaspora spaces. Contemporary cultural studies critics, including sociolinguists, argue that language as an evolving, mediated discourse, is an adaptable cultural entity that is shaped in order to “fit” the communicative needs of its constituents through varied, hybrid verbalization. In *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Walter I. Ong centers this argument in the justification of an “oral tradition” that supersede a “literary tradition” within many linguistic communities to argue ultimately the codependency of the oral and the literary. Ong states in a tautological mode:

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In essence, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. (ONG, 2007: 15)

For Ong, the uniqueness of oral creation and its impending performance gives rise to the literary mirroring of audible iterations as they are written in order to create a “literate” account of the spoken. In as much, conjoined, the oral performance and its written twin form the basis for communal literary expressions, as the adaptation of the spoken becomes a cultural representation of “community” in the accessible written form. The argument is that, in the Americas, people of African ancestry have created an “oral culture” that is rich with “powerful and beautiful verbal performances” that have come to define space, place, people and history. Language, in both oral and written manifestations, has evolved to express the cultural particularities of a defined community. And, these communities are accessed through, as Ong clearly states, literacy: the written word.

This paper proposes to explore the use of popular forms of linguistic coding (oral performance) by groups of Africa-descended people in the Americas for the purpose of demonstrating the use of, or manipulation of linguistic variance as cultural representations of ethnic/racial identity in literature. Particularly, hybridized-oral language forms in their written manifestation will be examined as semiotic markers of performing identity via vernacular particularities for certain Black communities in the United States and in Cuba. In contestation are the official and popular languages and linguistic structures as Blacks in certain geographical spaces in the African Diaspora exert through oral performance an ethnic identity that is tied to in-group communicative forms. With regard to modalities for this critical examination, excerpts from classical works of African-American and Afro-Hispanic literature will be used in order to illustrate the linguistic “play” that has marked, grouped or come to identify Blacks in the certain geographical communities in the US and in Cuba. Specifically, the poem “Búcate plata” by Cuban national poet Nicolás Guillén and

excerpts from Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, first published in 1937, will demonstrate how oral language, through literary manipulation in contested spaces, has created a hybridized space for the celebration of a Black-cultural identity in the Americas. The contested spaces about which I make reference are Eatonville, Florida, and Havana. For Hurston, it is the cultural fabric of an early to mid-20th century United States of North America, the South no less, that gives birth to linguistic signifiers that represent geographical space and the people who inhabit that space, Black North Americans in the region of the Florida everglades. For Guillén, Havana becomes the crucible for the testing of linguistic variances that define people and place. The theoretical paradigms presented in this paper are postulations regarding performance theory, post-coloniality and language, cultural hybridization, and post-colonial identity as presented by scholars, the like of Homi Bhabha, Helen Tiffin, Frantz Fanon, and other cultural and post-colonial theorists. Suffice it to say, the use of Guillén and Hurston does not limit the scope of the discussion exclusively to these two writers of the African Diaspora or to their writings. Both writers and their works will be used in order to explicate the point of the use of language as a mode of Black cultural express among African Diasporic communities in the Americas. Similarly, the same could be said about the writing of Anglophone Caribbean Blacks who employ *patois* as a linguistic and marker of culture or Francophone Caribbean Blacks who use a variance of *créole*. For the purpose of this very brief investigation, however, the literary focus will be placed on Guillén and Hurston.

Regarding the creation of national culture, Frantz Fanon proposes that “(a) national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence...” (FANON, 1995: 155) Likewise, Helen Tiffin in

“Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse” states, “post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridized, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity”. (TIFFIN, 1996: 95) Fanon and Tiffin suggest a process involving dialectic of cultural bartering and shifting as former colonial subjects mediate normative European cultural constructions by means of manipulation, re-appropriation and recreation for the purpose of knowing, understanding, and identifying self and community. In former colonial spaces in the Americas that have a palimpsest of national and cultural performative practices, such as the US and Cuba, the intricacies of colonization, compounded by slavery and emancipation have afforded people of African ancestry a milieu of fodder for vernacular articulations that come to represent cultural performance. Within these spaces, the historical waltz between the “official” and the “popular” result in representations that attempt to give meaning to audible and visible manifestations that become unique to confined and defined geographical spaces. And, a pivotal component utilized by Blacks in the Americas to define, celebrate, understand and locate their cultural heritage is language. For numerous diasporic Blacks, language, replete with its propagandistic vernacular, has become a tool of cultural resistance and signification as it has been used to identity and (re) presents a people, community and culture. Or as Marcyliena Morgan puts it:

Modern creole language situations have arisen mainly from European-conceived and controlled plantation systems that brought together people of different nations, cultures, and languages to serve as either indentured workers or slaves.

While the situations from which creole languages have emerged can be described merely as examples of language contact, the denotation is hardly sufficient if one considers the complex ways in which the communities of speakers currently use language to mediate and substantiate the multiple realities that constitute their world. (MORGAN, 1994: 1)

Morgan lucidly articulates the notion of hybridized language formation resulting from cultural contact of disparate systems. In her view, she, too, sees the phenomenon of language as a cultural signifier. To return to my argument, in the case of the United States and Cuba, language is viewed as a semiotic marker of cultural performance as Blacks have altered dominant linguistic discourse, creating in-group communicative orality, or oral discourse, that has become, as Spolsky states, “a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity.” These symbols are performed in an effort to define and localize identity through the spoken and written word. I assert that in the case of Nicolas Guillén and Zora Neal Hurston, the use of popular language (Morgan would argue creole language) in their creative texts emerge as semiotic markers for the performance of Black cultural identity in two disparate, yet similar, locales of the African Diaspora.

A noteworthy observation is the fact that both texts under analysis were published in the same decade. “Bucate plata” was published in Guillén’s collection entitled *Motivos de son* (1930) and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in 1937. Both works deal with the particulars regarding the expression of Blackness in post-colonial, post-emancipatory spaces where Africanized cultural forms in

literature, music, dance, language, etc., are in conflict with dominant paradigms of national representation of culture and are thus, relegated to the margins of society and devalued in terms of representation of nation and national culture. Additionally, both works were published in an historic moment when global African Diaspora consciousness was emerging in the Americas and beyond. In literature, the rise of the Negritude Movement, principally in the French-speaking Americas and Africa, was underway in the 1930s as a literary and political response to French colonial racism. Writers such as Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire and Leon Dumas believed that the shared black heritage of members of the African Diaspora was the best tool in fighting against French political and intellectual hegemony and domination. In the United States, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to the mid-1930s was viewed as an African-American cultural movement through which black writers, cultural and political activists struggled to include manifestations of Black culture into the fabric of American culture through literature, performing arts, plastic arts, etc. Additionally, Cuba has its own particular history of Black political activity at the dawn of the 20th century. It is home to the first Black political party in the Americas, *el Partido Independiente de Color*, and scholars such as Franklin Knight, Aline Helg and others write about the importance of Black mobilization in Cuba with regard to Pan-Africanist movements during the first decades of the 20th century. The abovementioned is but a scant iteration of Black Nationalist activity happening in the Americas during the time in which Zora Neal Hurston and Nicolas Guillén emerged onto the literary scene with the texts used in this brief analysis. Additionally, the historical mentioning serves to locate the linguistic performance of Black culture within a larger collective throughout the Americas and in Africa with literary manifestations in colonial languages of English, Spanish and French. And, the

creation of a black cultural vernacular within these communities is achieved in written and oral communication through phonetic alliteration, the use of apocope, consonant omission, phonetic transferal of consonants, to name a few stylistic variances.

As referenced earlier, Cuban national poet Nicolas Guillén published “Búcate plata” in his highly assessed volume *Motivos de son*. According to noted scholar Richard Jackson in *Black Writers in Latin America*, “(t)he appearance of his *Motivos de son* in 1930, an authentic literary happening, was upsetting, unsettling and controversial partly because they broke momentarily with traditional Spanish verse expression and partly because they dealt with authentic black characters, but largely because they brought to literature a new and genuine black concern, perspective, and poetic voice, which even some blacks misunderstood”. (JACKSON, 1979: 81) Jackson’s assertion echoes that of numerous Guillen scholars as they intellectually decode the “blackening” of the poet’s aesthetic. The first stanza of Guillén’s highly anthologized poem is replete with cultural signification that describes the Afro-Cuban subject in terms of language and culture. The linguistic variance and manipulation of “official” Spanish represents cultural interpolation where the “popular” Spanish spoken by Cubans of African descent is presented in written form for the sake of linguistic visibility, syntactic resistance and cultural signification. The result is a written Afro-Cuban vernacular lexicology that linguistically marks people and place mimicking the oral performance found in many Black communities in Cuba, Havana specifically. The first stance reads as follow:

Búcate plata,

búcate plata,

poqqe no doy un paso má:

etoy a arró con galleta,
na ma.
(Búscate plata,
búscate plata,
porque no doy un paso más:
estoy a arroz con galleta,
nada más.)

The first noted linguistic contestations are manipulations of the singular informal command form of the verb “buscar” (to look for) and the first person singular conjugate form of the irregular verb “estar” (to be). The phonological representation of the spoken-Spanish illustrates consonant ellipsis as the “s” is omitted from the consonant clusters of “sc” and “st” found in the official orthographical representation of the verbs “buscar” and “estar.” The official “búscate” is substituted for “búcate” and the official first person singular conjugate “estoy,” is represented as “etoy.” Additionally noted in the first stanza is the omission of the consonants “s” and “z” found at the end of words, such as “ma” for “más” and “arró” for “arroz.” The use of apocope is found in the omission of the last syllable of the Spanish word for nothing “nada”, where the Afro-Cuban poetic voice says “na” as in “na ma” instead of “nada más.” Thus, this linguistic manipulation represents the creation of an oral identity marker commonly found in Afro-Cuban communities in written form. Here, Guillén masterfully illustrates Ong’s postulations on the evolution of oral traditions (orality) and written language (literacy). Further, Guillén’s manifestation of “literacy” represents the written hybridized representation

of a Black-Cuban speech dialectic emerging from the history of colonial linguistic hegemony within region.

The first and subsequent stanzas continue to illustrate the linguistic play between orality and literacy. Consequently, Spanish vocabulary, orthography, syntax and grammar are manipulated to bear a cultural vernacular that comes to identify Afro-Cubans through oral and written speech. However, the linguistic play in Guillén's work also serves as semiotic markers that relate to the reader-defined markers of Black cultural performance in Cuba. The poem thematically speaks to the social, economic and political plight of Afro-Cubans in a communicative form understood by them. The use of "plata" (silver) becomes a colloquial, popular symbolic metaphor for money "dinero" for Afro-Cubans. Additionally, the poet voice expresses the level of poverty and struggle in this community through stanzas such as:

Yo bien sé cómo etá to,
pero biejo, hay que comé:
búcate plata,
búcate plata,
poqqe me hoy a corré.
(Yo bien sé cómo está todo,
pero viejo, hay que comer:
búscate plata, búscate plata,
porque me voy a correr.)

The poetic voice identifies with poverty, alienation, economic disparity and unemployment within Havana's black population. The alliteration of "búcate plata" attests to the lack of financial resources and means by which to acquire it. Loosely translated, the poetic voice in the second stanza states a familiarity with the condition for Afro-Cubans as she states "I know very well how things are/but man, one has to eat/find money/find money/because I am going to run." The poem alluded to the level to which the Afro-Cuban female has to descend in order to survive. The poem reeks of images of prostitution and female exploitation due to poverty and a lack of opportunities.

Depué dirán que soy mala,
y no me quedrán tratá,
pero amó con hambre, biejo,
¡qué ba!
Con tanto sapato nuevo,
¡qué ba!
Con tanto reló, compadre,
¡qué ba!
Con tanto lujo, mi negro,
¡qué ba!
(Después dirán que soy mala,
y no me quedrán tatar,
pero amor con hambre, viejo,

¡qué vale!

Con tanto zapato nuevo,

¡qué vale!

Con tanto reloj, compadre,

¡qué vale!

Con tanto lujo, mi negro,

¡qué vale!)

Nicolas Guillén with “Búcate plata” manipulates language in order to address the complexities of the Afro-Cuban subject. In so doing, the use of popular language becomes the vehicle by which the author culturally locates people, space and place. The linguistic dialectic used by Guillén in the poem is one that serves as a mimetic cultural signifier addressing the tension between the hegemonically enforced official and the culturally significant “popular” manifestations of black identity in Cuba. And, such is not isolated to Cuba as will be demonstrated briefly in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Scholars and critics of African American literature consider Zora Neale Hurston to be one of the pre-eminent writers of twentieth-century African-American literature. For many, the rediscovery of Hurston’s *Their Eyes* in 1975 by Alice Walker represents one of the most significant literary excavations of the late 20th century. A “hushed” voice among male luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston’s *Their Eyes* deals specifically with the life of Janie Crawford and her discovery and celebration of self in the Florida everglades. The novel brings to the literary fore the position of Black women in a racist and sexist America, metonymically represented by Janie, and their fight for agency in a patriarchal social structure. However, that

which is presented in this analysis is the stylistic form and content of Hurston's acclaimed work. It is my contention that, like Guillén, Hurston's use of visual representations (literacy) of oral culture (orality) in the text serves to signify black cultural performance. Additionally, it must be understood that this analysis will not tackle the debate regarding in-group communicative structures that situate Black American speech as a language, dialect or a combination of both.

However, the assertion is that the "language" spoken by African Americans in Hurston's novel represents the author's attempt to display the linguistic variance of popular oral modes of communication among African Americans located in Southern Florida and elsewhere. Additionally, like Guillén's poem, Hurston's novel addresses race and gender through the presentation and performance of the written/printed word. Literary scholar Susan Willis in "Wandering: Zora Neale Hurston's Search for Self and Method" suggests that Hurston used "grammatical tricks" to mediate Black speech from "standard" English as a means of subversion. In a conversation with Joe Starks, he who was to be Janie's second husband, the linguistic manipulation of language, or "grammatical tricks" as inferred by Willis, is observed and gendered. The following excerpt from the text illustrates the use of apocope, transferal of words and consonant, syntactic variation and symbolic metaphors to code racial and gender performance. In a response to Joe as to her parent's whereabouts, Janie responds:

"Dey dead, Ah reckon. Ah wouldn't know 'bout 'em 'cause mah Grandma raised me. She dead too."

(They are dead, I believe. I would not know about them because

my Grandma raised me. She is dead too.)

“She dead too! Well, who’s lookin’ after a lil girl-chile lak you?”

(She is dead also! Well, who is looking after a little girl-child like

you?)

“Ah’m married.”

(I’m married.)

“Married? You ain’t hardly old enough to be weaned. Ah betcha

you still crave sugar-tits, doncher?”

(Married? You are not hardly old enough to be weaned. I bet you

that you still crave sugar-tits, don’t you?)

“Yeah, and Ah makes and sucks ‘em when de notion strikes me.

Drinks sweeten’ water too.” (HURSTON, 1990: 27)

(Yes, and I make and suck them when the notion strikes me.

Drink sweetened water too.)

Lyrically written with laces of humor and flirtation, Hurston manipulates language in order to show the transferal from the oral to the written. Her use of phonetic transferal of the consonant cluster “th” to “d” is seen in the play between

standard-English orthography and the cultural representation of the definite article “the.” Additionally, such is seen in the representation of the third person plural pronoun “they”, as the “th” consonant cluster is replaced orthographically by “d.” Regarding total substitution of standard-English words with what I consider more culturally and geographically relevant African American lexicons, words and phrases in standard English such as “bet you” and “don’t you” are conflated and phonetically manipulated into “betcha” and “doncher” to emulate written representations of oral speech performance that become cultural.

Another important observation relating to the use of language as a cultural signifier in Hurston’s work is language as a semiotic marker of gender positionality. The extract from the novel communicates the role of men and women in society. Joe’s question of “who’s lookin’ after a lil girl-chile lak you?” speaks to the notion of the inability of women to exercise agency. Understood from the use of language is a female usurpation of power expressed in Janie’s assumed incapability to care for self, as observed from the male position. However, the light-gender banter, laced with sexual overtones, reverses dominant male discourse as Janie exercises agency through language as she states that she is able to make and drink sugar tits when the “notion strikes” her.

A second extract from the text continues to reiterate the use of language in *Their Eyes* as a marker of Black cultural performance. More so in this extract than the one mentioned before, is the example of linguistic transferal of words, where complete morphemic and phonemic representations are used in the popular that have no semantic recognition in official English. In the in-group communicative form, such is said by sociolinguists to represent loosely a phonetic spelling at best. However, the codes in the popular relate a meaning that ventures beyond its presumed

corresponding equivalent in official English.

“De Indians gahn east, man. It’s dangerous.”

(The Indians are gone east, man. It’s dangerous.)

“Dey don’t know always know. Indians don’t know much
uh nothin’, tuh tell de truth. Else dey’d own dis country still.

De white folks ain’t gone nowhere.”

(They don’t always know. Indians don’t know much about
anything, to tell the truth. Or else, they’d own this country.

The white folks aren’t going anywhere.)

Lias hesitated and started to climb out, but his uncle wouldn’t
let him.

“Dis time tuhorrer you gointuh wish you follow crow. You
better stay heah, man.”

(This time tomorrow you are going to wish you’d followed
crow.

You’d better stay here, man.)

“If Ah never see you no mo’ on earth, Ah’ll meet you in
Africa.”

(HURSTON, 1990 ed: 148)

(If I never see you any more on earth, I'll meet you in Africa.)

The morphological construct of “gahn” for “gone”, “tuh” for “to”, “tuhmorrer” for “tomorrow” and “heah” for “here” are rendered unrecognizable in the official written discourse of standard English. However, such are given communicative meaning in the popular and serve as signs that identify African American oral and written cultural identity. Additionally, the referenced extract is imbued with African mythological folklore. Joe’s parting comment “If Ah never see you no mo’ on earth, Ah’ll meet you in Africa” conjures the notion of the African spirit’s return to Africa after death. This intertextual connection to Africa mythology is a trope utilized by Hurston extensively in the *Their Eyes*. “Africa” is linguistically and symbolically the connotation of “Eden,” paradise, or heaven.

Zora Neale Hurston’s highly acclaimed novel is one that unveils many levels of racial, ethnic and gender inscription. Through a revisionist historical conversation between two friends, Janie weaves Phoebe through the many intersections of her life that ultimately awakened her racial and gender consciousness, producing an African-American female protagonist at the end, that comes to represent black female empowerment and agency before the coining of the term/label Black feminist. Moreover, that which has been addressed in this brief analysis, is Hurston’s rich and powerful use of language, transferring the oral discourse to a written form, that represents a people, a history, a story and a cultural identity.

In conclusion, the multifarious manifestations of language within African Diaspora communities “speak” to the history of space, people and region. It is in and through language as a marker of culture that differing communities are identified and come to exist. Each utterance bears a specific history in its formation that oftentimes

exhibits vestiges of contact with another linguistic configuration forging oral and written borrowing, altering, or hybridizing. However, it is by means of language that communities of people have come to self-identify and be identified. In as much, the editors of the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* assert:

the appropriation of the language is essentially a subversive strategy, for the adaptation of the ‘standard’ language to the demands and requirements of the place and society into which it has been appropriated amounts to a far more subtle rejection of the political power of the standard language. In Chinua Achebe’s words this is the process by which language is made to bear the weight and the texture of a different experience. In so doing it becomes a “different language”. (ASHCROFT et al, 1995: 284)

Guillén and Hurston represent two writers of African Diaspora literature whose works bear out such an assertion. In their production of a counter discourse in English and in Spanish, both writers achieve in demonstrating the linguistic performance of black culture in form and in content. In so doing, each writer takes the reader on a journey into the cultural creativity of these communities as performative vernacular mediates humor, life, love, despair, and hope. Thus, through the manipulation of official grammar, syntax, vocabulary and orality, Guillén with “Búcate plata” and Hurston with *Their Eyes*, manipulate language in order to create a literary space where poetic and narrative voices and characters perform black cultural performance through language, ultimately rendering with their work, as Bernard Spolsky suggests, “a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity.”

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