

“We, Too, Sing America”:
The Friendship and Literary Correspondence
of Langston Hughes and Manuel Zapata Olivella.

In an article titled “Male Versus Female Friendship in *Don Quijote*,” Debra D. Andrist, commenting on traditional perspectives of human relations, points out that “friendship necessarily involves some form of desire (even if it is only to be safe from violence threatened by another, or to care for and be cared about by another).” She goes on to say: “Even though the protagonist in Western literature, especially the non-contemporary, is more frequently male, and while male relationships may be a cornerstone of the literary society’s dynamics, female relationships in comparison may not only offer insight on their own merits but may illuminate male relationships as well.”¹

Two other scholars concerned with women’s writing also challenge male-oriented thinking and literary tradition. In response to Harold Bloom’s postulations “that the dynamics of literary history arise from the artist’s ‘anxiety of influence,’ his fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings,”² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, declare:

. . .the female writer’s battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading of *her*.³ In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle, therefore,

often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called “Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction . . . an act of survival.” Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible. (49)

Gilbert and Gubar continue: “The woman writer . . . searches for a female model not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definitions of her “femininity” but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavors” (50)

In the United States of America of the 1920s, the flourishing of literature, art and music that became known as the Harlem Renaissance, and especially the voice of its premier exponent, Langston Hughes (1902-1967), represented a new awareness and embrace of black identity and culture in the Americas. As a radical challenge to and departure from traditional white authority and representation,⁴ the literary outpouring of Hughes and other writers and artists of the period exercised a strong influence on poets and writers throughout the hemisphere. Testimony of that influence is the friendship of Hughes and Cuba’s Nicolás Guillén (1902-1987), which began with a trip Hughes made to Cuba in 1930 and ended only with his death in 1967.

Arnold Rampersad, who has written the definitive biography of the African American poet and writer, and other scholars⁵ have documented Guillén’s relationship with Hughes. Rampersad makes no mention, however, of another prominent Spanish American writer with whom Hughes maintained a friendship for more than twenty years:

Colombia's Manuel Zapata Olivella, the foremost novelist of the African diaspora who died last November in Bogotá at the age of eight four. Unlike Guillén, who was born in the same year as Hughes, Zapata Olivella, who was some eighteen years younger, spent relatively little time in Hughes' company. Moreover, Hughes never traveled to Colombia. Nevertheless, their meeting and the friendship that ensued had lasting importance and mutual benefit to both of them. While Hughes helped Zapata Olivella to sharpen his literary skills and to understand better U.S. black life and culture, Zapata Olivella enhanced and broadened Hughes' appreciation of the black experience in Spanish America.

Born in 1920 in Lorica and raised in Cartagena, Zapata Olivella met Hughes in 1946, one year after the end of World War II and about three years after he had abandoned medical school and his homeland, eager to discover the world beyond Colombia: “. . . yo no quería ser médico... quería ser vagabundo. . . ,” he would write later in his 1949 book, *Pasión vagabunda*. “Ya había probado el veneno del vagabundaje y todo mi cuerpo añoraba los caminos que aún no se insinuaban en el horizonte” (69). Earlier in 1946 he had crossed the Mexican border into the United States where he encountered hunger, homelessness and unemployment, especially among the African American veterans/ population. Although the U. S. and its Allies had defeated the Axis forces of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and imperial Japan, the nation had not begun to confront seriously its history of racial injustice and discrimination or to end the longstanding and legalized practice of racial segregation.

Eventually making his way to New York City with the help of black veterans and lacking a steady means of support, Zapata Olivella struggled for food and shelter. Having

read Langston Hughes' autobiography *The Big Sea*⁶ and a few of his poems, and anxious to resume his own writing, Zapata Olivella sought out Harlem's poet laureate, who, as a youth had also taken to the road to see the world.⁷ Under the aptly titled section "Resurrección" of his 1953 book *He visto la noche*,⁸ which recounts his experiences in the United States, Zapata Olivella describes his encounter with Hughes:

Toqué a sus puertas esperanzado en que me ayudara a vender algún artículo en los periódicos negros, aun cuando no había visto ninguno editado en Nueva York. Detrás de esta ayuda que pensaba solicitarle, se escondía la profunda admiración que como hombre y poeta me habían despertado los relatos de su vida y los pocos poemas que le conocía. En el poeta encontré mucho más de lo que abrigara mi alma batida: un amigo. (1953: 88; 1969: 126; 2000: 351)⁹

Although Hughes was both older and a well established writer, the warm welcome and unselfish assistance he gave the young aspiring Colombian writer was conducive not to the development of "a filial relationship"—of father to son, as Bloom posits—but rather to a fraternal relationship, characteristic of those who recognize in each other not merely a kindred spirit but a common ancestral experience, a heritage of suffering that bound them inextricably together. Indeed, for Zapata Olivella and others, Hughes (by Latin American standards a mulatto, like Zapata Olivella), embodied, through his embrace of blackness and black culture, his outspoken eloquence against Jim Crow and racism, and his openness to other languages, cultures and peoples, the model of a successful and committed black writer worthy of emulation, not competition.

Zapata Olivella confirmed in an interview with Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo the strong fraternal sentiment that Hughes' poem "I, Too," had inspired in him: "Tal vez el [poema] que más me influyó en el sentido de entusiasarme, en hacerme sentir hermano de él fue 'Yo también soy América.'" [Perhaps the one poem that most influenced me, in the sense that it fired me with enthusiasm, it made me feel his (Hughes') brother, was "I, too, am America").¹⁰ Revisiting in *¡Levántate mulato!* (1987) the feelings engendered by his meeting with Hughes, Zapata Olivella again underscored the fraternal quality of that encounter: "Aun cuando sólo conocía algo de su obra, me acogió con los / sentimientos de un viejo hermano" (278-279).¹¹

Langston Hughes' correspondence to Zapata Olivella corroborates the two writers' mutual respect and identification. Consisting of autographed dedications on five of Hughes' books and a Christmas card accompanied by a typed letter, the correspondence is numerically smaller than that written by Hughes to Nicolás Guillén, which has come to light.¹² Nevertheless, it may be no less significant. The earliest dedication appears on a copy of *The Ways of White Folks*, Hughes' first collection of short stories, which was published in 1934. It reads as follows:

"For Manuel Zapata, with all good wishes for a happy stay in the U.S.A., Sincerely,
Langston Hughes. New York, September 2, 1946."

This first correspondence is especially important because it offers evidence of Zapata Olivella's presence in the United States and indicates a precise day, month and year when the two writers were most likely together. In contrast, it is interesting to see that in *He*

visto la noche Zapata Olivella rarely offered exact information about the day, month or year of his particular experiences. It is as if he wanted to literally avoid “dating” his work. The dedication also implies that the young traveler was in the early stages of his visit to the U.S.

The second piece of correspondence is the dedication found in Zapata Olivella’s copy of *El inmenso mar*, the Spanish version of Hughes’ autobiography, *The Big Sea*. The words here, inscribed less than three months after Hughes signed his short story collection, read:

"For my friend and fellow vagabon, Manuel Zapata, with all good wishes--
Sincerely, Langston Hughes. New York, Nov. 22, 1947."

While both dedications are written with sincerity, they differ in tone and in degree of intimacy. The words of the first dedication, which seem more formal, express with cordiality the kind of greeting given to a person one has just met and does not know well. Those of the second affirm the existence (or desire) of a friendship while also evincing an awareness of a common experience and identity—vagabondage--that reinforces the friendship. It is likely that Hughes mailed the book to Zapata Olivella or entrusted it to someone who was going to Colombia. Available sources indicate that Zapata Olivella had returned to his homeland before the date written on the dedication.¹³

The next book by Hughes that bears a dedication to Zapata Olivella is the collection titled *Something in Common and other stories*, which was published in 1961. There are two important changes that distinguish this dedication from the two earlier

ones. On this occasion (fourteen years later) Hughes addresses Zapata Olivella by his first name only. Concomitantly, Hughes signs the book with just his given name. Clearly, these two minor but significant modifications simultaneously reveal and reinforce the greater familiarity and intimacy that undoubtedly had come to define the unique friendship of these two Afro-American writers. The dedication reads:

“For Manuel—with sincere regards from—Langston[.] Harlem, U.S.A., May, 1961.”

It is also interesting to note that Hughes no longer indicated, broadly, the city of New York as the place from which he was writing. Rather, he chose to denote the predominantly black neighborhood or community of Harlem as the specific location from which he wrote, in which he lived, and with which he identified and which held fond memories for Zapata Olivella. 1961

Two years later Hughes sent to Zapata Olivella his latest book, which was simply titled *Five Plays*.¹⁴ Hughes maintained the simplicity and intimacy that marked the previous dedication by addressing his correspondent again only by first name and signing the book in a similar manner. On the other hand, Hughes returned to indicating New York City as the site from which he wrote. The words of the dedication are as follow:

“Especially for Manuel—my plays, Sincerely, Langston New York, May 1, 1963.

In addition, one can note that Hughes added personal emphasis to the dedication by the use of the intensifying adverb “Especially.” Also, unlike the previous dedication, which included the month and year of the signing, Hughes wrote in this instance the complete date, including day, month and year.

The fifth--and apparently the last—book of his that Hughes forwarded to Zapata Olivella is his second autobiography, titled *I Wonder as I Wander*.¹⁵ The first three words of the dedication (“Especially for Manuel”) echo those that Hughes wrote on the volume of plays. Immediately following these words and placed between dashes are four more words, not used before, that contain the strongest expression of sentiment by Hughes to his Colombian fellow writer and Afro-American: “--with all my affection.”

As in the dedications of 1961 and 1963, Hughes signs this one with his given name only. Similarly, he again records the city of New York as his location and also specifies the exact date of his signature. The final words of the dedication, however, depart from the usual, brief --perhaps even formulaic--but no less sincere manner in which Hughes dedicated his books. Written after the place and date are five additional words, which constitute an invitation or appeal to Zapata Olivella to visit Hughes again. The words also serve as a reminder to Zapata Olivella of the exact place where he and Hughes first met and their long friendship began: Harlem. Here is the text of the dedication:

“Especially for Manuel—with all my affection—Sincerely, Langston New York,
March 9, 1964 Oye, come back to Harlem!”

The use of the Spanish verbal imperative “Oye,” which Zapata Olivella would, of course, understand and appreciate, exhibits Hughes’ awareness of and ability with the language. More important, it adds a playful yet more personal and sensitive touch to the sincerity of the dedication.

As far as can be determined, Zapata Olivella did not return to Harlem in time to see Hughes before his death in New York on May 22, 1967. Nevertheless, for almost forty years he continued to remember and evoke the name of his friend and literary mentor, as his novel *Changó el gran putas* and his autobiography *¡Levántate mulato!* show. More than mere personal recollection or even literary intertextuality, these remembrances and evocations concur with the African belief—to which Zapata Olivella seems to have subscribed—of keeping alive the memory of the departed, by which the living are able to “carry on with a firm sense of self and identity.”¹⁶ In remembering and revering Hughes, by honoring their friendship, Zapata Olivella not only strengthened the poet’s well-earned reputation within the Hispanic world but also enhanced his own standing within the Americas as a talented Afro-Colombian writer committed to literature and the struggle for justice for all. Together and individually, through their poems and novels, their essays and plays, and especially their friendship and correspondence, they affirm, “We, Too, Sing America.”

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¹ Debra D. Andrist, “Male Versus Female Friendship in *Don Quijote*,” *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 3.2 (1983): 149.

² See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 46.

³ Cf. W. E. B. Du Bois: "It is not that we are ashamed of our color and blood. We are instinctively and almost unconsciously ashamed of the caricatures done of our darker shades. Black *is* caricature in our half conscious thought and we shun in print and paint that which we love in life." See *W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. William M. Tuttle, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 53.

⁴ See, for example, Langston Hughes' essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *Nation* 23 June 1926.

⁵ Edward Mullen, Dellita Martin-Ogunsola, Martha Cobb, Robert Chrisman, and Richard L. Jackson are some of the principal scholars who have written about Hughes' influence on Guillén and their friendship.

⁶ *The Big Sea* appeared in 1940; a Spanish translation of the autobiography was published in Buenos Aires in 1944 under the title *El inmenso mar*.

⁷ For Hughes' travels to the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe as a mess boy on a freighter in the 1920s, see *The Big Sea; an autobiography* (1940; New York: Hill and Wang, 1963).

⁸ To date, there have been four different editions of *He visto la noche*: the first, subtitled "relatos," appeared in 1953; a second was published in Cuba (1962), three years after the 1959 revolution; the third, corrected, was published (1969) and reissued several times by Bedout of Medellín, Colombia; and the fourth and latest edition (2000) was published with *Pasión vagabunda* in one volume as part of the Homenajes Nacionales series of the Ministerio de Cultura.

⁹ As early as 1929, translations of Hughes' poetry, including "I, Too," "Our Land," and "Negro," had begun to appear in the Colombian press. For more information about the Hughes' reception in Colombia, see Prescott, "We, Too, Are America: Langston Hughes in Colombia," forthcoming in *The Langston Hughes Review*. The first edition of *He visto la noche* contains several typographical errors, which Zapata Olivella corrected in subsequent editions. He made other changes in the later edition, e.g., "Se mostró más animado. . ." (1953: 89) vs. "Se mostró más entusiasmo . . ." (1969: 126).

¹⁰ Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo, "Conversaciones con el doctor Manuel Zapata Olivella, Bogotá, 1980, 1983," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 4.1 (1985): 26. Hughes' poem begins with the lines "I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother" and ends with the line, "I, too, am America."

¹¹ It is worthwhile to note that *¡Levántate mulato!* which carried as a subtitle Mexican philosopher and educator José Vasconcelos' slogan "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu," and which first appeared in a French edition, was published just four years after Zapata Olivella's long awaited *Changó el gran putas* (1983), which introduced the Yoruba/Lucumí term "ekobio," meaning "brother," into the common parlance of black Colombians and black scholars of Afro-Hispanic literature throughout the Americas.

¹² See "Langston Hughes: Six Letters to Nicolás Guillén," edited by Robert Chrisman, *The Black Scholar* 16.4 (1985): 54-60.

¹³ By July of 1947 articles written by Zapata Olivella about Colombian themes and institutions and on his observations of New York were appearing in Colombian newspapers and magazines. See, for example, in *Cromos*: "Confidencias de un tinto. Tertulias bogotanas" (5 July 1947); "Cosas de la Ciudad Blanca. Los 'Chinos' Residentes" (12 July 1947); "Problemas del libro colombiano. Los inéditos" (16 Aug. 1947).

¹⁴ The plays are "Mulatto," "Soul Gone Home," "Little Ham," "Simply Heavenly" and "Tambourines to Glory."

¹⁵ Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander; an Autobiographical Journey* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

¹⁶ See Laurence E. Prescott, *Without Hatreds or Fears: Jorge Artel and the Struggle for Black Literary Expression in Colombia* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2000) 131.