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Changó in Translation: Lateral Movement and Lateral Thinking

This study is a reflection on the motif of laterality as found throughout the Colombian writer Manuel Zapata Olivella's fine and substantial novel Changó, el Gran Putas.¹ The motif is extended further by the process and product of the novel's translation into English. Having myself carried out that translation, which after much consideration I dubbed "Changó, the Baddest Dude,"² I find myself in a privileged position to comment on the quality of the writing and thought of the original, or source text, as translation theorists would have it, which is rife with both translation and lateral movement. Additionally, toward the conclusion of this study I shall attempt to apply some of my own lateral thinking to the texts in question (mainly from the perspective of ecological criticism), teasing out some of the perhaps less obvious consequences of such unconventional movements of mind. Finally, to impart a sense of the practical problem-solving involved in translating Zapata Olivella's text, I provide an Addendum that reproduces specific passages in both English and Spanish, so that one may observe the movement--lateral or otherwise--of the verbal and cultural material.

Changó (both the original and the translation) is an epic novel of immense proportions that deals with the no less immense diaspora of the African muntu³ in the western hemisphere. Within its five- to seven-hundred-page length⁴ it visits a diversity of geographic locales—including the Niger River region in west Africa, coastal Colombia (twice), Venezuela, Minas Gerais in Brazil, different parts of Mexico, Haiti, and parts of the United States ranging from Atlanta to Lawrence, Kansas, to Harlem. Those episodes span the early sixteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, an impressive range that reveals and imparts a broad and rich vision of the African-Americans' diasporic condition. Truly hemispheric, multicultural and polycentennarian, Changó stands as Zapata Olivella's most ambitious and, in my view, most accomplished fiction.

What is outstanding in the novel, however, is not just the monumental scale on which it is structured. It is the freshness and originality of the novel's perspective, which while recounting repeatedly the outrages and vexations to which the muntu are subjected over the centuries, avoids a pedestrian

enumeration of abuses. Zapata Olivella's breakthrough in this text (his previous works only hint at this insight)⁵ resides in a reframing of African-American history within a mythical context, that of the African orichas (deities), chief among whom is Changó, the god of lightning, war, dance, and fertility. This context portrays all the muntu—those as famous as the Liberator Simón Bolívar or the Haitian leader Henri Christophe and those as anonymous as the slaves whose bones provided lime for the mortar of the walls that surround Cartagena de Indias—as children of Changó, who keeps in touch with the living through his messenger Ngafúa as well as the muntu's lurking, hovering Ancestors. For those who are so attuned, the Ancestors constantly accompany the living in their ongoing travails, lending them strength and sharing in their suffering. Conversely, losing contact with the Ancestors leads the muntu to believe the White Wolves'⁶ contention that the muntu are the embodiment of Satan. In a sense, since the Ancestors lend support to the living without the limitations of time, space, and mortality, the dead are more alive than the living. It is the living, for whom freedom and justice are always out of reach, whose existence is tantamount to a death. By revisiting major incidents in African-American history from the standpoint of the ever-present Ancestors, Changó effaces the frontier between life and death and dehierarchizes them, breathing new life into African-Americans' struggle for dignity, along with the artistic representation of that struggle.

Lateral movement for the African muntu, on a brutally immense scale, begins in a distinctly involuntary form: the capture of whole villages by the Portuguese slave traders in west Africa—ably assisted by traitorous Africans—and their forced transporting across the Atlantic Ocean chained in the hulls of slave ships. Symbolically, the African muntu are represented in the novel through the legend of the African woman Sosa Illamba, who dies while giving birth to a son. The son is born at sea and is thus already an orphan in transit upon entering this world. The muntu's forced movement is, of course, an integral part of Europe's colonization of its surrounding continents and people. Having decimated the New World's native population through disease and exploitation, the conquerors turned to Africans for the labor power necessary to fuel their empires' developing modernization. Once exiled in America, the Africans' travels were meant to cease, as their assigned roles were to work on plantations, in mines, or as domestic servants in their masters' homes. Only the unruly cimarrones (runaway slaves) would remain on the move, taking refuge in the barricaded palenques (slave enclaves) with the aid of other runaways. In such cases,

we are told in Changó, communication with people of other African nations took place by means of multi-lingual interpreters. The unimpeded movement of language across supposed barriers, implicit in the Latin translatio, thus functions in this instance to facilitate the muntu's physical release from bondage. In North America in the 19th century, the unauthorized continuation of the muntu's errancy takes the form of the Underground Railroad, which permitted runaway slaves from the South to reach safety and freedom in the North. And lateral movement, as the process by which meaning is sought and produced, is figured in the aptly named ekobio (comrade) woman from the same period, Sojourner Truth.

If lateral movement is at the heart of the muntu's oppression, it is also central to resistance. The forms of resistance throughout history have been many, running the gamut from mass armed rebellion to suicide. The war of independence that led to the formation of the world's first black republic in French-speaking Haiti is probably the most prominent example of the former. Whereas revolution etymologically implies an overturning of a given regime, democracy—revolution's goal—proposes a radical horizontality of power, with even the nation-state's chief executive subject to censure by the most common citizens.⁷ What arouses Changó's wrath so often in the novel is the failure of the so-called freedom fighters (usually bourgeois, European-bred criollos, but also mulattoes and mestizos of various stripes) to follow through to true social horizontality (egalitarianism) in their wars of independence. Whereas the muntu are fated by Ifá's tablets (into which their destiny is etched) to wander in the American desert of slavery, it is also part of Changó's curse that they bear the responsibility for their own liberation as well as that of all humankind. This delicate balance among determinism, free will, and messianism contributes in large part to the novel's unique cosmology.

Mothers killing their offspring and then killing themselves, as narrated repeatedly in the novel, in order to avoid lives of miserable enslavement, illustrates the latter, more individual form of resistance. Whether by taking poison, jumping overboard, setting oneself on fire, or starving oneself, suicide is represented as a legitimate form of thwarting the master's desires. Despite centuries of practice that would lead one to conclude the contrary, nowhere is it written (certainly not on Ifá's tablets, and not in the New or Old Testament) that cheap labor is one of the rights of European man. Whereas a Judeo-Christian interpretation might view suicide as merely self-destructive, Changó portrays it as a sideward drift into the

supportive company of the Ancestors. Alienation, aloneness, and the fierce individualism that characterize the contemporary western condition obscure the fundamental being with that underpins Changó's metaphysics.⁸ Being with confers mobility to the entrapped and grants agency to the disenfranchised, empowering the subaltern to move and to act while in free association with their predecessor Shadows.

As the discourse being evoked may appear similar to what for some five decades has been called “magical realism,”⁹ I hasten to underscore its fundamental difference. To be sure, magical realism means many things to many readers, but it also threatens to become a monolithic and ironclad cliché for the only sort of Latin American writing acceptable to readers in the industrialized parts of the world. The basic problem with magical realism as a critical tool is that it couches the textual phenomenon in superficial, stylistic terms, describing it as an aesthetic option for a writer who wishes to mix the natural with the supernatural (or mythical, marvelous, symbolic, surreal). It thus lends a piquant tropical exoticism to fictions that comfortable urban readers may find entertaining, but never troubling. Changó's textual system, through a means almost antithetical to Brecht's alienation effect, is subversive, upsetting, provocative. As I intimate above, its agenda is impatiently political and redemptive. It accuses its readers of either collaboration with the forces of oppression or derelict passive quiescence before those forces. We are all guilty, it contends, of 250 years of legal slavery and 150 more years of cryptoslavery, of the assassination of the South American Benkos Biojo and the North American Malcolm X, of illicit enrichment and environmental rape (see below). And it gives the reader the explosive tools, through lateral movement, to do something about it. That is about as far as you can get from the mock-innocent, Disneyfied commercial fabulation commonly termed “magical realism.”¹⁰

Saying this does not imply, however, that Changó does not work hard at the level of language and narrative technique (i.e., style) to resist complacency. It may sound impressionistic to state that the text has “countless” first-, second-, and third-person narrators but, because the narrators constantly change form (from the coachman Bouckman, to Bouckman's horse, to Changó's messenger Ngafúa, to the deceased Nat Turner, to Bouckman again, for example), it is literally impossible to know who those narrators are at a given textual juncture and therefore to count them. Suffice it to say that the narrators are abundant and often one encrusted in another, with documents such as a slave ship's logbook, a letter to a sorely missed

lover, or proceedings from a hearing of the Spanish Inquisition, among others, intercalated to enrich the mixture. What links all the diverse narrators, however, is a subaltern, marginalized status and its corresponding outlook on the world. Clearly, for all its investment in non-Western cosmologies, Changó is still deeply imbued with kaleidoscopic postmodern narrative strategies that challenge its readers as it projects a hybridized, heterodox vision.

Nor is narrative point of view the text's only transgressive formal trait. In order to suggest the co-presence of the past, present, and future, verb tenses are relentlessly skewed, producing such cacophonous utterances as "[Elegba] tasted the wine and wipes his eyes so as not to miss a word of what they had dictated to him in a future he remembers without having thought of yet" (60). Of course, to use the terms past, present, and future is already to fail to grasp what the text is attempting to do with time, for to rupture time's ceaseless flow into three discrete categories violates the alterity being evoked. That alterity is so important because it is the Western notion of linear time, exaggerated and exacerbated by the industrial revolution, with its productivity per time-unit logic, that is every bit as much the enemy as the demonized White Wolf. Remove that particular temporal paradigm and the entire project of modernity collapses into a shapeless lump. Changó challenges that model by providing a highly elaborated alternative and by showing what that model has wrought in terms of social injustice and human suffering.

But the utterance "[Elegba] tasted the wine and wipes his eyes so as not to miss a word of what they had dictated to him in a future he remembers without having thought of yet," quoted above, does not consist of the very words of the Spanish-speaking author. As we are already within the realm of translation, we must turn our attention again to the matter of translation and its connection to Zapata Olivella's enterprise. Given the novel's thematic and formal investment in resistance, in no way did I want the translation to run counter to or undermine that impulse. If the incongruous use of verb tenses is designed to produce disconcerting effects in source-text (Spanish) readers, I wanted analogous sensations to figure in the experience of target-text (English) readers. Likewise, where the source text employs unfamiliar terms (muntu, bazimu, ekobio, etc.) from the Yoruba and other African languages (including Mandé, Hosa, Bakongo, Soninké, Fula, Serere, Fiote, Ngala, Ashanti, and Mandinga), the translation leaves

those terms untouched, as they perform their disorienting function every bit as effectively in English as in Spanish.¹¹

Let us consider just one such term: Bantú, which many may be familiar with. The term's basic meaning is "people" but, as the novel's glossary reveals, there is much more to it than that. The complete quotation from the glossary reads as follows:

Bantú: plural of Muntu: man. 1) The concept implicit in this word transcends the connotation of man, since it includes the living and the dead, as well as animals, plants, minerals, and things that serve them. More than entities or persons, material or physical, it alludes to the force that joins in a single knot mankind with its forebears and offspring, all immersed in the present, past, and future universe. 2) A generic term to allude to the linguistic family of the same name that extends throughout all of southern Africa, below the Niger River. (684)

From the first part of this sample it should be clear that the world evoked in Changó contains enormous cultural differences from that of mainstream western culture, with its own logic and sense-making mechanisms. It is also a world being represented through the written word, but that world, with the exception of Ifá's fated tablets, is completely oral. In that sense, the original text is already a translation, an attempt at introducing readers to something alien in time, space, reason, and texture. The novel's commitment to resistance to western, scripture-based thinking can be extended by a likewise resistant translation, which attempts to return opacity to the invisible translator.¹² This is done, in general, through the judicious use of archaisms, foreignisms, literalisms, and the like, thus reminding the monolingual and perhaps ethnocentric reader that the text is indeed a translation and not "just the same" as domestic texts.

In this particular instance, Changó, el Gran Putas, the original text, is laden with so many unfamiliar terms that, as mentioned, it requires a glossary. At the same time, the text's prologue offers some unusual advice to its readers. Entitled "To the Fellow Traveler," it reads as follows:

Climb aboard this novel like so many millions of African prisoners on the slave ships;
and feel free despite your chains.

Get naked!

Whatever your race, culture, or class, don't forget the land you walk on is America, the New World, humanity's new dawn. So become a child. If you find strange spirits—in word, character, plot—take them as a challenge to your imagination. Forget about academics, verb tenses, the boundaries between life and death, because in this saga there is no other trace than the one you leave: you are the prisoner, the discoverer, the founder, the liberator.

If you come upon a mysterious term, give it your own meaning, reinvent it. Don't consult the glossary at the end of the book, because that serves only to show the landmarks already passed; it will not orient you along new paths. (3)

Looking up unfamiliar terms is a rationalist, bookish gesture that grates against the more intuitive, gut-feeling episteme of the textual system. But the suggestion within the book not to use the glossary provided by the same book presents Hispanophone readers with a dilemma—to define or not to define? This is a dilemma that the translation tries to reproduce in and for English-speaking readers. Sometimes being literal can help extend a text's lateral reach.

The numerous sideward glances cast within this study thus far find their theoretical origin in a self-help best seller of the 1970s, Edward De Bono's Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity.¹³ De Bono was a successful executive who became even more successful by teaching other businessmen how to think creatively and unconventionally. Although the book deals with thought itself, it is extremely practical in nature, for it is full of examples taken from everyday life and its stated aim is to have the sort of thinking it espouses applied to concrete cases. A typical example of De Bono's technique is this:

As an analogy for the problem of vertical thinking one might use the story of how monkeys are supposedly caught by burying a narrow mouthed jar of nuts in the ground. A monkey comes along, puts his paw into the jar and grabs a handful of nuts. But the mouth of the jar is of such a size that it will only admit an empty paw but not a clenched paw full of nuts. The monkey is unwilling to let go of the nuts and so he is trapped.

With vertical thinking one grasps the obvious way of looking at a situation because it has proved useful in the past. Once one has grasped it one is trapped because one is very reluctant to let go. What should the monkey do? Should he refuse to explore the jar? This would be a refusal to explore new situations. Should he deny that the nuts were attractive? It would be silly to deny the usefulness of something for fear of being harmed by it on some

occasion. Would it be better if the monkey had not noticed the jar? To be protected by chance is a very poor form of protection. Presumably the best thing would be for the monkey to see the nuts, perhaps even grab them, then to realize that the nuts were trapping it, to let go of them, and to find another way of getting at the nuts—perhaps by digging up the jar and emptying it out. So the major danger in vertical thinking is not that of being trapped by the obvious but of failing to realize that one may be trapped by the obvious.¹⁴

From this illustration as well as many others, one gains a sense that De Bono believes all problems have a solution, if only they can be approached appropriately. In the sense that the approach is not traditional, standard or mainstream, but innovative, eccentric or idiosyncratic, it may be considered “lateral.” Instead of grappling head-on with the problem (this, in De Bono’s terminology, would be “vertical thinking”), one seeks perspective from a different angle, looking for unusual relationships between components of the whole. Included among the techniques De Bono proposes for restructuring conventional patterns of thought are fractionation, brainstorming, provocation, recontextualization, and reversal. With regard to the last of these, De Bono says: “In the reversal method one takes things as they are and then turns them round, inside out, upside down, back to front. Then one sees what happens. It is a provocative rearrangement of information. You make water run uphill instead of downhill. Instead of driving a car the car leads you.”¹⁵ In short, these and other devices may be deployed to bring about a felicitous outcome to quandaries if they are attacked with sufficient energy and imagination.

Literary and cultural-studies scholars, especially during the past thirty years or so, often use theories, such as those of Edward De Bono, to explain phenomena observed in artistic texts. Normally, then, one would expect my next move to be another application of De Bono’s style of lateral thinking to the fictional narrative text presently under scrutiny. Such a step might lead toward suggestions as to how the muntu might have brainstormed their way out of slavery or subalternity. I would propose, however, a methodology that works in the contrary direction: using *Changó*, with its rich motif of laterality, to contextualize and show the limitations of De Bono’s propositions, as a symbolic revolution in which literature asserts its validity as a sense-producing discourse vis a vis more expository modes of writing.

The limitations of “lateral thinking” can first be glimpsed in De Bono’s comment above with regard to possibly reversing the sequential order of a chain of events. Stepping back from such a

phenomenon and reflecting, we can ask what is “lateral” about such a reversal, which is more suggestive of contrariety than of obliqueness? And is seeking alternative perspectives on a problem limited to looking at its flanks, or is there not involved a more profound and attenuated process of circumspection, which takes into account views from above and below, as well as before and after? But can we imagine a book titled “Circumspection” attaining the sort of sales figures that would meet De Bono’s expectations? In short, lateral thinking is called lateral thinking in order to squeeze a complex set of processes (not just cognitive but also emotional, physiological, and cultural) into a term with a simplicity that will be palatable to a broad commercial market. But the label constitutes a metaphor, and a reductive, imprecise one at that. Realizing that something we thought was real and concrete is nothing but a loose figure of speech (not even a mot juste but just a run-of-the-mill mot) tends to reduce our estimation of it.¹⁶

More significantly, though, lateral thinking as De Bono represents it is a technique of problem solving that depends upon excluding a number of ideas from one’s mind, and that act of exclusion constitutes its greatest limitation. The exuberant optimism with which De Bono approaches each problem, for example, as if the problems were never interconnected or part of an overall structure of insoluble problematicity, is never questioned. History, the sort of history of suffering and injustice recounted in texts like Changó, both on an individual and a mass scale, is systematically suppressed. When De Bono makes statements like “Lateral thinking is a necessary part of thinking and it is everybody’s business,”¹⁷ he is presumably not thinking about the fact that most well-paid executives in Europe and the Americas, presumably the problem solvers De Bono addresses, are white and male. Concerns about the relationship between corporate profits, presumably the motivation for bottom-line brainstorming, and global environmental degradation are never voiced. What is left after the exclusion of such troubling considerations is a sort of trivial cleverness that, for all its short-term creative potential, can lead to blindness and, in such venues as the Amazon jungle and the Chesapeake Bay, has already led to wholesale destruction. The alternative vision demonstrated in Changó, nonetheless, allows for the recuperation of those suppressed thoughts, which are also repressed moments in history, by radically detaching them from a profit motive, thus bringing an additional and powerful sense to the term “freethinker.”

Having liberated De Bono from the shackles of his own thought, Changó offers additional insights into the ongoing search for freedom and justice. A number of utterances sprinkled about the text come to mind in this regard. Here is a representative prophecy: “In the new land Nagó will unite the dead and the living, along with the animals and the trees, the stones and the stars, all tightly joined by the fist of Odumare, who gives us life” (125). Another, which rejects a hypothetical return of Africans to Africa, which was the dream of Marcus Garvey, is: “The land of exile ought to be the first conquered by the living and the dead, to share it with the animals, trees, and our descendants” (157). And a third, sharply gendered figuration, is: “Mother Earth is inviolable!” (586). What these excerpts hold in common, and what is also intrinsic to the definition of Bantú I recited earlier, is an awareness not only of the African peoples’ potential role to redeem themselves and all humanity but also a responsibility to do so in a way that is not injurious to the natural environment. The being with at the base of their ontology refers not only to mankind’s recalled forebears (the ancestor shadows that accompany the living muntu) but also entails an ecological consciousness that contextualizes and puts in perspective any (multi-) cultural concerns to which one may wish to grant priority. Ecology, of course, is the science that studies the interrelationships between and among living organisms and their surroundings.¹⁸ It leaves the study of organisms to biology and that of inorganic objects and processes to other sciences such as chemistry and geology. As with structural linguistics, it concentrates on the spaces in between these elements—the relationships of predominance, dependency or symbiosis, as well as identity and opposition—rather than the interstices of the elements themselves. The word “ecology,” which did not arise in scientific literature until the 1860s, is composed of the Greek terms oikos and logos (roughly, “home” and “order”), and its objective is to help us put and keep our home, the biosphere, in order. In western terms, the passages quoted above do not so much characterize ecological thought as a necessary pre-condition to human redemption (were such a thing practically conceivable), as they constitute a principle of environmental respect, in the pursuit of a balanced political agenda, of importance in no way inferior to racial, tribal, ethnic, religious, or national interests.

Changó represents a world in which everything—from language to empires to slave ships to forces of liberation—is in motion, laterally or otherwise. In such a dynamic circumstance, the direction and mode of movement become a key concern. The novel suggests a crab-like sidestepping, while looking back through memory to one’s predecessors (the ancestor shadows who accompany the living muntu) and

looking around at one's environment, toward freedom. Rather than primarily physical displacement, this African-inspired dance is more a movement of mind, for the text's "Fellow Traveler," sometimes embodied in the figure of the freed female slave Sojourner Truth, is a companion reader who follows the flow of Zapata Olivella's narration from left to right across the printed page. Rather than the individualistic lateral thinking advocated by Edward De Bono, Changó proposes a holistic, dialogical activity, a being with whereby the others within the self are given free expression, in an effort to overcome a tragic history and achieve transcendence.

ADDENDUM

Wishing to present emblematic samples of translational challenges presented by the text of Changó, el Gran Putas, I found that this goal could perhaps be best accomplished by identifying a series of eleven discourses (each requiring its particular lexicon and grammar). No attempt is made, of course, at exhausting the possible discourses inherent in the text, and those listed could easily be constituted by variant vocabularies and syntaxes. English quotations (indicated in parentheses) refer to my unpublished translation manuscript, while those in Spanish [indicated in square brackets] allude to page numbers in the Rei Andes edition of 1992.

1. The discourse of navigation (pp. 67-69 [117-19]):

The night is an impenetrable wall. Not even Elegba's protégé could be sure about the ship anchored in front of the fortress.

Nagó watches it!

It had berthed at night, when all were asleep, except you who watch dreaming. Etch its silhouette on your memory. You will relive it in the hold's moonlit night. The bilge, a deep tomb for your companions; the holds reserved for the women; the keel where the waves will break, indicating to you the sea's fury and the direction of the winds.

Eía, contemplate the ship that Elegba has given you!

Having wrested it from the White Wolf, you sink it in seas of fire. Peer through the transoms of port and starboard. Have you counted the deck capstans yet? From the top of the mast you observe the mizzenmast of the poopdeck tied to the firemen's pole by which you will escape from the hold. Did you weave the dream web, following the sailors' leap amidst the rigging? ... Take charge of the rudder:

On the last night in the land of the elders one must drink one's memories a sip at a time.

The nocturnal birds screeched, and you have the certain signal that the ship is drawing near. From the high tower you can hear the lookout's shout, and the lieutenant does not hesitate in calling out toward the Governor's door:

"The slave ship is in view!"

Naked, barefoot, he went out onto the balcony. He can scarcely imagine the outline of the sails through the mist.

"Almost a month late. Two days more and they would have found only corpses."

Impatient, he gave instructions to Coutinho:

“Wash the filth the slaves leave behind in their cells. Get rid of that smell of carrion that keeps me from sleeping.”

With his ear pressed against the door, the lieutenant hears still more orders.

“Inform the doctor I want to see him at once!”

The wind goes on ahead, opening a path for him. Without having to plant a foot on the waves, he boarded the boat wrapped in his own shadow. His warm breath caused the crew's eyelids to droop, submerging them in deep sleep. From the helm, sitting in Captain Muñis's chair, he contemplates the desolate vessel that awaits its human cargo. The seven beams of his eyes penetrate to the depths of the hold and scan the empty galleys. He carefully checked the integrity of the ensemble, nails, crossbeams, patches of pitch and oakum. On either side, the empty spaces where the Muntu, packed tightly, would press bone on bone. While observing the iron rings and shackles, he thinks that Nagó will spend many nights filing through Zafí Zanahaga's rivets. Now, rocked by the wind, he let his glance wander amidst the rigging. He estimates the height of the masts and the width of the gathered sails.

Elegba, it dawned on you at that instant: the Muntu's anger would consume those objects in its fire!

[La noche es un muro impenetrable. Ni el mismo protegido de Elegba pudo estar seguro del barco fondeado frente a la fortaleza.

!Obsérvalo Nagó!

Ha atracado en la noche cuando todos dormían, menos tú que miras soñando. Graba su silueta en tu memoria. Lo revivirás en la noche de la bodega con la claridad de la luz ... la sentina, fondo sepultura de tus compañeros; las bodegas reservadas a las mujeres; la quilla donde golpearán las olas indicándote la furia del mar y el sentido de los vientos.

!Eíá contempla el barco que te regala Elegba!

Arrebatado a la Loba Blanca, lo hundirás en mares de fuego. Asómate por las claraboyas de estribor y babor. ¿Ya contaste los cabrestantes de cubierta? Desde lo alto del mástil observa la mesana de popa amarrada el palo de buenaventura por donde escaparás de las bodegas. ¿Tejiste la telarana sueño siguiendo el salto de los marineros entre las jarcias? ... !Apodérate del timón!

En la última noche en la tierra de los mayores hay que beberse sorbo a sorbo los recuerdos.

Chillaron los pájaros nocturnos y tienes la señal cierta de que el barco se aproxima. En la alta torre se oyó el grito del vigía y el lugarteniente no vacila en gritar a la puerta del Gobernador:

-!Se avista la nao negrera!

Desnudo, los pies descalzos, salió al balcón. Apenas puede imaginar el visaje de las velas entre la bruma.

-Casi un mes de retardo. Demora dos días más y sólo encuentra cadáveres.

Impaciente, dio instrucciones a Coutinho:

-Deben lavar las inmundicias que dejan esos esclavos en las celdas. Tiene que desaparecer este olor a carroña que no me deja dormir.

Con el oído pegado a la puerta, el lugarteniente todavía escuchó más instrucciones:

-!Avísale al médico que quiero verlo en el acto!

Por delante va el viento trazándole el camino y sin apoyar su planta sobre las olas, subió al barco envuelto en su propia sombra. Su aliento caluroso cerró los párpados de la tripulación, haciendo profundo su sueño. Desde el gobernario, sentado en la silla del capitán Muñis, contempla la nao desolada en espera de la cargazón humana. Los siete rayos de sus ojos se filtraron al fondo de las bodegas y recorren las vacías galeras. Verificó cuidadosamente la trabazón del ensamblaje, los clavos, los reverses, las taponaduras de estopa y alquitrán. A uno y otro lado los vacíos espacios donde el Muntu, apelmazado, estrechará sus huesos. Al observar las argollas y vergalones de hierro, piensa que Nagó gastará muchas noches para limar los remaches del Zafi Zanahaga. Ahora, mecida por el viento, dejó vagar su mirada por entre las jarcias. Calcula la altura de los mástiles y la amplitud de las velas recogidas.

!Elegba, tú lo supiste en ese instante: la cólera del Muntu las consumiría con su fuego!]

2. The discourse of the slave trade (pp. 72-74 [122-24]):

“I’d like to know the opinion of the King’s overseer. I have to pay thirty ducats per head and I am committed to delivering alive at least three quarters of the shipment covered by the license. I therefore need absolute assurance as to the health and docility of the shipment, lest I risk my life, my money, and my ship.”

He props his elbows on the table and rests his chin between his hands. He needed to hold on to something. The overseer, after dividing his attention between vendors and traders, spoke with one lone eye open:

“The only thing I can promise you is that I am ready to inspect the shipment tomorrow morning and to facilitate the bureaucratic steps.”

The boatswain got up from the table and observed through the larboard porthole the distant beach that scarcely insinuates itself near the fortress lighthouse. He opens his wide, moist, canine nostrils. His sense of smell more than made up for the eye he had lost in Alcazarquivir. Since then he covers it with a black rag that he ties at the ear from which hangs the gold earring with the name of the Muslim who left him one-eyed.

Ruy Rivaldo Loanda, it is not the first time you stalk the crumbs that fall from the masters’ mouths!

In the lowlands of Santa Ana, in Cape Verde, and even in the Molucas you have recruited the riffraff of your crew among the scoundrels and assassins expelled from other ships. On abandoned isles you have covered your footprints until the noose remembers your real name. In Ponta Delgada you registered under the false name of Ruy Rivaldo Loanda in order to hide your nightmare of an excommunicated cleric. You would rape neophyte nuns in the monastery of Coimbra and give the paternity of your own children over to the Devil. But the Holy Office subjected you to tortures on the rack, anointed your back with melted pitch, and let you go only

when it was sure you would never fornicate again. Humiliated, taciturn, in Padua you sold white slave women to the Persians, and you are known as an expert castrator of white slaves. You sense something is astir when you hover about your captain and his associates.

“We all know the slave business brings more headaches and losses than fortunes,” mused Muñís in a feigned effort at sincerity. “Illnesses, rebellions, suicides, and death reduce our ships’ cargoes by half.”

He is unaware that Elegba shuffled his words, and he believes it is the moment to show his cards:

“Without intending any disrespect or disobedience to our Majesties, let us make a treaty more tailored to our own interests. I offer to pay you ten ducats for each head you let me load on board without the King’s brand.”

The Governor and the overseer, birds of an identical feather, look at each other distrustingly. Neither of the two dared pick at the carrion on the table. The boatswain Ruy Rivaldo, at the Oricha’s command, serves them more wine.

“You shouldn’t have to think too hard about it,” adds the Captain after refilling his cup again. “I’m not proposing anything strange to you. It is a common practice among the contractors in Lisbon and Seville, as well as in Cartagena and Hispaniola. Accept my offer and let’s celebrate the benefits it will bring us.”

Elegba must have whispered something in the overseer’s ear, for the latter opens his mouth without measuring the prudence of his words:

“To be perfectly frank, your proposal is ludicrous and highly injurious to my standing. It would be better for the Governor and me if you raised it ... We should receive fifteen ducats per head, a price that is still below that listed in the permits.”

“Ah, my wise friend,” responds the slave trader, repeating the words the Oricha was putting on his tongue. “You know well the high price the Sudanese woman charges for her slaves. That is the only factor that keeps me from accepting your generous offer.”

“If Ezili is the cause of the costliness that is harming us all, why not eliminate her?”

No one knows who suggested the solution. Teeth cast in smiles gnash, and when the wineglasses clink, the image of the Sudanese woman’s body reminds them of the numerous times they had possessed her.

The agreement in place, Orúnla’s able messenger gets up from the table and returns to the crossroads from where he stalks the steps taken by men in life and death.

[-Me gustaría conocer la opinión del veedor del Rey. Debo pagar treinta ducados por cada pieza de indias y tengo el compromiso de entregar vivos por lo menos las tres cuartas partes de la cargazón que amparan las licencias. Necesito, pues, las máximas seguridades de salud y docilidad de la cargazón si no quiero arriesgar mi vida, mi dinero y mi nao.

Apoya los codos sobre la mesa y luego la barba entre las manos. Necesitaba afianzarse en algo. El veedor, después de repartir sus miradas entre vendedores y reinderos, habló con un solo ojo abierto:

-Lo único que puedo asegurarle es que estoy listo a inspeccionar la cargazón mañana mismo y abreviar los trámites.

El contraamaestre se levantó de la mesa y observa por la portañola de babor la distante playa que apenas se insinúa por el faro de la fortaleza. Abre sus narices de perro, anchas, húmedas. El olfato le sustituía con creces el ojo que le vaciaron en Alcazarquivir. Desde entonces lo cubre con un trapo negro que amarra de la oreja donde colgaba la condonga de oro con el nombre del musulmán que le dejó tuerto.

!Ruy Rivaldo Loanda, no es la primera vez que acechas las migajas que caen de la boca de tus amos!

En los Bajos de Santa Ana, en Cabo Verde y hasta en las Molucas has recogido la escoria de tu tripulación entre truhanes y asesinos expulsados de otros barcos. En islas abandonadas escondiste tus huellas hasta que la horca te recuerde tu verdadero nombre. En Ponta Delgada te registraste con el falso nombre de Ruy Rivaldo Loanda para esconder tu pesadilla de clérigo excomulgado. Violabas novicias en el monasterio de Coimbra y al Demonio cedes la paternidad de tus propios hijos. Pero el Santo Oficio te hizo sufrir torturas en el potro, lardeó tus espaldas con brea derretida y sólo te deja suelto cuando estuvo seguro de que nunca más fornicarías. Humillado, silencioso, en Padua vendías esclavas blancas a los persas y se te conoce como experto castrador de esclavos blancos. Algo hueles cuando rondas en torno a tu capitán y sus socios.

A todos nos consta que el negocio de la trata trae más desengaños y pérdidas que ganancias- rumió Muñís en un fingido esfuerzo de sinceridad-. Las enfermedades, rebeliones, suicidios y muerte de los esclavos merman en una mitad la cargazón de nuestros barcos.

Ignora que Elegba barajaba sus palabras y cree llegado el momento de destapar las cartas:

-Sin dejar de ser respetuosos y obedientes a nuestras Majestades, convengamos entre nos un pacto más ajustado a nuestros intereses. Propongo pagarles diez ducados por cada pieza de indias que me dejen embarcar sin la marquilla del Rey.

El Gobernador y el veedor, cuervos de un mismo nido, se miran con recelo. Ninguno de los dos se atrevía a picotear la carroña sobre la mesa. El contraamaestre Ruy Rivaldo por mandato del Oricha les sirve más vino.

-No es para pensarlo demasiado- agrega el capitán después de hacerse repetir otro jarro-. No les propongo nada extraño que no sea práctica corriente entre los asentistas de Lisboa y Sevilla, tanto como en Cartagena de Indias y la Española. Den por aceptado el trato y celebremos el bien que en ello nos va.

Algo debió susurrar Elegba al oído del veedor pues éste abre la boca sin medirse en prudencia:

-Para ser franco, su propuesta es irrisoria y altamente lesiva a mi rango. Es mejor que la eleve para mi bien y el del gobernador ... justo es que recibamos quince ducados por pieza franca, habida cuenta que este precio es menor del contemplado por las licencias.

-Ah, mi sabio amigo – le responde el negrero, repitiendo las palabras que el Oricha ponía en su lengua- bien sabe el alto costo que cobra la sudanesa por sus esclavos. Esta es la única razón que me impide aceptar su generosa propuesta.

-Si Ezili es la causa del encarecimiento ?que nos perjudica a todos por qué no eliminarla?

Nadie sabe quién ha sugerido la solución. Rechinaban los dientes ocultos en las sonrisas y al chocar los jarros de vino, el cadáver de la sudanesa les recuerda las repetidas veces que la habían gozado.

Asegurado el pacto, el hábil mensajero de Orúnla se levanta de la mesa y retorna a la encrucijada desde donde acecha los pasos dados por los hombres en la vida y en la muerte.]

3. The Orichas' discourse (pp. 83-84 [133-35]):

I am Ngafúa, the son of Kissi-Kama, babalao of Ifá. Even though I was born in Cabinga, the Ngalas are my blood brothers and sisters.

You should know, ekobio captives, that my kulonda was engendered in my mother's womb by my great-grandfather Ancestor in order for me to be the high priest of Ifá.

In said epoch, when my member spat forth the first drops with which the Ancestors reward the male, I am placed under the tutelage of the tribal priest in order to be initiated in the mysteries of the Muntu. In a magical ceremony his knife traced the holy circle around my navel. I am instructed by the Great Mayombé in the religion of the immortal Ancestors.

Eía! For centuries we Ngalas from Mossanga have resisted the alien gods. We rejected the influx of the Fiotes, who preached death for our Vodúns in order to worship Allah. Now we are resisting this Christ that the White Wolf wishes to impose on us with sword and cross.

Our prince, Nzynga Nbemba, converted and baptized, repudiates our Vodúns. At his command the young Bakongos are jailed in convents and forced to memorize biblical verses.

Eía! The new religion condemns and dishonors the customs of our Ancestors!

Hear ye, ekobios, how these chains came to encircle my arms:

Provoked by the Christians, our prince cursed the Ngalas, calling us infidels, grovelers, dogs, and traitors. Since then our country has been converted into a howling desert. Bands of Yaka assassins raped our women and hunt the ekobios to sell them as slaves to the missionaries of Christ.

Eía! I have seen my native village sacked. Mothers driven with their flocks of goats and their children marked with the branding iron of fire. We Babalao resist once again and refuse to rebaptize our Ancestors with the names of alien saints and virgins. We decided, therefore, to conspire against the Ngola. Each hut should be an altar, every heart a door closed to the invader.

Ifá, lord of future past,
 Eye open to memory,
 Eye that penetrates the shadows that cover the morrow,
 You knew the betrayal of the Bakongo blacksmith!

Before our daggers could slit the Ngola's throat, the gendarmes, forewarned, cut the thread of our lives.

Eía! I owe eternal gratitude to my father! The night when they beheaded my fellow Babalao, prostrate before the Ngola and pleading, he paid in gold the price of my life.

Eía! Here am I, one more among the many Ngalas enchained for preserving the religion of our elders. I will not die of drowning in Yemayá's waters, like all of you. Orúnla has reserved

for me the Christians' gallows and the bonfire so that my burned and hanged body may proclaim again and again the sunfire of Changó.

[Soy Ngafúa, hijo de Kissi-Kama, Babalao de Ifá. Aunque nacido en Cabinga, los ngalas son mis hermanos de sangre.

Habéis de saber ekobios cautivos que mi kulonda fue engendrado en el vientre de mi madre por mi tatarabuelo ancestro para ser sacerdote de Ifá.

En la edad señalada, cuando mi miembro escupió la primera gota con que los Ancestros premian al varón, soy puesto bajo la custodia del sacerdote de la tribu para ser iniciado en los misterios del Muntu. En ceremonia mágica su cuchillo trazó el círculo sagrado en torno a mi ombligo. Instruido soy por el Gran Mayombé en la religión de los Ancestros inmortales.

!Eía! Desde siglos los ngalas de Mossanga hemos resistido a los dioses extraños. Rechazamos el influjo de los fiotes que predicaban la muerte de nuestros Vodúns para reverenciar a Alá. Ahora resistimos al Cristo que desea imponernos la Loba Blanca con la espada y la cruz.

Nuestro príncipe Nzynga Nbemba, convertido y bautizado repudia a nuestros Vodúns. Por su mandato los jóvenes bakongos son encerrados en conventos y aprenden de memoria los versículos bíblicos.

!Eía! !La nueva religión condena y deshonra las costumbres de nuestros Ancestros!

Oíd ekobios cómo llegaron estas cadenas a mis brazos:

Atizado por los cristianos nuestro príncipe maldijo a los ngalas, llamándonos infieles, rastreros, perros y traidores. Desde entonces nuestro país se ha convertido en desierto aullante. Las bandas de asesinos yakas violaban a nuestras mujeres y cazan a los ekobios para venderlos como esclavos a los misioneros de Cristo.

!Eía! He visto saquear mi aldea nativa. Las madres arreadas con sus rebaños de cabras y sus hijos marcados con la carimba de fuego. Los Babalaoos resistimos una vez más y nos negamos a rebautizar nuestros Ancestros con los nombres de santos y vírgenes ajenos. Decidimos, pues, conspirar contra el Ngola. Cada choza debía ser un altar, cada corazón una puerta cerrada al invasor.

!Ifá, señor del pasado futuro,
ojo abierto a la memoria
ojo que traspasa las sombras que cubren el mañana,
tú sabías la traición del herrero bakongo!

Antes de que nuestras dagas se clavaran en la garganta del Ngola, los gendarmes, advertidos, cortan el pabulo de nuestras vidas.

!Eía! !Debo eterna gratitud a mi padre! La noche en que degollaron a mis compañeros Babalaoos, postrado ante el Ngola, suplicante, pagó en oro el precio de mi vida.

!Eía! Aquí estoy, uno más entre los muchos ngalas encadenados por preservar la religión de nuestros mayores. No moriré ahogado en las aguas de Yemayá, como todos ustedes. Orúnla me tiene reservadas las horcas y las hogueras de los cristianos para que me cuerpo quemado y ahorcado muchas veces proclame el solfuego de Changó.]

The boat was listing to starboard, and I fear the storm may scuttle it. I ordered the ekobios to hold firm. But no one can subdue their bodies: they raised their fists, their knives, the sharpened points of their irons. We hastened to enlarge the hole in the stern, but the light and the clouds at water's level erase the stars. Everyone wanted to peer out at the sea they can't see and bathe in the winds' waters. Kanuri "Mai" stops them and gave way only to the thirty ekobios chosen for the assault. The waters begin to inundate the ship through the dismantled stern. Supported by Yemayá's powerful hand, I reach the firemen's pole; clutching at my body, other arms, hands, nails, and shadows grasped at the staffs or fall into the sea, swallowing their cries. Whipped by the storm, the helmsman holds the rudder wheel, searching for the Pleiades that have disappeared from the sky. But from atop the mast, where he had been hanged from a rope, Ngafúa's eyes, lighted by the fire of Saint Thelmo, guide us. The capstans revived and begin to turn; on every crossrope there are climbing spiders.

Four ekobios accompany me in the assault on the command bridge; others will surround the Captain's cabin. The rest must attack the Wolves who stormed the hatchway.

After the leaps and howls, the Wolves have ceased hacking. We know, however, that they are armed with muskets and blunderbusses. They wait silently for Olugbala and the ekobios, cornered in the hold, to show their heads in order to shoot them point blank. They were not aware that, behind their backs, their lifetime was expiring.

A lightningflash illuminated the deck, and then we heard his laughterthunder sink into the sea. Changó announces he is with us. The shadows of the Ancestors, Ngafúa, and the dead protect us. We spread out, a living current, Yemayá's water engulfing the ship from stern to figurehead.

I inflicted the blow. The pilot, now lifeless, still grasps the rudder, steering a course toward the other shore. The wounded boat, a great ballerina, dances blindly over the waves.

[El barco cabeceaba por estribor y temo que la tormenta pueda hundirlo. Pedí a los ekobios que se mantengan firmes. Pero nadie puede sujetar sus cuerpos: alzaban los puños, los cuchillos, las puntas afiladas de sus argollas. Nos dimos prisa en agrandar el boquete de popa, pero la noche y las nubes a ras de agua nos borran las estrellas. Todos querían asomarse al mar que no ven y bañarse en las aguas de los vientos. Kanuri "Mai" los detiene y tan solo dejó paso a los treinta ekobios escogidos para el asalto. Las aguas comienzan a inundar el barco por la popa desmantelada. Sostenido por la poderosa mano de Yemayá, alcanzo el palo de buenaventura y pegados a mi cuerpo, otros brazos, manos, uñas y sombras se agarraban a las vergas o caen al mar tragándose los gritos. Azotado por la tormenta el piloto se aferra a la rueda del timón buscando a las Guardas que han desaparecido del cielo. Pero desde lo alto del mástil, donde había sido colgado de la soga, a nosotros nos guían los ojos de Ngafúa encendidos por el fuego de San Telmo. Los cabrestantes revivían y comienzan a andar; en cada portarebenques hay arañas trepadoras.

Cuatro ekobios me acompañan en el asalto del puente de mando; otros rodearán la cabina del Capitán. Los demás deben atacar a las Lobas que acechaban la escotilla.

Después de los saltos y los aullidos, las Lobas han dejado de hachar. Sin embargo, sabemos que están armadas de mosquetes y arcabuces. Silenciosas esperaban que Olugbala y los ekobios acorralados en las bodegas asomen las cabezas para dispararles a quemarropa. Ignoraban que a sus espaldas se agota el tiempo de sus vidas.

Un relámpago iluminó la cubierta y luego oímos su risa-trueno hundiéndose en el mar. Changó nos anuncia que está con nosotros. Las sombras de los Ancestros, Ngafúa y los difuntos nos protegen. Nos desparramamos, corriente viva, agua de Yemayá recorriendo el barco desde la popa hasta el mascarón de proa.

Descargué el golpe. El piloto ya sin vida se aferra al timón trazando el rumbo hacia la otra orilla. El barco herido, gran bailarín, danza ciego sobre las olas.]

5. The discourse of myth: prophecy (pp. 128-29 [182]):

“Listen, ears of the Muntu. Listen! The avenger is hereby born, with us is the arm of fire, the wrist that will escape the manacles, the tooth that smashed the chains. Listen, those who hear me! Listen, those who bring into this life the Muntu’s children! Elegba’s protegé has the blood of a prince. He is born among us, he will be our King. Elegba’s protegé will be baptized with the Christian name of Domingo, but all of us will call him Benkos, because Benkos is the name of the great-great-grandfather King who sowed his kulonda. Raised in the house of Father Claver, he will rise up against it. He will die in his enemies’ hands, but his magara, the breath of other lives, will come back to life in the ekobios who rebel against their masters.”

[!Oíd, oídos del Muntu. Oíd! Aquí nace el vengador, ya está con nosotros el brazo de fuego, la muñeca que se escapará de los grillos, el diente que destruye las cadenas. ¡Oigan ustedes que traen a esta vida los hijos del Muntu! Escuchen: el protegido de Elegba trae sangre de príncipe. Nace entre nosotros, será nuestro Rey. Protegido de Elegba será bautizado con el nombre cristiano de Domingo pero todos lo llamaremos Benkos, porque Benkos se llama el tatarabuelo Rey que sembró su kulonda. Criado en la casa del padre Claver se alzaré contra ella. Morirá en manos de sus enemigos pero su magara, soplo de otras vidas, revivirá en los ekobios que se alcen contra el amo.]

6. The translator’s confessional discourse before the Inquisition (pp. 142-44 [195-97]):

“Holy fathers, kissing the cross, on my knees, in the name of Crucified Christ, I confess the truth.”

“Speak, infidel! Speak! You were baptized, the Lord’s forgiveness took you out of the depths of the hold where you were rotting and brought you to the shadow of the Colegio where we gave you bread and tried to save your soul. There we healed your wounds and taught you the tongue you command with such ease now that we believe it is the devil who moves it.”

(I listen but do not hear, I seek them, I smell them, they whip me, but I do not see them. Where are they hiding? Almighty holy fathers, inquisitor judges who see all and show nothing, have pity on me!)

“Sacabuche! Dog from Cape Verde! You were spotted entering and leaving his lair at midnight. You had a tail, you grunted like a swine, you were drinking his urine, and you swore obedience to that demonic engenderment they call ‘king.’”

“Most holy of Sacraments, protect me! Free me from calumnies, do not abandon me in this predicament!”

(I sweat in my nakedness, the sign of disgrace hanging from my neck. Now I see their black hoods, they grip the strap with its five iron points.)

“The Holy Office is listening to you. Think thrice about what you say. Weak is your body, but strong and inveterate your soul. Open your mouth and may your tongue tell the truth if you do not want us to pull it out in pieces.”

“I wish to kiss the Holy Bible: Father Claver, where are you hiding instead of coming to my aid? You know I always heeded your preaching. I translate faithfully, word for word, everything

you dictated from Christian to Fula, from Wolof to Christian. I never mixed an alien language nor did I switch to holy truth for heresy.”

(Oh! Again, that makes fifty-eight lashes, and still no sign of stopping. I am skinned alive, the whiplash no longer hurts; it burns like a flame of salt.)

“Holy Father, protect me with your mantle so the whip does not tear my flesh!”

“Blasphemer, let nothing but the truth come from you. Every time you lie the whip will summon you back to the path of the Lord. Look, as proof of his infinite forgiveness, he lets you kiss the Holy Bible, but do not drool on it with your lying saliva!”

[-Santos padres, besando la cruz, de rodillas, por Cristo crucificado, confieso la verdad.

-!Habla impío! !Habla! Fuiste bautizado, la misericordia del Señor te sacó del fondo de la bodega donde te pudrías y te trajo hasta la sombra del Colegio donde te dimos pan y pretendimos salvar tu alma. Allí curamos tus llagas y te enseñamos la lengua que ahora dominas con tanta largueza que hasta nos hace pensar que la mueve el diablo.

(Escucho y no oigo, los busco, los huelo, me azotan y no los veo. ¿Dónde se esconden? !Santos padres todopoderosos, jueces inquisidores que todo lo ven y nada muestran, tengan piedad de mí!)

-!Sacabuche! !Perro de Cabo Verde! Te han visto a media noche entrar y salir a su cubil. Tenías rabo, gruñías como cerdo, bebiste sus orines y juraste ser obediente a ese engendro de demonios que llaman “rey”.

-!Santísimo Sacramento, protégeme! !Líbrame de calumnias, no me abandones en este trance!

(Sudo desnudo, el sambenito colgado de mi garganta. Ahora veo sus capirotos negros, empuñan la correa con sus cinco puntas de hierro.)

-El Santo Oficio te escucha. Piensa tres veces lo que dices. Débil es tu cuerpo, pero fuerte y empedernida tu alma. Abre la boca y que tu lengua diga la verdad si no quieres que te la arranquemos a pedazos.

-Quiero besar la Santa Biblia: Padre Claver, ¿dónde te hallas que no acudes en mi socorro? Tú sabes que siempre fui atento a tu prédica. Traduje fielmente palabra por palabra cuanto me dictaste del cristiano al fula, del gelofe al cristiano. Nunca mezclé lengua extraña ni cambié la verdad santa por la herejía.

(!Ay! Otra vez, ya van cincuenta y ocho azotes y no se cansan. Estoy despellejado, el rebencazo ya no duele, arde, llama sal.)

-!Santo padre, protégeme con tu manto para que el látigo no abra más mis carnes!

-Blasfemo, se te oiga sólo la verdad. Cada vez que mientas el látigo te llamará al camino del Señor. !Mira, como prueba de su infinita misericordia, te deja besar la Santa Biblia, pero no vayas a mojarla con tu saliva mentirosa!]

7. The shared discourse of drumming (pp. 178-81 [232-36]):

At night the drums transmitted in Congo, Mina, and Angola when and where we would meet. And according to what was known, said, and proposed, the afternoon of the dance finally comes. It was decided to hold it in broad daylight rather than at night; in case we were taken by

surprise we could contend that it was not a question, as in fact we had agreed, of rising up against the masters [...]

King Benkos appeared in a count's cape that everyone says was ordered in Madrid. A captain's uniform, with a high-collared red cossack, a blue band on the chest, short ballooned pants and high boots. They say he tore the pants off an English pirate! That they're a gift of the Queen! With his youth, he looked almost childlike beside María Angola, who was years older, but his firm heels were made to support a king since before his birth. They enter the patio with a sun that crouched down to ground level, the better to see them. The Queen drags a long blue velvet skirt with sequins that shined with as many tones as eyes beheld them; gold stars at her waist, silver stars in the lace, at her neck, on the sleeves. King Benkos takes her by the arm, neither behind the other, the moon and sun joined together for the first time. The Princes, the Generals, the Ladies-in-Waiting, the ancient Empire of Oyo reborn, and Benkos its new Emperor. He was the Ngola, the Monomatapa with his march of a thousand elephants, and the din and the dance of a thousand Congos, a thousand Ardás, a thousand Angolas, united through the voices of a thousand drums. The cane liquor has already taken its toll. We all clapped and danced packed together in the great patio. The Princes and Princesses, the Counts and Countesses, and the Governors all enter, accompanied by their servants and pages. They strode up to their thrones: first King Benkos, then Queen María Angola. The Babalao places on their heads their crowns of gilded paper and peacock plumes. The drums beat, only to grow silent and let me, Pupo Moncholo, lend my tongue to Ancestor Ngafúa so he could sing the story of our kingdom:

Here I am with my drum,
 Beat upon beat,
 For my King Benkos I explode
 Its new skin.
 With me begins the ditty,
 The kingdom of the Congos
 Where his crown will shine,
 Potenciana Biojo's son.

Here I am with my drum,
 Beat upon beat,
 For my King Benkos I explode
 Its new skin!

They say he was fatherless born,
 Like the white man's Jesus.
 Lies I don't believe.
 For a father he had Nagó,
 His mariner grandfather.
 A shipwreck of the winds
 He was born on the open sea;
 Eyes of a fish, a mighty tail,
 Son of Yemayá,
 For nine nights he drank
 The white milk of her waves.

Here I am with my drum,
 Beat upon beat,
 For my King Benkos I explode
 Its new skin!

Thrown upon the beaches,
 Free of shackles and chainless,
 A tortoise that grows alone

With the heat of the sand.
 When his hands were born,
 When his feet grew,
 Without asking anyone,
 No one did he ask,
 He climbed into the belly
 Of the mother who bore him.

[Por las noches repicaban los tambores en congo, en mina, en angola, cuándo y dónde nos congregábamos. Y de acuerdo con lo sabido, lo dicho y propuesto, al fin viene la tarde del bunde. Se decidió que mejor sería bajo la claridad del sol y no en la noche para que en caso de ser sorprendidos pudiéramos alegrar que no se trata, como en efecto se convino, de levantarse contra los amos (....)

El Rey benkos apareció con capa de conde que todos dicen se la han mandado de Madrid. Uniforme de capitán, casaca roja de golilla alta, franja azul al pecho, pantalón bombacho y botas altas. ¡Que los pantalones se los arrebató a un pirata inglés! ¡Que es regalo de la reina! Su juventud se añababa mucho más al lado de María Angola que le aventaja en años, pero sus talones firmes estaban hechos para soportar un rey desde antes de nacer. Entran al patio con un sol que se agachaba a ras del suelo para verlos mejor. La Reina arrastra una larga falda de terciopelo azul con lentejuelas que respandecían con tantos tonos como ojos la miran; estrellas de oro en la cintura, estrellas de plata en los encajes, en el cuello, en las mangas. El Rey Benkos la lleva del brazo, nadie detrás del otro, la luna y el sol por primera vez juntos. Los Príncipes, los Generales, las Damas de compañía, el antiguo Imperio de Oyo renacido y Benkos su nuevo Emperador. Era el Ngola, el Mono matapa con la marcha de sus mil elefantes y el bullicio y la danza de mil congos, mil ardás, mil angolas, reunidos por las voces de mil tambores. El guarapo ya ha hecho su estrago. Todos apaudíamos y danzamos apretujados en el gran patio. Entran los Príncipes, los Condes y los Gobernadores acompañados de sirvientes y pajes. Subieron al trono: primero el Rey Benkos, después la Reina María Angola. El Babalao les coloca las coronas de papel dorado y plumas de pavo real. Repicaban los tambores, sólo para acallarse y dejar que yo, Pupo Moncholo, preste mi lengua al Ancestro Ngafúa para que cante la historia de nuestro reinado:

Aquí estoy con mi tambor
 resuena que resuena
 por mi rey Benkos reviento
 su piel nueva
 conmigo comienza el porro
 el reinado de los Congos
 donde lucirá su corona
 el hijo de Potenciana Biojo.

!Aquí estoy con mi tambor
 resuena que resuena
 por mi rey Benkos reviento
 su piel nueva!

Dicen que nació sin padre
 como el Jesús de los blancos,
 mentiras que yo no creo.
 Por padre tuvo a Nagó
 su abuelo navegante.
 Náufrago de los vientos
 nació en la mar grande
 ojos de peje, fuerte cola,
 hijo de Yemayá,
 por nueve noches bebió

la leche blanca de sus olas.

!Aquí estoy con mi tambor
resuena que resuena
por mi rey Benkos reviento
su piel nueva!

Arrojado a las playas
sin grillos y sin cadenas
tortuga que se cría sola
con el calor de la arena.
Cuando le nacieron las manos
cuando le crecieron los pies
sin preguntarle a nadie
a nadie le preguntó
se fue metiendo en el vientre
de la madre que lo parió.]

8. The discourse of peripheral (i.e., lateral) vision (pp. 194-96 [248-52]):

Down below, in the tunnels, his voice resounds in every hollow, splitting at the corners of the walls to hide among the rafters. I can state this because in those depths the Holy Office has interrogated me. A conversation with a few voices, like the one we are having now, there in the abyss would sound like a witches' Sabbath. I am Pupo Moncholo, a baculú, the man who can speak with authority of these things. I've been wearing the Sambenito of disgrace for a year, and there is no sign of their coming to take it from me. This tongue of mine has been burned with torch embers, and only by order of Orúnla can I speak among the living. These eyes listen, these ears saw the terrible voice of the Grand Inquisitor; the scars I can show you on my back were given to me in order to extract confessions from me about things I never said. I was in the cell contiguous with the torture chamber, and I can tell you what questions they ask and how the Babalao's answers left them speechless. Even the sighs are engraved on my memory. The Holy Catholic Church never had priests so wise that they knew how to respond as he does about the mysteries of this world and the beyond.

The tormentors had him tied at the arms, fearful he will fly off. Inquisitor Meñozca sat in front of him, but at a certain distance, they say, so the prisoner could not spit in his face. But the Babalao is not a venomous serpent of the sort that spatters before biting. They recite to him cautionary warnings, knowing they do not frighten him with the announcement of his punishment. They spoke to him of how painful the tortures would be, and he shows them scorn; they threaten him with Hell, but the fire in his eyes said that he controls Changó's lightning bolt; they asserted they have witnesses of his blasphemies against the Christian God; that he preached daily that the religion of Moses is as false as that of Jesus Christ; that it was not true that Mary had been a virgin and that Jesus is her only son.

Long before they opened their mouths he knew what their minds were thinking. Grandfather Ngafúa has given him the gift of clairvoyance. Choking tortures do not faze him because Yemayá has anointed him with her holy waters. They could submerge him in boiling lead and still not succeed in making him deny nor silence what he felt. They ask him who his parents and his teachers were, and it was then that he opened his mouth to sing the glory of our Orichas:

"My lineage is older than yours. When the Hebrews and the Romans came to dispute the Holy Land, my forebears had already traversed it, plowed it with oxen, making it bear saplings and grains that were shared without greed among all the needy. It was understood in those days that no one wished ill of others. My past is as old as this shadow that accompanies me and I step on; through my voice the Ancestors of eight great African tribes speak; the experience of mankind

dwells in my memory because all my grandparents were holy storytellers who memorize the deeds of our great kings, their musicians and cantors.

They place before him the Holy Bible and thrice asked him to kneel before it and swear to tell only the truth. Thrice the Babalao refused to prostrate himself, saying he would tell the truth without swearing on those scriptures, which the Hebrews consider sacred but that do not have the venerable history of our forebears, nor do they allude to the glory of our Orichas, for whom he certainly is willing to kneel.

That is why when some ekobios deny we are the life of our Ancestors, like that Sacabucho, who has more scapularies around his neck than pores in his body, I feel pity. Those people are zombies, they have ceased to live, their souls drowned in holy water. Listen to how, instead of disavowing our forebears, they took pride in them:

“If you are patient,” he said to the Inquisitor, “I can tell you for a thousand nights and a thousand days the great epic of my people, from its origins until their exile to this continent because of Changó’s curse.”

Astonished, they jot down in their books these confessions that for them contain greater heresies than the ones they invented in their warnings.

[Allá abajo en los túneles la voz resuena en cada hueco, partiéndose en las esquinas de los muros para esconderse entre las bóvedas. Lo puedo afirmar porque en esas profundidades me ha interrogado el Santo Oficio. Una conversación de pocas voces como la que tenemos ahora. Allá en los abismos sonaría como aquelarre de brujos. Yo soy Pupo Moncholo, baculú, el hombre que puede hablar de estas cosas. Tengo un año de llevar el sambenito y no hay muestras de que llegue el día en que me lo quiten. A esta lengua la quemaron con tizones de candela y solo por mandato de Orúnla puedo hablar entre los vivos. Estos ojos escuchan, estos oídos vieron la voz terrible del gran Inquisidor; los verdugones que puedo mostrarles en la espalda me los harán para sacarme confesiones de cosas que nunca dije. Yo estaba en la celda contigua a la sala de tormento y puedo decirles lo que le preguntan y cómo sus respuestas los dejaba mudos. Mi memoria guarda grabados hasta sus suspiros. La Santa Iglesia Católica no tuvo nunca sacerdotes tan sabios que sepan responder como lo hace él sobre los misterios de este mundo y del más allá.

Los atormentadores lo tenían amarrado de los brazos temerosos de que pueda volar. El Inquisidor Mañozca se sentó frente a él, pero a distancia dizque para que no le escupiera la cara. Pero el Babalao no es serpiente venenosa de las que salpican antes de morder. Le recitan las cautelas a sabiendas de que no le asustaban con el anuncio de sus castigos. Le hablaron de lo doloroso de las torturas y él las desprecia; le amenazan con los Infiernos pero el fuego de sus ojos decía que domina el rayo de Changó; afirmaban que tienen testigos de que blasfema del Dios de los cristianos; que a diario predicaba que la religión de Moisés es tan falsa como la de Jesucristo; que no era cierto que María hubiese sido virgen y que Jesús sea su único hijo.

Mucho antes de que abran su boca él conocía lo que pensaban sus mentes. El Abuelo Ngafúa le ha dado el don de la clarividencia. Las torturas sofocantes no son para él porque Yemayá lo ha ungido con sus aguas sagradas. Podían sumergirlo en plomo hirviendo sin que lo obliguen a negar a callar lo que sentía. Le preguntan quiénes fueron sus padres y maestros y entonces fue cuando abrió su boca para cantar la gloria de nuestros Orichas:

-Mi stirpe es más vieja que la vuestra. Cuando los hebreos y romanos vinieron a disputarse la Tierra Santa mis antepasados ya la habían recorrido, arado con bueyes, haciéndola parir espigas y granos que se repartían sin avaricia entre todos los necesitados. Entonces, sin que alguien lo predicara, nadie quería el mal para el prójimo. Mi pasado es tan viejo como esta sombra que piso y me acompañará; por mi voz hablan los Ancestros de ocho grandes tribus africanas; la experiencia de los hombres anida mi memoria porque todos mis abuelos fueron narradores sagrados que memorizan las hazañas de nuestros grandes reyes, de sus músicos y cantores.

Le ponen por delante la Santa Biblia y por tres veces le pidieron arrodillarse ante ella para que jurara y diga sólo la verdad. Por tres veces el Babalao se negó a postrarse diciendo que diría la verdad sin jurar por aquellas escrituras que los hebreos tienen por sagradas y que no contienen la historia venerable de nuestros antepasados ni aludían a la gloria de nuestros Orichas por los cuales sí está dispuesto a arrodillarse.

Por eso cuando algunos ekobios niegan que somos vida de los Ancestros, como ese Sacabuche con más escapularios en el cuello que poros en el cuerpo, me dan lástima porque ya dejaron de vivir, zombis, cuyas almas han sido ahogadas por el agua bendita. Oigan, cómo en vez de desconocer a nuestros antepasados se vanagloriaba de ellos:

-Si tenéis paciencia –dijo al Inquisidor- yo puedo contarle por mil noches y mil días las grandes epopeyas de mi pueblo, desde sus orígenes hasta su exilio a este continente por maldición de Changó.

Asombrados anotan en sus libros estas confesiones que para ellos son mayores herejías que las que inventaron en sus cautelas.]

9. The discourse of epic: military triumph (pp. 339-43 [405-09]):

Listen to my strategy, Father. With my fleet three times weaker than the enemy's in ships, men, and munitions, in order to enter the Gulf I shall have to defy gunfire from the Castle of San Carlos. Once inside, running the risk of a defeat with no escape, I shall force my way through the sandbar of Maracaibo, which will leave me staring face to face at the enemy fleet. They with easy and constant reinforcements from the port, and I with my back exposed and within range of cannon fire. My generals have promised me troops that advance by land. Combining their infantry attack with my maritime maneuvers, we will undoubtedly have a good chance of success. But in reality I depend on no greater force than the bravery, skill, and cunning of my own soldiers.

"Colombians! Freedom or slavery awaits us! We cannot expect mercy from an enemy who has given repeated demonstrations of being bloodthirsty and cruel!"

"Father, now we stand before the cannons of the Castle of San Carlos. It is raining drumfire. The bullets cross from port to starboard without hitting us. They riddled my jib halyard with shot. My gunners will respond, and we see how the enemy's powder shed explodes. I am the first to advance, and I should not only cross over but also dismantle the battery with cannon blasts so the rest of the fleet, weaker but more agile, can cross the neck. I run downwind. The breezes and waters of the gulf are ours. I count my ships: The "Mars." The "Great Bolívar." The "Confidence." Four brigantines, with mine, the "Independent." Sound and ready to fight. The schooners, following my instructions, separate and keep their distance. "Spartacus." "Daring." "Terror." "Creole." Finally I glimpse the "Manuela" and the "Lioness." It gladdens my heart to see them safe, with only slight damage. Broken shrouds, scorched masts ... What most encourages me is to contemplate my understated flotilla: launches, dinghies, rowboats, sloops, canoes with my blacks and Indians. Set in front of the enemy's greater fleet, they will be, they are the gadflies of victory.

The sun illuminates our appetite before the enemy. But a disaster that I do not fear but should avoid obliges me to keep my ships immobile. I shall convene all the captains on board. No one speaks of defeat. The more the enemy grows, the smaller he seems to us. Tonight my rowboats will get so close that we will smell the cigars of the guards on duty. They count the cannons ready to fire; the number of their crew, their rowboats. The spies I have sent to Maracaibo via the estuaries now return. Five thousand royalists willing to defend the port while the promised battalions do not reach me. I must depend on my nine hundred twenty-nine men on board. I do not sleep. The bittern hawk warns me from the shore every time a star sinks on the horizon. Yes, I know that the earth also sails in space. In my wakefulness I notice that Nagó's

Shadow-Fire shines on me from the tops of the mainmast. Near me, a rustic yokel chats with me, his eyes aglow. Tonight he does not smoke his cigar. This silent gaze suffices for me to feel the confidence of a naked warrior who knows the strength of his fist. But it is Yemayá who gives me her fortitude. Hers are the waters, the wind, the tide, the waves. Not a single thundercloud threatens a storm in this month of May. I decide to sleep with one lid closed, while the other, Yemayá's insomniac eye, will be attentive to the noises, the fish's leap, the smells, the fugitive star that lights my path of glory.

Four days later the enemy goes on the attack. I know it is a tactic to test our will to fight. That is why they unfurl all their ships, showing us their power. Two divisions, one composed of two brigantines, seven schooners, two pilot boats. The other--I can count them--features fourteen light craft, among them two long canoes. The cards are dealt at sea.

The bulk of their fleet remains distant while some units engage in combat. The fight will be bloody. They tried a direct assault but they collide against our decision to take them on with fire and sword. I see them retreat, fleeing, seeking shelter in the bay under the protection of the artillery on land. The battle has lasted an hour and a half. The enemy has left us fifteen dead, among them the commanders of their two divisions. Few are our losses: three dead and three wounded, but we know they are more alive than we are. Their spilled blood, as happens with sharks, makes us more furious.

On the following afternoon they confront us again. They now knew we would not turn and run. In the port the coveted bride awaits us: final victory. I understood that they proposed to tip the battle in their favor by using subtle forces. We are ready for that combat. My men have orders to convert every one of their bodies into frigates. Soon the brigantines and schooners that join the fray discover to their dismay that our great ships are swifter and more daring than their long canoes. We knock down masts; we shall destroy bridges, we ruin their artillery, we attacked and sank a canoe. Once again the enemy flees, is mortally wounded. We demand their surrender but they think they still enjoy an advantage with their ships and armies.

Definitively, the final battle will take place at sea under the protection of Mother Yemayá.

Father, the day, hour, and moment of the great battle arrive. Dawn finds us anchored off the coast of Moján. Now it is we who initiate the combat. The enemy shows us his ships in single file. Then I remember that lesson learned at Trafalgar: never present a line of fire. My ships act independently, each one with its best prey in sight. The large units accompanied by the light ones in the hunt. While the enemy tries to react before the surprising attack of my ships surrounding theirs in an Indian wheel, my naked sailors start boarding, knives between their teeth, their hands free and agile; feet that grab and climb; fists that wound and behead. The enemy no longer fights, he submits. The flag of surrender waves everywhere. But it is red blood on the sails, on the decks, in the stained waters, that gives the victory message: eight hundred enemy dead. Seventy-nine officers, three hundred sixty soldiers taken prisoner. On our side: eight officers and thirty-six soldiers fallen, all avenged by themselves before dying. Fourteen officers and one hundred thirty soldiers wounded, proudly displaying to us their bloody stumps.

Father, recalling victories is not something that gladdens the dead. We should not feel nostalgia for the past when there are still so many battles to win ahead of us. My fame grows as it eclipses that of my murderers.

[Oye mi estrategia, padre. Con mi flota tres veces inferior a la del enemigo en barcos, hombres y municiones, para entrar al Golfo tendré que desafiar el fuego del castillo de San Carlos. Una vez en su interior, corriendo el riesgo de una derrota sin escape, forzaré la barra de Maracaibo con lo que estaré frente a frente a la flota enemiga. Ellos con el refuerzo fácil y constante desde el puerto y yo con la espalda desguarecida y a tiro de cañón. Mis generales me han prometido tropas que avanzan por tierra. Combinado su ataque de infantería con mis accones marinas

indudablemente tendríamos probabilidad de éxito. Pero en realidad no cuento con más fuerza que el valor, la pericia y audacia de mis propios soldados.

-!Colombianos! !Nos aguarda la libertad o la esclavitud! !No podemos esperar merced de un enemigo que ha dado repetidas muestras de ser sanguinario y cruel!

Padre, ya estamos frente a los cañones del castillo de San Carlos. Lluve fuego vivo. Las balas cruzan de babor a estribor sin alcanzarnos. Me ametrallaron la driza del foque. Mis artilleros responderán y vemos cómo explota el polvorín enemigo. Soy el primero en avanzar y debo no sólo cruzar sino desmantelar la batería a cañonazos para que el resto de la flota, más débil pero más ligera, atraviese la garganta. Barloventeó. Las brisas y aguas del golfo son nuestras. Cuento mis barcos: El “Marte”. El “Gran Bolívar”. La “Confianza”, cuatro bergantines, con el mío, el “Independiente”. Salvos y listos a combatir. Las goletas, siguiendo mis instrucciones se separan guardando las distancias. “Espartaca”. “Atrevida”. “Terror”. “Criolla”. Finalmente divisó a la “Manuela” y la “Leona”. Alegra verlas a salvo con averías ligeras. Obenques rotos, vergas chamuscadas ... Lo que más me entusiasma es contemplar a mi flotilla sutil: lanchas, flecheras, botes, chalupas, canoas con mis negros e indios. Frente a la flota mayor del enemigo, ellos serán, son, los tábanos de la victoria.

El sol alumbra nuestro apetito frente al enemigo. Pero un desastre que no temo pero que debo evitar, me obliga a mantener mis barcos inmóviles. Congregaré a bordo a todos los capitanes. Nadie habla de derrota. Mientras más crece el enemigo, más pequeño nos parece. Esta noche mis botes se acercarán hasta oler el tabaco de los guardias a bordo. Cuentan sus cañones listos a disparar; el número de sus tripulantes, sus botes. Ya vuelven los espías que he enviado a Maracaibo por los esteros. Cinco mil realistas dispuestos a defender el puerto en tanto que los batallones prometidos no me llegan. Debo contar con mis novecientosveintinueve hombres a bordo. No duermo. El alcaraván desde la orilla me avisa cada vez que una estrella se hunde en el horizonte. Sí, yo sé que la tierra también navega en el espacio. En el desvelo advierto que la Sombra-Fuego de Nagó me alumbra desde el pico del árbol mayor. Padre, los Ancestros están acompañándome. Cerca de mí, un guajiro dialoga conmigo encendiendo sus ojos. Esta noche no fuma su tabaco. Me basta con esta mirada silenciosa para sentir la confianza del guerrero desnudo que conoce la potencia de su puño. Pero es Yemayá la que me da su aliento. Suyas son las aguas, el viento, la marea, las olas. Ni un solo nubarrón amenaza con la tormenta en este mes de mayo. Decido dormir con un párpado cerrado, mientras el otro, insomne ojo de Yemayá, estará atento a los ruidos, el salto del pez, a los olores, a la estrella fugitiva que me alumbra el camino de la gloria.

Cuatro días después el enemigo sale al ataque. Sé que es una maniobra para explorar nuestra decisión de lucha. Por eso despliegan todos sus barcos, mostrándonos su poderío. Dos divisiones. Una compuesta por dos bergantines, siete goletas, dos pailebotes. La otra, puedo contarlos, dispone de catorce buques ligeros, entre ellos dos grandes flecheras. Las cartas están sobre el mar.

El grueso de su flota permanece alejada en tanto algunas unidades nos presentan combate. La lucha será sangrienta. Intentaron el asalto pero se estrellan contra nuestra decisión de recibirlos a sangre y fuego. Los veo retirarse, huyendo, buscando la guarida de la bahía y el amparo de la artillería de tierra. Hora y media ha durado el combate. El enemigo nos deja quince muertos, entre ellos a los comandantes de sus dos divisiones. Pocas son nuestras bajas: tres muertos y tres heridos, pero sabemos que están más vivos que nosotros. Su sangre derramada, como sucede a los tiburones, nos torna más furiosos.

En la tarde siguiente vuelven a desafiarnos. Ya sabían que no nos alejaremos. En el puerto nos espera la novia codiciada: la victoria final. Comprendí que se proponían inclinar la batalla a su favor utilizando las fuerzas sutiles. Estamos preparados para ese combate. Mis hombres tienen órdenes de convertir cada uno de sus cuerpos en fragata. Pronto los bergantines y goletas que entran en la lucha descubren sorprendidos que nuestros grandes barcos son más

veloces y atrevidos que sus flecheras. Les tumbamos mástiles; destruiremos puentes, arruinamos su artillería, asaltada y hundida una flechera. Una vez más el enemigo huye, está herido de muerte. Exigimos su rendición pero creen que aún pueden contar con la superioridad de sus barcos y ejércitos.

Definitivamente la batalla final será en el mar con la protección de la madre Yemayá.

Padre, llegan el día, la hora y el momento de la gran batalla. Amanecemos fondeados en la costa del Moján. Ahora somos nosotros quienes iniciamos el combate. El enemigo nos muestra sus naves en rigurosa fila. Entonces recuerdo aquella lección aprendida en Trafalgar: nunca presentar una línea de fuego. Mis barcos actúan independientemente, cada cual con la mejor presa a la vista. Las unidades grandes acompañadas de las ligeras en el acoso. Mientras el enemigo trata de reaccionar ante el sorpresivo asalto de mis barcos circundando los suyos en rueda india, mis marineros desnudos inician el abordaje, los cuchillos entre los dientes, ágiles y sueltas las manos; pies que agarran y escalan; puños que hieren y deguellan. Ya el enemigo no combatía, se entrega. La bandera de la rendición ondea por todas partes. Pero es la sangre roja sobre las velas, en las cubiertas; en las aguas teñidas, la que da el parte de victoria: ochocientos enemigos muertos. Setentinueve oficiales, trescientos sesenta soldados prisioneros. De nuestra parte: ocho oficiales y treintaseis soldados caídos, todos vengados por sí mismos antes de morir. Catorce oficiales y cientotrenta soldados heridos que nos muestran sus muñones sangrantes con orgullo.

Padre, recordar las victorias no es nada que alegre a los difuntos. No debemos sentir nostalgia del pasado cuando se tiene por delante muchas batallas por ganar. Mi fama crece mientras se opaca la de mis asesinos.]

10. The discourse of cultural translation (pp. 449-53 [523-26]):

The ekobio woman peered out the door with her bulky lips fallen. Her many years had defeated her muscles, but upon noticing the presence of a white man at her door, she had sufficient scruples to wrinkle up her nose. I decide to put her on guard with the light of my hundred eyes.

“Miss Dorothy Wright ...”

“If it’s any business of yours, you are speaking to her.”

“I don’t wish to inconvenience you ... I am an agent of the regional penal court system.”

“I don’t owe anything to the white man’s justice.”

“I understand you were one of those caught at the place where the so-called Cult of Shadows operated.”

“That’s precisely where I saw your face. Something told me it was not unfamiliar to me. But what does the police want with us? Very soon they are going to have to release our Agne. You whites will never understand the noble sentiments that inspire our cult.”

“If you permit me ... I would be grateful if you could provide me with some facts about your ‘sect.’”

“As far as I know, we still haven’t decided to accept any whites in our religion.”

The agent smiled persistently.

“I have a court order to interrogate you regarding Mrs. Brown’s activities.”

She was sniffing the scent of all his gestures. The detective looks all around him. Several prints decorate the back wall. On the opposite side the photograph of an old man with an open-neck shirt stands out. I have the impression it was the only image our ekobio woman had been able to frame. The functionary goes over to look at it.

“That’s my grandfather, lynched by you people in Louisiana.” She put her glasses on and sat down as far as she could from the policeman.

“How long have you known Mrs. Brown?”

“I believe, if I am not mistaken, it was in the fifth or sixth life before this one.”

He took out a memo pad and, without registering any puzzlement, he jotted down something in it.

“How long have you been a member of the ‘sect’?”

“Since when I had the first of my children. His kulonda was sowed by a Bakota ancestor, three thousand years before you were born.”

“But according to our information, the ‘sect’ was founded only six months ago.”

Her many centuries of living made her secure in the cramped spaces of that room where she had lived since getting married. In the inside bedroom she gave birth to her five children, and right there in the living room she kept vigil over the oldest when he was killed by the police during the famine that struck Harlem in 1930.

“For your information, our religion is older than yours. Before Christ was baptized in the Jordan River, the founders of our Cult were bathing at sacred ceremonies in the waters of the Niger.”

“Do you have some sort of card that identifies you as a member?”

“My five children. Without Changó’s grace, neither my forebears, nor my children, nor I myself would have been born. The proof that I belong to the great family of mankind created by Odumare is that I am alive. That is the only requirement for belonging to our religion: everyone who was born has the chance to eternalize himself alongside the Ancestors.”

Showing no disconcertion, he kept on filling up his pad. The apparent lack of logic and the promptness with which the woman responded snaps the thread of his investigation. He tried to crack her shell:

“Do you practice polygamy?”

The question produced a convulsive gesture of hilarity in her.

“Of course I do. All the ekobio women in the Cult are Changó’s concubines and have been impregnated by him, not once, but many times.”

“Do you believe in the possibility of such a pregnancy at the hands of a phantom god?”

“It’s nothing new. The Holy Bible tells us that the Virgin Mary was made pregnant by the same process.”

A bit of saliva trickled down the policeman’s throat, but he could not swallow.

“Could you explain to me the procedure?”

“Very simple. You go to bed with a man, and if the god Changó blesses the union he engenders a child. That’s all. That’s the way the Holy Scriptures tell it too.”

“So your ‘sect’ denies that fathers engender their children?”

“Only Changó can decide about life and the number of children that mortals may have.”

He opted to end his interrogation, placing the pad in his pocket in a gesture of deplorable incomprehension. The ekobio woman hurries to open the door for him. The detective started but then stops. A new idea occurred to him.

“Everything seems to confirm that Mrs. Brown will have to serve a long sentence for procuring and prostitution. Besides, the headquarters of the ‘sect’ has been closed down, and it is highly unlikely it will receive a permit to reopen. In view of such facts, could you tell me what will be its future?”

The ekobio woman gets as close as she could to the detective, pushing him with her breath.

“We are meeting starting this very night at 325 East 147th Street. We are not catacomb dwellers who wallow in the city’s sewers. Our religion will grow in America and the world, and you will not be able to prevent our Ancestors, Africans and Americans, from uniting with us, fortifying and teaching us in the struggle to liberate humanity from the White Wolf’s dementia. Changó’s command!”

[La ekobia se asoma con los labios caídos y abultados. Sus muchos años habían vencido los músculos, pero al advertir la presencia de un Blanco frente a su puerta, tuvo suficientes escrúpulos para arrugar la nariz. Decido ponerla en guardia con la luz de mis cien ojos.

-La señora Dorothy Wright ...

-Si le interesa, sepa que está hablando con ella.

-No quiero incomodarla ... soy agente al servicio del juzgado penal del sector.

-Nada debo a la justicia de los Blancos.

-Tengo entendido que usted fue una de las sorprendidas en el local donde operaba el llamado Culto de las Sombras.

-Precisamente fue allí donde vi su cara. Ya me decía yo que no me era desconocida. Pero qué quiere la policía de nosotros? Muy pronto tendrán que soltar a nuestra Agne. Ustedes los Blancos no entenderán nunca los sentimientos nobles que inspiran nuestro culto.

-Si me lo permite ... me agradecerá recoger algunos datos sobre su “secta”.

-Que yo sepa, aún no se ha decidido aceptar en nuestra religión a ningún Blanco.

El agente persistía en sonreírle.

-Tengo orden del juez para indagarla respecto a las actividades de la señora Brown.

Estuvo husmeándole el olor a todos sus gestos. El detective echa una mirada general. Varias láminas adornaban la pared del fondo. En el lado opuesto se destaca la fotografía de un

anciano sin corbata. Tengo la impresión de que era la única imagen que nuestra ekobia había podido enmarcar. El funcionario se acerca a mirarla.

-Ese es mi abuelo, linchado por ustedes en Louisiana. Se llevó los lentes a la cara, sentándose lo más lejos que pudo del policía.

?Desde cuándo conoció a la señora Brown?

-Creo, si no me equivoco, que fue en la quinta o sexta vida anterior.

Sacó una libreta y sin aparentar extrañeza anotó algo en ella.

-?Qué tiempo hace que ingresó a la "secta"?

-Desde que tuve el primero de mis hijos. Su kulonda fue sembrado por un antepasado bakota, tres mil años antes que usted naciera.

-Pero según datos recogidos por nosotros, la "secta" sólo tiene unos seis meses de fundada.

Sus muchos siglos le hacían sentirse segura en los estrechos marcos de aquella habitación donde había vivido desde que se casara. En la alcoba interior dio a la luz a sus cinco hijos y ahí mismo en la sala veló al mayor cuando fue muerto por la policía durante la hambruna del treinta que sacudió a Harlem.

-Para su conocimiento, nuestra religión es más antigua que la suya. Antes que Cristo fuera bautizado en el Jordán, los fundadores de nuestro Culto se bañaban en ceremonias sagradas en las aguas del Níger.

-?Tiene usted algún carné que la identifique como correligionaria?

-Mis cinco hijos. Sin la gracia de Changó no habrían nacido mis antepasados, ni mis hijos, ni yo misma. La evidencia de que pertenezco a la gran familia de los hombres creada por Odumare es que estoy viva. Este es el único requisito para pertenecer a nuestra religión: todo el que haya nacido tiene posibilidad de eternizarse al lado de sus Ancestros.

Sin mostrar desconcierto, continuó llenando su libreta. La aparente falta de lógica y la prontitud con que le respondía la mujer desbarata el hilo de su pesquisa. Trató de romper su cáscara:

-?Practica usted la poligamia?

La pregunta le produjo un revulsivo gesto de hilaridad.

-Desde luego que sí. Todas las ekobias del Culto somos concubinas de Changó y hemos sido embarazadas por él, no una vez, sino muchas.

-?Cree usted en la posibilidad de ese embarazo por artes de un dios fantasma?

-No es nada nuevo. La Santa Biblia cuenta que la Virgen María fue empañada por el mismo procedimiento.

Un poco de saliva recorrió la garganta del policía sin que pudiera humedecerla.

-?Podría explicarme cuál es el procedimiento?

-Muy sencillo. Uno se acuesta con un hombre y si el dios Changó bendice la unión, le engendra un hijo. Eso es todo. Así lo cuentan también las Sagradas Escrituras.

-¿Entonces su “secta” niega que los padres engendren a sus hijos?

-Sólo Changó puede decidir sobre la vida y el número de hijos que posean los mortales.

Optó por terminar su interrogatorio, llevándose la libreta al bolsillo en un gesto de deplorable incompreensión. La ekobia se apresura a abrirle la puerta. El detective avanzó pero se detiene. Una nueva idea vino a remover su olfato.

-Todo parece confirmar que la señora Brown tendrá que pagar una larga condena por proxenetismo y prostitución. Por otra parte el local de la “secta” ha sido clausurado y será poco probable de que se le conceda licencia de funcionamiento. En consideración a tales hechos, ¿podría usted decirme cuál será la suerte de su “secta”?

La ekobia se acerca todo lo que pudo al detective, empujándolo con su aliento.

-Nos estamos reuniendo desde esta misma noche en el número 325 de la Calle East 147. No somos catecúmenos para sumergirnos en las cloacas de la ciudad. Nuestra religión crecerá en América y el mundo y no serán ustedes quienes puedan impedir que nuestros Ancestros, africanos y americanos, nos unan, fortalezcan y aleccionen en la lucha por liberar a la humanidad de la demencia de la Loba Blanca. ¡Mandato de Changó!

11. The discourse of myth: apocalyptic conflagration (pp. 621-24 [697-700]):

I’ve been walking the streets of Harlem since when the Dutch appeared on the city’s southern tip. They want to expel us from New Amsterdam, from the Jordan they had promised us in Europe. At night, protected by white gendarmes, they organized roundups in order to evict us from the tenements. Our response was to incinerate all the boroughs. Today Manhattan, tomorrow Brooklyn. Since then Harlem has always been on the verge of war. My dear niece, fire is the cheapest spark Changó has devised for the Muntu to mount a resistance and gain freedom.

“Let’s get out of here,” I tell you, and, frightened, you follow my footsteps. “Let’s walk amidst the charred remains of the old housing projects. On every brick of the modern buildings you find the prints of my ten fingers, because New York was built from stem to stern with our hands.”

When we enter her bedroom, Lou Dowell covered her mouth with a bloody handkerchief. She bathes in her old bathtub. Her pale eyes scolded me for this unexpected visit. A hundred years ago, the last time I was here, tuberculosis had begun to consume her lungs. But you can see she still preserves her beauty. She sang the blues at the Cotton Club. Old songs in French that a paralytic aunt had taught her down in New Orleans.

We go down a staircase, wandering amidst rubbish. You never thought that, beneath these Harlem cellars, the light and the breeze of the sea could ventilate the lungs of us blacks. We traveled on rollers through the long subway tunnel until an old man approaches, shining on us with his carbide flashlight. He greeted me with a drawl proper only to the miners killed in the coal shafts of Georgia:

“How goes the work, Sam?”

He answers me when he had walked away a good distance, and you manage to hear only the radiance of his lamp:

“Last night we buried the last of the bodies.”

His words confirmed what your feet were feeling and crush: bones and backs riddled with holes.

“They belong to the striking railroad workers who refused to join in the invasion of Texas.”

“What are they saying?” Uncle Antón asked me upon pausing in front of the bed where Joe and I exchange pinches. Blushing, I cover my face.

Agne: Who were you with last night while I had to deal with that pig of a policeman?

Joe: Malcolm came to say good-bye ... He’s leaving for Africa.

Agne: I was afraid of that. Now that they are rounding us up, he runs away and leaves us.

Joe: It would be a good idea if you told me what you got out of that cop. Malcolm has revealed to us that he will be the one who murders Malcolm when he returns.

Joe wraps his naked legs around me and, embarrassed in front of Uncle Antón, I hide my face behind the Bible. He smiles at my modesty and, lifting me in his arms, he places me on the back of his mule, which starts walking through the tobacco fields of Kentucky.

Ah! I am a poor thing lost at sea,
Far from home,
Far from home!

Clinging to the mule’s back, I start to retrace Uncle Antón’s long trek that began when they forcibly removed him from the Manicongo.

The slums begin to burn in Watts, Newark, New York, Cleveland, Detroit ... Agne Brown, that is the way the nights of Damballa, a rainbow of fires, were born.

The patrol of leather-jacketed Black Scorpions got out of the car. Even in the darkness we can see their submachine guns. They spread out on the corners, calling to the unsleeping ekobios. Inside our burrows even the hungry rats were upset by the heat. They run over our bodies, gnawing on the children’s fingers, and climb onto the tables to dispute with us the breadcrumbs. The cats approach the doors where half-undressed mothers appear with their children on their laps.

“Leave these hovels and flee! We are going to burn this Jordan down!”

On the other corner, the flames illuminate the great nightmare that has not yet begun. An explosion sounded, and the Jewish-owned department store burns. The shouts are barely a moan that springs from the houses’ foundations. Afterwards, with all the weeping fused, the wails will shower the district. The little church where you preach resignation, Agne Brown, collapsed on top of its atrium. Forgetting their chants and prayers, the ekobios run away, pursued by invisible demons. The Black Scorpions take aim with a military precision learned in Viet Nam. The evacuation teams indicated the escape routes to the mothers and elderly while the demolition crews lay their steaming eggs.

“Get back, the school is going to explode!”

Now young faces appeared. Children who had lost their homes and run away, not knowing to where, with a booty of fruit and clothing. Explosions go off, in series.

Amidst the resplendence of the fires you thought you recognized him. You are still not sure, despite this incandescent river that separates you. Joe rescues you from amidst the ruins of the church. Not even the fire reflected in his teeth could erase the smile that “Aunt” Ann taught him to show in moments of anger.

“Let’s go, girl. Now it’s our turn to preach!”

[Ando por las calles de Harlem desde los tiempos en que los holandeses aparecieron en la parte sur de la ciudad. Quieren expulsarnos de la Nueva Amsterdam, del Jordán que les habían prometido en Europa. Por las noches, protegidos por gendarmes Blancos, organizaban cacerías para arrojarnos de las barracas. Nuestra respuesta fue la quemazón de todas las islas. Hoy Manhattan, mañana Brooklyn. Desde entonces Harlem siempre ha estado en pie de guerra. Sobrina, el fuego es la chispa más barata que haya inventado Changó para que el Muntu resista y se libere.

-Salgamos de aquí- te digo y asustada me sigues los pasos. Caminemos por entre los carbones de las antiguas barriadas. En cada ladrillo de los modernos edificios están marcadas las huellas de mis diez dedos, porque New York fue construida pared a pared con nuestras manos.

Cuando penetramos en su alcoba, Lou Dowell se tapó la boca con el pañuelo ensangrentado. Se baña en su vieja tina. Sus ojos pálidos me reprochaban esta visita inesperada. Hace cien años, la última vez que la visité, la tuberculosis había comenzado a quemar sus pulmones. Pero ya ves aún conserva su belleza. Cantaba blues en el Cotton Club. Viejas canciones que le enseñó en francés una tía paralítica allá en New Orleans.

Bajamos por una escalera, siempre perdidos entre escombros. Nunca pensaste que debajo de estos sótanos de Harlem la luz y la brisa del mar pueden airear los pulmones de nosotros los Negros. Anduvimos sobre polines por el largo túnel del metro hasta cuando un anciano se acerca alumbrándonos con su linterna de carburo. Me saludó con el dejo que sólo tienen los mineros muertos en los socavones de carbón de Georgia:

-¿Cómo va el trabajo, Sam?

Me responde cuando andaba muy lejos y sólo alcanzas a oír los resplandores de su lámpara:

-Anoche encontramos los últimos cadáveres.

Sus palabras te confirmaron lo que ya tus pies sentían y trituran: huesos y espaldas agujereadas.

-Pertenece a los huelguistas de los ferrocarriles que se negaron a marchar a la invasión de Texas.

-¿Qué se dicen?- me preguntó el tío Antón al detenernos frente a la cama donde Joe y yo nos intercambiamos pellizcos. Avergonzada me cubrí la cara.

Agne: ¿Con quién estuviste anoche mientras yo debía soportar a ese cerdo policía?

Joe: Malcolm vino a despedirse ... sale para el Africa.

Agne: Me lo temía. Ahora que nos acorralan, huye y nos abandona.

Joe: Es mejor que me digas lo que sacaste a ese policía. Malcolm nos ha revelado que será él quien lo asesine cuando regrese.

Joe me abraza con sus piernas desnudas y, avergonzada ante el tío Antón, me tapo el rostro con la Biblia. Se sonríe de mi rubor y levantándome en sus brazos me sienta en la grupa de su mula para echarse a caminar por entre los tabacales de Kentucky.

!Ah! !Soy un pobrecito perdido en la mar
lejos de mi casa
lejos de mi hogar!

Pegada a sus espaldas comienzo a desandar el largo camino del tío Antón desde que lo arrancaron del Manikongo.

Los slums empiezan a arder en Watts, Newark, New York, Cleveland, Detroit ... Agne Brown, así nacieron las noches de Damballa, arcoiris de los incendios.

La patrulla de los Escorpiones Negros descendió del automóvil con sus casacas de cuero. Aún en la oscuridad podemos ver sus metralletas. Se dispersan por las esquinas llamando a los ekobios trasnochados. En el interior de nuestros agujeros hasta las ratas hambrientas se alborotaban por el calor. Corren sobre nuestros cuerpos, roían los dedos de los niños y se suben a las mesas para disputarnos las migajas de pan. Los cats se acercaban a las puertas donde se asoman las madres semidesnudas con sus niños sobre las piernas.

-!Salgan de estas pocilgas y huyan! !Vamos a quemar este Jordán!

Ya en la otra esquina las llamas alumbran la gran pesadilla que aún no ha comenzado. Se escuchó una explosión y arde el gran almacén de los judíos. Los gritos apenas son un quejido que brota de los cimientos de las casas. Después, reunidos todos los llantos, se regarán por la barriada. Tu iglesia, Agne Brown, donde predicabas resignación se desplomó sobre el atrio. Los ekobios olvidados de sus cantos y plegarias huyen perseguidos por demonios invisibles. Los Escorpiones Negros dirigen sus golpes con precisión militar aprendida en Viet Nam. Las patrullas de evacuación se encargaban de mostrar las salidas de escape a las madres y a los ancianos mientras el piquete de demoliciones deposita sus huevos humeantes.

-!Retírense, va a estallar la escuela!

Ahora aparecían caras juveniles. Niños que habían perdido sus casas y que escapan, sin saber hacia dónde, con el botín de frutas y ropas. Las explosiones en serie se repiten.

En el resplandor de los incendios creíste reconocerlo. Aún no estás segura aun cuando puedes identificarlo desde este incandescente río que los separa. Joe te rescata de entre los escombros de la iglesia. Ni el fuego reflejado en sus dientes pudo quitarle la sonrisa que le ha enseñado la "tía" Ann para que la muestre en los momentos de cólera.

-!Vamos nena, ahora nos toca predicar a nosotros!]

NOTES

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1. Manuel Zapata Olivella, Changó, el Gran Putas (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1983); Bogotá: Rei Andes, 1992). The novel won the Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho Literary Prize in 1985. The Rei Andes edition contains a critical introduction by its translator into French, Dorita Piquero de Nouhaud (Chango, ce sacré dieu [Calais: Editions Nord, 1991]).
 2. Page references shown parenthetically within this article are to the English translation manuscript, which is not yet published. The question of the novel's title is vexed in the extreme, as there is no literal equivalent for the coastal Colombian expression "el Gran Putas." I find the title of the French translation (Chango, ce sacré dieu) too tame, even though Sacré Dieu! does have a nice double entendre quality to it. Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo, in her book-length study, The Culture of Fiction in the Works of Manuel Zapata Olivella, taking a cue from the militant Bobby Seale and the author himself, advocates "Shango, the Holy Motherfucker" (132-33). This would certainly capture the obscenity of the original but would also be more scandalous and sexual than the original Spanish (the Colombian colloquialism el putas does not have any direct association with prostitution). My "Changó, the Baddest Dude," while avoiding such sensationalism, transfers the violence inherent in the subversive substantive in Zapata Olivella's sobriquet to the barbaristic adjective "baddest," which violates both the rules of irregular superlatives (bad ->worse->worst) and accepted conventions of semantics (baddest = goodest).
 3. Minimally, this Yoruba word means "man." It is adopted here as part of a systematic strategy of defamiliarization in order to demonstrate the potential effects of resistant translation, as discussed later in this study.
 4. The first edition consists of 528 pages; the second, 752 pages; the French translation, 592 pages; the English translation in manuscript (printed in Times font, 10 pt.), 675 pages.
 5. Captain-Hidalgo also characterizes this work as a "breakthrough" for the author and for Spanish-American literature, basing her evaluation on the following factors: "for the first time in Spanish-American narrative, the African cultural element is successfully incorporated on its own terms as Spanish-American. This claim of uniqueness is further affirmed by the fact that the work is profoundly Afrocentric while at the same time it is thoroughly New World. Even though it is outside of direct European influence, it simultaneously expands the notion of Western culture. *Shango* represents an intriguing and welcome challenge to its readers precisely because, in part, it belongs to all these categories without contradiction" (Op. cit., 135).
 6. White Wolf (Loba Blanca) is the text's figure for the Spanish, Portuguese, English, Dutch, French, and Italian colonizers.
 7. This comment is predicated on the assumption that popular revolutions, such as that of the U.S.A. and of France in the late 18th century, had in mind forming a less hierarchical, more broadly participative form of government than the monarchies that were then in power.

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8. The use of being with as a fundamental principle is meant to provide an alternative to the more individualistic principle of Dasein (being there) advanced by Martin Heidegger in Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962).
 9. The classic study on magical realism belongs to Angel Flores, "Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction," Hispania 38, 2 (1955): 187-92. Flores deals with a phenomenon slightly different from that of an earlier study by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier on lo real maravilloso, in the prologue to the first edition of the latter's novel El reino de este mundo (1949). This piece is more readily available in the Ensayos section (V. 13) of his Obras completas de Alejo Carpentier (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1990). For a more recent, comprehensive view of the matter see Seymour Menton, Historia verdadera del realismo mágico (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998).
 10. In the 1980s and 1990s a number of women writers from Spanish America, principal among whom are Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel, have capitalized on the commercial viability of magical realism on the North American market. Both Allende's La casa de los espíritus and Esquivel's Como agua para chocolate were not only successful novels in English translation but also lent themselves to Hollywood screen adaptations.
 11. Please see the Addendum for examples of different challenges posed by the translation of Changó.
 12. One could read extensively in this fascinating branch of Translation Studies. A good book-length entry into the terrain is Lawrence Venuti, The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
 13. Edward De Bono, Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity (London: Penguin, 1990 [1970]). De Bono's work has been enormously influential, and it is my observation that educated professionals refer to the term "lateral thinking" with a frequency that rivals allusions to Freud's model of the unconscious, and no doubt with comparable imprecision.
 14. Ibid., 149-50.
 15. Ibid., 125-26.
 16. To be fair, De Bono has a section on names and labels, and the value of challenging them (pp.190ff.), but at no point does he suggest turning that mechanism on his own undertaking.
 17. Ibid., 240.
 18. Ecological criticism is virtually non-existent with regard to literature written in Spanish. Its seminal Anglo-American anthology is Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (London and Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1996). Academic ecowarriors have rallied in a group called ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment), which produces a journal titled ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment).

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