

## Translating the Spanish Civil War: Langston Hughes's Transnational Poetics

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967) was a lover of travel, and a voracious reader, writer, and collector of books. His wanderlust took him from Harlem to Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. Living abroad he became fluent in Spanish and French, and slipped seamlessly into literary circles, translating many works of the writers he met in his travels. During a yearlong trip to Mexico in 1935, Hughes met the celebrated Spanish avant-garde poet and dramatist Rafael Alberti (1902–1999). The two were reunited when Hughes traveled to Spain in July of 1937 to join the Popular Front and serve as a political correspondent for the Baltimore *Afro-American* during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939).

One of many international supporters of the Spanish Republic, Hughes was particularly interested in investigating Spain's "color line." In many articles for the *Afro-American* and the *Volunteer for Liberty*, he examined race relations between Spaniards and Moroccans, whom General Francisco Franco had conscripted from the Spanish Protectorate to fight for the Nationalist cause. Additionally, Hughes wrote about the African American men and women who, against U.S. noninterventionist policy, volunteered to assist the fledgling Spanish Republican democracy as part of the Lincoln Brigade, the battalion of American soldiers in the International Brigades.

Soon after arriving in Spain, Hughes settled in at the *Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas* (Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals), the institute Alberti and his wife, the dramatist María Teresa León, directed to support the revolutionary art of the Republican cause. It was there that Alberti gave Hughes a copy of Federico García Lorca's collection of poems, the *Romancero gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*) (1928). Lorca, a key member of the Spanish avant-garde group known as the Generation of 1927, was one of the early casualties of the Spanish Civil War, murdered by Franco's

Nationalists in July 1936. His body was buried in a mass grave outside his hometown of Granada.

Later that year, Alberti reissued Lorca's celebrated collection with the *Editorial Nuestro Pueblo*. In this edition, Alberti wrote the prologue, which pays touching homage to his slain friend and his work. Hughes immediately began translating Lorca's *Romancero gitano* and Alberti's elegy, "*Palabras para Federico*" ("Words for Federico"). These translations were drafted with the careful assistance of Alberti and another poet and close friend of Lorca's, Manuel Altolaguirre. While Hughes published several of his translations from the *Romancero gitano*, along with a short selection of Alberti's elegy in 1938 in *New Masses*, the completed collection was not ready for publication until many years after the war had ended. In 1951, Hughes's English translations, *Gypsy Ballads*, finally appeared in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*.

As Hughes explained in his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, Lorca's *Romancero gitano* was merely a tiny portion of the Spanish literature that he had read during his six months in Spain. By the time he had left Spain in December of 1937, his suitcases could not hold all the texts he had acquired:

Because I had so little time, I stuffed my suitcases carelessly and quickly as full as I could get them. Then I stood in the middle of the floor puzzled as to what I should do with all the other things I had to carry—books by the dozens which various writers had given me, warmly inscribed . . . it was hard to figure out at that late hour what to discard . . . Of the books and ledger and manuscripts, I made a single heavy package. (Hughes, *Wonder*, 393–394)

In transporting particular books and manuscripts across the Atlantic Ocean from Spain to the United States, Hughes embodied the transnational movement which is at the heart of translation. The Latin word for "translation," *translatio*, means "to carry across."

While Hughes kept the notes and materials that meant the most to him during his stay at the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals—ones that documented his friendships, original poetry, journalism, and translations—he lamented the inevitability of discarding some objects, fearful of losing the memories they embodied. He suggested that even what has been thoughtfully preserved may be a haphazard collection of the original moments. Likewise, archives and museums preserve the material fragments, the memory traces of personal experiences, but archival memory is as patchy as the memories of the individuals compiling the material.

Significant materials may be misplaced, or as Hughes was forced to do, left behind. But even when these materials have been properly collected, the objects may also be “lost” in the archive, only to be discovered to the delight of scholars and historians.

The Langston Hughes Papers at Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library hold the Spanish literature Hughes read while in Spain, and contain the original drafts of his own journalism, poetry, translations, and radio speeches completed during the Civil War. Reexamining the literary and autobiographical record in that archive reveals important new historical information about the cultures and literary movements of the Hispanic world that Hughes visited. While researching Hughes’s translation activity and his interaction with the members of the “Generation of 1927”—the group of Spanish avant-garde writers Hughes befriended in Spain, and with whom he closely collaborated artistically and politically—I was fortunate to experience that delight of discovery.

Though it is well known that Hughes had translated Lorca’s two masterpieces, the *Romancero gitano* and *Bodas de Sangre* (*Blood Wedding*) during the Spanish Civil War, I saw indications in his books, notebooks, and manuscript drafts that he may have translated more material than scholars have studied. I combed the archive looking for clues about what Hughes read in Spanish while covering the Civil War, since the exchange of books with his Spanish friends and colleagues is fondly recalled in his memoirs. These books, “warmly inscribed,” were my first clue that Hughes might have been working on other translations. In Alberti’s collection of poetry, *De un momento a otro* (*Poesía e historia*) 1932–1937 (*From One Moment to Another* [*Poetry and History*] 1932–1937), first published in 1937 as a compilation of his radical writing from the early 1930s and his poetry about the Spanish Civil War, he affectionately inscribed Hughes’s copy in September, 1937: “A Langston Hughes, ahora en nuestro precioso y heroico Madrid. Con un abrazo, Rafael Alberti” (“To Langston Hughes, now in our precious and heroic Madrid. With a hug, Rafael Alberti” (LHP) (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

Alberti had not only given Hughes a copy of Lorca’s *Romancero gitano*, but had also given him editions of his own work and the literary publications which were being swiftly compiled at the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals. The inscription shows a drawing of the Puente de Segovia, the famous footbridge over the Manzanares River, which encircles the city of Madrid. As Madrid stood “heroic” against repeated and relentless attacks from Franco’s Nationalists, Spanish Republican writers during

the bombings hunkered down with their pens to fight fascism and its threat to destroy the liberal values they held dear. Both professional writers and common soldiers documented the gruesome reality of war by writing romances, or ballads, a form of oral poetry dating back to Spain's Middle Ages, to depict the everyday lives of soldiers on the front lines. The footbridge drawn in Alberti's sketch served as a reminder of the shared political vision that connected these writers from different geographical locations.

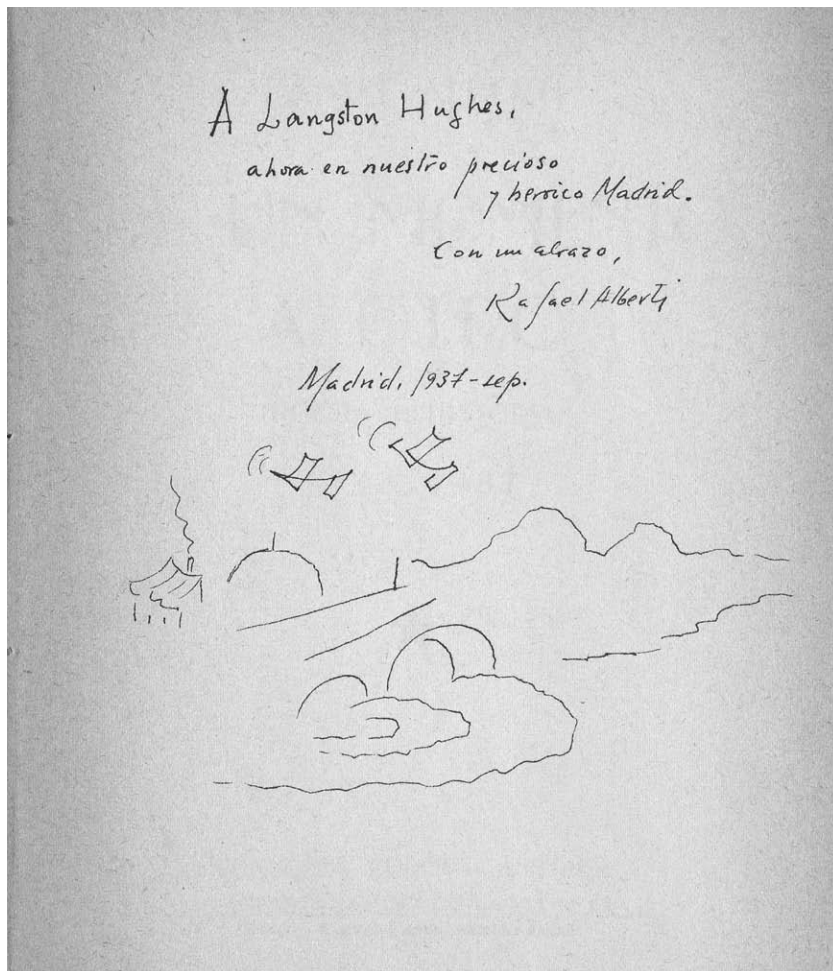


FIGURE 1. Rafael Alberti's note to Langston Hughes in *De un momento a otro* (*From One Moment to Another*): "To Langston Hughes, now in our precious and heroic Madrid. With a hug, Rafael Alberti." The inscription contains Alberti's original sketch depicting the Manzanares River encircling Madrid. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Like a bridge, translation, too, had the power to forge strong friendships across disparate cultures and languages.

Two other books that Hughes carefully saved from Spain preserved in the archive are the seminal collections of Spanish poems compiled during the early years of the Civil War. The first, *Poetas en la España leal* (*Poets in Loyalist Spain*) (1937), was an anthology of poems about the war by Spain's most well-known writers. The Alliance commissioned this collection, and it was published by Ediciones Españolas. The second anthology, *Romancero de la Guerra Civil* (*Ballads of the Spanish Civil War*) (1936), was a compilation of ballads published by Spain's Republican Ministry for Public Instruction and widely disseminated as propaganda. Many of the ballads anthologized in this collection had first appeared in the "*Romances de la Guerra Civil*" ("Ballads of the Civil War") section of *El Mono Azul* (*The Blue Overalls*), the weekly literary journal under Alberti and Altolaguirre's direction published at the Alliance. At around the same time that Hughes began translating the ballads in these collections from Spanish to English, Alberti also recognized the importance of translation in publicizing the Republican struggle. Alberti translated four of Hughes's poems into Spanish, which were published on the front page of *El Mono Azul*'s issue on August 19, 1937. Many of the literary activities under Alberti's direction at Alliance valued the role of translation as a vehicle for social action and change, and recognized translation's power to widely disseminate information about the Republican cause across international borders.

While reading these collections in the archive, I noticed that many poems contained marginalia in Hughes's handwriting. One entire section of the *Romancero de la Guerra Civil* dedicated to poems about Franco's Moroccan troops, titled "*Romances de moros*" ("Ballads about the Moors"), showed that Hughes had underlined particular Spanish words and scribbled English translations beside the original text. A few years after discovering his annotations, while researching material at the Beinecke in the files pertaining to Hughes's autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, I came across a large unmarked envelope of miscellaneous material relating to Hughes's travels to Spain, Russia, and Asia. Sifting through piles of notebook pages collected from his many trips, I noticed a fragment of paper which read "Poems by Spanish poets, etc. Translations— Madrid." Subsequently, one by one, I found interspersed with other unrelated material the completed typescript drafts of five translations from the three poetry collections previously mentioned: Rafael Alberti's *De un momento a otro*, *Poetas en la España leal*, and *Romancero de la Guerra Civil*.

Three of the five translations are published for the first time here. From Alberti's *De un momento a otro*, Hughes translated the collection's opening poem, "*Dialoguillo de la Revolución y el poeta*" as "A Little Dialogue Between the Poet and the Revolution" (Figure 2). In this propaganda poem, Alberti, a committed member of the Spanish Communist Party, openly voiced his radical politics. In times of crisis and bloodshed, Alberti encouraged his readers to stay loyal and follow the "red glory" of the Communist revolution. Hughes's translation of this poem illustrated his appreciation for Alberti's radicalism.

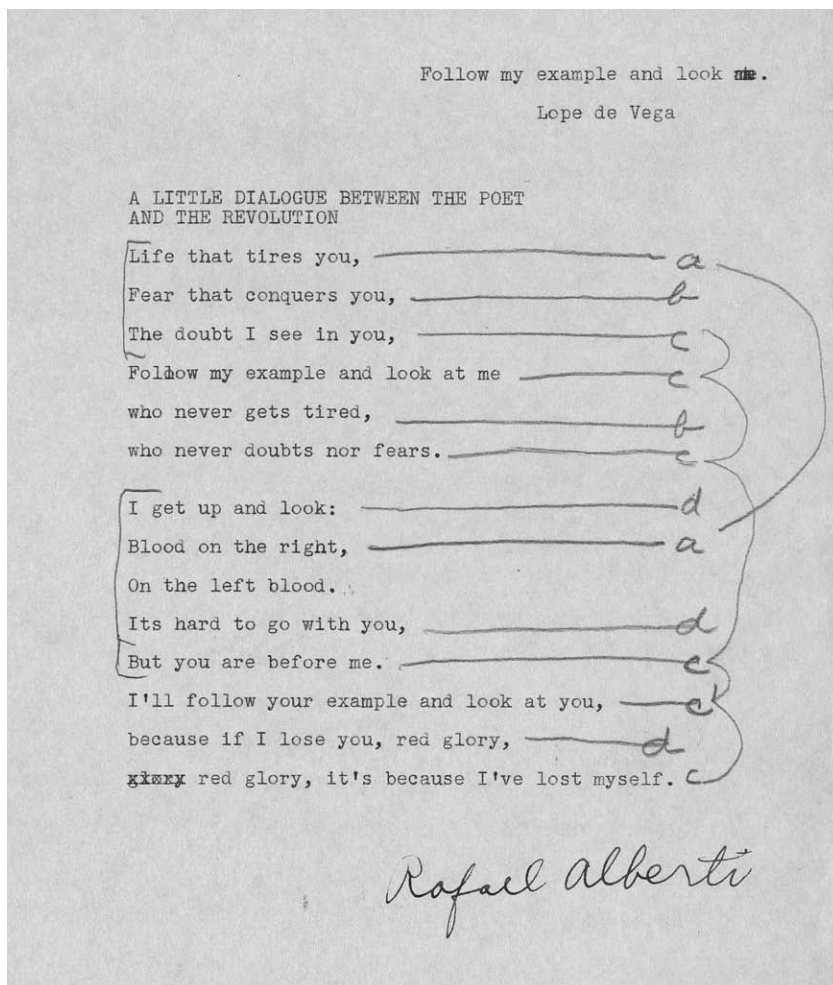


FIGURE 2. Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



From *Poetas en la España leal*, Hughes translated José Moreno Villa's "Frente" ("Front") (Figure 3). "Front," published here, acted as a testimony to the harsh realities of the everyday wartime experience. The composition and anthologizing of the poem—as well as Hughes's English translation—ironically belied Moreno Villa's second line, "Books have no meaning." The projects at the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals used translation as a political strategy to ensure publicity for and preservation of the Republican fight abroad. The collaboration between, translation of, and anthologizing of international Republican writers created

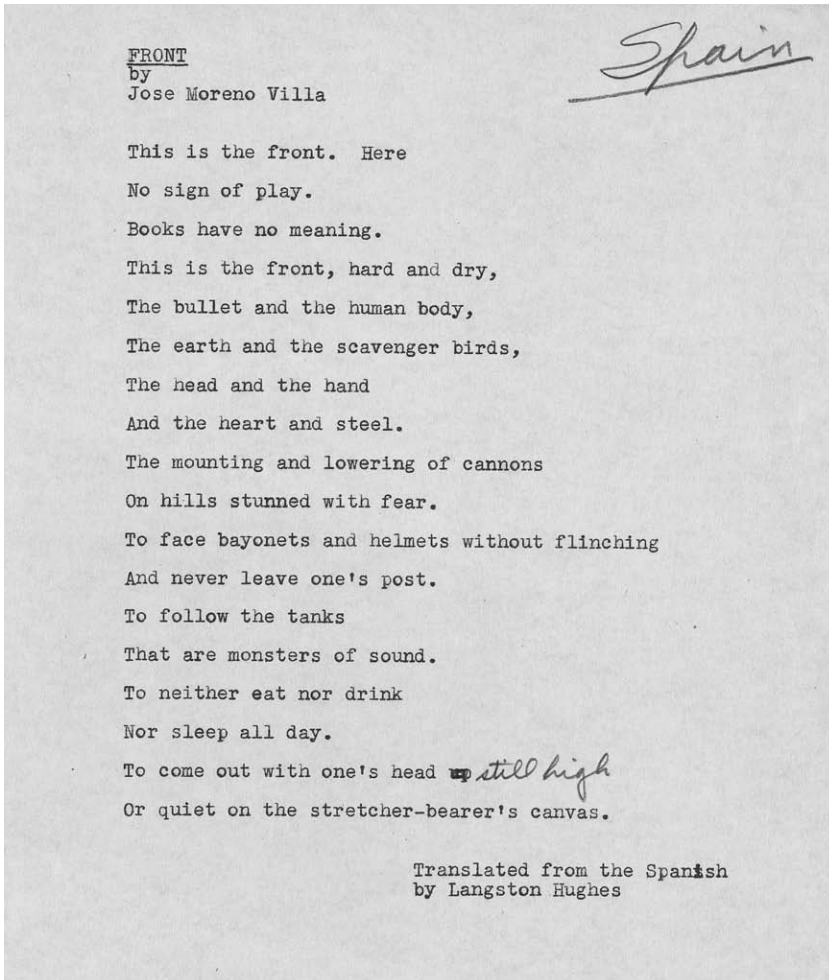


FIGURE 3. José Moreno Villa, "Frente," from the collection, *Poetas en la España leal* (114–115).

an antifascist literary legacy that survived the destruction of war.

Also in the collection *Poetas en la España leal* were poems about Franco's Moroccan troops. In his poem, "*Lamentación por los muchachos moros, que, engañados, han caído ante Madrid*," which Hughes translated as "Lament for the Young Moors," Gil Albert showed sympathy for the Moors whom Franco used as shock troops on the front lines of battle. Under the pseudonym Antonio García Luque, Alberti also published "*El moro fugado*," which Hughes translated as "Moorish Deserter." The poem told the story of those Moroccans who abandoned Franco's front lines to fight the "good fight" with the Republicans:

Crawling through the grass,  
he suddenly rises in front of our guns,  
his clinched fist held high,  
alone, serenely shouting:  
I'm with you, comrades!  
Do not shoot, I'm with you! (LHP)

But many Republicans were far from sympathetic to Moroccan involvement. Because of the crucial assistance of Moroccans to Franco's Nationalists, Republicans viewed these Arabs, along with Hitler's German forces and Mussolini's Italian troops, as enemies.

Some Republican ballads displayed contradictory attitudes towards seeing Moroccans fight for fascism. In the collection *Romancero de la Guerra Civil*, the Spanish poet Emilio Prados published "*El moro engañado*" ("The Moor Betrayed") (Figure 4). Printed here, this poem condemns Franco's use of Moroccan troops in his Nationalist army. Like many, Prados viewed Moroccans as exploited mercenaries who have "betrayed" the values of Spanish democracy. He urged Moroccans to "go back to Africa" because Spaniards did not want to "understand" them (LHP). This vision of the Moroccan troops as medieval hordes trying to invade Spain in 1936, just as they had in 711, was at odds with the egalitarian message of fraternity between nations and races, an ideal that was so central to the Republican ethos but was complicated and distorted by wartime propaganda.

In several articles for the *Afro-American*, Hughes too lamented the deaths and exploitation of Moroccans as one of the many atrocities committed in the name of fascism. In much of his Spanish Civil War journalism and radio speeches, Hughes used Madrid's libraries and museums as a trope to symbolize the power of artistic creation to combat the destruction of fascism. Hughes argued that writers and artists must translate for foreign audiences what they were witnessing in Spain in order to document their version of



THE MOOR BETRAYED  
by Emilio Prados

Go back to Africa, Moor.  
Spain is not for you.  
~~I know that~~ here  
only bad luck awaits you.  
And the money that buys you  
is the money that sells you ~~yourself~~,  
and the traitor that buys you  
is a traitor that doesn't fear you  
because he knows that (in buying you)  
he has bought your death.  
Go back, go back to Africa  
before the cold comes  
and your dark skin is chapped  
by its cruel caresses.  
Leave our high peaks  
whose winds don't understand you.  
There the sun waits for you,  
but here it spits snow.  
There you can feel your blood  
throbbing strong at the temples,  
but here there is the danger  
of your warm blood freezing.  
Go back, ~~xxxxxxx~~ Moor, go back,  
Go back to Africa.  
Leave our Castille                      LLana  
whose plains are not for you,  
~~xxx~~ for if they're fire in the summer,  
in winter they're hard with ice.  
Go down through Extramadura,  
Heulva, Sevilla, until  
you come to Algeciras, the white city,  
with Ceuta before it  
where boats in the bay  
await you impatiently.  
And if there are no boats  
Aa good Moor fears nothing---  
cross the water swimming  
and if in crossing you are lost,  
it is better to die living  
than to live a wicked death.  
Go back to Africa, Moor,  
go quickly, go,  
the money they give you  
is worthless paper,  
and their promises are lies  
turned against you to kill you.  
They're making fun of you,  
~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ darker brother.  
Look at all that they offer you  
and remember the face that in the past  
has caused you so much sorrow.  
Go back to Africa, Moor,  
but do not leave your gun behind,  
and keep in your hot blood

*Back home  
the sky*

FIGURE 4A. Typescript of Hughes's translation of Emilio Prados's poem "The Moor Betrayed." *Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

## THE MOOR BETRAYED-2

the flame of combats.  
 Look, in your own land  
 your people are fighting,  
 and fighting with good cause:  
 Your sons and your women  
 are fighting for freedom,  
 to release for you the land  
 that has been captive so long  
 in the same hands that today  
 buys you and bribes you.  
 Look, Moor, look!  
 Your desert-tent is burning,  
 and among cries and banners  
 your chains are breaking. (thrown off)  
 You're no coward, Moor,  
 and you know well how to fight.  
 Go back to your land  
 and struggle against the treacherous dogs there.  
 It's wrong for you to leave behind the weak ones,  
 while, without knowing it,  
 you defend your own enemies.  
 Go back to Africa, Moor,  
 for here where we look face to face  
 at treachery and trouble,  
 we understand you.  
 Go quickly, go quickly,  
 for there your people await you,  
 and here the snow and the cold  
 comes with the coming of winter.  
 and a tree that's born in the paramo  
 dies in the high sierra.  
 Fight, fight, fight, Moor,  
 for the freedom you will have  
 when the arms you carry today  
 are turned against those who now bribe you.  
 That same freedom we, too, are seeking---  
 but you have been sent to kill us,  
 and the black poison of your hate and  
 is bitter with deception.  
 If we are fighting for liberty,  
 we know well how to defend it,  
 and if you would have your freedom  
 go back to your Africa,  
 because no freedom is possible      que no hay libertad  
 if others you would not have free.      possible/ si otra  
 But if on the contrary,      libertad no quiere.  
 you are traitor to your own people,  
 then we can see you only  
 as a traitor to us, too.  
 Go, go back to Africa, Moor,  
 for here death closes in on you,  
 certain and cold,  
 but there the flame of life awaits you.  
 Go back, go back to Africa,  
 Spain is not for you,  
 and the money that buys you      (they have given you)  
 is the money that sells yourself.

FIGURE 4B. Typescript of Hughes's translation of Emilio Prados's poem "The Moor Betrayed." *Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.*

history. In his 1937 radio speech “The Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals,” Hughes offered a long list of the literary and publishing achievements of the Alliance as a beacon of cultural hope in a time of chaos. One of the anthologies he mentioned specifically in the speech, *Poets in Loyalist Spain*, encapsulated for him how writers created transnational camaraderie between Republican supporters in a “living, vital way” (Hughes, *Essays*, 151). Although it has been unknown until now that Hughes was actively translating from this collection, his translations are testimony to this collaborative process.

Hughes believed that during war, when homes, monuments, and bridges are destroyed, institutions like the Alliance and its literary activities were the foundation of new monuments, memorializing the casualties of war and acting as relics of their ideological vision (Figure 5). In attempting to translate segments of *Poetas en la España leal* and *Romancero de la Guerra Civil*, he looked to translation as another method of creating these building blocks of cultural construction and survival. For him, books were miniature monuments, embodying the artistic, cultural, and political posterity of the Republican cause. At the end of the speech, Hughes described the Alliance, and the intellectual projects worked on within it, as a Republican monument. Specifically, he compared the Alliance to a bridge, linking the spirit of the cause to the masses:



FIGURE 5. Hughes in Madrid with fellow Republican intellectuals, from left: Nicolás Guillén, Rafael Alberti, Juan Marinello, and Langston Hughes. *Langston Hughes Papers*, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

It is a place where now, today, art becomes life and life art, and there is no longer any need of a bridge between the artists and the people—for the thing created becomes immediately a part of those for whom, from whom, it was created. The poem, the picture, the song, is only water drawn from the well of the people and given back to them in a cup of beauty so that they may drink—and in drinking, understand themselves. (Hughes, *Essays*, 152)

Perhaps Hughes had in mind the bridge over the Manzanares that Alberti sketched for him. Regardless, to Hughes and Alberti, the Alliance was more than just a literary production house—it encapsulated their belief that Republican art attempted to bridge racial, economic, and geographic differences and boundaries. While these translations are just fragments of several unfinished translation projects Alberti and Hughes spearheaded at the Alliance, they memorialize a larger process of transnational political collaboration between Spanish and American writers during the Spanish Civil War.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All translations not otherwise indicated as Hughes's are my own. The references to the collection at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library are abbreviated as follows: LHP are the Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

## WORKS CITED

Alberti, Rafael. *De un momento a otro (Poesía e historia) 1932–1937*. Madrid: Ediciones Europa-América, 1937. Print.

Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 9: Essays on Art, Race, Politics and World Affairs*. Ed. Christopher C. De Santis. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. Print.

———. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 14, Autobiography: I Wonder as I Wander*. Ed. Joseph McLaren. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003. Print.

*Poetas en la España leal*. Madrid-Valencia: Ediciones Españolas, 1937. Print.