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Roots of Lorca's Black Poetry in Van Vechten's Vision of the African American Spiritual

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Abstract

Just as Lorca identified the Andalusian Gypsies (hereafter Roma) with deep song, so he equated New York African Americans with their spirituals, as defined in Carl Van Vechten's 1925 article, "The Folksongs of the American Negro: The Importance of the Negro Spirituals in the Music of America." Van Vechten notes that Black people felt ashamed of their spirituals for their slave origins, and Lorca surmised that African Americans were uneasy by nature. Yet Van Vechten regards spirituals as the most important contributions of America to music composition. Their sincerity makes them equal or superior to any folk music. Hence Lorca deems African Americans the most American minority of all, the most spiritual and delicate. From spirituals, writes Van Vechten, stem all popular American music. Therefore, Lorca finds Black people to be influential on all North American culture. Van Vechten contrasts what he calls "natural" Black music sung in its original dialect to artificial European operatic techniques for singing it. Accordingly, Lorca opposes African American naturalness in general to Caucasian artificiality. This antithesis permeates all of Lorca's African American poems: "Norma y Paraíso de los negros," "El rey de Harlem," "Iglesia abandonada (Balada de la Gran Guerra)," and "Danza de la muerte." After summarizing Van Vechten's article, we use it to clarify that otherwise hermetic poetry.

Keywords: music and literature, African American spirituals, Federico García Lorca, Carl Van Vechten, *Poeta en Nueva York*, African American poetry

Resumen

Si Lorca identificaba a los gitanos andaluces con el cante jondo, equiparaba a los afro-americanos neoyorquinos con sus espirituales, según los define Carl Van Vechten en su artículo 'The Folksongs of the American Negro: The Importance of the Negro Spirituals in the Music of America'. Van Vechten observa la vergüenza que los espirituales daban a los negros por sus orígenes en la esclavitud, y Lorca supone que son recelosos por naturaleza. Van Vechten, empero, juzga los espirituales negros como la aportación más significativa de América a la composición musical del mundo, con una sinceridad que los iguala o los hace sobrepasar a toda la música folklórica. Prefiere Van Vechten la naturalidad del canto original de los espirituales a la artificialidad de las técnicas operáticas europeas. Por eso Lorca concibe a los negros como a los norteamericanos más auténticos, oponiendo su naturalidad general a la artificialidad de los blancos. Esta antítesis, derivada de Van Vechten, permea toda la poesía negra de Lorca: 'Norma y Paraíso de los negros', 'El rey de Harlem', 'Iglesia abandonada (Balada de la Gran Guerra)' y 'Danza de la muerte'. Después de resumir el artículo de Van Vechten, lo utilizamos para aclarar aquella poesía de otra manera hermética.

Palabras clave: música y literatura, espirituales afroamericanos, Federico García Lorca, Carl Van Vechten, *Poeta en Nueva York*, poesía negra

It appears evident that Lorca believed, "Tell me how you sing, and I will tell you who you are": the folk music of an individual or group defines that person or people. Jesús Torrecilla maintains that Lorca identified the Roma people of Andalusia with deep song, the art which it had brought to a

state of perfection (Torrecilla 2008, 231). In a book published by me on Lorca and Falla in 2014, I built on Torrecilla's equation of the Roma with their song and attempted to prove that the qualities attributed by Falla to the *siguiriya gitana*, the genre he felt typified deep song, came to be ascribed by Lorca to the Roma in the poetry book *Romancero gitano* [*Gypsy Ballads*]. Such qualities amounted to elevation, depth, aristocracy, genuine Andalusianism, and universality (Orringer, 2014,125).

Lorca's experiments with esthetic atavism did not stop with the essence of the Andalusian Roma but extended to the Black people of Harlem during his stay at Columbia University between June 25, 1929, until his departure for Cuba March 4, 1930 (interrupted by a brief sojourn in Vermont). As Stephen Roberts reports, "according to John Crow, a neighbour in John Jay Hall [at Columbia], Lorca 'never really managed to understand the Black population of New York and modelled the African American characters who appear in his poems too closely on his Andalusian Gypsies'" (Roberts 2020, 133; see Maurer and Anderson 2013, 208). Crow thought that Lorca saw in the Black people traits that they did not possess while subtracting from them characteristics patent to anyone who has lived beside them for several years (Maurer and Anderson, 2013, 208). Of course, Crow does not specify African American qualities fantasized by Lorca or missed by him. Nor does it occur to him that he (let alone Lorca) is stereotyping Black people. Suspending Crow's negative value-judgments for the moment, which spill over into his opinion of the poems (Maurer and Anderson, 2013, 208, note 2), we have found a way to profit from the likenesses of Lorca's Roma and his African Americans unfelicitously silenced by Crow. The Granadan poet did in fact model the African Americans after his Andalusian Roma, but in a very specific sense: the qualities attributed by experts to Black spirituals were ascribed by Lorca to the Harlem Black people themselves. This analogy between music and ethnicity clarifies the form and substance of Lorca's poetry on the Harlem African Americans. We have shown that Falla's personal notes generating his anonymous pamphlet *El Cante jondo (Canto primitivo andaluz)* [*Deep Song (Primitive Andalusian Song)*] gave Lorca the musical characteristics he transmuted into the characterology of his Roma (Orringer 2014,125-26). Likewise, he seems to have transfigured the qualities of Black spirituals into the traits of the ethnic group who authored them.

According to musicologist Carol A. Hess, music has the potential for interpreting Lorca's collection of New York poetry, deemed by Ángel del Río one of Lorca's "most enigmatic and challenging works" (Del Río 1955, ix). However, instead of addressing the poetry itself with her expertise in Hispanic music, ably demonstrated in her excellent books on Manuel de Falla, she prefers to study the musical ambiance in which Lorca's poetic collection arose, the "musical-ideological lacuna, centering on African-Americans' views of black music, black music's status as the 'music of the oppressed,' and the primitivistic discourse frequently employed by both critics of black music and commentators on the New York poems" (Hess 2008:330). This tactic of dodging specifics of the poetry enables Prof. Hess to allow for the polysemia of *Poeta en Nueva York*, the multiple possible meanings of its verse, instead of settling on the likeliest interpretive possibility. Nonetheless, when Lorca wishes to be understood in many possible senses, in commentary on his poetry he often indicates as much. And when he is writing in a monosemic way, he will inform the reader. For instance, his most puzzling poem is perhaps "Romance sonámbulo" [Sleepwalking Ballad]. Knowing that mystery affords esthetic enjoyment, in a lecture-reading of *Romancero gitano*, he does not refute some readers' interpretation of that ballad as conveying the yearning that Granada has for the sea, but he adds that the work could just as plausibly mean something different (Lorca 1986, 3, 343).

On the other hand, he seems to want a single, unequivocal interpretation of his Black poetry in *Poeta en Nueva York*. Otherwise, he would not have repeated verbatim, both in a public reading of *Poeta en Nueva York* of March 1931 and in a 1933 newspaper interview, that

en Nueva York se dan citas las razas de toda la Tierra; pero chinos, armenios, rusos, alemanes, siguen siendo extranjeros. Todos, menos los negros. Es indudable que ellos ejercen enorme influencia en Norteamérica, y, pese a quien pese, son lo más espiritual y lo más delicado de aquel mundo. Porque creen, porque esperan, porque cantan y porque tienen una exquisita pereza religiosa que los salva de todos sus peligrosos afanes actuales (Lorca, 1987, 3,350; 1987, 3,515).

[in New York all the races of the earth arrange to meet; but Chinese, Armenians, Russians, Germans, continue to be foreigners. All except the Blacks. There is no doubt that they exercise enormous influence on America, and despite all are the most spiritual and delicate part of that world. For they believe, because they hope, because they sing and because they have an exquisite religious laziness that save them from all their present-day dangerous yearnings.]

In noting the immense impact of the Black people on the United States, Lorca was clearly analogizing the African Americans to the Roma of southern Spain, influential on the music of all Spain and on her musical imitators throughout the world. Here I wish to prove that whereas he derived his vision of Spanish Roma from Falla's view of the *siguriya gitana*, so he may well have developed his idea of New York African Americans from the notion held by American writer, music critic, and photographer Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964) of the African American spiritual. When Lorca says that Black people have the theological virtue of faith because they also have the virtue of hope, then relates their faith and hope to their songs, he must be referring to the spirituals, wherein they express both their faith and their hope in salvation.

Controversy exists between his critics about his acquaintance with those religious songs. Crow, with his frequent negations, remarks that Lorca "knew nothing at all about Negro spirituals, and said that he had never heard one." Crow speculated that Lorca's lack of interest stemmed from the supposition that spirituals must have been the most monotonous of Protestant hymns (Crow, 1945: 3). On the other hand, Ángel del Río maintains that Lorca memorized two, although this good friend of Lorca's never identified them (del Río 1955, xxxii). Here I hope to show that the July 1925 *Vanity Fair* article "The Folksongs of the American Negro: The Importance of the Negro Spirituals in the Music of America" by Van Vechten offered Lorca the features of spirituals, which the Granadan poet metamorphosed into characteristics of the American Black in *Poeta en Nueva York*. The pages to follow attempt to reconstruct the probable way that Lorca came across Van Vechten's thinking, which I will apply to clarify Lorca's poems, "Norma y Paraíso de los negros," "El rey de Harlem," "Iglesia abandonada (Balada de la Gran Guerra)," and "Danza de la muerte."

Before departing for New York, Lorca intuited that drawing analogies between the Andalusian Roma and U. S. African Americans could yield memorable poetry. His mentor Fernando de los Ríos had taught him the "affinity" between the music of American Black people and *cante jondo*, or "deep song" (Gibson 1989, 255). To his parents, he wrote on July 14 from New York, "He conocido (...) a una famosa escritora negra, Nella Larsen, de la vanguardia literaria de los Estados Unidos, y con ella visité el barrio negro, donde vi cosas sorprendentes. Con gran asombro mío, yo me entiendo en francés con todo el mundo. Con esta escritora hablamos francés toda la tarde y nos dijimos milagros" [I have met... a famous Black writer, Nella Larsen, in the literary avant-garde of

the United States, and with her I visited the Black neighborhood, where I saw surprising things. To my great amazement, I make myself understood to everybody in French. With this writer we spoke French all afternoon and said miraculous things to each other] (Lorca, 1987, 3, 831). Lorca characterized Larsen as “una mujer exquisita, llena de bondad y con esa melancolía de los negros, tan profunda y conmovedora. Dio una reunión en su casa y asistieron sólo negros” [an exquisite woman, full of goodness and that melancholy of the Blacks, so deep and moving. She held a meeting in her house and only Blacks were present]. Of the music played in Larsen’s apartment, Lorca narrated, “Los negros cantaron y danzaron. ¡Pero qué maravilla de cantos! Sólo se puede comparar con ellos el cante jondo” [The Blacks sang and dance. But what wondrous songs! It is only possible to compare deep song to them] (Lorca 1987, 3,831).¹ This statement proves that in New York, the analogy between Roma and Black folksong remained firm in Lorca’s mind.

His exchange of musical culture with Larsen’s guests moved him deeply: “Había un muchachillo que cantó cantos religiosos. Yo me senté en el piano y también canté. Yo no quiero decirlo lo que les gustaron mis canciones” [There was a young boy who sang religious songs. I sat down at the piano and also sang. I don’t need to tell you how much my songs appealed to them], songs classifiable as folkloric, though not deep song. Among these were “Las moricas de Jaen,” “No salgas, paloma, al campo,” and “El burro,” all of which his listeners made him encore four or five times [“The Little Moorish Girls of Jaen,” “Don’t Go Out, Dove, to the Country,” and “The Donkey”] (Lorca 1987, 3, 831). This statement to his parents contradicts Crow’s statement of Lorca’s lack of acquaintance with Black spirituals. Further, it is quite probable that if Larsen did not summarize to Lorca in French her friend Van Vechten’s 1925 article on spirituals, she could have given him a copy of that brief article in the assumption that the obviously cultivated Spaniard read English, despite his limited *oral* abilities with the language (see note 1). Otherwise, she would not have gifted him autographed works of her fiction, something she rarely did for anyone (Lorca, 1987, 3, 831).

Hence, folk music mediated between Lorca and New York African Americans, just as it had between himself and the Andalusian Roma. In her book on the eminent U. S. music critic, novelist, and photographer, *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance*, Emily Bernard informs us that Van Vechten had close ties to Nella Larsen, as well as to many other artists of that movement (Bernard 2012, 7). “She was a private person, and Van Vechten was one of the very few people in whom she confided about her private life” (Bernard 2012, 201). Moreover, had Van Vechten not kept up a “close relationship” with publishers Alfred and Blanche Knopf, the literary careers of authors of the Harlem Renaissance like Larsen and even Langston Hughes might have taken a different turn (Bernard 2012, 53). It is likely that, directly apprised in her own home of Lorca’s interest in folk music, Nella Larsen acquainted him with Van Vechten’s widely read *Vanity Fair* article on American

¹ Of Lorca, Larsen wrote the following impressions to Van Vechten at the end of June, 1929, calling him “a charming Spanish musician and poet (...). He really is delightful. Sings and plays. That’s beautifully fragile old fifteenth and sixteenth century things. I can’t tell anything about his poetry because it hasn’t been translated” (Hutchinson 2006, 333, Lera, 2018, 67, and Maurer and Anderson, 2013, 204). Larsen’s assumption that Lorca read English was correct, for in correspondence to his family dated the beginning of December, 1929, he wrote that on a subway in the newspaper of a passenger seated beside him, he read that Spanish military dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera had left power (Maurer and Anderson 2013, 87). In the same letter, he confessed, “Estudio inglés, que ya leo, pero es muy difícil de entender” [I am studying English, which I already read, but it is very hard to understand] (Maurer and Anderson 2013, 86).

Negro folksongs. This was the first of a series of writings on African American culture and performance published by Van Vechten in that magazine (Bernard 2012, 93). Let me summarize this brief but dense article, which Emily Bernard calls a “treatise on black spirituals” (Bernard 2012, 93). From it, I will argue, Lorca most likely gleaned his characterology of the African American, whose ethnic traits could have come from Van Vechten’s characterization of the Black spiritual. The genre had deeply moved Lorca during his visit to Nella Larsen’s apartment, prompting him to sing his own country’s folksongs. Character traits of the spirituals, applied to their authors, could subsequently have passed to Lorca’s Black poetry and his public reading of and interview on his book of poems *Poeta en Nueva York*.

Van Vechten, a Caucasian admirer of African American art of the Harlem Renaissance, began his article by pointing out that he was writing in the tradition of Booker T. Washington, who had celebrated that Oliver Ditson, the greatest African American musician of his times, had chronicled the transcription and publication in 1904 of twenty-four Black melodies. Two decades later, in 1925, when Van Vechten was writing, he lamented that, leaving aside the songs that had been transcribed, the old Black spirituals and the traditional manner of performing them threatened to fall into oblivion. The African Americans themselves, Van Vechten surmised, felt ashamed of such hymns, recalling the slave era of their origin. Save in smaller communities, where churches still performed them, Black people of the 1920s apparently disfavored them (Van Vechten, 1925, 59). Even so, the Fisk Jubilee Singers made triumphant tours in 1871 in the United States and Europe. Moreover, in his Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”), written in New York and orchestrated in Iowa, Antonín Dvořák had made ample use of musical conventions found in Black spirituals. According to Van Vechten, the Czech composer incorporated references to “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” into his best-known composition (*Adagio*, exposition, closing flute-solo theme in G major). He also employed the pentatonic scale, which omits the fourth and the seventh notes of the conventional diatonic scale (coincidentally also a trait of Czech folk music). In addition, he had frequent recourse to the Lombardic rhythm or “Scotch snap,” that is, a syncopation coupling a thirty-second note to a dotted sixteenth and often found in African American music (particularly “rap,” I might add!).



Scotch snap (Musipedia)

Finally, he would use a flattened seventh, common, like all the above-named conventions, in African music imported to the New World by the slaves. However, Van Vechten regrets that only in “isolated instances” have serious composers imitated Antonín Dvořák, as he himself had advocated in developing Black musical practices (Van Vechten, 1925, 52).

Nevertheless, between 1914 and 1925, Van Vechten discovers the dawning of a new age, “never dreamed” of by Booker T. Washington, when “the intelligent members of the [African American] race are doing more to perpetuate these melodies, the most important contribution

America has yet made to the literature of music, than anyone else” (Van Vechten, 1925, 52). Suddenly, spirituals achieve enough popularity to be often transcribed by music publishers and gathered into a book by Hugo Frey of the most frequently sung exempla of that genre. Van Vechten dates the start of this popularity to 1923, when European-trained and highly acclaimed African American classical singer Roland Hayes returned to the United States from the Continent, where he included spirituals in every program. Van Vechten credited Paul Leroy Robeson (1898-1976) with giving successful all-Black concert programs, joined in this pursuit by singer, composer, and pianist Lawrence Brown (1893-1972). In 1925, as he wrote, Van Vechten singled out the efforts of James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), lawyer, diplomat, and composer, to edit a series of volumes intended to contain nearly all extant spirituals (Van Vechten 1925, 52).

Musicians, and all people involved with music, Van Vechten marvels, have acknowledged the “rare beauty” of spirituals for a long time. Their origins, when not ascribed to the Southern plantations of the slave era, have been shrouded in mystery and legend. Whatever their origination, Van Vechten finds their “unpretentious sincerity” the quality making them equal to or better than any folk music known to the world. Their “poetic quality,” Van Vechten reluctantly acknowledges, may be “crude,” but he points to the “poignant symbolism” of the spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” wherein Israel represents the slaves, Egypt the South, and Pharaoh the white masters being implored, “Let my people go!” To display the variety of the moods of the spirituals in a way that dignifies them, Van Vechten contrasts with the Mosaic spiritual what he calls the “scherzo-like” hymn “Little David, Play on Your Harp,” which has a lilting, 2/4 rhythm and a humorous mood similar, we may say, to the scherzo movement (*Allegro molto vivace*) of Mendelssohn’s *Violin Concerto in E Minor*, Op. 64. Finally, he presents the example of the spiritual “Weepin’ Mary” to illustrate “austere dignity” (Van Vechten 1925, 52).

Van Vechten does not think it a novelty to affirm that spirituals form the “source of our modern popular music.” In them he discovers “every element of modern jazz” except for its orchestration. He names a number of spirituals which he maintains that, with secular lyrics, would resemble pieces by George Gershwin. Even in a composition like Gershwin’s “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise,” Van Vechten hears echoes of melodies and words of spirituals (Van Vechten 1925, 52).

He points out that among the African Americans, there have arisen as many work songs and convict songs as religious ones, although he notes that few have received the honor of compilation. Some, though, like the convict song “Water Boy,” as arranged by Avery Robinson, and H. T. Burley’s arrangement of “Scandalize My Name,” together with the songs of cotton-picking, corn-husking, and hammering gathered by Natalie Curtis Bulin, have achieved familiarity among African American listeners. On the other hand, what Van Vechten conceives as another category of African American folksong—the Blues—originated in disreputable areas of Memphis. Invented by obscure pianists and cabaret artists, many have broken into print, graced with new lyrics but without naming the author or revealing the shamelessness of their origins. James Weldon Johnson identifies “The Bully,” as sung by May Irwin, as the first song to reach broad popularity. This piece, written in 1895, was the arrangement of a “roustabout song,” a dock laborer’s ditty, long sung on the Mississippi River. However, given Van Vechten’s thesis of the superiority of the spiritual, he finds it unnecessary to seek beyond this genre itself for a wide variety in moods, as already mentioned (Van Vechten 1925, 52).

He distinguishes African Americans' folksongs from those of most other peoples through the use of harmony. Since Blacks, according to Van Vechten, harmonize by instinct, performances differ from one another while preserving the integrity of the melody. Customarily, Black singers in choruses can sing tenor or bass at their own discretion in accordance with their moods. Hence, it does not involve more labor than duty requires to harmonize songs for piano and voice. To a degree, the piano supplies the harmony needed by other singers, even though the scale is missing quarter tones often supplied by a flatted seventh (Van Vechten 1925, 92).

Van Vechten closes his article by observing that H. T. Burleigh is chiefly responsible for the spread of the spirituals into the repertoire of most singers who perform in public. As Van Vechten writes, he notes that Burleigh has been putting out his "concert arrangements" of these "masterpieces of homely music" for almost ten years. Yet Van Vechten's contrast between the stately word "concert" and the adjective "homely" implies a note of disapproval as inappropriate. Burleigh has chiefly called the attention of white singers to those songs, but Van Vechten unabashedly affirms, "I do not think white singers can sing Spirituals. Women, with few exceptions, should not attempt to sing them at all." What explains the success of Burleigh's arrangements, in Van Vechten's judgment, is the presence in them of "tricks" or cantorial gimmicks accounting for their attractiveness, as well as of "highly sophisticated" accompaniments (Van Vechten 1925, 92).

Even Burleigh himself, in the foreword to his transcriptions, advises singers not to "imitate the manner of the Negro in singing them, by swaying the body, clapping the hands, or striving to make the peculiar inflections of voice that are natural to colored people" (Van Vechten 1925, 92). To Burleigh's warning, whose racist phraseology may well offend present-day readers, Van Vechten adds his own rather surprising belief that "white singers had better leave them alone." He deplores that instead, too many black singers are avoiding the accurate performance of spirituals. Not only do they dodge the "natural Negro inflections," to quote Van Vechten's outmoded wording, but they also avoid the "dialect." For this reason, according to Van Vechten, many listeners choose the "traditional, evangelical renderings" of Paul Robeson over the "more refined performances of Roland Hayes" (an admirer of Enrico Caruso).

Yet, Van Vechten points out that even Caruso's renditions of Neopolitan folksongs retained the dialect of Naples as much as possible. It makes no difference that the spirituals have a religious nature, as Van Vechten simply wishes to maintain the "*original* manner in which they were sung." He regrets that so many of the concert arrangements follow the versions in four-part harmony of the Fisk and Hampton University collections. He concludes his article by urging more "original research." A trained African American musician, to whom Van Vechten would restrict the scores for performing, should "scour the South" for still-unknown songs and should make "accurate records" of performances using harmony in the old spirituals before they disappear forever. Such a musician, Van Vechten asserts, would surely come across a treasure of untapped material in work songs and convict songs, as well as in the "underworld" of cities of the South, where the Blues had their origins (Van Vechten 1925, 92). In sum, the Black singer of spirituals in original dialect performs for Van Vechten a service of rendering a "sincere" and "authentic" artwork. European-oriented, operatic versions of those songs hold something inauthentic about them (Van Vechten, 1925, 52).

Let me summarize the main properties of the Black spirituals as presented by Van Vechten and as later ascribed to the character of the Harlem Black people themselves by Lorca. The

spirituals of the African Americans, as seen by Van Vechten, make the most significant contribution of America to musical composition. Within America itself, they have generated all subsequent popular music (except for its instrumentation). They have emerged from the very nature of the Black people, Van Vechten holds, following Burleigh in the description of “natural” inflections and renderings of this music. Their performance traditionally allows flexibility in accordance with the sensitivity of the individual performer, a tenor or bass at will. They encompass a wide variety of moods. As songs, spirituals have less noble siblings in work songs and prisoner songs. With their African-derived musical conventions, they vitalize the music of Dvořák and of Gershwin, who recognized their potential for generating new symphonic compositions. Despite their “crude” poetic quality, to employ Van Vechten’s adjective, they can display “poignant” symbolism. They are real and intense, like the nature from which they spring, not manneristic and affected, like the civilization that tries to improve upon them.

Now let us observe how Lorca applies the properties of Black spirituals, as described by Van Vechten, to the Harlem African Americans themselves. Like their spirituals in North American music, the Black people strike him as one of the most influential ethnic groups in their continent (Lorca, 1987, 3,515). In fact, Lorca considers them the most American group of all (Lorca, 1987, 3,515). We recall that, likewise, the Roma were for Lorca the “soul of our soul” (Lorca 1987,3,201), the essence of the Andalusians. Yet, just as Van Vechten has noted the shame the Blacks often feel about their music, so Lorca sees them uneasy in general about themselves in the world: “Recelo. Recelo negro por todas partes. [. . .] Algo muy típico de esa raza. Se teme a las gentes ricas de Park Avenue” [Uneasiness. Black uneasiness everywhere. [. . .] Something very typical of that race. One fears the rich people of Park Avenue] (Lorca 1987, 3,515). He confesses his ambition to compose “el poema de la raza negra en Norteamérica” [the poem of the Black race in North America] and to stress their pain of being Black in a contrary world, where White inventions, Caucasians’ machines, enslave them and make them live in perpetual fear of not performing their tasks well (Lorca 1987, 3,515).

Even so, he regards them as authentic, as pure products of nature, as opposed to their Caucasian oppressors, the fruits of dehumanized and dehumanizing culture. As D. Gareth Walters accurately perceives, “The blacks of New York are appropriately compared to the gypsies of Andalusia. [. . .] It is an interest prompted less by a social concern or a socialist agenda than by a sense of valuable otherness, of desirable difference” (Walters 2011,217). For that reason Lorca finds the truly savage element of New York not the sensitive folk of Harlem, but rather the heads of Wall Street. As opposed to the performers of the Black spirituals, the capitalists are “cold,” “cruel” in their overestimation of the present moment and its rivers of gold; they make perceptible there as nowhere else the “ausencia total del espíritu” [total absence of spirit] (Lorca 1987, 3,516). Just as Lorca’s Gypsies traced their roots back to an idealized India, so the Black people of Harlem, as viewed by him, revere their origins in Africa, conceived as a limitless wild-animal reservation, a jungle, a desert, or a sea prior to history. Their beliefs spring from hope for salvation, as opposed to the other New Yorkers, who merely despair and expect nothingness. African Americans entone their spirituals in an attitude of what Lorca calls “pereza religiosa,” that is, slowness, pious indifference to time, as if seeking timelessness itself, saving them from their risky undertakings of the present (Lorca 1987, 3,515).

We now examine the Black poetry of Lorca, mostly narrated in the past and the imperfect, like the narrative of *Romancero gitano* or the frequent biblical parables of Black spirituals. His poems with an African American theme form a threesome: 1. “Norma y Paraíso de los negros” [Norm and Paradise of the Blacks], 2. “El rey de Harlem” [The King of Harlem], and 3. “Iglesia abandonada (Balada de la Gran Guerra)” [Abandoned Church (Ballad of the Great War)], and, as an apocalyptic finale, “Danza de la muerte” [Dance of Death].

In the first poem, the poetic voice establishes harmony with nature as a general norm for African-American life in Harlem. This may well follow out of Van Vechten’s and Burleigh’s praise of untutored Black singing, in conformity with the supposed nature of the African American race. They contrast this authenticity with the conventional European artificiality of cultivated performers. Likewise, the author of “Norma y Paraíso de los negros” portrays the loves and hatreds of the Black people, despising the anti-natural artificiality of Caucasians while identifying with the blue of the sea. In the second Black poem, Lorca sketches the archetypal African American, the King of Harlem, who sings along with his multitudes—perhaps spirituals. A spiritual being with an African heritage, according to Lorca, he would ideally live in a primordial African jungle, warring with the wild beasts. Instead, his daily circumstances chain him to the will of the contranatural Caucasians of New York, who debase him and control even his facial expressions. The symbol of his debasement is his doorman’s garb, perhaps suggested by Van Vechten, who points out the general contempt for worksongs, which hardly ever appear in collections (Van Vechten, 1925: 52). In the third poem included in the section of *Poeta en Nueva York* labeled “Los negros” [The Blacks], the speaker laments his own deprivation from life in nature. The metaphor for this condition—and most likely for Lorca’s very real unfulfilled desire for offspring—is the loss of a son in the First World War, a product of Caucasian cruelty. Lorca seems to be dialoguing not only with Van Vechten as author of the contrast between autochthonous song and European conventionality, but also with Manuel de Falla, composer of an antiwar Christmas carol, “Oración de las madres que tienen a sus hijos en brazos” [Prayer of Mothers Holding their Children in their Arms], peopled like Black spirituals with biblical figures. Finally, the “Danza de la muerte,” an invective against the New York Caucasians’ materialism, results in their apocalyptic annihilation by Africanist energies they have so abused.² Let us now focus on the four poems one by one.

In “Norma y Paraíso de los negros,” the first two quatrains describe the anti-naturalness that the Black people presumably hate, while the third shows natural phenomena in which they delight. In Lorca’s “Oda al santísimo sacramento del altar” [Ode to the Most Sacred Sacrament of the Altar], the speaker depended on the Eucharist to defend him from the threat of nothingness, symbolized by Poe’s raven of the Nevermore, the bird in black (Martín, 1986, 268, line 16). In “Norma y Paraíso de los negros,” the Black people hate the “sombra del pájaro” [shadow of the bird], perhaps the same nihilistic bird, on the “high tide of the white cheek,” the powerful face of the tyrannical Caucasian. In other words, the African Americans of Lorca reject the nihilism of the stronger Caucasians. In New York, in the space between the skyscrapers, light conflicts with the

² Christopher Maurer (1994, 24) examines the anti-materialism of the early Lorca of 1917-18, for whom good human beings are the “espirituales,” the artists, while their unjust adversary is scornful, impious society. Van Vechten, however, may well have taught Lorca that in North America, the “espirituales” are the Black people, and the commercially motivated materialists, the more powerful Caucasians.

wind, hated by the warmth-loving Black people. African Americans dislike the absence of love; they despise the precise handkerchief of farewell, leave-taking from the beloved; and they abhor the artificial expression, the needle that keeps the pressure of rosiness in the smile. On the other hand, they love the blue desert, the expanses of the sea; the changing expressions of the cow; and the lying moon of the poles. Lorca's African American, as a nature-lover, appreciates the lunar lie, the variety of perspectives on the moon.³ Finally, he or she loves the curved dance of water on the shore, the music of the surf—a delight in nature (Lorca 1987,1,457). Lorca's African Americans possess intimate knowledge of that nature as well: the science of the tree-trunk and of animal tracks. They fill clay with luminous nerves; in other words, they illumine and enliven all creation with their cognition. With the natural innocence of their erotic passion, they skate lustfully through the surf, the waters and sands, while savoring the bitter freshness of its age-old sputum (Lorca 1987,1,457). Blueness, nature itself, lacking history (“sin historia”), forms the color of a night that never fears the day, that never dreads ending (Lorca 1987,1,158). Van Vechten, in his novel of Harlem of the twenties, *Nigger Heaven* (2000, 285), defines blue as an Afro-American with very black skin. Lorca's lyric voice implies that as long as the Black incarnates Nature itself, that individual need never feel apprehensive about dying.

This is the blue where the naked wind breaks sleepwalking camels of empty clouds. In other words, the harsh, naked wind of the sea eternally cuts through empty vapors of camel-shaped clouds, proving Heraclitus' vision of nature at war with itself, a view shared by Lorca at least since *Poema del cante jondo*, where the prickly pear feels at home threatening the wind (Lorca 1987, 1,220), and *Romancero gitano* [*Gypsy Ballads*], where the “sword” of the lilies duels with the air (Lorca 1987,1,407). Of the sea, endless life, torsos under the gluttony of the grass, subject to the hunger of death, go dreaming on—the decaying dead dream of eternal life. In the sea, corals saturate the despair of ink; life within the waters of eternity impregnates the desperation of writers (Lorca 1987,1,458). Living remote from nature, in short, failing to believe in eternity, tends to withhold eternal life.

The second poem of “Los negros” [The Blacks] relates to the first just analyzed, because it too turns on Van Vechten's opposition between the genuineness of Black singers and the artificiality of European-style artists, nature versus pseudo-refinement. Moreover, life in nature offers the Heraclitean view of the strife-dominated natural order peculiar to Lorca's poetry.⁴ The archetypal Harlemiter, the King of Harlem, weaponizes an instrument of his servitude and lives in nature by partaking in its innate violence. A modern-day, Africanized Saint George, painted by so many European artists in a bloody confrontation with his dragon, this “Rey de Harlem” [King of

³ To clarify, inhabitants of the Northern and Southern hemispheres perceive the moon in the same phase but with a different orientation with respect to the horizon. Which orientation is true, which false? From the standpoint of the North Pole, the orientation of the South Pole is untrue, just as from the perspective of the South Pole, the North Pole orientation constitutes a lie.

⁴ For instance, “Con el aire se batían/ las espadas de los lirios” [With the air the swords/ of the lilies were dueling]; (Lorca 1987, 1,407); “Cuando las estrellas clavan/ rejonas al agua gris” [When the stars are thrusting short spears/ into the gray water] (Lorca 1987, 1, 419); “La noche llama temblando/ al cristal de los balcones,/ perseguida por los mil/ perros que no la conocen” [The night knocks all atremble/ at the windows of the balconies,/ while pursued by the thousand/ dogs that do not recognize it] (Lorca 1987, 1, 421); “La luz, maciza, sepulta/ pueblos en la arena parda” [The light, massive, buries/ towns in the tawny sand] (Lorca 1987, 1, 440).

Harlem] scoops out crocodile's eyes and strikes monkey's posteriors. However, this prototype of Harlem does not brandish a sword against the reptile, but rather a spoon. According to two verses of this poem, he preaches the "infinite beauty/ of dusters, graters, copper pots and pans of the kitchens" (Lorca 1987,1,460). Hard labor offers esthetic enjoyment. Hence, the poet transforms the spoon into his hero's natural weapon and scepter. The King of Harlem undertakes his reign to the frequent rhythm of the Scotch snap or Lombardic rhythm, the doublet comprised of a thirty-second note followed by a dotted sixteenth. We indicate that syncopation by underscoring the two syllables forming it during the reading:

Con una cuchara,
arrancaba los ojos a los cocodrilos
 y golpeaba el trasero de los monos.
Con una cuchara.

[With a soup-spoon,
 he scooped out the crocodiles' eyes
 and struck the monkeys' rears.
 With a soup-spoon.]

These four verses, later repeated in the poem with the superlative "durísima" placed before the initial mention of "cuchara" [soup-spoon] accumulate harsh phonemic stops (c-, -ch-, -c-, c-, g-, p-) to imitate the striking sound in a nature in conflict with itself. However, this bellicose natural world of Harlem Black people clashes in this poem with the culture of the Caucasians. The alcohol of their cabarets denaturalizes the world around it. Hence, the natural potential for fire lies untapped in flints ("Fuego de siempre dormía en los pedernales" [Eternal fire was sleeping in the flint])—perhaps a subtle allusion to the 1924 anti-racist novel by Walter Francis White, *The Fire in the Flint*—while beetles drunk on anisette forget the natural sphere of their rural birthplaces ("y los escarabajos borrachos de anís/ olvidaban el musgo de las aldeas" [and the beetle drunk on anisette/ were forgetting the moss of the villages]: Lorca 1987, 1,459).

To reach the world of the Black people, the lyric subject thinks it necessary to cross bridges and attain the "black blush," the shame of the Harlemites which, according to Van Vechten, is so unfortunately attached to being Black. For only in passing over those bridges can we smell the breath, the "lung perfume," that strikes our temples with its hot pineapple dress, its cloak of nurturing and warming naturalness (Lorca 1987, 1,459).

It would then be possible for the King of Harlem to sing with his multitudinous chorus ("para que el rey de Harlem cante con su muchedumbre" [in order that the King of Harlem sing with his crowd]), perhaps Lorca's reference to the ideal Black's performance of spirituals while enslaved to Caucasians! (Lorca 1987,1,460).⁵ However, first, the pernicious forces of Caucasian civilization must

⁵ Virginia Higginbotham suggests that the title of "king" alludes to a head of a voodoo ritual, believing in "ritual exorcising of enemies residing in animal shapes or bodies" (1986, 780). On the other hand, Carol A. Hess reminds that "while some [critics] consider the 'king' motif to reflect nostalgia for a primitive Africa in which blacks had greater control over their destinies (Higginbotham 780), ..., 'kings' were also common in U.S. jazz circles." Hess offers the examples of Louis Armstrong, called by Goffin the "real King of Jazz," of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and others (Hess 2008, 341). While we find in the poem rhythms like the Scotch snap, common both to jazz and to spirituals, we also espouse the notion of yearning for a primordial Africa. The notion of voodoo rites in the poem strikes us as

be destroyed: the blond brandy-seller, vendor of dehumanizing alcohol. The poetic voice would also condemn to death all friends of the apple and sand—perhaps a reference to Original Sin and to sterility. Only by doing away with such sinners against nature, according to the lyric “I,” will crocodiles sleep in long lines (Lorca 1987,1,460), undoubtedly awaiting their ritual blinding by the Harlemite monarch.

The lyric subject raises its voice in a threnody lamenting the anguish suffered by Harlem and incarnated by its king. Once more we encounter the Scotch snap, the syncopation common in spirituals (among the other Black musical genres):

¡Ay Har-lem! ¡Ay Harlem! ¡Ay Harlem!
 ;No hay angustia comparable a tus rojos oprimidos,
 a tu sangre estremeci-da dentro del eclipse oscuro,
 a tu violencia granate sordomuda en la penumbra,
 a tu gran rey prisionero con un traje de conserje! (Lorca 1987, 1,460)

[Oh Harlem! Oh Harlem! Oh Harlem!
 There is no anguish comparable to your oppressed reds,
 To your shuddering blood within the dark eclipse,
 To your pomegranate deaf mute violence in the half-shadow,
 To your great imprisoned kind with a bellman’s uniform!]

The oppressed red shades may allude to the suppressed blushes of Van Vechten’s and Lorca’s African Americans, ashamed of themselves for their heritage of slavery. This would explain the dark eclipse, the darkness of skin concealing embarrassment; hence, the allusion to pomegranate violence, the violence against the blood perpetrated by forcible blushing. In Van Vechten’s writings on Blacks, particularly in his 1926 novel on Harlem, *Nigger Heaven*, “repeatedly the trope of Negro blood is used to signify passion, savagery, and excess, which stand in dialectical opposition to the supposedly European traits of temperance, civility, and restraint” (Perkins 1998,13). The fury of this blood is an attribute found by Van Vechten in the Black’s blood. Such fury, in Lorca’s words, lives in the thorn of the dagger and in the breast of the landscapes beneath the sign of the crab. In so saying, Lorca’s poetic voice alliterates numerous initial p’s, producing percussive sounds of penetration (*pieles, puñal, pecho, paisajes* [skin, dagger, breast, landscapes]: Lorca 1987,1,461). The blood looks slowly and warily out of the edge of the eye, for Lorca’s African American trusts no one. The king imprisoned in his compulsory servitude, symbolized by his doorman’s uniform (Lorca 1987,1,460), also stands incarcerated by the dominion over African American facial expressions exercised by the tyrannical Caucasians of Harlem.

The night has a crack (“hendidura”), an unnatural rupture produced by the anti-natural Caucasians. They freeze salamanders into motionless ivory (“quietas salamandras de marfil”). The Caucasian girls of America, as materialistic as their parents, carry children and coins in their wombs. They all exist to drink silver whisky (bootlegged alcohol) near volcanoes of passion. While the Black people cry in confusion, mulattoes stretch rubber bands (“gomas”) in an effort to attain a Caucasian torso (“torso blanco”) (Lorca 1987,1,461), a reference to the endeavor to pass with effort

problematic, however, given Lorca’s emphasis on the dualism spirituality versus materialism. Would he consider syncretism spiritualistic or materialistic? Did he even pause to consider the problem?

for White, translated into novelistic form by Nella Larsen in her novel *Passing*. The wind, contaminated by this falsehood, tarnishes mirrors and injures the veins of dancers, spoiling living works of art.

The final part of “El rey de Harlem” adopts an apocalyptic tone implicit in Van Vechten’s article on “The Folksongs of the American Negro,” yet resoundingly explicit in his controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*. The article implies that when African American artists take the initiative in promoting their art, they take over the rest of artistic America. Hence, when Roland Hayes came back from Europe in 1923, with a suddenness that startled Van Vechten, spirituals attained popularity, generating a “flood of transcriptions issued by music publishers” and prompting “the intelligent members of the race” to go beyond perpetuating such melodies, and to make colossal editions as well (Van Vechten, 1925,52). The eclipse of the Caucasians by the Black people comes into focus in Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, whose controversial title, according to Maurer and Anderson (2013, 205), may well have influenced the title of Lorca’s poem “Norma y paraíso de los negros,” whose last four words form an exact Spanish translation of Van Vechten’s title.

Here one of his main Black characters, Byron Kasson, equates Harlem to “Nigger Heaven”: the district resembles the gallery (in Spanish, “paraíso”) of a New York theatre, where African Americans sit and observe the “white world” seated in the comfortable orchestra seats below. Sometimes they turn “hard, cruel” expressions upward, laughing and sneering but never beckoning. They never think that Nigger Heaven is overcrowded, compelling action. It never occurs to them that the Black can drop objects down on them or “crush” them, nor that the Blacks can “swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats” (Van Vechten 2000,149). Hence, in Lorca’s “El rey de Harlem,” in multiple ways, African American blood seeks “muertes enharinadas,” deaths of culture white as flour, and “ceniza de nardo,” the ashes of white spikenards. The skies grow sterile and decline, and the “colonias de planetas,” the (Caucasian) colonizers of the entire planet, go rolling onto beaches along with other refuse (“objetos abandonados” [abandoned objects]: Lorca 1987, 1,461).

The blood here, as earlier in Van Vechten (2000, vii) and years later in Lorca’s “Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías” [Lament for the Bullfighter Ignacio Sánchez Mejías], acquires a destructive force (Lorca 1987,1,555). In the present poem, it makes war against the denaturing, dehumanizing Caucasians. This blood, the poetic voice apocalyptically foretells, will enter from everywhere to burn the chlorophyll, the vegetative impulses, of blond women. Those threatened by the blood must flee and hide. The marrow of the forest, nature at its most aggressive, will seep through the cracks to leave a light trace of an eclipse in White flesh, unconsolated by false pity made of a faded glove and a chemically infected rose (Lorca 1987, 1, 461).

From the four directions of the compass there arises in New York a wall against nature, impossible for the mole and the piercing force of water to traverse. The poetic voice urges Blacks not to seek a crack in that wall in order to locate the infinite mask of their own culture, the primitive African totem. Instead, the lyric subject exhorts searching for the sun of Africa, sliding through forests where it is certain not to find the nymph of White mythology. This intense sun will destroy numbers, the foundation of materialistic white culture. Wearing primitive tattoos, this sun, a natural force, crosses rivers while lowing like a bovine, docily followed by alligators (Lorca 1987,1,462). By contrast, stressing the anti-naturalness of Caucasians by “fetishizing color,” to use

Toni Morrison's expression (see Perkins, 1998, 13, n. 28), the lyric subject observes that no animal like the serpent, the zebra, the mule ever grew pale when dying, and that the woodsman ignores when the trees he cuts expire (Lorca 1987,1,462). Such fetishism permeates the rhythmic line, "Negros, Negros, Negros, Negros" (Lorca 1987, 1, 461).

The poetic voice advises African Americans to wait under the natural, vegetative shadow of their king until the most lethal species of the vegetable kingdom, hemlocks, thistles, and nettles, unsettle their enemies on their own rooftops. At that apocalyptic time, Black people will be able to kiss the wheels of the bicycles they would love to own, place pairs of microscopes in the abodes of animals they would love to understand, and dance while aggressive vegetation murders the patriarchs of the Caucasians like Moses beside the "bullrushes of heaven" (Lorca 1987,1,463).

"El rey de Harlem" ends with an invocation to Harlem dressed in disguises: the denaturalized populace wears headless laborer's uniforms, unthinking, unfeeling. The murmuring complaint of Harlem reaches the poetic subject through its nature and its culture, tree trunks and elevators, through its laminated plates supporting cars covered with teeth, like the mouths of the crocodiles submissive to the King of Harlem, through thwarted sexuality ("caballos muertos" [dead horses]) and petty crimes ("crímenes diminutos"), and finally through its monarch, possessed by the despair of his self-deprecation, with a beard so virile that it reaches the sea (Lorca 1987,1,463). In sum, "El rey de Harlem" is a poem praising his authenticity, that enables him to sing spirituals while enslaved to the Caucasians. He embodies the supposedly fierce natural drives of the Black people, and the verse in his honor also contains an invective against the artificiality of his Caucasian oppressors. This antithesis most likely derives in large measure from the contrast between the two styles of singing spirituals as perceived by Carl Van Vechten, the native and the artificially adorned.

The third poem of the three comprising "Negros," on the contrary, does not seem to have a Black theme.⁶ José Antonio Llera, in an excellent analysis of "Iglesia abandonada (Balada de la Gran Guerra)," imagines that the speaker and his deceased son in the poem are Blacks (Llera 2015,46). However, this is not explicitly stated. Llera correctly affirms that the death of any son constitutes a reality *contra natura*, which reverses the natural laws of generation (Llera 2015,47). Van Vechten's identification of the Harlem Black people with nature forms a constant of Lorca's section "Negros." Moreover, the theme of sterility forms a poetic constant in the gay poet. We find this concern in his poem "Canción del naranjo seco" (Lorca 1987, 1,389) and in his famous tragedy *Yerma* [BarrenWoman] (Lorca 1987, 2,803-80). It is not necessary to specify the race of the lyric "I" in "Iglesia abandonada." The First World War, waged between Whites, was an event against nature for both Lorca and his former mentor Falla. Critics have overlooked Lorca's intimate acquaintance with Falla's music, or they would have taken into account Falla's beautiful "Oración de las madres que tienen a sus hijos en brazos" [Prayer of Mothers Holding their Children in their Arms], written in December 1914 during the Great War and setting a poem attributed to Gregorio Martínez Sierra, but like most of his writings, penned by his wife María de la O. Lejárraga, a childless woman (Zabala

⁶ Lorca's subtitles within his poetry books are unreliable. For instance, in *Canciones* [Songs] (1921-1924), the subtitle "Andaluzas" [Andalusian Songs] includes poems without a specified Andalusian content like "Zarzamora con el tronco gris" [Bramblebush with your gray trunk] (Lorca 1987, 1,310), "Es verdad" [It's True] (1987,1,314), "Galán" [Gallant] (1987, 1,317).

2018,385). The song, sung in a melancholy key of G-minor, arose in Falla's Andalusianist period, when its cadences could not have helped but attract the Granadan Lorca. Like a Black spiritual, the song, originally a Christmas carol (*villancico*), addresses biblical figures—here baby Jesus—as if they were present to the singer. Let us reproduce the lyrics as they appear in the program notes of the debut of the song, copied by Alejandro Zabala Landa (2018, 386):

Dulce Jesús que estás dormido:
 Por el santo pecho que te ha amamantado,
 te pido que este hijo mío
 no sea soldado.
 Se lo llevarán, y era carne mía;
 Me lo matarán, y era mi alegría.
 Cuando esté muriendo,
 dirá: «Madre Mía!»
 Y yo no sabré la hora ni el día.
 Dulce Jesús que estás dormido:
 Por el santo pecho que te ha amamantado,
 te pido que este hijo mío
 no sea soldado.

[Sweet Jesus, fast asleep:
 By the holy breast that has suckled you,
 I pray you that this son of mine
 Never be a soldier.
 They will take him away, and he was my flesh.
 They will kill him, and he was my joy.
 When he is dying,
 He will say, "Mother of mine!"
 And I'll never know the hour and day.
 Sweet Jesus, fast asleep:
 By the holy breast that suckled you,
 I pray you that this son of mine
 Never be a soldier.]

Lorca's poem "Iglesia abandonada" could well be a dialogue with the song by Falla and Lejarraga, as well as with the article by Van Vechten on African American hymns. Like "El rey de Harlem" and "Oración de las madres," this poem gathers force from its repetition. In this regard, it resembles many a composition by Falla during his epoch of Andalusianism, as exemplified by the art song under study, with its repetition of a single motif at start and finish—in the present poem, the possession of a son that the poet never had. Unlike Falla's and Lejarraga's song, Lorca's poem acquires pathos from the use of past tenses common to all his Black poetry. He writes an elegy without a real decedent. "Yo tenía un hijo que se llama Juan./ Yo tenía un hijo" [I had a son named John/ I had a son], begins the poem, choosing the simplest of Spanish masculine names, Juan, perhaps for its universality. However, the poem ends by transposing the possession to the third person, pathetically making that possession more remote and in addition placing this fact in the mouths of unknown others, who set distance between the possessor and the being lovingly possessed: "él tenía un hijo./ ¡Un hijo! ¡Un hijo! ¡Un hijo/ que no era más que suyo, porque era su hijo!/ ¡Su hijo! ¡Su hijo! ¡Su hijo!" [he had a son./ A son! A son/ who was nothing but his because he was his son!/ His son! His son! His son!] (Lorca 1987,1,465).

Falla's singing mother, referring to another bereaved mother, the Virgin Mary, who will know when her son dies, laments that she herself will never know the hour or day of her soldier son's death. This lack of knowledge will make it more difficult to come to grips with his death. However, Lorca's dying characters either foresee the time they will die, or else their demise acquires a temporal fixity that individualizes them. In "Romance del emplazado" [Ballad of the Summoned Man] the day and time of the death, rigorously foreseen, turn into a main theme of the ballad (Lorca 1987,1,424). In *Bodas de sangre* [Blood Weddings], the Mother specifies the time of death between two and three o'clock on the appointed day of the passing of her son and his rival in love (Lorca 1987, 2,798), and in *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, the time of death at five in the afternoon repeatedly knells like a bell tolling (Lorca 1987, 1,551-52). Knowledge of the time of death both singles out the defunct person, perpetuating the fateful circumstance, and emphasizes his finiteness and the finality of his death. In the spiritual "Weepin' Mary," revered by Van Vechten for its dignity, the death and resurrection of Jesus make him "draw nigh" to Mary, to Peter, to Thomas at precise instants in their respective biographies. In every classic elegy, the detailing of the circumstances of the death accentuates and consecrates those circumstances. In Lorca's "Iglesia abandonada," however, the dying son "Se perdió por los arcos un viernes de todos los muertos" [He got lost through the arches one Friday of all dead souls] (Lorca 1987,1,464). As José Luis Rodríguez Herrera observes (1995, 371), in Lorca the archway serves as a poetic code for the doorway to the other world. Moreover, the specification of Friday for the day of the death may single it out, but the fact that the deceased son shares this day with all the other dead deprives him of individuality, tragically removing from his final hour the consecration it might otherwise have received.

The father saw his son "jugar en las últimas escaleras de la misa" [playing in the final stairs of the Mass]; and these stairs could very well allude to the steps leading up to the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem ascended by Jesus Christ for his trial during his Passion, a stairway transported by Saint Helena to Rome. On February 26, 1908, Pope Pius VII allowed a plenary indulgence whenever the devout climbed the Scala Sancta after Confession and Communion on their knees while contemplating Christ's passion (Brockhaus, June 5, 2019). Hence, the speaker's son, though playful on the final stairs, must have shown great piety to arrive where he did. His father, less reverent, "echaba un cubito de hojalata en el corazón del sacerdote" [was throwing a little bucket of tinfoil in the heart of the priest]. To toss a small bucket of tinfoil into the priest's heart is to insure even to a small degree that something of the perishable son may be mercifully spared from oblivion. However, the hope of his preservation is dashed by his indistinguishability from the many who have succumbed. Lorca's lyric voice strikes a number of coffins, seeking "¡Mi hijo! ¡Mi hijo! ¡Mi hijo!" in the Scotch-snap rhythm common in Black spirituals.

His son's fusion to, and confusion with, the community of the dead has deprived his father of knowledge about his identity. To acquire new understanding about his offspring, the poetic subject resorts to the superstition of contemplating a hen's foot by moonlight. However, this act only blurs the child's identity further, makes him more elusive than ever, for his father now refers to him as a little girl and as a fish. Instead of a dead son, the bereaved parent now possesses a "dead fish" beneath the ashes of the used incense burners. If the fish symbolizes Christ, the symbol has little consequence when described as dead. Rather than the dead fish, the lyric "I" asserts that it possesses "un mar" [a sea] (Lorca 1987,1,464).

In Castilian, “un mar de” plus a noun signifies a wealth of that substantive. However, the speaker interrogates, “¿De qué?” [Of what?] as if to inquire what object he possesses in abundance. “¿Dios mío!” exclaims the poetic voice, “¿Un mar!” that is, a richness of something, it knows not what. To celebrate his own hypothetical wealth, the speaker ascends to the belfry of the church to ring out the bells, but the fruits were peppered with worms, in other words, the fruits of his body were decaying, and the used matches presumably employed to light the candles of the Mass consumed the spring wheat, the fresh crop of his hope. The most devastating image of the poem appears next: “Yo vi la transparente cigüeña de alcohol/ mondar las negras cabezas de los soldados agonizantes” [I saw the transparent alcohol stork/ gnaw the black heads of the agonizing soldiers] (Lorca 1987, 1,464). The stork habitually symbolizes birth. But this stork lacks life, with its unnatural transparency and its body of alcohol, the liquor that deprives New Yorkers of life in the other Black poems of Lorca. Moreover, that bird decapitates the Black soldiers dying in the war, thereby despoiling them of their potential for heroism as warriors. They fall victim, hence, to a conflict created by Caucasians. Instead of raising the host, the priest shows his strength by raising the mule and the ox, sterile animals, enabling the speaker to locate his heart amidst the showy flowers of the offertory and frightening away the night toads that haunt the chalice with their filth. The speaker then imagines his dead son as a giant, yet no match for the other dead, who devour “pieces of heaven,” dear ones like the son (Lorca 1987,1,464). The equalization of Juan to all other dead humanity obliterates his own being for his father.

Had his son been a bear, a powerful force of nature, the poetic subject would not fear the alligators, the relatives of the crocodiles fearlessly blinded by the King of Harlem. Nor would the speaker have seen the sea—symbol of his wealth or potential—moored up to trees where a pack of regiments in the war could have wounded and violated it. The horrors of war fantasized by Lorca outstrip those imagined by Lejarraga and set to music by Falla. Perhaps to underscore this relationship to Falla, the poetic subject repeats five lines later an exclamation imagining his son as a bear, as if to punctuate the end of his ursine idea the way that Falla ends his musical ideas through repetition of the initial one.

The lyric “I” resolves to wrap itself in hard canvas to protect itself from the coldness of mosses. As is well known, moss can survive intense cold. Although the mosses will in vain hold out to the speaker a sleeve or even a tie to warm himself, in the middle of Mass, he plans to break his rudder, that is, to refuse religious direction for the supposed wealth of his possibilities, his “sea.” His renunciation of a pious orientation in life will cause the well-oriented, symbolized by sea creatures like crazily noisy penguins and gulls, to approach the stone, symbol of the grave, and to make sleepers and singers declare that he actually had a son at one time, because it was only his, his only possibility (Lorca 1987,1,465). Hence the symbol of nature as a human possibility, perhaps received from Von Vechten and applicable to Black spiritual-singers, acquires a nuance of hopelessness in Lorca’s elegy for the son he never had in “Iglesia abandonada.”

A fourth black poem, “Danza de la muerte,” repeats and intensifies the apocalyptic note sounded at the end of “El rey de Harlem” by passing it through the convention of the danse macabre, the medieval vision of death as the great leveler of social hierarchies. With his dualistic view of life, divided into spirit and matter, Lorca regards spirituals as inspirers of life and hope of salvation. Invert the spiritual, and what emerges is what we could call a “material,” a piece of music like the Dance of Death, threatening nothingness, a return to the clay of creation. The Black people

embody the spiritual life; their captors, the Caucasian capitalists of New York City, personify a cult to matter.

The poetic voice itself feels conflicted, now favoring belief in eternity, now lapsing into doubt and resignation to nothingness. In the center of “Danza de la muerte,” the speaker found himself on the terrace, wrestling with the moon, in Lorca, a frequent symbol of death. Swarms of windows—a product of material New York culture—were riddling a “thigh of the night,” perhaps a symbol of vulnerable nature. While the lyric subject struggled with the lunar orb, “sweet cows of the skies” were drinking in his eyes; nature nurtured itself in his spiritual vision. The breezes with long oars, far-reaching spiritual guideposts, were striking the “cencientos cristales de Broadway” [the sooty windows of Broadway], the sooty windows of the world of matter (Lorca 1987,1,471).

The poem “Danza de la muerte” has a repeated refrain, much resembling that of “La saeta” [the arrow of song] in *Poema del cante jondo* [*Poem of Deep Song*]: “¡Miradlo por donde viene!” [Look at him from where he’s coming], modified to “¡Miradlo por donde va!” [Look at him to where he’s going!] (Lorca 29, 1987, 1,184). The change marks the approach and departure of the image of crucified Jesus during the procession of Holy Week. However, whereas the Holy Week procession arises from a hope for eternal life and resurrection, the circle of the danse macabre moves in a despair signaling resignation to the nothingness of matter. In the repeated refrain of “Danza de la muerte,” appearing four times throughout the poem and slightly varied each time, the rhythm of the Scotch snap recurs: “El mascarón. ¡Mirad el mascarón!/ ¡Cómo viene del África a Nue-va York!” [The hideous mask! Look at the hideous mask! How it’s coming from Africa to New York!] (Lorca 1987, 1,469). This is a mask resembling those painted by Picasso in the early twentieth century during the outset of his analytical cubist period, when he practiced Africanist primitivism (Leymarie 1972, 29). The Africa here mentioned does not correspond to the actual Africa of the 1920s, a patchwork of white colonies, but instead idealizes primitive African life like Van Vechten’s description of the stylistic traits of Afro-American music. In Lorca’s poem, the long African mask symbolizes the deadly takeover by Nature, synonymous with the authenticity motivating the spiritual-singing Black people, of the Caucasian-dominated world in an apocalyptic age. Hence the repetition the second time of the initial refrain, incorporates a slight variation to convey the terror of the Apocalypse: “El mascarón. ¡Mirad el mascarón!/ ¡Arena, caimán y miedo sobre Nueva York!” [The hideous mask! Look at the hideous mask! Sand, caiman, and fear atop New York!] (Lorca 1987, 1,469). The sand expresses the desolation left behind by this scourge of the White New York world. Dead animals, a symbol of nature destroyed by Wall Street, congregate to rejoice in the coming of the vengeful mask: “Era la gran reunión de los animales muertos,/ traspasados por las espadas de la luz;/ la alegría eterna del hipopótamo con las pezuñas de ceniza/ y de la gacela con una siempreviva en la garganta” [It was the great meeting of dead animals,/ transfixed by the swords of light;/ the eternal bliss of the hippopotamus with hooves of ash/ and of the gazelle with an houseleek in its throat] (Lorca 1987, 1,469). The swords of light that transfix the animals may stand for the highly illuminated weapons, shafts of the reflectors that pierced the night sky, creations of the civilization in decline, as evinced by the Stock Market crash that Lorca witnessed in person. The ashen paws of the hippopotamus may symbolize its demise, but its joy at revenge lasts forever; the houseleek in the throat of the gazelle may stand for a star-shaped, self-eternalizing plant, as it does at the end of “San Gabriel (Sevilla)” [Saint Gabriel (Seville)] (Lorca 1987,1,416). The allusion to the alligator in the refrain as repeated for the second time gives notice that savage beasts, as well as fear and sterile sand, will dominate the lethal age that is dawning.

The third time that the poetic voice repeats the imperative to look at the African mask, the poet incorporates a reference to New York filth amidst its luminescence: “El mascarón. ¡Mirad el mascarón!/ ¡Qué ola de fango y luciérnaga sobre Nueva York” [The hideous mask. Look at the hideous mask!/ What a wave of filth and firefly atop New York!] (Lorca 1987,1,470)! New York, insists the speaker, is the appropriate place for the Dance of Death. For amidst columns of high skyscrapers from which ruined New Yorkers have hurled themselves, on the one hand, and columns of numbers that add up to financial depression, on the other, the African mask can dance. It moves between “hurricanes of gold,” storms that have wafted wealth away, and “moans of unemployed workers,” howling on this dark night of the soul, to use Saint John’s expression as Lorca does, though in a sense never intended by the Discalced Carmelite: 1929 is an era without lights, without possible salvation. At this point, the attribute of savagery pertains to the Caucasian civilization of Wall Street: “¡oh salvaje Norteamérica! ¡oh impúdica!, ¡oh salvaje,/ tendida en la frontera de la nieve!” [Oh savage North America! Oh shameless one! Oh savage,/ stretched out on the border of snow!] The tables have turned, for the African element of Lorca’s poem favors the spirit, and the Caucasian American element acquires savagery from its materialism on the edge of its cold borders (Lorca 1987,1,470).

Lorca’s poetic voice biblically suggests that there is a time for dancing and a time for silence. Those who dance are drunk on silver (“borrachos de plata”). They drink in the bank the tears of dead children (“lágrimas de niña muerta”) (Lorca 1987,1,471). All history as calculated by capitalist civilization, from the era of sphinx to the age of the safe-deposit box, extends a “tense wire” penetrating the hearts of poor children (Lorca 1987,1,470). When the time for the dance is over, the lyric subject commands the Pope to stop dancing, the King to desist, the blue-toothed millionaire to cease moving, the dried-out dancing women of cathedrals to be still, and would-be saints as well as sinners, builders as well as sodomites, to remain in one spot. Only the mask can persist in the dance. For the African jungle represented by the mask in an apocalyptic future will take over New York: the cobras will whistle on the highest floors, the nettles will infest patios and terraces, the Stock Market will become a “pirámide de musgo,” a huge, moss-covered tomb. The command to look at the destructive African mask resounds for the fourth time at the end of the poem, where it spits the venom of the jungle onto the unhappy imperfection of New York (Lorca 1987, 1, 472).

To conclude, the foregoing paragraphs have attempted to prove that the Black poetry of Lorca most likely develops out of Van Vechten’s contrast between African American and Caucasian musical cultures, between the authentic cultivation of the spiritual in its original sincerity and dialect, on the one hand, and the inauthentic rendering of it in Continental tonalities, on the other. The “Danza de la muerte” equates to an inversion of the spiritual. The poem is traceable to a *saeta* from *Poema del cante jondo*, shifting a song of redemption and resurrection into one of destruction and annihilation. The Africanism of Van Vechten’s description of Black spirituals has likely inspired Lorca to employ the Africanism of Picasso’s masks from his first cubist period as a wrecking ball aimed against materialistic Wall Street. Hence, the jungle will take over the city, and the sensitivity of authenticity threatens to do away with the falseness and savagery of capitalistic civilization. In “Iglesia abandonada (Balada de la Gran Guerra),” the poet appears to dialogue with Van Vechten, on the one hand, and Falla and María Lejárraga, on the other hand, as authors of the Christmas carol, “Oración de las madres que tienen a sus hijos en brazos.” Lorca’s poem turns the theme of sterility into a conflict between nature and civilization that results in the speaker’s loss of religious

faith, the “abandoned church” to which he refers. World War brings about the death of his (non-existent) son, who despite his fervent faith, loses his identity through dying. “El rey de Harlem” is the poetic song of furious African American blood yearning to throw off its disguises and to live free. The King of Harlem is a singer of spiritual songs with his multitude. A would-be participant in the Heraclitean war which is nature, impelling him to blind crocodiles and strike monkeys with his kitchen spoon, he lives imprisoned in a doorman’s uniform by his white captors, themselves crazed by alcohol. This poem ends in an apocalyptic tone of authentic nature aspiring in vain for the moment to take over the city and its falseness. Finally, “Norma y Paraíso de los negros” begins by setting down what the African Americans supposedly hate and love. They hate the materialistic nihilism of the Caucasians, the unfulfillment of genuine passion, and the feigning of emotions never felt. They love the limitless sea of nature, the changing expressions of animals, the optical illusions of celestial bodies, and the dancing surf. They espouse the deep blue “without history” of night that does not fear the daytime. Theirs is the genuineness in life and art that the world of Wall Street attempts to deny them. All this poetry Lorca has quite probably derived from speaking to Nella Larsen and possibly receiving from her the all-revealing article by Carl Van Vechten on the authenticity of the Black spiritual.

To deal, finally, with John Crow’s objection to Lorca’s incomprehension of the African Americans and his modeling of them after the Andalusian Roma, we may say that Van Vechten’s guidance possibly helped him to undertake this modeling. Yet, in a perceptive article, “The Achievement and Failure of ‘Nigger Heaven’: Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance,” Margo V. Perkins sums up the main defect of Van Vechten’s controversial novel in one word, which applies as well to Lorca’s Black poetry: essentialism. *Nigger Heaven*, Perkins thinks, relies too heavily on “essentialist notions of race, class, and gender already prevalent in the culture” of Harlem (Perkins 1998, 6). Such essentialism, we have noted, underlies his views on Black spirituals. We may say the same about *Poeta en Nueva York*. Insofar as it is propaganda against Wall Street of the Depression Era, the poetry is dated. Mercifully, if those conditions no longer apply to African American life, or at least apply to a much more limited degree, then *Nigger Heaven* and *Poeta en Nueva York* achieve worth as products of the world history they both rejected as conventional. Even antiques offer a considerable measure of esthetic enjoyment.

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