

Rebecca Pawel

**“LAURA” AND THE “LANDLORD”: DOROTHY PETERSON'S  
*FUENTEVEJUNA***

Rebecca Pawel  
Columbia University

All translators of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* must decide how much they are willing and able to preserve the original text's delicate ideological balance between condemnation of tyranny and glorification of royal authority. The demands of translating the drama into accessible language for a modern, foreign audience force the translator to decide whether Lope intended the restoration of feudal hierarchy at the end of the play as merely a sop to royal censorship or as an expression of genuine conservatism. The fierce propaganda competition around the nature of Spanish identity in the 1930s gave rise to a series of adaptations of *Fuenteovejuna* in both Spanish and other languages. Each of these adaptations made strong claims for either the inherently right-wing or left-wing nature of the play. The Falangist newspaper *Haz* criticized Federico García Lorca's 1933 adaptation for the theater group La Barraca for turning “an authentically Spanish drama” into a “petty Russophile” one (qtd. in Stainton 416–417). In 1935 the Hamburg Staatliches Schauspielhaus produced a “heavily adapted” version of *Fuenteovejuna*, restoring the Catholic monarchs removed by Lorca and earlier Russian translators and turning the play into what the Fascist Giménez Caballero approvingly called “el primer drama del nacional-socialismo” (qtd. in Wheeler 85). During the Spanish Civil War Jean Cassou staged a strongly pro-Republican production at the Paris Théâtre du Peuple in French, and Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl staged a benefit production for the Spanish Republic in 1936 at the Manchester Theatre Union in English (Boswell).

That English production may have used John Garrett Underhill's translation, which Laurence Boswell calls the first English translation of the play.<sup>1</sup> Underhill's translation was first staged in 1936 at Vassar on the symbolically important date of May 1. The production was favorably reviewed by *The New York Times*,<sup>2</sup> who advised readers that it would run through May 4 in Poughkeepsie. Those interested in the New York theater scene were therefore well aware of the play's existence in English and the basic outline of its plot a few months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War made it urgently relevant to current events in Spain. Among the New Yorkers who shared an interest in left-wing, politically committed drama and sixteenth century classical theater was Dorothy Peterson. A daughter of New York City's African American elite, Peterson rebelled against her family's conservative social conventions and moved out of her parents' home as a single young woman in the early 1920s.<sup>3</sup> She supported herself as a Spanish teacher at Wadleigh High School, the first public high school for girls in Harlem, while becoming “a central part of the Harlem Renaissance scene” (Scaramella, “Literary Liaisons” 63), writing at least two (unpublished) novels, and pursuing an interest in theater, which led to her appearance in a production of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* in 1930. She was a founding member of the Harlem Experimental Theater, in 1929, and the Harlem Suitcase Theater, in 1937. She was also an indefatigable translator who frequently collaborated with the author Langston Hughes, seeking out Spanish-language poets and offering Hughes literal translations as a basis for adaptation.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to know whether Peterson saw the *New York Times* notice about the Vassar production of *Fuenteovejuna*. What is certain is that by the end of 1937 she was working on her own translation of the play, intended particularly for the Harlem Suitcase Theater, a project she had co-founded with Hughes and social worker Louise Thompson Patterson (who succeeded, at least temporarily, in securing funding from the International Workers' Order). The company took its name from the idea that all the props used in each of its productions could fit inside a suitcase. Hughes and Patterson explicitly described it as “theater for the masses” and made sure that ticket prices were “on par with those to attend a movie” (qtd. in “Harlem Suitcase Theater” 146). Not surprisingly, the company was bedeviled by financial problems. These problems, combined with the organizers’ relative inexperience as theater entrepreneurs, caused it to disband in 1939 after only two seasons.

Hughes and Louise Patterson's vision of a theater that would produce serious drama with left-wing social messages at affordable prices was unquestionably inspired by left-wing theater companies in Europe, including Lorca's La Barraca and Littlewood's Theatre Union. These companies, in turn, were linked by what Ramona Tougas calls a “transnational presence” that connected the local and specific struggles of marginalized or oppressed populations to an explicitly “internationalist drama” (261–262). Tougas emphasizes that “the term ‘transnational presence’...highlights these works as...performance...movement and words spoken in the presence of an audience” (261). Thus, these European productions shared formal aspects as well as international political sympathies. Dramatic form followed political function, which led to a revival of dramatic techniques that were not only important to the 1930s avant-garde but also, as Gwynne Edwards points out, typical of sixteenth century drama in both Spain and England, where theater was (as the Harlem Suitcase Theater, the Manchester Theatre Union, and La Barraca aspired to make it once again) a truly popular art form, performed out of doors and in public spaces for people of all social classes. Edwards identifies “the presence of different registers of language, including prose and poetry... songs and music...scenery [that] was sparse, and often quite simple; and movement [that] was unrestricted on a largely bare and open stage” (“Theatre Workshop and the Spanish Drama” 306) as aspects that were typical of both early modern drama and the international avant-garde theater companies of the 1930s. The “suitcase” into which all the Harlem Suitcase Theater’s props allegedly fit was thus at once an aesthetic, financial, and ideological choice: for practical financial reasons linked to the ideological decision to keep ticket prices low, it was impossible to splurge on elaborate sets and props. The resulting bare stage without attempts at realistic scenery (painted or otherwise) promoted a kind of transnational empathy by allowing the setting of a given play to remain ambiguous. Audiences who saw dramas that resonated with their present position were free to use their imaginations to place those dramas in familiar settings, no matter how many verbal cues proclaimed that the dramas took place in distant lands and centuries. Alongside similar avant-garde groups on both sides of the Atlantic, the Harlem Suitcase Theater, removed one of the great practical stumbling blocks on the road to international solidarity: the visual markers of cultural difference. Peterson’s translation of *Fuenteovejuna* suggests ways in which this approach to theater could also make the foreign familiar verbally in order to further enable audiences’ identification with early modern Spanish peasant characters.

The Harlem Suitcase Theater’s eponymous “suitcase” of props therefore helped ensure a minimalist aesthetic that facilitated the performance of culturally foreign works,

including works in translation that had been “carried across” languages in a suitcase that was metaphorical as well as literal. As with staging, the political and aesthetic implications of translation in the 1930s were inextricably intertwined. Gayle Rogers argues that translation between Spanish and English was a “constitutive, rather than a constituent, element” of modernist literature that simultaneously enabled formal experimentation and commented on national and imperial political constructs (Rogers 5). The multiple translations published in the 1930s of *Fuenteovejuna*, with its highly apropos plot about a peasant uprising in the midst of a civil war, were certainly *all* forms of political commentary as well as artistic experimentation. As Evelyn Scaramella suggests, in the case of the African American left, the Harlem Suitcase Theater’s decision to stage *Fuente Ovejuna* “tie[d] the struggle to fight American racism to antifascist and anti-colonialist projects worldwide” (“Literary Liaisons” 66). At a historical moment when the African American press was linking Mussolini’s Italian troops in Spain to his invasion of Ethiopia<sup>6</sup> and celebrating the presence of integrated fighting units commanded by Black officers in the International Brigades,<sup>7</sup> the production of *Fuenteovejuna* provided another opportunity for Harlem audiences to identify with the people of the Spanish Republic.

Nevertheless, in spite of its international sympathies and techniques, the Harlem Suitcase Theater’s concerns were primarily local, and as much weight was given to “Harlem” as to “Suitcase.” Indeed, the group’s “Constitution” begins: “the purpose of the Harlem Suitcase Theater is to fill a long-felt need in this community for a permanent repertory group presenting plays dealing with the lives, problems, and hopes of the Negro people in their relation to the American scene” (“Harlem Suitcase Theater Documents”). Aside from this noble mission, Hughes’ primary interest was probably in providing venues for productions of his own work where he could retain more artistic control over his plays than allowed by Broadway productions (such as the one that rewrote his play *Mulatto* in spite of his objections).<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Harlem Suitcase Theater produced no fewer than six plays by Hughes in two seasons, including the long-running hit *Don’t You Want to Free?* With the notable exception of *Fuenteovejuna*, the plays that the Harlem Suitcase Theater produced or meditated were all set in the United States, and they dealt explicitly with African American history, themes, and characters (“Harlem Suitcase Theater” 146). *Fuenteovejuna* was both the only European work and the only translation the Harlem Suitcase Theater ever put on. Even granting that the play was enjoying something of a popular renaissance as translations and adaptations appeared in various languages, its inclusion in the programming of a theater aimed so squarely at “the Negro people in their relation to the American scene” is somewhat curious.

To some extent, the play’s inclusion in the Harlem Suitcase Theater’s repertory reflects the same international interest in the Spanish Civil War that led to its production in Manchester and Paris. Hughes and Louise Thompson Patterson visited Spain in 1937 as enthusiastic supporters of the Spanish Republic, and Hughes spent six months as a war correspondent in Spain in 1937–38. In his memoir *I Wonder as I Wander* he describes translating Lorca’s poetry at the Alianza de Intelectuales in Madrid “with the aid of Rafael Alberti and Manuel Altolaguirre [who] had known Lorca well and still grieved for his execution at the hands of the Fascists” (386–387). Hughes’s papers testify to the strong affective connection that linked him to Spanish authors, and his belief that “translation...had the power to forge strong friendships across disparate cultures and languages” (Scaramella, “Translating The Spanish Civil War” 181). His personal and professional sympathies with the Spanish Republicans he met at the Alianza de

Intelectuales may have encouraged his interest in works that were meaningful to them, even though those works were remote from Harlem. In fact, on his way home from Spain in the summer of 1938, Hughes wrote Peterson from Paris about her rough draft of the play:

I guess you never did send that first act, deciding that you'd wait until I get back, which is just as well. By excellent good fortune, I met the man who worked with Garcia Lorca during his days of traveling theatre when they did *Fuenteovejuna* in a modernized version in the villages of Spain, and he indicated to me how they cut the play, leaving out all the king business, and doing it in ordinary present day clothes of village folk. They staged it on a truck, with only suggested sets, but excellent lighting, he said, for dawns, sunsets, a fire, etc. So that is something for us to worry about. (qtd. in Scaramella, "Literary Liaisons" 66)

Hughes's letter suggests that the adaptation he intended to make based on Peterson's translation would follow the La Barraca production quite closely. However, in the same letter, Hughes notes that he had "translated Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre*, a beautiful thing, done here [in Paris] last year by a left-wing theater group with much success. I'm afraid that it's too hard for us without sets, but maybe some other group in New York will like it" (qtd. in Scaramella, "Literary Liaisons" 66). Hughes was politically and aesthetically committed to Lorca's work, but his comment on *Bodas de Sangre* shows he was ready to acknowledge when he thought it was *not* an appropriate fit for the Harlem Suitcase Theater.

While Langston Hughes's interest in Lope's work was based on his knowledge of the Spanish Civil War and his commitment to left-wing Spanish intellectuals,<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Peterson's was rooted in a less political loyalty to works of the Spanish Siglo de Oro. Peterson's father worked as a diplomat in Venezuela and an IRS official in Puerto Rico, so she spent much of her childhood in Spanish-speaking countries. Unlike Hughes, who was largely self-taught in Spanish, she had received formal instruction in both Spanish language and literature.<sup>10</sup> Hughes admitted to Peterson that "*Fuenteovejuna*...must be hard to translate, since I read it on the boat again and understood about every fifth word. It's too much like Shakespeare" (qtd. in Scaramella, "Literary Liaisons" 66). Peterson, however, clearly reveled in this similarity. In spite of Hughes's expressed intention to do the play in the "ordinary present day clothes of village folk," she wrote to Hughes a few months later that "a friend of mine, Samuel Martí, a Mexican musician...wrote to me from Mexico last week and sent me sketches of the costumes to be used in *Fuenteovejuna* which he got from a costume book of the Lope de Vega period. I have been doing some research work on the period of the play, which I would like to discuss with you..." ("Letter to Hughes April 1939"). While Peterson did share the left-wing sympathies of the other members of the Harlem Suitcase Theater in the 1930s, her interest in Spain both pre-dated and outlasted her interest in left-wing causes. She was part of a delegation of U.S.-based Spanish language teachers who toured Spain in the summer of 1921,<sup>11</sup> studying its cultural and historical monuments. In 1929 she did several translations for the short lived journal *Alhambra*, which was edited by the academic Angel Flores (Scaramella, "Literary Liaisons" 63). She also seems to have been the unofficial interpreter for her novelist friend Nella Larsen and Federico García Lorca during the latter's visit to New York in 1929,<sup>12</sup> and she finished one novel and started another while on sabbatical in Spain with Larsen in 1930 (Hutchinson 396). Finally, in the late 1950s, she moved to Spain and became a fixture

of the American expatriate community in Seville, having apparently made her peace with the Franco regime.

Peterson's translation of *Fuenteovejuna* was intended as raw material for Langston Hughes to adapt freely. However, her work reveals a distinctly different philosophy of translation from the one that guided Hughes's contemporaneous translation of Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*. Kernan details how during Hughes's time in Madrid he developed an "ethics of translation...that figures the translator as a type of witness or medium" (234). The implied transparency of a "medium" who "eschew[s] decisions that make for closed readings" (Kernan 271) is substantively different from that of an author who freely *adapts* a piece for public performance. However, even before the text of Lope's play reached Hughes's editing pen, Dorothy Peterson's translation demonstrated a far more interventionist ethic. She sought to firmly situate her translation in a culturally specific imaginative space that was neither the original early modern Castilian setting nor the implied contemporary Spain of the Civil War that other adaptations from that period invoked, but rather an imaginary location that emphasized the parallels between early modern Spanish and African American cultural referents. Perhaps because her knowledge of Lope de Vega was *not* filtered through the immediate radical context of the Spanish Civil War, Peterson's translation is notably less interested in speaking to its audience in the language of the "universal" oppressed. Rather, it delights in the specificity of both Lope's original setting and an imagined African American context—a context that was quite far from the universal struggle of the proletariat evoked in Littlewood's or Cassou's stagings of the play. To some extent, Peterson's English version of Lope de Vega reverses the trend Vera Kutzinski noted among Spanish translators of African American poets (particularly Langston Hughes), who "aligned a discourse of blackness...with the more inclusive rhetoric of political solidarity among *all* the victims of capitalism" (66). Peterson's translation, designed for a company with an exclusively African American cast, does *not* attempt to engage its audience by presenting the work as universal in either space or time. Rather, the translation exemplifies Kutzinski's argument that translation can be "respectful, non-competitive play...at once performative and transformative" (3). By exploiting historically specific parallels between the world of Lope's original play and the early-twentieth-century African American experience, Peterson's *Fuenteovejuna* seeks to blend two seemingly disparate worlds without sacrificing the specificity of either one. Peterson's confidence that Lope's drama was (in the words of the Harlem Suitcase Theater's constitution) relevant to "the lives, hopes, and problems of the Negro people" is based not only on the parallels between American anti-racist and Spanish anti-fascist struggles, but also on the older (and more politically conservative) conviction that African Americans and Spaniards shared a "common racial and cultural bond" (Scaramella, *Remembering Al-Andalus* 170).

Peterson's choices as a translator demonstrate the tension between her desire to remain faithful to what she called her "research work on the times and manners and costumes of *Fuente Ovejuna*" ("Letter to Hughes" 8 Feb 1939), and to create a performance text that would resonate with Harlem audiences. Her letter to Hughes accompanying the draft of her translation details some of these contradictions:

There are two places where I have done nothing about translating, leaving your imagination free rein – in the first scene which needs much adaptation from the Spanish, and where I have indicated more or less what the content ought to be, and then

later on, on pages 11–12, where Flores tells the story in “romance” of the Landlord's history.... There is one thing I have noticed about the original and you may feel the same about the translating I have done and that is: there is not enough differentiation in the use of language between the high-born and the low-born characters – They all seem to use the same medium of expression.... I don't know whether you're planning to do the whole thing in verse or not – it isn't really necessary but there are certain parts that I think definitely should go into verse – the speech Laura has at the bottom of pages 2 and 3 where she describes her simple peasant desires – probably Pascuala's answer pp. 3–4 – Frondoso's speech p 5 and probably Laura's answer at the bottom of p. 6 and 7 – Maybe the gift presentation speech on p. 13 and 14 by Esteban and the love scene on p. 17 and 18 and 19 with a sharp contrast in meter and language when the Landlord breaks into that scene and ends up the first act. (“Letter to Hughes” 1938)

Peterson's notes on her rough draft illustrate both the changes she made to the structure of the play—she removed the first scene, and “all the business of the king,” as Hughes terms the plot involving the “Reyes Católicos” and their military maneuverings—and the alterations she made in terms of word choice by referring to Laurencia and the *Comendador* as “Laura” and the “Landlord.” Her thoughts about the use of language argue simultaneously for attempting to preserve the distinct verse forms made famous by Lope in his “Arte nuevo de hacer comedias” and for a greater “differentiation” between different characters’ language, which would presumably mimic modern class-based differences in colloquial speech.

The challenge of writing in various types of strictly metered verse while also differentiating between “highborn and lowborn” characters’ vocabulary and grammar might have taxed even a poet of Hughes's skill. However, taken in the context of Peterson's other comments, this possibly contradictory demand suggests a coherent vision for adapting *Fuenteovejuna* not merely as a left-wing parable, as had been done contemporaneously in England and France, but as a drama that would have a specific and personal relevance to African American audiences. The intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance—especially those who had internationalist left-wing sympathies—had an ambivalent relationship with the fashionable “primitivism” of the 1920s. Nevertheless, and in spite of their recognition that the insistence on “the African” as a “primitive” was harmful and limiting, many of the period’s African American intellectuals wryly acknowledged that, as Langston Hughes put it, “Europeans, as well as Americans, seem to be victims of that old cliché that all Negroes just naturally sing—without effort” (Hughes, *I Wonder* 80). Although Hughes self-deprecatingly claimed he could “hardly carry a tune” (*I Wonder* 80), he jokingly justified his composition of the opera *De Organizer* for the Harlem Suitcase Theater with the words “I can't help it! A theater, especially a cullud one, has to have music!” (“Letter to Peterson” 30 August 1938). Hughes's own work did much to cement the link between African American poetry and musical forms, including blues, jazz, and be-bop, and he carefully exploited the connection between musical and poetic rhythms. But other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including James Weldon Johnson and Jean Toomer, argued strongly for the inherently “poetic” nature of not only African American song, but also African American vernacular speech.

As an aspiring African American actor and sometime romantic companion of Jean Toomer, Peterson could hardly be unaware of the cliché that African American performers were gifted with exceptional rhythm. The scenes in *Fuenteovejuna* that she suggests

translating in verse all involve the peasant characters: Laurencia, Frondoso, Pascuala, and Esteban. The “sharp contrast in meter and language” that she proposes for the entry of Fernán González, the “Landlord,” suggests an intrusion of prose when the aristocratic characters appear. While Lope's original was unusual in *allowing* its peasant characters to speak in poetic forms normally reserved for nobles, Peterson envisions an adaptation that builds on stereotypes of “singing” farm laborers, particularly in the rural south (where, in fact, the situation of many sharecroppers closely mirrored that of early modern serfs in Europe). Given the tropes about the “natural rhythm” of African Americans in the 1930s, her suggestion that the aristocratic characters be translated in prose implicitly suggests a racial identification for them as well as a class one.

The connection between the poetic speech of the peasants in *Fuenteovejuna* and their implied musical or rhythmic talent is further emphasized by one of Peterson's more daring translation choices. The earlier Underhill translation of *Fuenteovejuna* calls the town “Sheep Well,” and the set of both the Theatre Union's 1936 production and its 1955 revival “included a great ram standing on its hind legs beside a well” (Edwards “Theatre Workshop and the Spanish Drama” 309). Peterson, in turn, re-names *Fuenteovejuna* “the village of Deep River” (Peterson *Fuente Ovejuna*). This allows her to cleverly translate the moment of mingled heroism and humor when the play's “gracioso,” Mengo—a self-proclaimed coward—offers to tell his torturers who killed the Comendador. Just at the moment when Mengo's friends mourn his inability to resist further torture, he triumphantly cries “Fuenteovejuncica!” Since English lacks the diminutive forms of Spanish, finding a non-literal translation of “Little *Fuenteovejuna*” poses a legitimate challenge for any translator. Peterson captures Mengo's defiance by having him say that the responsibility for the murder lies with “Deep Rivulet!,” a nice contradiction in terms that makes the response of Peterson's “Judge”—“What devilish cunning is this? They are mocking their own pain” (Peterson *Fuente Ovejuna* 72)—completely reasonable.

In addition to enabling this graceful translation of the Spanish diminutive, the name “Deep River” also calls to mind the spiritual of the same name. Wildly popular in the period after the First World War, the song had been recorded in 1936 by Marian Anderson and nearly ten years earlier by Peterson's personal friend Paul Robeson, among others.<sup>13</sup> Nothing in Lope's text suggests the name “Deep River” beyond the generic “*fuentes*,” so Peterson's choice of a name that would have religious and cultural weight for her audience moved the play out of the unfamiliar world of early modern Castile and into the timeless geography of what was already known then as an “old” spiritual that recalled at once the present-day misery of sharecropping and the bygone horror of slavery. In fact, there is no record of the existence of “Deep River” until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and it seems to have only become popular in the twentieth (Shirley 493). Nevertheless, the song's popularity was linked to its supposed antiquity and authenticity. Only a few decades into its life it was advertised as a “famous old spiritual” (Shirley 513). The somewhat synthetic oldness of “Deep River” aligns with what Richard Utz calls the “medievalist ethos” (55) of the antebellum U.S. South—the post-Civil War apologia for the confederacy promoted a faux-medieval vision of the South not only as agrarian and pre-industrial, but also as possessing a unique brand of “chivalry.” As Utz points out, slave-owning white Southerners fashioned a cultural identity in which “the medieval knight rather than the rough American pioneer became the Southern ideal... the Southern aristocracy... celebrated their own scaled down version of the medieval court, the Southern gentleman land and slave owner and his belle” (55). By blurring the lines between the late-medieval Castilian

village of Fuenteovejuna and the gospel-inflected “Deep River,” Peterson commented on the Southern fantasy that “conflate[s] and conjoin[s] the medieval and the antebellum past...so that the temporal distance between both historical eras is completely erased” (Utz 60).

Lope de Vega’s “Comendador,” who is both the peasants’ “legal” overlord and an utterly immoral tyrant, demonstrates that there is nothing inherently moral about a medieval feudal system, and thus undermines the idea that the “southern gentleman’s” supposed association with medieval chivalry gave any legitimacy to his role as “land and slave owner.” Moreover, the Comendador’s specific transgression in *Fuenteovejuna*—namely the repeated rape of village women—is a form of violence inextricably intertwined with the construction of southern white masculinity. The Comendador’s argument that the women of Fuenteovejuna have no honor parallels his assertion of entitlement to their bodies: “What honor do you possess, you who are only peasants?...There are...cities/where no one would dream of preventing/the wishes of the men of quality./There, the married men appreciate/the visits we make to their wives” (Peterson, *Fuente Ovejuna* 26). Or, as a Georgia judge who denied the possibility that the Ku Klux Klan had ever committed rape put it in his congressional testimony, “the [sexual] conquest of such people is generally so easy that it does not require any resort to violence, for there is very little virtue in them” (qtd. in Rosen 225). Hannah Rosen has traced how in the post-emancipation South, at precisely the moment when southern elites most glorified the medievalizing myths of chivalry, they used sexual assault to systematically reinforce a white supremacist ideology which denied the ability to consent—and by extension fitness for citizenship—to Black Americans: “The language [white] assailants used...represented as normative and unexceptional white men soliciting black women in their own homes for sex [and] repudiated the possibility of black women in chaste and respectable marriage relations...[and] portrayed black men as uninterested in preventing their wives’ and daughters’ denigration” (8). Transposed in place and time, this attitude is perfectly summarized in the Comendador’s outlook in *Fuenteovejuna*. Thus, Peterson’s blurring of the lines between the medieval Castile of “Fuente Ovejuna” and the possibly Southern U.S. village of “Deep River” draws on the broader tradition of medievalizing the U.S. South while simultaneously dismantling the supposed moral legitimacy conferred by the South’s faux-medieval value system.

Lope’s *Comendador* is an easy riposte to those who imagine a rose-tinted age of chivalry where all the peasants are conveniently nameless and faceless. However, in addition to allowing the character’s words and actions to recall more contemporary villains, Peterson’s translation added a distinctly modern echo to his name. Aside from renaming the town that gives the play its title, Peterson remained fairly faithful to most of the proper names in Lope’s text, with two notable exceptions. The heroine Laurencia receives the much more common English name Laura, making her less exotic and more familiar. And the “Comendador,” Fernán Gómez, becomes the “Landlord of the farms in Deep River” (Peterson, *Fuente Ovejuna*). Whether or not the term “landlord” is technically accurate, it is unquestionably anachronistic. Underhill’s 1936 English translation calls Fernán Gómez “Commander,” emphasizing his military rank. Cassou’s French adaptation refers to him as “Seigneur” to underline his feudal position. Unlike the distant and somewhat romantic titles of “Lord” or “Commander,” in Depression-era Harlem a “landlord” was a real and ever-present menace, the human face of the massive and systemic discrimination against African Americans, who faced exorbitant prices for sub-standard housing while also being paid



significantly lower wages than their white counterparts. The people of Fuenteovejuna—or Deep River—might be rural farmers, but making their tyrant a “landlord” made the focus of their hatred instantly comprehensible to the Harlem Suitcase Theater’s distinctively *urban* African American audience.

There are in fact several hints that the political organization of Peterson’s Deep River is not quite the same as Lope’s Fuenteovejuna. The *comendador*’s title is not the only one Peterson changes. Esteban, the father of the heroine, is the “*alcalde*” of Fuenteovejuna in the original text, assisted by Alonso and another unnamed “*regidor*.” Although they are subject to the abuse of unscrupulous nobles like Fernán Gómez because they are not noble, these leading characters do have recognized political and judicial positions that suggest that under normal (or at least ideal) circumstances the peasant society of Fuenteovejuna has a good deal of autonomy. Rather than recognizing Esteban and Alonso as “mayor” and “alderman” or “councilman” respectively, Peterson flattens their titles into the generic “peasant leaders of the village,” and translates Fernán Gómez’s command to Esteban “*reñidla, alcalde, por Dios,*” as “scold her, leader, by God” (*Fuente Ovejuna* 25). The original has the quasi-legal force of a feudal superior ordering a subordinate member of a legally constituted government to reprimand someone. Peterson’s translation here eliminates Esteban’s official position and gives him authority to “scold” Laura/Laurencia purely because she is his daughter. In Peterson’s version, Esteban and Alonso enjoy the respect of the other townspeople, but they are not implicated in the power structure which maintains the position of the *comendador*. Peterson’s choice to *not* use the accurate modern translation of “*alcalde*” suggests a desire to evoke the systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans. In fact, in some parts of the rural South, all-Black municipalities like Zora Neale Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville, Florida (made famous by its fictional alter-ego in Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) *did* exist. However, they were relatively uncommon, and as the 1923 Rosewood massacre demonstrated, their existence was terrifyingly precarious. Peterson (urban and Northern by birth) apparently chose to imagine a more typical setting for “Deep River.” She reiterates the theme of disenfranchisement when the enraged Laura erupts during a council meeting after escaping from her kidnappers with the words “a woman is able at least/to lift her voice—if not to vote” (Peterson, *Fuente Ovejuna* 53). Lope’s original line for Laurencia, “*bien puede una mujer, /si no a dar voto, a dar voces*” (lit. “a woman can well scream even if she can’t swear an oath”), makes somewhat more sense in the context of Laurencia giving legal testimony as a witness. Playing on the ambiguity of the word “voto” (both “vote” and “vow”), Peterson makes her character Laura’s frustration center on a ballot rather than an oath.

Peterson took these gestures toward a more urban setting no further in her translation; indeed, given the extremely anti-urban passages in the original, it would have been difficult to do so. But the rural setting of Lope’s play would have presented no bar to empathy for a Harlem theater-going audience. Along with that of every northern city, Harlem’s African American population had exploded over the past two decades as a result of the Great Migration, and the majority even of young Harlem residents born in New York retained familial and cultural ties to the rural South, where sharecropping that resembled serfdom (if not actual slavery) was still a way of life. The terrors of the spiritually named town of “Deep River” would have been all too familiar to African Americans acquainted with the rural South. The omnipresent threat of violence—including exactly the kinds of beatings, hangings, and tortures described in the play—and the pretexts for this widespread terror required no imagination for anyone who had experience with the Klan, or for that matter

the U.S. police and prison system. Indeed, audiences at the Harlem Suitcase Theater would have been able to compare *Fuenteovejuna* with the same company's earlier production of Langston Hughes's drama *Angelo Herndon Jones*, the real life story of a labor organizer convicted of "insurrection" in Alabama in 1932. Herndon's own description in his memoir *Let Me Live* of being taken out into the woods and beaten by Southern sheriffs rivals any description of Mengo's or Frondoso's tortures in Lope's play.

Even the elimination of Fernando and Isabel as characters in Peterson's translation proved unexpectedly coherent in the context of the U.S. South. For García Lorca, as for the Russian and French translators who eliminated the king as a *deus ex machina*, the staunchly loyal expressions of the peasants of *Fuenteovejuna* were an awkward reminder of the conservatism of the past, to be stamped out with properly pro-Republican sentiments, even at the expense of Lope's twinned sub-plots making sense. Gwynne Edwards notes that Joan Littlewood's 1936 production of *Fuenteovejuna* for the Manchester Theatre Union eliminated the Reyes Católicos and the Master of Calatrava as speaking parts, but retained "allusions to Ferdinand and Isabella as the recipients of the villagers' loyalty and the Commander's treachery" ("Theatre Workshop's Translations" 54). Peterson's translation does not simply cut all the scenes with royal characters; she turns King Ferdinand into the "Governor of the Province" and translates the repeated line "viva el rey!" as "long live the true government!" The villagers' defiant insistence that "nuestros señores son los reyes católicos" becomes "our master is a just government." In the highly centralized systems of both Spain and the UK in the early twentieth century, the idea of a conflict between a "just" central government and an unjust or corrupt local authority would not have made much intuitive sense to audiences. But in the United States, especially in the South, where local governments were completely repressive, the only hope of justice for African Americans lay in federal power, whether in the form of troops during Reconstruction, the Supreme Court (an intermittent or imperfect ally), or the long and unsuccessful campaign for federal anti-lynching laws. Frondoso's final words—"the Governor has decreed as a just man should. And here, dear audience, *Deep River* ends"—have the ring of testimony. They are reminiscent of the testimonies given to WPA interviewers about slavery (a "long ago" time), but also (more prosaically) of the various congressional committees that investigated the KKK and similar organizations over the course of several decades.<sup>14</sup> The ambiguously sympathetic but ineffectual federal government—framed in opposition to corrupt and oppressive local power structures—held real meaning in the United States, even without the presence of a king as a figurehead to whom the oppressed could appeal.

There are no records of the Harlem Suitcase Theater production of *Fuenteovejuna*, and I have been unable to find copies of Hughes's adaptation of Peterson's translation, if in fact he succeeded in doing one before the company closed. Any speculation about whether the production would have been made more or less effective by the seventeenth-century costuming Peterson proposed and the "research work" she did on early modern Castile must remain in the realm of wild guesswork. What is certain is that by turning "Laurencia" and the "Comendador" of *Fuenteovejuna* into "Laura" and the "Landlord" of *Deep River*, Peterson illuminated a little-noted set of parallels between Lope's quintessentially Castilian drama and the lived experience of Harlem's African American community during the Great Depression.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gwynne Edwards agrees that Underhill's was the only published English translation in 1936, but she suggests that the Theatre Union could not yet have been aware of this translation, since it appeared the same year as their production. He argues that the Theatre Union's production was a collaborative effort by Joan Littlewood, Ewan MacColl, and Howard Goorney, assisted by "someone with a good knowledge of Spanish [who] helped them, either orally or by providing a literal translation" ("Theatre Workshop's Translations of Three Spanish Plays" 53).
- <sup>2</sup> See "LOPE DE VEGA PLAY STAGED AT VASSAR: 'Fuente Ovejuna' Has Its First Performance in English at Experimental Theatre." *New York Times*, N4, May 3, 1936.
- <sup>3</sup> For a full background on Dorothy Peterson's family and her strained relationship with her parents' generation, see her niece Carla Peterson's *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth Century New York City* 14–18.
- <sup>4</sup> See Evelyn Scaramella's article "Literary Liaisons: Translating the Avant-Garde from Spain to Harlem" 63–64.
- <sup>5</sup> See Langston Hughes's letter to Dorothy Peterson, 30 August 1938, Beinecke, JWJ MSS 10, Box 1, Folder 19.
- <sup>6</sup> See Robin D.G. Kelley's, "'This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do': African Americans and the Spanish Civil War" in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*.
- <sup>7</sup> See Michael Thurston's chapter in *Black Press* for a summary of the coverage of African American *brigadistas* like Oliver Law and Milton Herndon (153) and an analysis of how the African American press linked the Spanish Civil War to domestic political issues.
- <sup>8</sup> See *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hill and Wang 1993, 310–314.
- <sup>9</sup> For further records of Hughes's friendship with Rafael Alberti and María Teresa León, see Evelyn Scaramella's "Translating the Spanish Civil War: Langston Hughes's Transnational Poetics." *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, Summer 2014, 177–188.
- <sup>10</sup> Scaramella notes that Peterson graduated from the University of Puerto Rico ("Literary Liaisons" 64). However, since the official policy in Puerto Rico until 1949 was to give instruction exclusively in English in secondary schools (see Angrist), it is unlikely that she ever attended an institution where the primary language of instruction was Spanish, although she would have studied Spanish formally in school, unlike Hughes.
- <sup>11</sup> For an account of Peterson's trip and what were apparently her first impressions of the country, see Nunemaker, J.; Horace, Antoinette T. Lang; and Dorothy R Peterson. "A Summer in Spain." *Hispania*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1922, pp. 51–55. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/331487](http://www.jstor.org/stable/331487).
- <sup>12</sup> See Maurer and Anderson pp. 202–206 for contacts between Dorothy Peterson, Nella Larsen, and Federico García Lorca.
- <sup>13</sup> See Shirley, Wayne D. "The Coming of Deep River." *American Music*, 15.4 (Winter 1997), 493–534.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Hannah Rosen's "Testifying to Violence" in *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South*. University of North Carolina Press, July 24, 2014.

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