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NICOLÁS GUILLÉN, LANGSTON HUGHES,  
AND THE BLACK AMERICAN /  
AFRO-CUBAN CONNECTION

With the work of James Weldon Johnson, Cuba was introduced into the Afro-American literary imagination in the twentieth century. A substantial portion of Johnson's novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), is devoted to his protagonist's sojourn among Cuban tobacco workers in Jacksonville, Florida. In addition to its historical importance, the whole episode advances the essential theme of the novel: the problematization of black identity. Johnson's extensive experience in Latin America, where he served in the U.S. Consulates to Nicaragua and, later, Venezuela, gave him an acute sense of the various social constructions that may be imposed upon a person of African or mulatto descent. Johnson's anonymous protagonist is a light-skinned mulatto who, in addition to his mutable appearance, has the social facility and sense of opportunity to adapt to all circumstances. (Johnson had first titled the novel, *The Chameleon*.) He assimilates as easily into black American and Latin society in Jacksonville as he enters later into the circles of upper-class white society, or black elite society.

In the Preface to his anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Johnson again touches upon the tantalizing question of the relationship between race and nationality. Johnson discusses the poetry of the Cuban mulatto, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) (1809–1844), as an example of outstanding poetry produced by blacks. However, racial consciousness was not among Plácido's themes, a fact that Johnson knew but does not note in his essay. In comparing the prospects and potential of Afro-American poets writing in English and those in Latin languages, Johnson conjectures that the Latin-language black poets will achieve a greater universality than those from the United States: