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VOICE- OVERS

*Translation and
Latin American Literature*

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Introduction

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—¿Por qué tú no escribes?—le pregunté de pronto.

—¿Por qué no te preguntas mejor por qué no traduzco?

—No. Creo que podrías escribir. Si quisieras . . .

—Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Tres tristes tigres*

Translation has become both a mechanism and a metaphor for contemporary transnational cultures in the Americas. Literature in the United States, for example, is filled with “marks” of difference—words, concepts, practices—that have served with increasing frequency and ever greater intensity to define the nation’s complex “multiculture,” and similar phenomena are present in the contemporary literature of Canada, Britain, and many of the countries of Western Europe. Readers of these texts encounter concepts that are to some extent already translated, but not fully, as elements of estrangement or differentiation in the text signal other languages, other cultures, other experiences. Thus, when the anthropologist James Clifford, in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, speaks of translation as a symptom of our modernity or postmodernity, he considers translation as part of a cluster of cultural practices that define and characterize contemporary experience. Similarly, Beatriz Sarlo, in her recent book *La máquina cultural*, regards translation as a function of a cultural “machine” that has constructed Argentine culture, and Latin American culture in general. Translation continues to be one of the main tools, and defining images, of Latin American culture in its relation to world cultures.

The history of translation in Latin America is anchored in the region’s colonial past and its post-Independence process of developing and redefining cultural identities. The twenty-odd Latin American countries have as their official languages those of the European powers that colonized them, Spanish and Portuguese. (Brazil, though the only Portuguese-speaking country in the region, has a population equal to that of all the Spanish-speaking countries of the hemisphere combined.) As with Europe in the Renaissance, at the time of the colonization of the

Americas the language of learning was Latin, with an extensive industry of scholars involved in the translation of documents to and from that language, as well as from Arabic and Hebrew (including Arabic translations of the Greek classics) in the famous translation school in Toledo and in the universities. Commerce, and the penetration into the region of England, France, and the Netherlands, meant that there was a considerable circulation of texts among the various European languages. The enormous task of communication between the Europeans and the indigenous peoples, who spoke hundreds of languages, sometimes resulted in the European use of indigenous languages. In particular, in Jesuit Paraguay and southern Brazil, Tupi-Guarani was spoken; in central Mexico many Europeans learned Nahuatl; and Quechua and Aymara were spoken in the Andean region. Eventually, colonialism established widespread use of the Roman alphabet to transcribe native languages early in the colonial period (see Braga-Pinto). The linguistic diversity throughout the region (especially in the Caribbean region, with its wealth of creole languages) has made translation a central characteristic of New World identities. The role of the lettered class, therefore, regardless of race, incorporated translation as a practice and as a method of analysis. The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Guaman Poma de Ayala present mestizo and indigenous examples of cultural "interpreters" of the colonial experience. Through their own strategies and methods, they consciously provided bridges for the texts and practices of their "hybridized" identities and communities. Afro-Latin American experience later contributes to this multicultural expression in the literary texts associated with *negritude* and *negrismo*.¹

Independence, which came early in the nineteenth century in most of Spanish America and near the close of the century in Brazil and Cuba, meant something of a cultural realignment with considerable repercussions for the linguistic situation. As most of the new republics adopted the Napoleonic code for their legal systems, so most of the elite groups of the Latin American countries adopted French as the language of learning and culture, and the French educational system as a model. A few Latin American writers of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth wrote in French (Lautréamont, the Countess of Merlin, Jules Supervielle, Victoria Ocampo, César Moro, Héctor Bianciotti) while countless others read more in French than in any local language. English became dominant as the language of international commerce with the building of railroads and modern ports, and with the power of the British Empire. As Jorge Luis Borges notes in his famous essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," by the middle of the twentieth century the contemporary writing of Spain was something of an acquired taste for Spanish American writers. The emerging Latin American nations' cultural, political, and economic connections with France and England, and later the United States, created a com-

plex geopolitics with Europe and North America that recent literary trends continue to evidence (see Schwartz).

The contests over language and cultural identity that still rage in contemporary writing derive from these early nation-building struggles. Whether post-Independence Latin America truly represents a postcolonial situation, or whether its pattern of a resettled and transplanted European culture determined by *criollo* élites warrants some other defining term, is a continuing debate in colonial studies.² Nevertheless, Latin American writing and literary movements have always revealed a conscious reflection upon the many languages of the Americas and have directly incorporated that awareness into their texts. Translation is central to the process of self-identification in the throes of cultural and linguistic differences, in Latin America's "constant production of differential sites of enunciation" (Mignolo "Occidentalización" 32, our translation).

Whether or not one considers Latin America to have been "colonial" or "postcolonial" or neither, its literature exhibits many of the characteristics of "postcolonial" writing that theorists have studied in writing from India and Africa (see Bhabha, Tiffin et al.). The intersection of languages is a hallmark of postcolonial literature, according to William Ashcroft, and Latin American writing clearly demonstrates this distinguishing feature. Translation and language variance are symptoms of "a writing which actually *installs* distance and absence in the interstices of the text" (Ashcroft 61). The projection onto other cultures and literatures results in conflicting identifications, such as that of Europe as a figure of a former colonizer from which the new nations need to be freed as well as a source of "high" culture or "civilization" with which to identify. This straddling and overlapping of cultural associations and relationships is what marks the literature of the Americas. As Ashcroft notes, foreign terms, neologisms, ethno-rhythmic prose, transcription of dialects, and syntactic fusion are the discursive markers of postcolonial writing before it is even translated. These markers are what Homi Bhabha considers a text's "unhomely moments," or the rites of "extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation" (9). This book has chosen to highlight those moments, historically and textually, to unveil the story of translation embedded in Latin American texts in the multilingual otherness inherent in their original Spanish, Portuguese, and most recently, English.

It is not surprising, then, that the task of translation itself has been of central cultural importance in Latin America for a long time. Many Latin American intellectuals have worked as translators for important periods of their lives, making translation a part of their intellectual practice, and a reflection on it a central part of their systems of thought. The names of Borges, Julio Cortázar, Octavio Paz, and Haroldo de Campos, for instance, are inseparably associated with their work as translators, their overseeing the translations of their own works, and their theorizing of translation as an integral part of communication and intellectual

life. Perhaps only Russia could be posited as a comparable situation, in that cultural life there was integrally involved with the translation of texts and with the circulation of foreign texts in the original languages among multilingual intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Britain, France, and the United States were for a long time somewhat isolated from this sort of circulation of languages in the space of everyday life, though that isolation is now coming to an end with the large displacements of populations, and the movement back and forth of those populations to other countries, at the close of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

Despite extensive borders shared between Brazil and many of the Spanish-speaking countries, and the growth of a lingua franca, "Portuñol," in some of these border areas, the cultural histories of Brazil and Spanish America have developed largely independently from one another. However, some Latin American intellectuals on both sides of that linguistic divide promoted the cultural integration of the two halves of Iberian America through translation. Intellectuals such as Alfonso Reyes, Angel Rama, Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Haroldo de Campos, Antonio Cândido, Jorge Schwartz, Davi Arrigucci, and Raúl Antelo have worked to bridge the cultural gaps between Brazil and Spanish America, and in that process to reconnect Latin America with world literature.

The best-known Brazilian theorist of translation, Haroldo de Campos, has not only translated but also written extensively on translation as re-creation such as in his essay "Mephistofaustian Transluciferation (Contributions to the Semiotics of Poetic Translation)." In that essay, de Campos calls "the translator of poetry . . . a choreographer of the internal dance of language" and opposes the "straight ahead goal of a word-to-word competition, the Pavlovian bell of the conditioned feedback" (183) to what he advocates: "to hear the beating of the 'wild heart' of the art of translation, regarded as a 'form': poetic translation, 'transcreation,' hypertranslation" (184). In a section of the essay that purports to give instruction to translators, de Campos argues that

in operational terms a creative translating practice [means] to go over the configurative road of the poetic function again, recognizing it in the source-text and re-inserting it, as a device for textual engendering, in the translator's language, in order to arrive at the transcreated poem as an isomorphic re-project of the original's design. (183)

De Campos's approach has influenced many scholars of translation in Brazil, especially at the University of Minas Gerais and at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, largely devoted to explicating his ideas (see articles by Vieira). A bold example of a method of translation and commentary inspired by de Campos is Vera Mascarenhas do Campo's *Borges & Guimarães*. This project presents a "translation" of Borges's famous story "Hombre de la esquina rosada" into a Portuguese

inflected by the personal idiom of João Guimarães Rosa, and then uses that translation as the point of departure for a fascinating literary commentary on the two authors. John Felstiner's *Translating Neruda*, an excerpt of which is reprinted in this volume, is a somewhat parallel example in English, without the influence of de Campos but with a similar concern for translinguistic re-creation.

Brazil is not the only Latin American country to institutionalize translation as a discipline. Alongside many Latin American universities, nonacademic publishing in literary magazines and the cultural supplements of newspapers has long maintained a tradition of translation. Translation was central to Victoria Ocampo's magazine *Sur*, part of whose mission was to bring the latest ideas and literary texts of Europe and the United States to Argentina (and thus to Latin America in general) (see King and Sarlo).

During the earlier part of the twentieth century, translation was a major concern of writers as diverse as Alfonso Reyes (Mexican essayist), Jorge Luis Borges (Argentine poet, essayist, and short story writer), and José María Arguedas (Peruvian anthropologist, novelist, and short story writer). While many critics have considered Borges a "cosmopolitan" intellectual disassociated from his national and regional surroundings, his interest in translation actually pertains to an intense effort to establish connections between Argentine and world literature. Recent studies have pointed out that his fascination with British and North American literature, Dante and the classics, Biblical translations, *The Arabian Nights*, and variations of Homer (see the reprinted Borges essay as well as Costa's discussion in this volume) rather than alienating him from the regional concerns of Latin America, actually demonstrates an extremely *local* preoccupation with belonging and place in a heterogeneous, post-colonial society (see Sarlo, Balderston, and Molloy). He even privileges the translated text over the original as a site of transnational nexus between the periphery and the "center." In his famous essay on Beckford's *Vathek* (1943), he complains ironically that "the original is unfaithful to the translation" (in this case, the English translation of Beckford's French original, a translation in which the author was involved) (Borges 732).

In an analogous spirit of cultural soul-searching, Arguedas made his Spanish-Quechua bilingualism an esthetic nucleus of his literary production, and asserted this hybrid, bicultural consciousness as a mark of Andean cultural identity. His prose is known for not only frequent code-switching between Spanish and Quechua, but also incorporating Quechua syntax into his narration in Spanish. In his essay, "The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru" (1950), he explains that Spanish, particularly what he calls "the most correct and literary Spanish" (xvii), could not adequately recount the struggle of Andean indigenous communities. He considers Spanish "spurious" because it reveals

“an apparently contrived world—marrowless and bloodless” (xvii). Therefore, Spanish must be modified to reflect this interlingual and intercultural reality:

Could I perhaps be advocating the Indianization of Spanish? No. But there is a case, a real case, in which the man from those regions, feeling ill at ease with the Spanish he has inherited, sees the need to use it as a raw material that he may modify, taking from and adding to it, until he transforms it into his own means of expression. . . . I solved the problem by creating . . . a special Spanish language, which has since been used with horrible exaggeration in the work of others. But the Indians do not speak that Spanish, not with Spanish speakers, and much less among themselves. It is a fiction. (xvii, xix)

Augusto Roa Bastos's incorporation of Guaraní into the Spanish of his 1974 novel *Yo el Supremo* provides another example of language convergence in the contemporary Latin American novel.

In more recent decades, many literary movements in Latin America have extended this tradition of translation as a practice and a cultural perspective. Octavio Paz wrote on translation and poetry. His interest in “translating” the experience of the avant garde across languages perpetuates an earlier concern of the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, who declared his intention of writing poetry that could be translated (see Balderston). Paz defends the translatability of poetry in his 1971 essay, “Translation: Literature and Letters.” He begins with a reference to the confusion of Babel, and laments the loss of language's role in human and spiritual universality when modern translation tendencies served to point out foreignness rather than confirm similarities. According to Paz, difference and conflict only inspired more translation:

Thanks to translation, we become aware that our neighbors do not speak and think as we do. On the one hand, the world is presented to us as a collection of similarities; on the other, as a growing heap of texts, each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation—first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase. (154)

From this philosophy of language and difference, Paz enters into a discussion of poetic translation and its challenges. He praises “the interdependence between creation and imitation, translation and original work” (161) in the process from the original poem to a new, original translation:

The poet, immersed in the movement of language, in constant verbal preoccupation, chooses a few words—or is chosen by them. As he combines them, he constructs his poem: a verbal object made of irreplace-

able and immovable characters. The translator's starting point is not the language in movement that provides the poet's raw material but the fixed language of the poem. A language congealed, yet living. His procedure is the inverse of the poet's: he is not constructing an unalterable text from mobile characters; instead, he is dismantling the elements of the text, freeing the signs into circulation, then returning them to language. . . . The second phase of the translator's activity is parallel to the poet's, with this essential difference: as he writes, the poet does not know where his poem will lead him; as he translates, the translator knows that his completed effort must reproduce the poem he has before him. The two phases of translation, therefore, are an inverted parallel of poetic creation. The result is a reproduction of the original poem in another poem that is . . . less a copy than a transmutation. (159–160)

Paz honors the process of translation as a different but still “original” creative activity. His engagement with poetry internationally, from his own work translating neighboring U.S. poets into Spanish to participating in Japanese *rengas*, further demonstrates his contribution to translation's possibilities and results.

The multilingual texture of writing from areas with strong indigenous presence, as Edmundo Paz-Soldán's contribution to this volume elaborates, complicates the issues of language and regional identity. More recently, the complex role of the translator/interviewer in testimonial writing further demonstrates the wide arena in which translation plays a crucial role in Latin American discursive practice (see Gugelberger). As Steven White discusses in his essay in this volume, testimonial writing, whose best-known example is Rigoberta Menchu's and Elizabeth Burgos's book, is already a sort of translation that poses further challenges in marketing and teaching translations into English and other languages for readers distant from the complex linguistic, geographical, and cultural contexts of these mediated projects.

The displacement of thousands of intellectuals and writers from Cuba after the 1959 revolution and from Brazil and the Southern Cone in the 1970s and 1980s due to political exile gave the project of translation a new international purpose. In order to flee repressive regimes, many writers “returned” to Europe, providing an ironic twist to Latin America's complicated relationship with European literary traditions that projects in translation had been attempting to resolve. Not only did writers produce fiction, poetry, and journalism abroad denouncing the human rights violations at home; this recent chapter in Latin American writing also recorded the bombardment of “foreign” cultures in the Spanish of exiled writers facing linguistic and cultural alienation in Western Europe and North America (see Masiello in this volume).³

Since the 1960s, Latin American literature has been celebrated internationally in large part due to and in translation. The explosion of experimental fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, which included works by

Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes, has been coined the “Boom.” This period of unprecedented massive distribution, extensive media coverage, and academic interest coincided with an enormous surge in translations in the United States, Europe, and Asia (see Mudrovic and Steenmeijer in this volume). Therefore, the long tradition of translation already established, even institutionalized, in Latin America acquired a new dimension in the reception of that literature abroad. Latin American writing is now often read in translation, whether in community book clubs or in college courses in American studies, English, or Latin American studies. One of the aims of this book is to contextualize this multifaceted tradition of translation for Anglo-American readers of Latin American literature (see White here).

The burgeoning field of Latino/a literature, usually in English, prompts a rethinking of many of the conventional approaches to language and cultural identity in the United States. Translation is at the core of these texts that recreate a hybridized language (“Spanglish”) with extensive code-switching and cross-cultural plays on words and social behaviors. There is also a growing phenomenon of the translation of this literature into Spanish—Juan Bruce-Novoa, for instance, has published an anthology of the Chicano short story in Mexico, in Spanish translation. This new wave of translation projects from English into Spanish has highlighted how Spanish varies considerably throughout the region. The Dominican-U.S. writer Julia Alvarez found inadequate the Argentine translation of her best-known novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and a second translation into Dominican Spanish was subsequently published. Cristina García recounts a similar disorder in the translation of her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, in her essay for this volume. In Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel’s convincing analysis of language and translation in writers such as García, Alvarez, and Sandra Cisneros, she highlights the difficulties and losses in translation from English into Spanish, and even suggests the *impossibility* of translation into only one language because of the multilingual registers in the original texts:

It seems that what is lost in translation is precisely the bilingualism of the original episode, or the contact between languages that enriches the nuances of the narration. . . . [T]his “untranslatability” of the text is paradoxical, since Latino/a writing is based on a continuous practice of translation, displacements and exchanges, both cultural and linguistic. (21, 23, our translation)

Israel Reyes’s essay here broaches the complexities of García’s second novel, *The Agüero Sisters*, as it crosses into Spanish in translation, while Junot Díaz and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith offer insights into the production and negotiation of language(s) and place(s) inherent in translation. In these and other Latino/a writers, family sagas, generational dynamics,

and geopolitical identification are all bound up with linguistic belonging and hybridity. David Johnson elaborates on the interconnected nature of place and language for U.S. Latino/a writers, exemplifying the “law” of Hinojosa-Smith’s novelistic series: “everything will be in its place and every place will be determined by language, even if by ‘language’ is meant the mixture of tongues, a certain babel” (Johnson 150). Poetry by Latino/a writers capitalizes on both the musicality and the politics of multiple languages. In Nuyorican and Chicano literary circles, writers such as Miguel Algarín, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Francisco Alarcón use language combatively, in their often militant pedagogy of cultural consciousness raising. The growing Hispanic population in the United States, and the dynamic literary activity of this community in both English and Spanish in this country and abroad, are testaments to the expansion, geographically and linguistically, of Latin American literature.

This book, besides considerations of the economy and politics of translation, dramatizes the integral role that translation has played in the evolution of Latin American letters. This collaborative examination situates translation and its politics at the core of literary and intellectual identification in Latin America’s postcolonial context. As the anthropologist James Clifford states, place and identity must be interpreted “as an itinerary rather than a bounded site—a series of encounters and translations” (11). While statistical analyses of the marketing and publishing of Latin American writing, and extensive bibliographies of translated titles, may provide concrete data, this project moves beyond numbers and lists to help account for *how* and *why* the phenomenon of translation has flourished as such a dynamic process in the Americas. *Voice-Overs* attempts to fill several gaps in this significant arena of literary history. Key essays that we have included in English by major Latin American writers on translation (by Borges, Cortázar, García Márquez, Ferré) access some of the foundations of translation’s practice in Latin America, and demonstrate its importance for their own reading, writing and thinking. The short pieces from contemporary writers and translators included in the volume offer candid portraits of the relationship between individuals, texts, and languages within the dual challenge of creation and recreation represented by translation. Whether a means of livelihood, a source of communication and friendship, a frustrating impasse, or a step toward resolving linguistic and cultural identity, translation persists as a relevant and unavoidable ritual in American letters.

This book is an invitation to reflect on multiple and intersecting circuits of cultural production. We hope it will be pertinent to readers of Latin American literature and students of translation who participate in these very networks. *Voice-Overs* proposes that translation is integral not only to the distribution and circulation of printed literature but more fundamentally to the constitution of contemporary culture itself in the Americas.

NOTES

1. Nicolás Guillén in Cuba and Nicomedes Santa Cruz in Peru are examples of poets who develop their own versions of Afro-Latin American Spanish and use the black experience in Caribbean and coastal regions to examine the complexities of cultural identity in their work. See studies by Prescott, Jackson, and Lewis.

2. The anthropologist J. Jorge Klor de Alva has argued with the term *post-colonial* because according to him Latin America never had a truly colonial past but rather transplanted European society in a new place. Walter Mignolo considers Latin America as "post-Occidental," in terms of its contradictory impulses that resist Westernized globalization while at the same time continually redefine its relationship to Western culture.

3. Many examples of narrative and poetry in exile employ translation as a metaphor for the displacement and alienation of the exile experience. In José Donoso's principal novel of exile, *El jardín de al lado*, for example, the protagonists are professional translators and frustrated novelists. Cristina Peri Rossi and Luisa Futoransky, in their poetry and fiction, explore the transnational semiotics of urban life in exile through images of Babelic linguistic chaos and dictionary definitions. Literature of the Cuban exile experience also highlights linguistic hybridity, such as in Cristina García's novels (see her short essay in this volume).

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