

RESEÑA

**Solinas, Marcella. *Islas de palabras: Cuba y el Caribe en traducción*. Universale
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Islas de palabras: Cuba y el Caribe en traducción (2023) [Islands of Words: Cuba and the Caribbean in Translation] by Marcella Solinas –Associate Professor of the Department of Languages and Cultures from the Università degli Studi “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti–Pescara– examines how translations commissioned by the Cuban institution *Casa de las Américas* have influenced the image of the Caribbean in Latin America and the role of Cuba as a cultural hub for the region from 1959 to the present. Solinas engages with European translation theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida, alongside Caribbean and Latin American intellectuals like Édouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, and Octavio Paz. Through this dialogue, Solinas argues that translation provides a refreshing angle to understand the Caribbean, a geopolitical region characterized by the convergence of multiple languages and cultural strata:

Lugar de traducción por excelencia, el Caribe ha sido representado con numerosas metáforas que intentan describir su compleja y articulada conformación. El mar Caribe con sus islas es, de hecho, una suerte de universo en miniatura. Precisamente por sus dimensiones limitadas y circunscritas, en realidad se vuelve denso, rico en capas a menudo fundidas y confusas, difíciles de descifrar, pero capaces de reproducir lo universal, convirtiéndose en metáfora y traducción de la condición humana. (Solinas, 27)

[A translation place par excellence, the Caribbean has been represented with varied metaphors that describe its articulated and complex formation. The Caribbean Sea with its isles is, indeed, a sort of micro-universe. Precisely, for its limited and circumscribed dimensions, the Caribbean is dense and rich in confusing and melted layers, difficult to decipher, but able to reproduce the universal, becoming a metaphor and translation of human condition]

The transformation of the geographic landscape into a metaphor to explain the linguistic richness of the Caribbean enables a particular view of its cultural landscape where translation is fundamental.

The first chapter explores Ricoeur’s concept of “linguistic hospitality” and the function of translation as a mode of mediating cultural difference. Translation is a practice that allows the “other” to inhabit us through our language, revealing an ethical dimension that unfolds in the dichotomy difference/identity: “No existe una identidad en sí, sino que es siempre el resultado de la relación con el otro, y toda identificación es al mismo tiempo una diferenciación” (29) [There is not an identity as such. It is the result of the relationship with the other, and each identification is at the same time a differentiation]. Based on Derridean concepts of *différance* and *différence*, Solinas further explains how translation simultaneously comprises the notion of identity and displacement, and how this is particularly reflected in the Antilles where translation is

"...un agente que garantiza el derecho a la diferencia y a la opacidad y que, al mismo tiempo, acerca a los sujetos caribeños que, tanto a través de la literatura concebida en términos de escritura y traducción, como a través de una interpretación crítica de los textos traducidos, “deconstruyen” continuamente el modelo cognitivo con el que se ha estructurado su mundo y reconstruyen un nuevo modelo que lleva en sí mismo la huella de la *différance*...". (33)

[...an agent that grants the right to be different and to the opacity that brings closer the Caribbean subjects who, through a literature conceived in terms of writing and translation, and the critic interpretation of translated texts, continuously ‘deconstruct’ the cognitive model that has structured their world and reconstruct a new model that carries a trace of “*différance*.”]

This chapter also provides a historical account of literary translation in Cuba highlighting the importance of translators including Estevanico, the first black translator in Colonial Cuba; José María Heredia; Gertudis Gómez de Avellaneda; José Martí; José Lezama Lima; Cintio Vitier; and Virgilio Piñera. It also highlights the presence of pre-revolutionary literary journals such as *Origenes* (1944-1956) and revolutionary ones like *Lunes de revolución* (1959-1961) and *Union* (1962-).

The second chapter unwraps the singularity of the Caribbean region and its intrinsic connection with Cuba due to a shared historical experience rooted in plantation economy, slavery, miscegenation, music culture, religious syncretism, and the tradition of *carnaval*. Solinas emphasizes the multilingual condition of the Caribbean where colonial languages coexist with various forms of *patois* and *creoles*. She revisits Juan Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant's *Éloge de la creolité*, where the authors identify themselves as creoles and understand this as a value system that comprehends a preference for orality, a rewriting of the collective memory, a cannibalization of European traditions, the position of the Caribbean in the world system, and the restitution of creole languages (57). Adopting an antiessentialist perspective, Solinas conceives identity as a dialectic and contingent process that occurs and manifests in language, where different ideological and political aspects can shape the ideas and perceptions communities have of themselves. In the case of the Caribbean, after reviewing different periods where factors such as race, Africanness or ethnicity had a more prominent role in defining the Caribbeans cultural identity, Solinas claims that in recent decades there has been an openness that "ha conducido a una toma de conciencia sobre la importancia del multilingüismo entendido ya no como una amenaza para una presunta homogeneidad cultural, sino como un instrumento procesual de creolización, considerada ésta como elemento representativo de la region" (70) [has led to an awareness of multilingualism not as a threat to the presumed cultural homogeneity, but as an instrument for 'creolization', understood as a representative element of the region"]

The third chapter frames the discussion during the revolutionary period. The Cuban revolution was, according to Solinas, the most significant event for the Caribbean and Cuba during the 20th century. By creating and funding different research institutions, university programs and cultural centers, the revolutionary government aimed to connect Cuba with the rest of the Caribbean.¹ The core of these institutional efforts was *Casa de las Américas*, founded in 1959, the same year of the revolution. Historically, it was run by Haydee Santamaría (1959-1980), Mariano Rodríguez (1980-1986), and Roberto Fernández Retamar (1986-2019). *Casa* became a referent for Latin American intellectuals and created three relevant spaces where Caribbean literature circulated: 1) the series "Literatura latinoamericana" which in 2007 became "Colección de literatura latinoamericana y del caribe;" 2) the journal *Casa de las Américas*; 3) and the Premio Casa de las Américas, which since 1966 started to give awards to writers from the Caribbean World.

With regards to the importance of translation, Solinas argues that *Casa de las Américas* had a clear ideological function in advancing different projects of translation as part of the revolutionary cultural project. With this in mind, she affirms that "...se acentuó menos conciencia en cuanto a la valorización de la traducción como acto en sí y al papel mediador desempeñado por el traductor" (114) [there was less emphasis on the value of translation in itself and to the mediation role performed by the translator]. These spaces enabled the circulation and dissemination of Caribbean authors such as Césaire, Glissant, René Depestre, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James or Jean Rhys and reminded, in the words of Ecuadorian writer Jorge Enrique Adoum, that "La Casa nos recordaba a los olvidadizos, que las literaturas no españolas de las Antillas y del Brasil eran parte de nuestro archipiélago latinoamericano, y nos demostró el

1. The author makes reference to Universidad de la Habana, Escuela de Letras y Artes, Instituto Superior Pedagógico "Enrique J. Verona", Casa del Caribe de Santiago de Cuba, and Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística.

poder superior de la cultura frente a las agresiones del antipensamiento” (107) [Casa reminded us, a *los olvidadizos*, that the non-Spanish literatures of the Antilles and Brazil were part of our Latin American archipelago, and demonstrated the superior power of culture in the face of the aggressions ‘del antipensamiento’]

Building on Lawrence Venutti’s arguments, Solinas claims that

Si, por tanto, la traducción, como han argumentado ampliamente Lawrence Venuti y otros, constituye un instrumento de dominación para interpretar la historia y la cultura de un país, también es una actividad que contribuye a la afirmación de la identidad. *La Casa de las Américas*, con su política, centrada en la traducción de obras caribeñas, ha desencadenado un mecanismo de (re)conocimiento de estos escritores en el seno, si no de toda la población cubana, al menos de esa vasta “ciudad letrada” que participa en las manifestaciones culturales promovidas por la institución revolucionaria. (125)

[If, therefore, translation, as Lawrence Venutti and others have amply justified, is an instrument of domination to interpret the history and culture of a country, it is also an activity that contributes to the affirmation of identity. *Casa de las Americas*, with its policy focused on the translation of Caribbean works, has unleashed a mechanism of (re)acknowledgement of these writers within, if not the entire Cuban population, at least that vast ‘lettered city’ that participates in the cultural events promoted by the revolutionary institution.]

The fourth chapter illuminates both the theoretical principles presented in the introduction as well as the main theses of the book by presenting a comparative analysis of three translations into Spanish and one into Italian from British Antillean intellectual Jean Rhys. Her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is presented as a prequel of Charlotte’s Brontë *Jane Eyre*. Set two years before the events narrated in Brontë’s novel, this book tells the story of Bertha Mason, who is imprisoned in a castle tower in *Jane Eyre*. Through her point of view, she narrates her life in the Caribbean after the abolition of slavery, her marriage with Edward Rochester and the events that lead to her death in England. According to Solinas, the English used by Rhys, unlike Brontë’s standard use, combines various voices and languages, including elements of French, English and patois. This linguistic landscape is reflected in the novel, where:

La multiplicidad de códigos y voces se traduce tanto estilística y temáticamente como en el plano estrictamente lingüístico, y cada personaje, representante de un mundo, se expresa y comunica en una variedad diferente y caracterizadora. (129)

[the multiplicity of codes and voices is translated both stylistically and thematically in the linguistic realm, and each character, representing a world, expresses and communicates in a different and specific form].

This polyphony, on the one hand, reflects the richness of the Caribbean linguistic world, characterized by a colonial past and the subversion of colonized subjects who, like Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, took the language of the master and transformed into its weapon of redemption (131). On the other hand, it poses an enormous challenge for translators. By analyzing the translators’ strategies regarding lexicon, morphosyntax and cultural aspects, Solinas reveals that each rendering creates a different image of the Caribbean. Some of these images “domesticate” in a radical way the “*différance*” that characterizes Rhys’s Caribbean, betraying the original author’s intention, while others tried to preserve it, showing competing translations of the same text that also reproduces differences between Peninsular and Latin American forms of Spanish. For Solinas, the importance of this analysis allows the capture of:

"... las huellas comunes que conforman la compleja "identidad" caribeña. La traducción, portanto, puede ser un locus privilegiado desde el cual observar las tendencias culturales de una comunidad." (171). [the common traces that conform the complex 'Caribbean identity'. Translation, therefore, can be a privileged locus that allows us to observe the cultural trends of a community]. The book also includes two appendices that offer a snapshot of the praxis Solinas calls for, drawing attention to the translator task and the need for more research in translators' mediation role. The first appendix includes interviews to Lourdes Arencibia, Jesús David Courbelo and María Teresa Ortega, translators of Caribbean literature who worked for Casa de las Américas. The second includes a list of translations published in Casa de las Américas. This section gives voice to the translators, who are often underrepresented in literary history, and provides a unique lens to understand how translations were commissioned and under what circumstances. The list of translations is also a useful tool for researchers interested in expanding scholarship in translation and literary studies.

Solinas book offers a productive overview of how translation became a constitutive element of Caribbean literature and helps examine the role of Casa de las Américas in connecting the Caribbean with the rest of Latin America. Although she successfully explains why *Wide Sargasso Sea* is representative of translation policies of Caribbean translations into Spanish in Casa de las Américas, further insights could be gained by contrasting it with examples from other periods in Casa's history, an institution that has been active for more than 60 years. Likewise, it would be fruitful to see how Casa de las Américas's translations were republished in other Latin American journals and how they influenced translations in other Latin American countries. Other element that can be expanded is the problem of opacity and how this works in the context of Cuban intraregional hegemony. In other words, what it meant to make the Caribbean more transparent for the expansionist cultural project of the revolution.

Solinas work is an essential source for scholars in the field of translation, Latin American studies and Caribbean studies. It provides an insightful methodology to analyze the function of translations and its circulation within transnational literary systems. It underscores translation's pivotal role in integrating the Caribbean into the Latin American cultural and intellectual landscape, while also offering a nuanced understanding of how translation shapes regional and global identities.