

## REVIEW

***Cannibal Translation: Literary  
Reciprocity in Contemporary Latin  
America* by Isabel C. Gómez.  
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Isabel C. Gómez explores the relationship between Latin American poetry, translation and poetics in her new book, *Cannibal Translation*. Rooted in the Brazilian “movimento antropofágico” led by Oswald de Andrade in the 1920s, cannibal translation is defined as an act of reading “world literature with teeth, where readers can see the bite marks of the process, where translators never stay invisible” (18). It is also the act of critically and playfully digesting, absorbing, consuming and appropriating other traditions to subvert the cultural hierarchies that constitute world literature. By carefully analyzing the correspondence, texts and translations of some of the most representative Latin American poets and writers of the 20th century, Gómez reveals how translations defied concepts such as those of authority, tradition, originality and faithfulness. Translation, for these authors, was an act of radical criticism that opened creative avenues, as well as an act of friendship that allowed them to share aesthetic and political values.

In the first chapter, Gómez delves into the missives of Augusto de Campos and Octavio Paz with American poet e.e. Cummings. This triad illuminates the difference between an Anglo-centric view of translation and literature and what Gómez calls intra-American translation thinking. Both Paz and De Campos were assiduous translators of Cummings, an author who himself experimented with poetic forms. This chapter shows how Spanish, Portuguese, French and German hold different positions within the linguistic economy of these author-translators’ relationships and the world of letters (29). Gómez compares French and German translations of Cummings with those of Augusto de Campos, revealing how translators in the former languages followed norms of “fidelity,” rather than an approach that expanded the possibilities of Brazilian Portuguese by introducing translational changes that both preserved Cumming’s poetics and transformed his poetry into a creative force pushing Portuguese language to its limits. These changes included: 1) the use of words that preserved sonority instead of the literal meaning of Cummings’s poetry; 2) the adaptation enjambment and punctuation (which was already experimental in Cummings’s work) to Brazilian Portuguese; and 3) the reproduction of typographic and graphic details. Despite de Campos’s effort to explain his transcreations (as opposed to more literal translations) to the American poet, Cummings always presented himself as an authorial presence by correcting the disobedient Brazilian poet. Like de Campos, Paz wrote to Cummings that his translations come from a place of “love rather than respect,” meaning that he did not stick to fidelity. “In spite of this measured defense, Paz translates poems decidedly bare of these ‘extravagancies’ and instead cannibalizes Cummings to experiment with a style of accentual syllabic verse in Spanish” (54). Gómez also explores the complex relationship between Paz and Cummings and the linguistic separation produced by Cummings’s resistance to read and speak in Spanish. Paz resented that Cummings solely acknowledged the sonic qualities of the language and did not try to understand its semantics, which the Mexican poet saw as a condescending act that captured the American poet’s Anglo-centric view.

Chapter 2 explores the transrelationship (in Gómez parlance, a relationship fundamentally based on their views and praxis of translation) between Haroldo de Campos and Octavio Paz, who mutually translated each other during decades. These authors sustained a long correspondence that evinces mutual cannibalization of their poetics. Their fruitful but belated encounter is paradoxically enabled by Cummings who introduced concrete poets to Paz, who would lament that: “Unfortunately, my knowledge of the Brazilian movement is imperfect. It’s a shame, but that’s the way it is: I had to go through English to meet you” (69). The result of this friendship mediated by translation was the publication in *Transblanco* (1986), a creative Portuguese translation of Octavio Paz’s *Blanco* and *Topoemas*, a Spanish translation of de Campos’s *Topogramas*, as well as texts where Paz expressed his political position concerning state violence against civilians during the Massacre of Tlatelolco, generating a sense of solidarity between the Spanish American

and Brazilian world. This mutual and reciprocal exchange of ideas about language, politics and poetry created what the author calls a Latin American-centered laboratory of texts and an intra-American translation praxis. Gómez highlights De Campos's amplification of the semantic possibilities of Paz's texts by introducing subtle changes in his Portuguese translations that extend Mexican feelings of powerlessness to the Brazilian context, then marked by military dictatorship. This chapter contrasts sharply with the preceding chapter on Cummings, insofar as the relationship between both authors, rather than centering a notion of authority, is premised on exchange, disagreement, debate and solidarity (101).

In Chapter 3, Gómez explores Rosario de Castellanos and Clarice Lispector translations through the lens of gender. Their translation work was harshly criticized and to these days has never received any critical attention. Despite being a renowned writer in Mexico, Castellanos's translations of Saint-John Perse were not well received. Gómez discusses an anonymous review in *Plural*, a journal directed by Paz, which brought together the most prominent poets and writers of the time. The review mocks Castellanos's translations as "traducciones moco suena" [translations written as they sound], that involves wordplay evoking "mocosa" [snot-nosed little girl] and "como suena" [as it sounds], a pejorative term that "evokes immaturity or childishness" (105); what's more, the review includes a list of the "mistakes" in Castellanos's translation. Gómez challenges this idea by arguing that Castellanos reflected on translation and incorporated these reflections into her work. By analyzing Castellanos's work on Emily Dickinson, Gómez shows how translation decisions, such as the inclusion of poetic images not contained in Dickinson's versions, were acts of appropriation that allowed her to challenge the archetype of the female poet in Mexico established by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Castellanos included "her own biography with Dickinson, leaving as an open question whether her poems can be sufficiently explained by her life" (115). Lispector's translations of Edgar Allan Poe had a similar fate. They were criticized as "translations that operated on intuition; omitting full sentences freely and without note; translating based on sound; changing or even reversing meaning" (126). In her view, Gómez characterizes these as artistic practices in which Lispector reframes the stories based on Brazilian literary orality "to create a casual story telling mood" (126). Gómez then turns her attention to critics who never distinguish between versions, adaptations and translations. She argues that translations were used to diminish the intellectual efforts of women such as Castellanos and Lispector, who translated to explore writing possibilities, whereas praise was heaped on Paz or de Campos for their experimental translations. Critical reception (of translation), in other words, reinforced gender hierarchies within the world of literature and culture of the time.

Chapter 4 discusses Héctor Olea's translation of Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* for the famed Venezuelan publisher Biblioteca Ayacucho. The final edition of this text reveals the coexistence of two translation projects. The first, proposed by Olea himself, seeks to cannibalize the Indigenous oral tradition into a Pan-Spanish American lexical variety invented by Olea for the project. The second hews more closely to Ángel Rama's vision for Biblioteca Ayacucho, which resembles what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a thick translation.<sup>1</sup> Rama's view entailed mutual understanding between all Latin American countries, including Brazil. To this end, he considered Biblioteca Ayacucho a space for "a calibrated vision of the opposed ideological, artistic, and educational paradigms, since none have exhausted their relevance and they continue to orient the contradictory weave of our current societies" (143). Gómez analyzes the correspondence between Olea, Rama and other editors and translators involved in the edition to trace modifications of Olea's original project to satisfy Biblioteca Ayacucho's editorial guidelines. The result is an unstable text with two overlapping and even conflicting translations. This chapter proposes an innovative way of understanding

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1. Framed in colonial contexts, thick translations "should preserve for us the features that make it worth teaching" (138). Due to its pedagogical nature, these translations involve a paratextual apparatus that frames the translation as much as possible in the context of the culture where the text was first published. Note that Appiah frames his theory within the translation of the oral traditions of Ghana.

how a translator's work is also mediated by editors and how translations are influenced by this dialogue.

In Chapter 5, Gómez explains Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco's and Augusto de Campos's poetics of translations in terms of the former's metaphor of an arrow that is released but never hits its mark. The poet highlights the arrow's never-reaching trajectory, a resource for Gómez to approach translations as always becoming, an idea that permeates the whole book. In doing so, Gómez reverses translation norms based on fidelity or originality, instead emphasizing the idea of translations as texts with their own value; this aligns with Walter Benjamin's idea, expressed in the "The Task of the Translator," of the afterlife of source texts, where continuity is guaranteed by movement and transformation. Both Pacheco and de Campos put into practice their vision of world literature in *Aproximaciones* (1984) and *O anticrítico* (1986), where they creatively test their theories on translation. The act of translating and selecting is here a mode of critique that "contests hierarchies and assumptions build into the structures of world literature anthologies" (171).<sup>2</sup> In *Aproximaciones*, Pacheco "constantly introduces themes of Indigenous reclaiming of land, rights and recognition in the face of an enduring colonial logic of translation as embedded in a conflict between the 'civilized' and the 'barbarous'" (175). He also uses heteronyms à la Fernando Pessoa to smuggle in poems of his own creation as translations. This strategy proves significant as a way of criticizing racial hierarchies in Mexico and its representation in the Hollywood western (181), as well as conceptions such as border and frontier in the case of Mexican-US history. De Campos's anthology, on the other hand, is explicitly presented by his author as radical form of critique in which the translator permits themselves to write "a porous-prose introduction to the author, pose an argument about their work and render a hyperfragmented translation that illustrates concepts explored in the 'essay-poem'" (189). This praxis facilitated the Brazilian poet's questioning of tradition and address issues related to gender, homophobia and racism in Brazilian literary and cultural history.

While Gómez's prose is engaging and her ideas thought-provoking, there were times when more textually grounded arguments would have better served her rationale. Although the examples of close reading in *Cannibal Translation* are remarkable, I wonder to what extent it is possible to draw conclusions based on very subtle changes and then extend them to superimpose an interpretation over the translation itself and the writer's poetics. Other questions that arise relate to the distinction between cannibal translation and domestication. I am specifically thinking of Montaigne's canonical essay, wherein the "real cannibals" have been other traditions, especially those that, as Lawrence Venutti evinces, translate in a "cannibal" way to sustain an ethnocentric vision of the world. This creates tension between domestication and foreignization that is not directly addressed in Gómez book. I also found the discussion of Paz particularly interesting and contradictory. While he reinvents the poems he renders in Spanish, his relationship with tradition is significantly different from that of Augusto and Haroldo de Campos. I also wonder if we can apply this cannibal translation to all forms of translation that freely transform the source text. Do all the translation poetics described in the book contain the same revolutionary potential? Rather than eliciting accusations, these questions can enable a productive conversation regarding how to understand the role of translation in the literary history of Latin America.

Gómez's book is provocative and innovative. It contains stimulating metaphors to frame the role of translation in the history of Latin American literature. It also proposes a subversive reading by comparing the diverse effects of cannibal translations in some of the most iconic poets of the Mexican and the Brazilian cultural spaces. The author provides definitive analysis of translation as a form of critique of a Euro- and Anglo-centric perspective of culture and a crossing point between

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2. One example provided is *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (first edition 2004; most recent edition 2019), which "exemplifies Eurocentric values" (173).

the Hispanic American and the Brazilian poetic traditions, generating bonds of solidarity and a venue for experimenting and expanding the literary possibilities in both Spanish and Portuguese. Instead of understanding translation as *traslatio* –i.e. the act of “moving one thing into another”–, Gómez enables a more complex reading in which translation is an act of friendship and creation that defies the hierarchy that organizes the literary exchanges between Latin America, Europe and the United States.

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