Rosanna Masiola & Renato Tomei

Descriptions, Translations and the Caribbean: From Fruits to Rastafarians.

Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xiv + 143 pp. (Cloth US\$ 59.99)

For at least 500 years the Caribbean has been a linguistic meeting ground where languages are involved in complex interactions within and between oral and textual forms. The languages of indigenous Amerindians, enslaved Africans, Asian indentured laborers, Western Europeans, and, latterly, North Americans and others (there to make or spend money) have met and metastasized in this contact zone under conditions of radically asymmetrical power. In the process words have been lost, gained, and remade; languages have been de- and re-valued; and previously localized forms of speech have become globalized through new communications media. Questions of language are at the heart of the postcolonial cultural criticism of Caribbean thinkers such as Édouard Glissant and Sylvia Wynter, and fundamental to the work of writers such as Patrick Chevalier and Erna Brodber. This is, therefore, promising terrain for the new translation studies. Here, drawing on poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism, any sense that languages are self-contained systems that can be neatly translated, one into the other, has to be abandoned. In its place is the recognition that every translation is an interpretation, and that languages in use are both radically open to each other and involved in historical and geographical processes of power-laden transformation with all their excesses and gaps, mistranslations, and creative appropriations.

This short book by two Italian professors of English and translation, Rosanna Masiola (author of Chapter 1) and Renato Tomei (Chapters 2–4), explores these ideas through the problems of description, translation, and interpretation raised by Caribbean plants and musical cultures, from fruits to Rastafarians. Working chronologically, it moves from descriptions of Caribbean nature by Europeans from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries (Chapter 1), through the multilingual phytonymy (plant names) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Chapter 2) and the commercialization of Caribbean fruits via European and North American versions of popular songs from the region in the mid-twentieth century (Chapter 3), to the linguistic implications of the spread of reggae as a global cultural formation from the 1970s (Chapter 4). In doing so the authors emphasize how the seemingly natural bounty of “The Indies” exceeded the language available to describe it (preterition), the confusion engendered by multiple plant-naming systems adopted for different but overlapping uses, the domestication and aestheticization of Caribbean labor systems in the making of “Tropicana” (think Carmen Miranda’s tutti frutti hat and the Banana Boat Song), and the combination of misunderstandings and

creative re-makings that are part of the way Bob Marley has been heard as his music has moved across the globe: “The aim of cross-cultural translation studies is to shed light on the people and community and avoid textual domestication, reduction to rigmarole, and hypocoristic sounds” (p. 80).

And there lie the problems. First, Masiola and Tomei want to both invoke the impossibility of translation and, at the same time, insist that some translations (particularly of Bob Marley’s lyrics) are wrong. There is a political project here, which, because it is unexamined, sits uneasily with the poststructuralism of critical translation studies. Second, as the quoted sentence shows, readers are presented with a substantial linguistic challenge. Arguments are unclear or truncated; technical linguistic terminology and notation is used heavily in some sections (although it goes unexplained), but is absent from others (often based on summaries of the secondary literature); there is no explanation of method or any real sense that there is a systematic plan of analysis. So, it is perhaps understandable that there is a lot of (sometimes fascinating) material on Italy, but no real explanation of why.

It’s as if the publisher allowed the authors free rein, with no assistance in quality control, copyediting, or consistency of presentation. There are grammatical errors, punctuation errors, bibliographical errors, and factual errors: confusing Richard Ligon and Edward Long (pp. 60–61); putting Captain Bligh on a slave ship in 1778 (p. 55); and stating that Jamaica “had three historically documented rebellions (1655, 1816, 1831)” (p. 104). When the authors argue that, in the age of the Internet, “Inadequate, anonymous, and/or machine translation should be prevented on an ethical basis” (p. 102), I could not help thinking the same of new academic publishing models which produce books like this. The book has been published, but in a form that radically reduces its usefulness and credibility. This is a real pity since there is great potential here. For example, one fact that made me gasp was that the song “Jamaica Farewell” (“Hey, hey, I’m on my way ...”), domesticated from the raunchy “Iron Bar” and made famous by Harry Belafonte, was, once translated into Bengali, adopted as an anthem by the Naxalite Maoist insurgents! Unfortunately, this gem is buried in a footnote and nothing is offered on this revolutionary moment of creative cross-cultural translation that can’t already be found on Wikipedia.

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