Márquez, Roberto
A controversy of poets: translations by Roberto Márquez
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37717108
A controversy of poets:
Translations by Roberto Márquez

ABSTRACT

Appearing in what is their first lyric translations into English, this piece presents the historic poems of Fray Damián López de Haro, the poems of his anonymous 17th century colonial antagonist, and José Gualberto Padilla’s still more sharply pitched and nationally self-assertive 19th century rejoinders to a later visiting Spaniard’s lyric but derisive view of colonial Puerto Rico, his experience there, and its people. Setting the poems in their respective historical contexts, the translator’s introduction argues that, taken together, this double “Controversy of Poets” and the telling clash of attitudes and perceptions it reveals,
A friar of the Order of The Most Holy Trinity, Juan Damián López de Haro (1581–1648) was born in Toledo, Spain. Appointed Bishop of Puerto Rico in 1644, he arrived on the island on June 13th of that year and, after four years as insular prelate, died there, the victim of an epidemic of yellow fever.

Shortly after assuming the duties of his bishopric, de Haro wrote a lengthy letter to Juan Díaz de la Calle, a functionary of the Secretariat of New Spain in the Council of the Indies. In it he details the particulars of an uncomfortable Atlantic crossing and his general impressions of the colony. The island’s capital, when he encountered it, still showed signs of the damage caused by a 1625 Dutch attack and the assaults of a 1642 hurricane. Expecting a better-endowed diocese, De Haro was disillusioned by the discouragingly penurious state of the sparsely populated imperial backwater to which he had been posted. Its lack of resources, he protests, “has been a torment to me.” Equally unimpressed with the prospects he intimated in the general temper of the locals of every caste and condition, De Haro goes on to mock the mcing pretensions of white European settlers who, he ironically observes, are all “very chivalrous and those that come not from the House of Austria descend from the Dauphin of France or from Charlemagne.” That he himself is not beyond colonist class or racist snobbery is evident in his poem. The letter ends with reference to a female correspondent from Santo Domingo in response to whose inquiries “a man,” obviously De Haro himself, had earlier sent the sonnet with which, in sardonic summary of his views, the chronicle concludes. It is that sonnet we reproduce here. It is the first Puerto Rico-inspired poem of any literary consequence that we know of, after the sixth of Juan Castellanos’ Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias (1585).

Haughty register of the poet’s “cultural shock” and disenchantment, and earliest expression of a critically inflected lyric engagement with Puerto Rican life and society, de Haro’s poem retains a peninsular’s conventionally ultramarine outlook, sense of audience, and commanding hierarchy. Its nearly exclusive focus on the host of defects that distinguish the insular, in comparison with all that lies elsewhere (left behind in the metropolis), elides any recognition whatever of Spain’s share of responsibility for what he now finds wanting. Darkly lamenting the island’s general lack of cultivation and grace (material, social, and spiritual), De Haro offers us the image of an island community quintessentially defined by absences, by that which it does not have or fails substantively to resemble: it is its deficiencies that make it distinctively what it is and other than. His sarcastic closing praise of Puerto Rico’s rustic amenities, for all that, presages and anticipates, its irony notwithstanding, that celebration of the
This that for centuries was Puerto Rico
Today would best be called Poverty's Port,
For who seeks here of gold or silver aught
Will find less than will pay for cheapest tricot.

To eat mofongo or raise a child to man,
To die of languor though working like a mare,
To gaze at the endless calm of the sea's stare,
And never once let go your fluttering fan:

These are the pleasures savory and so sweet
In this grove of mothers- and fathers-in-law,
Where many women have children but no spouse;

Where guiro allegros ceaseless scratch their beat
Where all the blacks are filthy, foul, and raw
And blacks the best you'll find in this hothouse!

“The ripostes of *El Caribe,*” like his “Paraphrasis” of this sonnet, “reached an unparalleled popularity in Puerto Rico,” Manuel Fernández Juncos, his younger contemporary, recalls. “They were published hundreds of times and in different forms, with and without their author's permission; ... forty years after that incident... [they] are still sought after, copied and distributed with delight. All of which clearly demonstrates... that—their formal beauties apart—their author had faithfully interpreted the public's sentiment.” “Even those who don't know how to read,” he emphasizes, “recite from memory the most expressive lines of that proud and intrepid response.”

Representative of the liberal Creole elite at the moment of its radicalization and a keen and vocal critic of Spanish colonialism, Padilla was among the many arrested by the authorities in the immediate aftermath of the Insurrection at Lares (1868). In the nearly three decades before his death in 1896, Padilla frequently applied his lyric wit and playfully ironic spirit to the domestic insular scene, gaining a productive and no
This, Madame, is a tiny isle bereft of foodstuffs and of any coin; the blacks, as there, don’t cover any loin, and you’ll find more people in Sevilla’s jail.

Escutcheons common in Castilla are on few houses here, but many gents, dealers all in hides and ginger’s rents: the Mendozas, the Guzmans, and Padilla.

There’s water in our cisterns when there’s rain, a Cathedral Church, few priests to offer psalms, beautiful women lacking every grace;

Envy, ambition were born here to complain; there is much heat, some shade beneath the palms, and a little breeze the best thing in the place.

They come, Dear Lady, to our tiny isle in search of gold and lusting after coin, dark traders in blacks, who strip them to the loin, and proud hidalgos, all from Sevilla’s jail.

We have the customs brought here from Castilla and judge all men as though they all are gents, whether hides are bought or ginger brings in rents for the Mendozas, Guzmans and Padilla.

A bishop drops on us from the sky like rain, sagacious and literary as are very few, outshining all our beauties with his grace.

But cruel disenchantment born here to complain, which dreadful frightens, as bogeymen kids do, castles of empty air collapses in their place.

Anonymous (164?)
[RIPOSTE]
José Gualberto Padilla (1829–1896)
TO A PALACIO, A CARIBE:
REPLY TO MANUEL DEL PALACIO

De todo habla incansable, y corta, y raja,
lanzando un epigrama a cada uno,
que no siendo sus versos, todo es paja.
—Figaro

To your acid aggression
Against our Borinquen,
Disdain would be, fair friend,
Perhaps best contestation.
    For it shows a judgment wise
To pay little attention
To some clown’s antic mention
Since clowning’s his franchise.
    But we who in this country
Were to honor by luck born
Won’t brook the mocking scorn
Of some catty buttinsky.
    And so I here reply
To your four bits of nonsense,
And with five truths in defense
Of Puerto Rico testify.

You say penury’s all you see
In this place everything grows...
But Lord knows...! Yes, the Lord knows...
Alzas luego el varaplato
Sobre vates, coliseos,
Pobres, bailes y correos,
Y... ¡todo lo encuentras malo!

Ya el mosquito, ya la araña,
Ya el cangrejo, ya la exigua,
La microscópica nigua
Experimentan tu saña:

Admíraste si no llueve,
Si llueve te admiras más,
Y te espantas además,
Si el hemisferio se mueve.

Sorpréndete ver que aquí
Hay quien come y hay quien duerme,
Y quien juegue y quien enferme; ¡Todo te sorprende a tí!

Todo los juzgas exceso
Y te alborota y aterra; ¡Ya se vé, como en tu tierra
No sucede nada de eso!

¡Cómo no hay allí criatura
Que se juegue la camisa,
Ni dolencias que de prisa
Lleven a la sepultura!

¡Ni hay tramonanas, ni truena,
Ni el agua moja y salpica,
Ni la tarántula pica,
Ni la víbora envenena!

¡Ni escarcha, hiela y graniza,
Ni duerme nadie la siesta,
Ni el sabañón os molesta
Y el cutis os descuartiza!

Ni hay terremoto cruel,
Ni moscas en procesión,
Ni mendigos en montón,
Ni copleros a granel!

¡Ni toros, ni pataratas
Con que llaman mil rufianes
A docenas los bausanes,
A cientos los papanatas...!

¡Y como, por fin, tan bella
Tan culta tu tierra es... ¡Como que dijo un francés
Que el Africa empieza en ella!

Raising your brickbat to slight,
Poets and stadiums you flail,
The poor, dances, and the mail...
Nothing to you here seems right!

Mosquito, spider, and mite;
Now the crab, the tick, the bee,
And the microscopic flea...
All feel the sting of your bite:

You marvel if there's no rain,
If there's rain you marvel more,
And are frightened to the core
If our sphere movement sustain.

You're surprised past all degree
There are those here eat and sleep,
Those gamble, who, sick, grow weak:
You're amazed by all you see!

You judge all to be excess
That unsettles, terrifies.
So, clearly, under your skies
You've nothing like that, I guess!

Just as you'll find no one there
Who'll bet the shirt off his back,
Or affictions that can rack
And to the grave quickly bear.

Nor north winds, or thunder's boom;
Nor does water wet and splash,
Nor spider sting leave a rash,
Nor the viper's poison doom!

Nor does it frost, ice, and hail,
Nor are siestas there the mode,
Nor does chilblain incommode
I'll not like he from Paris.
More courteous, more of a gent,
I say as the saying that went:
"All the world is one country."
For in this as in those zones,
In Madrid, and in Cangrejos,
In Ponce and Alaejos
You've Sedans and Tarazones
For in truth, dear Don Manuel,
The being in all things great
Is not exclusive estate
Of this land or where you dwell.
Rather, I think that in each
the good and bad both abound,
That pass both one sun goes round,
That God's glance keeps both in reach.

But you don't lack excuse, too,
In this unpleasant affair,
For, thinking on it with care,
Not all the fault lies with you.
The blemish, no, is not your stain.
For here as in Flanders state,
The great are all only great
To them on their knees remain.
If my countrymen had paused,
Had not raised up and extolled you,
Had not flattered, and then spoiled you,
If, damming the torrent’s pull
Of such... fatuous admiration,
Made no busts in your laudation
With their love for pedestal;
    My country you’d not condemn,
And subjected, circumspect,
To all the laws of respect,
With respect you would treat them.
    Nor would you their naïve zeal
And keenness reward today
With what, insulting, you say,
The digs and scoffing you deal.
    But they as I understand,
Looking only to your good,
Ever lower... and lower stood
As you rose... and rose more grand!
    And to homage unbound, baseless,
For so much and to such clamor...
What else! With airs of seignior,
You turn master was once guest.
    That is why after embraces
We have now the surliness,
And where all once was caress,
The whip's lashes now leave traces:
    Now those parishioners say
That for thanks and for goodbye,
After eating, by the by,
You foul and their yard disarray.
    And think if to these dominions
Like so much baggage you came
It's your language is to blame,
That way, perhaps, it may be
That some of my fellow *paisans*
Will learn to stop kissing hands
And to have more dignity.
   With hard lesson’s motivation,
They may dodge the yawning trench
Of loathsome sycophancy’s stench
And an odious adulation.
   And when again to these zones
Another comes with his airs,
They won’t erect princely chairs,
Nor prepare him any crowns.
   They won’t then spread out the mantle
Which they placed over your numen...
And so, in sum... and resuming,
Why do you merit such pomp?
   As littérateur, no hero,
In society, a knave;
In politics, jester grave;
In arts and science, a zero!
   Whence, then, all this acclamation?
And whence all this deference?
Whence such lush extravagance?
Why, in short, all this ovation?
   So, once more let me reprise:
From Ande to Pyrenee
The great are great just to he
That, bent, remains on his knees...

But if I count to your credit
Part of all that I say here,
Simply does not act that way.
A good man does not retire
Before the battle's begun,
Or behind some barrier run,
In safety to load and fire.

Any Caribbean was born here
Would look, without fear, in your face,
Then fire, firm standing in place,
To wait on your pleasure right there.

So, let's make a truce, but be clear,
That before you insults launched in,
You made sure to see that your skin
Was hundreds of leagues far from here.

And so... the quarrel I end.
But... Wait! Lest I overlook
And fail, before closing the book,
A caveat here to append.

If the fates should ever again
Condemn you to any distress,
Come, here you'll always find rest
From your bitterness and pain.

For this people which your fury,
That you without qualm so offend,
Will aid always even extend
To him's done it injury.

Once more, Manuel, come and seek
Safe asylum in these parts,
For here you will find no hearts
Who any grudges can keep.
PARAPHRASIS OF THE SONNET “PUERTO RICO” BY MANUEL DEL PALACIO

This gent, a bard once flush with inspiration,
has so far fallen and become so poor,
the wretch now labors a few coins to secure
by playing antic fool to social station.

Looking to strike like a viper, this arch man,
so from his lips excess of poison flow,
wields the foul, dirty, brackish joke as though
he were in summer fluttering a fan.

For a brief time his luscious arpeggios
made mothers- and fathers-in-law dance,
wives and their husbands, too, were made to turn.

But now all of his guitar’s allegros
have grown so crass and vile in their nuance,
from whites and blacks contempt is all they earn.