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A POLEMICS OF PUERTO RICAN ART

(a translation of two chapters from *Propuesta polémica del arte puertorriqueño* by Marta Traba)

by
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments iii

Translator's Preface iv

Works Cited xvii

Bibliography xviii

A POLEMICS OF PUERTO RICAN ART 1

FOREWORD 2

CURRENT PUERTO RICAN ART: THE APOTHEOSIS OF ECLECTICISM 2

ART IN PUERTO RICO: A CRISIS OF VALUES. THE CRISIS AS A VALUE

UNTO ITSELF? CHALLENGING THE CRISIS 10

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Translator's Preface

Introduction

Upon trying to define the influence of the author, thinker, and critic Marta Traba in Puerto Rico, what can be gathered from accounts portrays a bold and ardent figure with no qualms about expressing her thoughts with unconditional honesty and passion. Despite the contentious reception of her words among the intelligentsia, or perhaps because of it, her writings became essential texts for the articulation of Puerto Rican modern art and were regarded as paradigms for the insertion of anticolonial thought in the critical discourse of the visual arts.

I chose the translation of *A Polemics* into English as the work to fulfill the thesis requirement of the Graduate Program in Translation from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. As I was already quite familiar with the book and its context, I had it in mind as a thesis project when I applied to enter the program. Once I took the course of Museum Translation, I knew that Professor David Auerbach, who has ample knowledge and experience in art translation, would be an outstanding advisor for this project.

I found out about Traba while majoring in art history during the latter half of the first decade of the 2000's. This was a time when traditional art criticism, usually published in journals, newspapers and magazines, was waning, and personal blogs emerged as much-needed outlets for holding debates and voicing the sincere opinions and tastes of younger generations. These bloggers admired Traba for her unwavering commitment to her own truth and an unreservedly mordant attitude toward what was seen as a pretentious and shallow art establishment. Carlos Antonio Otero, author of *El naufragio de las palabras* blog, has said that "Traba was a fierce enemy of conformism and that is why her prose was scathing and direct. It was not for nothing that her comments and critiques on the art of Latin America provoked unease and long faces at the mere mention of her name. In Puerto Rico, the experience was no

different. She criticized the modern art of the island head-on and scrutinized the work of some of the ‘sacred cows’ of art.”¹

However, as Melissa Ramos puts it, “[...] later generations of creators consider that her work is dated, bordering on obsolete, when it is decontextualized and applied to recent times.”² Of late, *A Polemics* has been mostly relegated to filler for bibliographies,³ while the most aesthetically pleasing passages are cited as fluff for theses and essays on the artists who were favored by Traba. Yet it is essential to bear in mind that care must be taken so that a work that left such a deep mark in the historiography of Puerto Rican art is not forgotten.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin famously posited the idea that the translation of a written text is a sign of the ongoing life (*fortleben*) of a text (Disler). When Benjamin highlights the vital cultural role of translation in perpetuating the relevance of a work, the implication of the translator as potentiator of the perennial nature of a text emerges. Therefore, texts like *A Polemics* benefit enormously from being translated, while furthering fresh readings of the book.

Background

Marta Traba was born in Buenos Aires in 1923 to a difficult home: her parents were Spanish immigrants and her father, who worked as a journalist, was an alcoholic, which led to frequent evictions, and an unhappy, unstable childhood. Nonetheless, Traba would go on to study Arts and Letters in the National University of Buenos Aires. She began her career as an art critic in 1947, writing for the art journal *Ver y Estimar* [Look and Assess]. In 1948, Traba moved to Europe, living in Paris and Rome, where she took courses with thinkers such as Pierre

¹ My own translation

² My own translation

³ In the essay “Sobre la pertinencia actual de una crítica comprometida” [On the Relevance of a Politically Committed Critic], Preface, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas*, Siglo XXI Editores, 2005), Maricarmen Ramírez explores the reasons for the weakening of Marta Traba’s importance.

Francastel, René Huyghe, and Giulio Carlo Argan. After 1954, she lived in Colombia, where she made significant contributions: She was a professor at the University of the Andes and the host of a television show on art appreciation; she established the Museum of Modern Art of Bogotá on her own and she wrote extensively on Colombian art and literature, often being at the center of intense debates. After publicly opposing the military occupation of the university where she was employed, Traba was forced into exile in 1968. She began to lead a nomadic life, relocating to Montevideo, Caracas, San Juan (Puerto Rico), Barcelona, Paris, Princeton, and Washington D.C. Traba died in 1987, the victim of plane crash near the Barajas Airport in Madrid. She left behind a rich body of literature, which included theory and criticism of art and literature, novels, short story collections, and a poetry collection.

It is worth noting, that, despite her itinerant existence just after being exiled, she continued to write prolifically, creating some of her most noteworthy critical and literary works. It was in this period when she published *A Polemics on Puerto Rican Art*.

When Traba arrived on the island in 1970, hired by the University of Puerto Rico to offer courses on aesthetics, it was a time of profound political and cultural upheavals, which dramatically shaped her stances on Latin American and Puerto Rican art: Amid the Cold War, Latin America was plagued with political instability and military coups backed by a United States that wanted to thwart any attempts at communism, especially in neighboring countries. Along with U.S. interventionism in regional politics came an increased interest in Latin American cultural endeavors. Yet events such as May 1968 in France, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution project, and the emergence of guerilla, counterculture, and community movements advocating for the liberation of the marginalized veered many sectors, particularly youths and intellectuals, toward socialism and the Left. Meanwhile, the 1960s in Puerto Rico were marked by a short-term boost in prosperity, an effect of the implementation of Operation Bootstrap in the prior decade and a subsequent injection of foreign capital. In the late 1940s and '50s, the

United States had tried to showcase Puerto Rico as an example of a Latin American country that faithfully complied with the requirements of a capitalist democracy. Consequently, as Ayala and Bernabe state, “By 1965, the life of most Puerto Ricans had been deeply altered by the economic reconfiguration of Puerto Rican society. Agriculture went into rapid decline, and industry increased its share of employment” (223). Furthermore, the early ’70’s were, per Nelson Rivera, “[...] A time of student confrontations during the Vietnam War and of political repression spearheaded by a pro-U.S. statehood government”⁴ (329).

In the Puerto Rican visual arts, during the first few years of the 1960s, artists such as Olga Albizu and Julio Rosado del Valle focused on Abstract Expressionism, whereas in the latter half of the decade and the start of the ’70s artists such as Zilia Sánchez, Rafael Ferrer, Noemí Ruiz, Roberto Alberty, Luis Hernández Cruz, Wilfredo Chiesa, Antonio Martorell, and Domingo García delved into experimental styles such as Pop Art, Arte Povera, Op Art, conceptual art, minimalism, happenings, and performance art, as well as the painting styles of Hard Edge, Color Field, and Lyrical Abstraction. Diasporic bonds in New York served as routes for these creative practices. Simultaneously, artists from the 1950s, such as Lorenzo Homar, Carlos Raquel Rivera, and Rafael Tufiño, kept producing art that sought to underline issues related to identity, and in some instances, showed some influence from avant-garde aesthetics. Other young artists, like Myrna Báez and Francisco Rodón, renewed figurative languages by creating complex, distinct styles. This context of the art world in Puerto Rico in the ’60s and early ’70s is what Traba critiques, at times harshly, in *A Polemics*.

Overview of *A Polemics*

The imperialistic and racist overtones of the article “Art in Puerto Rico” (*The Art Gallery Magazine*, Puerto Rico Issue, 1967), penned by U.S. art critic Jay Jacobs, would become the

⁴ My own translation

provocation for the drafting of *A Polemics* as a text that would eclipse Jacobs' opinions⁵: Traba distills perceptions gleaned from an eight-month stay in Puerto Rico. She ruthlessly lambasts the banality of the local art world and what she considers "eclecticism," which is defined as a lack of discernment upon exhibiting works, the critics' habit of throwing indiscriminate praise at art, and an inconsistency in artistic styles. She highlights how most local galleries and cultural institutions showcased Spanish and folkloric kitsch that appealed to tourists' exoticizing tastes alongside actual artworks. Basing her analysis on a Neo-Marxist framework, the author observes that, in a short time, the United States had cultivated an artificial modernity in Puerto Rico, coercing the island into becoming a consumerist and tourism-centered society, which resulted in an agenda to stunt the full development of genuine Puerto Rican culture. Such circumstances caused the transmission of imperial cultural values and aesthetics (which came mainly from New York) by way of Abstract Expressionism at first, and then by countercultural aesthetics from the late '60's, something that took place in the rest of Latin America as well—particularly in Central America and the rest of the Caribbean (excluding Haiti)—but which became more intensely manifested in Puerto Rico due to its unique relationship with the U.S. and the encouragement of hegemonic values by the middle class. Still, some artists resisted, and Traba describes at length the distinctive and "defensive" qualities of works that reaffirm the true Puerto Rican spirit," works rich in gloomy, melancholy, tense, and expectant tones and imagery. She also lauds artists whose remarkable aesthetics and locally relevant themes oppose colonial stereotypes and ideologies. Nonetheless, Traba presents stern criticism of works that relied on shallow pamphleteering, Indigenismo, folklorism, and anything resembling the style of Mexican muralism, which she finds inauthentic and shrill. She also decries the artists who

⁵ Jacobs writes that, most Puerto Rican artists merely portray themes related to a supposedly Indigenous culture, of which he comments "The only native culture this place ever had is carving coconut masks." Because of their avant-garde approaches, the painters Carlos Irizarry, Luis-Hernández Cruz, Domingo López, and Domingo García, whom Jacob calls the Way Out Group, and sculptor Rafael Ferrer are the only artists the author believes to be worthwhile.

embraced the avant-garde aesthetics of the United States, specifically those that belonged to the Way-Out Group, as she views their art as compliant with hegemonic values and because the nihilism of these works lacks meaning in the Puerto Rican context.⁶

Why Translate *A Polemics*?

Beyond the criticism and praise that has surfaced regarding the figure of Marta Traba in Puerto Rico in the last five decades, if *A Polemics* is examined from current standpoints, it is evident that her work is still fertile ground for fresh debates and perspectives.

In what concerns aspects that require broadened problematization, notwithstanding Traba's focus on the clash of northern imperial powers vis-à-vis the resistance of various Latin American regions, her extolment of the cultural production of the wealthiest countries of Latin America, while considering the art of more peripheral and subaltern regions such as Central America and the Caribbean as aesthetically inadequate and weak, responds to metrocentric views (Quiñones Otal) and overlooks the complex dynamics of power and inequality that transpire within the Latin American regions. Similarly, her sweeping views on Puerto Rican art and the superiority that comes from a Eurocentric, formalist framework (Benítez 125) lead her to make grievously flawed judgments, such as deeming Oller's Impressionism as "dull" and disconnected from the interests of modern painting, when he was an essential part (albeit an unjustly disregarded one) of Impressionism in Europe.

Traba also flaunts a profound lack of understanding of the historical undercurrents that shaped Puerto Rican art and the ideas of the artists on the island, which, regardless of her disclaimer in the introduction of her text, are indefensible: Her idea of "eclecticism" in art, besides showing a narrow view of the wide aesthetic breadth of Puerto Rican artists (Rivera

⁶ It seems likely that the seminal ideas contained in *A Polemics* were developed and magnified to examine the totality of Latin America in one of Traba's most important works, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1950-1970* [Two Vulnerable Decades in Latin American Visual Arts, 1950-1970] (Bazzano-Nelson, 26).

332), refuses to consider the intricate realities of the Caribbean as a region in which colonialism caused the mingling and layering of contrasting cultures, and how such syncretism might manifest as stylistic diversity. Likewise, a contemporary analysis reveals her shortsightedness in dismissing the Puerto Rican avant-garde as complicit with imperialism. In the essay, “From Latin American Art to Art from Latin America,” Gerardo Mosquera states the following:

By virtue of the characteristics of an early colonization that Europeanized this vast area, the culture of Latin America, and especially that of the visual arts, has frequently played on the rebound. That is to say, artists have returned the balls that arrived from the North, appropriating hegemonic tendencies and thus turning them into their own individual creativities within the complexity of their context. (72).

If we apply Mosquera’s analysis to Puerto Rican art, it becomes apparent that rather than merely submitting to the authority of the empire, Puerto Rican avant-garde artists were cannibalizing, and translating aesthetics from the centers of power to adjust them into the idiosyncrasies of their own experiences and circumstances. Moreover, if Traba’s work is seen from a contemporary feminist perspective, further problematic aspects emerge: Even though the work of women artists of the period was plentiful and relevant,⁷ Traba still chose to give more visibility to cisgender men, whether it be by praising or condemning their work. Thus, the pages of *A Polemics* are mostly centered (except for Myrna Báez and the passing mention of Olga Albizu) around the work of male artists. Yet, paradoxically, Traba’s work remains relevant today in part because of her legacy as a trailblazing woman.

Prior to Traba, there were relatively few women art critics in Puerto Rico. Yet, it is undeniable that Traba paved the way for women art writers and thinkers. If we look at newspaper and magazine articles of from the years that followed her visit, it is evident that

⁷ Some of the women artists who were active at the time of Traba’s visit were Suzi Ferrer, Luisa Geigel, Natividad Gutiérrez, Zilia Sánchez, Irene Delano, Noemí Ruiz, María Luisa Penne, María Rodríguez Señeriz, and Alison Daubercies de Morán. Luisina Ordóñez was not active at the time, but she had produced works in previous decades.

women's voices in the press became far more widespread as the '70s unfolded. What is more, Traba brought about a genealogy of anti-colonial women art thinkers, specifically Margarita Fernández Zavala and Teresa Tió, who became prominent critics, curators, art historians, and important advocates for feminism and Puerto Rican independence (respectively) in the art world during the following decades. Zavala, one of the founders of the Association of Women Artists of Puerto Rico, in particular, has spoken of the mark that Traba left on her views (Fernández Zavala). Moreover, aside from providing a theoretical framework for Puerto Rican visual art for the first time, and setting the underpinnings for anticolonial perspectives on art, Traba's manifest Neo-Marxism laid the groundwork for current radical and anti-capitalist curatorial and critical production, such as the work done by Colectivo Transforma, Emilia Quiñones Otal, and Raquel Torres Arzola, among others.

Lastly, Traba's description of the effects of imperialism and a tourism-based economy on our society still reverberates as hauntingly powerfully today as when it was set down on paper nearly fifty years ago, remarkably so given the current panorama of Puerto Rico. The colonial settling of our ancestral lands and the displacement of native Puerto Ricans due to tourism, financial colonialism, and a Hawaiinization of the archipelago are all becoming increasingly pressing issues.

The reasons for pertinence that are outlined above provide the basis for embarking on the translation of a work as complex and rich as *A Polemics*. Yet at first glance, translating a work that denounces the oppressive nature of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. into the language of the metropole might seem contradictory, while some might consider it an act of brazenness against the very beliefs that make up the ideological core of the book. The latter perception may be linked to the problematic relationship between Spanish and English on the island, which has been that of two colonial languages that have been forced upon local populations, but also of a long history of failed attempts to impose one language

(English) over the other (Spanish) during the first five decades of U.S. colonial rule, which gave rise to the defense of Spanish as a rallying point for cultural nationalism.

However, it would be a mistake to presume that all English translations would be focused on a hegemonic U.S. readership; these works could also be of interest to marginalized Anglophone audiences, such as English-speaking Black, Indigenous, and migrant Latinx communities, as a way of cultivating transnational solidarities among fellow oppressed peoples. Likewise, this translation is pertinent to many Anglophone readers and researchers (but especially those with Caribbean and Latin American roots) who are interested in anticolonial and radical approaches to art, in the figure of Marta Traba, in feminized genealogies in the visual arts, and in advancing the understanding of how Puerto Rico fit into the general context of Latin American and the Caribbean art in the '50s, '60s and early '70s. It bears mentioning that the translation of *A Polemics* also encourages the inclusion of Puerto Rico in transnational conversations.

Furthermore, this work is aimed at the generations of diasporic Puerto Ricans who, even if they have maintained their Puerto Rican identity, have been immersed in an Anglo-American context due to migrations since the late nineteenth century until the present day. As Puerto Ricans in the United States comprise the greater part of the Puerto Rican population (U.S. Census Bureau) and the existence of monolingual Anglophone diasporic Puerto Ricans becomes an increasingly more common occurrence (Duany 34), translators must ensure that these groups have linguistic access to their cultural heritage in the visual arts.

Translating Traba: Approaches and Challenges

Upon choosing an approach for the translation of *A Polemics*, my main interest was the rendering of Traba's voice. In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Spivak writes, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the

subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (83). Even though we would be hard pressed to identify Traba, already a celebrated critic and cultural producer when she arrived at Puerto Rico, as a subaltern or a proletarian subject, Spivak’s ideas apply when we consider that the latter outlines the use of silence and erasure as a strategy for epistemic domination, especially toward women. Furthermore, *A Polemics* is centered on Puerto Rico, a land that, due to its colonized political status, is an “enshadowed” (using Spivak’s metaphor) and invisibilized territory in the fray of international politics and academia. It is also important to bear in mind that, in Bassnett’s and Trevedi’s words, “Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity, but it is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors, and systems” (2). Considering the dynamics of power on silencing and translation as giving voice, and the fact that Traba was a Latin American woman writing from a space that was (and is) subject to colonialism, it was imperative to render *A Polemics* in such a way that the combination of mordancy, authority, insightfulness, and imagination that comprised her voice was conveyed into English in all its intensity and depth. After all, it was the author’s sharp, compelling prose that had stirred up fiery debates among the members of the art world at the time of the publishing of the source text. But, more significantly, this was a woman powerfully articulating radical thought at a time when feminized voices were seldom heard in the visual arts; therefore, it became even more necessary to strive for a translation in which the full prism of the author’s tone, which could shift from unabashed causticity to lyric radiance, was amplified. This was accomplished by adapting the text in such a way that the passion and assertive language could shine through the translation by tapping into the lexical richness of the English language, transposing the syntax and streamlining certain sentences to improve clarity and precision, and by using a vocabulary and high register that equals that of the source text.

Another essential aspect of rendering the target text was the use of intersemiotic translation, a method that, per Roman Jakobson's most basic definition (as cited by Nicola Dusi), is "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Dusi). The need to apply this type of translation rose due to Traba's reliance upon meticulous and poetic language when she makes the formal analysis of artworks to sustain her arguments, which necessitated looking carefully at images of artworks mentioned in the text to better understand Traba's ekphrasis and to translate such descriptions adequately in order to achieve an increased comprehension of the reader and to ease the visualization of the works.

Among the many challenges of translating such a complicated work, one of the main difficulties was the title. Because the word *polemic*, which indicates the rhetorical art of debate, in English already encompasses the meaning of a published text that communicates an impassionate defense of a particular stance, *A Polemics of Puerto Rican Art* was preferred over a word-for-word translation.

Another problem that stands out immediately are the copious misspellings, grammatical irregularities, omitted words, and inaccuracies. It seems likely that *A Polemics* was published with little time to edit and fact check. Nonetheless, once these errors were noticed during the translation process, they were dealt with by rendering the text by following U.S. English language conventionalities in spelling, orthotypography, and grammar, as befits the genre of the work. Even if most of these mistakes were small, at times they became significant issues when they resulted in ambiguities. For example, Traba writes: "(...) *sino de defender la sobras cuya tendencia...*" (61). In this passage, *sobras* could mean "leftovers." But once we see that the *s* is missing from the plural determiner *la*, by virtue of logic and context, it is possible to deduce that the author meant to write *las obras*, or "the artworks," rather than "leftovers," and that *sobras* was a misspelling.

A thought-provoking issue during translation had to do with the richness of Spanish varieties in Latin American. While working on the text, as a Caribbean Spanish-speaking translator, I kept stumbling upon unfamiliar terms such as *despropósito*, *gamines*, *revisación*, and *perimible*. After researching these words in the dictionary, a pattern emerged: These idioms belonged to South American dialects, the author's native region. However, Traba not only displays her origins through language, but also by applying concepts of South American history to Puerto Rico art by calling Puerto Rican nineteenth-century art *arte republicano* (13), a period that never took place on the island because it has never been a republic.

An additional difficulty that demanded finesse during the translation process was the capitalization of specific art movements versus general artistic tendencies, which rules dictate must be lowercased in English. For example, throughout the text Traba makes mention of realism as a general aesthetic (40, 41, 55, 57, 78), whereas in other instances, she talks about Realism as a concrete movement (47, 49, 73). Such usages required careful reading to understand in which instances the word should be written with a lowercased or uppercased initial letter.

Equally, in some other instances, the text was expanded to provide a better understanding for readers that might be unaware of some practices from Hispanic, Latin American or Caribbean cultures. An example of this was the word *mantón* being rendered in English as *Manila shawl*, a more specific and accessible referent for English speakers. Furthermore, in order to provide context and throw light on some of Traba's allusions to Puerto Rican art, footnotes with added information were also included as translator's notes.

An interesting issue that arose upon translating the text was the use of what is perhaps problematic language by the author. This can be seen in instances such as the passage describing of the work titled *The Storm*, in which Traba uses words that highlight the "brutality" of his features, while portraying the man as "no savage scenting the storm from the

back of a cavern, but a citizen wearing a shabby undershirt and a threadbare fedora.” This proximity of Blackness, “brutality” and “savageness” might be deemed racist; thus, these passages were translated as literally as possible, so that they can be subject to a critical analysis on the racial aspects in her work. Equally important is Traba’s use of the term “primitivism” to describe the art of mid-twentieth century Haitian auto-didact artists. Such a designation has been widely critiqued by several scholars due to its origin in a colonizing gaze, specifically the gaze of North Americans who “discovered” Haitian folk art after the U.S. military occupation of Haiti (Lockwood Haffner 4-5). Although the repeated mention of “Haitian primitivism” in the source text might strike some readers as troubling and outdated, it was preserved in the translation to reflect the prevailing lexicon of the period and to be assessed by the readership from a perspective of awareness of colonial and racist dynamics.

Likewise, it is crucial to acknowledge of the imperial nature of the using the term “American” to refer to the people of the United States and the fact that the term has been the subject of critiques, particularly from thinkers and writers from the Latin America. Thus, in this translation, “U.S.” or “from/of the United States” were the preferred equivalents to the original *estadounidense*. “American” was only used when the abovementioned options were not idiomatic.⁸

Lastly, because *A Polemics* is a book that relies on intertextuality, the work is interspersed with references from other authors. In most cases, the translation of direct and indirect quotes already existed in English; therefore, the prior translations of these text were used. The only exception was Jack Agüero’s rendering of Julia de Burgos, as his translation has considerable weaknesses due to his overly literal approach to the poems and his erasure of the author’s gender.

⁸ The demonym *American* been generally used in the United States since the 18th century. Still, it is a term that has been met with widely held disapproval from Latin American people (Smorag 72) and has been the subject of a slew of opinion pieces across the years. Because of this, the Real Academia Española prefers *estadounidense* over *americano* (American) (Real Academia Española).

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