

Translating New York: the city's languages in Iberian literatures

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Translating New York: the city's languages in Iberian literatures, by Regina Galasso, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2018, 216 pp., £80 (hardback), ISBN13 978-1786941121.

New York City has featured recurrently in Iberian literature since the end of the nineteenth century. For some writers, such as Juan Ramón Jiménez and Federico García Lorca, New York became a turning point in their literary careers, as their experience in this city inspired groundbreaking texts that have become universally acclaimed and studied. Of course, when one thinks about New York in Spanish literature, Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* comes to mind as the prime example of what the literary critic Luis García Jambrina has called "un género literario e, incluso, una tradición poética" ("Nueva York, género literario", *ABC, Suplemento "Blanco y Negro Cultural"*, March 27, 2004). Paradoxically, the success of Lorca's collection of poems has sometimes obscured the existence of an extensive tradition (using García Jambrina's term) of poetry in Spanish about New York, which has been examined by only a few academics such as Dionisio Cañas (*El poeta y la ciudad: Nueva York y los escritores hispanos*, 1994) and Julio Neira (*Historia poética de Nueva York en la España contemporánea*, 2012). Furthermore, the presence of this city in the literatures written in the Iberian Peninsula is not restricted to poetry but also spans a range of narrative genres, from the novel to the travel book, although these New York narratives have not received as much critical attention as their poetic counterparts.

Regina Galasso's *Translating New York: The City's Languages in Iberian Literatures* contributes to the study of some of these narrative texts, which have often been overlooked or not examined in detail. Her book (whose manuscript received the 2017 NeMLA Book Award) provides an original approach to this corpus, firstly by opening up the scope of this "género literario" to the concept of Iberian rather than Spanish literature, thereby

incorporating texts – such as Josep Pla’s *Week-end (d’estiu) a Nova York* (1954) – written in other Iberian languages (and also in English). Secondly, drawing especially on Michael Cronin’s work on the relationship between travel writing and translation, Galasso’s study looks at the authors of these books as translators in a wider sense, owing to their role as intermediaries between languages and cultures. This theoretical approach is outlined in the introduction to the book, where the author argues for the productivity of using “the trope of translation as a way of understanding the construction and representation of New York City in Iberian literatures” since “translation provides a framework that allows the complexities involved with travel to and the experience of a multilingual city to emerge” (12). In this regard, a key focus of the study is the choice of different translation strategies (from foreignization to domestication) in the case studies (although the book also touches on a variety of other related texts): José Moreno Villa’s travelogue *Pruebas de Nueva York* (1927) and his poetry collection *Jacinta la pelirroja* (1929), Felipe Alfau’s novel *Chromos* (1990), Julio Camba’s collections of journalistic articles *Un año en el otro mundo* (1917) and *La ciudad automática* (1932), and the aforementioned account by Josep Pla of his visit to the city (1954). The analysis of these texts is structured in three parts followed by a “coda”: “Transnational Language: Felipe Alfau’s Iberian English and Its Afterlife”, “The Source of Avant-Garde Voice: Music and Photography in José Moreno Villa” and “Travel in Translation: Julio Camba and Josep Pla Write for a Home Audience”.

The opening section sheds light on the life and work of a largely unknown author of Catalan origin who settled in New York at an early age, Felipe Alfau. Alfau’s narrative provides a fascinating case for the purposes of Galasso’s study. Originally written in English, his novel *Chromos* features Spanish-speaking characters, therefore lending itself as a fruitful locus to examine “the complexities that arise when specific languages meet” (49). The recurrent references to translation in the novel also lead Galasso’s analysis to focus on a

variety of theoretical issues (e.g., cultural translation and “pseudotranslation”); as she points out, “translation is not purely a linguistic question, but also a conceptual one” (39). This section, probably the most accomplished of the book, closes with a reference to the connections between Alfau’s and Eduardo Lago’s writings, as Lago has in fact included the former as a character in his own New York narrative.

The second section is devoted to José Moreno Villa’s New York production, both in narrative and poetry. Given Moreno Villa’s status as a (lesser known) member of the *Generación del 27*, the book establishes a relevant parallel between the effects that this city had on his and García Lorca’s literary careers. As in Lorca’s case, Moreno Villa’s visit to New York prompted a change in his writing style, which became more permeable to the influence of avant-garde movements and experimentation. That influence is reflected in the incorporation of a photographic language in his travelogue, one that can capture the speed of New York life, and also in the representation of New York’s musical landscape, encapsulated in references to jazz music. Therefore, without losing sight of the linguistic strategies deployed to convey English terms and culturally specific concepts to a Spanish readership, the strength and originality of this chapter lies in the understanding of the intersections between travel and translation as going beyond the purely linguistic, to investigate Moreno Villa’s strategy of “translating photography into written language” (82).

The last section of the book focuses on two writers “from the Iberian Periphery”, Julio Camba (Galicia) and Josep Pla (Catalonia). Once more, the analysis is attentive to the linguistic subtleties involved in translating the city for a home audience, and the different translation strategies chosen by these writers (for example translating English terms directly or leaving terms in the source language, either accompanied by an brief explanation in the target language or leaving the reader to rely solely on the context to guess their meaning). This section could perhaps have also exploited the potential of these texts to a greater extent.

For example, the difference between Pla's choice of (and "loyalty" to) writing in Catalan and Camba's refusal to write in Galician begged for some sort of comparison (in fact, Camba showed little appreciation for the use of this language in public life; see, for example, his books *Playas, ciudades y montañas* and *La rana viajera*). The ways in which these writers "translate" New York's multiculturalism, especially African American culture, could also have received some attention. The book provides a rather inspiring idea when stating that "writers of the city not only write place but also write in reaction to former representations, similar to the way in which literary translators, when creating a new translation of a given text, respond to, reject, or borrow, from extant versions" (155). Given the recurrent reference to African Americans in Iberian New York narratives (and the key role they play in Lorca's poems), an assessment of how this community is "translated" in these texts would have been quite illuminating, with, for example, a wider discussion of Pla's use of the word *negritos*, which is in fact mentioned in this section (164).

Finally, the study closes with "Coda: Re-Creating a Classic", where Galasso proposes that "New York emerges as a classic text for Iberian writers" (171). She also provides "food for thought", by pointing to more recent texts by authors such as Carmen Martín Gaité, Quim Monzó, Antonio Muñoz Molina and Ernest Farrés, for whom "writing New York requires a different way of portraying the city in the Iberian imagination" (172). In doing so, *Translating New York. The City's Languages in Iberian Literatures* succeeds in providing both academics and students of Iberian literatures with a new set of tools not only to read past "translations" of New York but also to examine how this city is conveyed in contemporary literature and how it (undoubtedly) will be in future renditions.

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