

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Necessity Is the Mother of Translation

NICHOLAS T RINEHART

At the end of my first (and likely last) decade as an academic, I have come to realize that the entirety of my research trajectory has been motivated by little other than an incessant feeling of being mocked by my own ignorance—a repetitive and almost forceful confrontation with what Donald Rumsfeld stupidly but not incorrectly dubbed “unknown unknowns.” It seems to me, indeed, that entire scholarly fields can be described in this way; there are things we know we know, things we know we don’t know, so on and so forth. The final Rumsfeldian category looms especially large over Black literary studies, which, because of its forced obscurity and institutional disavowal, still has set before it the gargantuan task of delineating its proper object field, if one can be said to exist.

This sense of just how much work remains in achieving a merely descriptive account of the Black literary past—at once paralyzing and invigorating—was thrown into stark relief when I spent several days going through the papers of Dorothy Porter Wesley at the Auburn Avenue Research Library in Atlanta. Porter (the name she went by before marrying Charles Wesley, the former president of Wilberforce University, in 1979) is best known as the primary curator of what is now the Moorland-Spingarn Research Library at Howard University. A pioneering librarian, archivist, and bibliographer, she published several key works: *North American Negro Poets: A Bibliographical Checklist of Their Writings, 1760–1944* (1945), an emendation of Arturo Schomburg’s earlier text; *Early Negro Writing, 1760–1837* (1971), a remarkable anthology of African American speeches, essays, meeting minutes, sermons, poems, narratives, and more; and *Afro-Braziliana: A Working Bibliography* (1978), a compilation of texts by and about people of African descent in Brazil.

NICHOLAS T RINEHART is a scholar, critic, and translator based in New York City. He earned a PhD in English from Harvard University and previously worked as a postdoctoral fellow in the Society of Fellows and a lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College. He is working on a book manuscript, “This Strange Communion: Slave Testimony and Social Practice in the Afro-Atlantic World,” and two translation projects: “Enslaved Poets in Nineteenth-Century Cuba” and “Getulino’s First Burlesque Ballads,” by Luiz Gama.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Modern Language Association of America

PMLA 138.3 (2023), doi:10.1632/S0030812923000664

A superficial glance at Porter's scholarly output would suggest that her investment in the study of Black diasporic history and culture beyond the continental United States was a late-stage development. Not only was her *Afro-Braziliana* one of her last major works, but her expansion of Schomburg's earlier *Checklist* (1916) also removed all of the Caribbean and non-anglophone authors included in the original, as Porter readily admits in the volume's preface: "While it does not include the foreign titles of the earlier list it more than doubles the number of domestic titles alone which were listed in the Schomburg list" (Preface 5). But this excision did not signal Porter's indifference to Black poetry from the Caribbean and Latin America. On the contrary, she made these subjects a focus of her bibliographical enterprise for several decades starting as early as the 1930s. These works were not intended to be the final word on the subject, but instead to open up further lines of inquiry. As she writes in her preface to the *Checklist*, "It was not the compiler's aim . . . to make this an exhaustive bibliography; some titles have escaped the attention of the compiler; others known to have been printed could not be located." Porter thus intended her emendation of Schomburg to be further improved by others: "It is hoped that omissions or corrections when determined by the reader will be forwarded to the compiler" (5).

The conditional and implicitly collaborative nature of Porter's (and arguably all) bibliographic endeavors is indeed central to their production and purpose. Bibliographies and other list forms are "at once assertive and provisional; they are generated out of the needs of the immediate moment but also become, in some fundamental way, future-oriented," Elizabeth McHenry argues. "They are texts that seemingly drive toward closure (a completed or fully checked-off list) and yet also serve as invitations to revise, whether by adding to or subtracting from its entries or by regrouping and reordering the list as a whole" (79). Indeed, in McHenry's account it is the "necessary incompleteness of the bibliographic enterprise" that "constitutes a call to further thinking and future action" (123, 80).

There is perhaps no greater unfinished project in Porter's lengthy and prodigious career than her

decades-spanning effort to compile bibliographic checklists of the works of "Negro poets" from Latin America and the Caribbean—especially Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti. Porter learned all three primary languages spoken in these regions; consulted anthologies of Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean literature in the original and in translation; copied relevant poems and translations from Caribbean and Latin American magazines, newspapers, and other periodicals; and contributed to scholarly initiatives like the Inter-American Institute and Workshop hosted by Wilberforce University in 1945 (where she presumably met Charles Wesley) and the short-lived Instituto Internacional de Estudios Afroamericanos / International Institute for Afroamerican Studies / Instituto Internacional de Estudios Afro-Americanos, a quadrilingual consortium founded in Mexico under the leadership of intellectuals like Fernando Ortiz Fernández, Alain Locke, Melville Herskovits, Miguel Covarrubias, and others. At Howard, she stressed the importance of "expanding" the "Negro collection" to include "[a]ll materials about and by persons of Negro descent in the twenty Latin American Republics" (Porter, "Latin American Materials").

It was in pursuit of these bibliographies in progress that I went to Auburn Avenue, which seems to have purchased two boxes of Porter's papers at a Swann Galleries auction in 2009, one described as an "Archive of material on Caribbean Writers and Poets." (Porter's materials are notoriously scattered and difficult to access.) This particular box contains several drafts of separate checklists of Cuban, Brazilian, and Haitian poets, which together evince the collaborative aspect of bibliographic research. In August 1943, for instance, she wrote to Horace Ashton—then the cultural relations officer at the US embassy in Haiti—seeking information about Haitian books and book dealers. Earlier that summer she had sought the counsel of Donald Pierson, an American sociologist and anthropologist working at the Escola de Sociologia e Política in São Paulo, regarding the applicability of the term *Negro* to Brazilian writers. "I am aware of the difference in our usage of the term Negro and the use to-day in Brazil," she writes. "I am enclosing a

list of names of Brazilians of Negro descent which I should like to include. Will you be kind enough to inform me as to whether or not you think I can justly include them in my bibliography” (Letter to Donald Pierson).

When glancing over these unfinished lists, I repeatedly felt what can best be described as an anti-eureka! moment. I had not solved any problem but was merely confronted by more of them; I recognized hardly any of the names spread out before me. When you consider yourself something of an expert in a particular field—for which one has earned an advanced degree—this sensation can feel almost like going a little mad. Have I been duped? Have I fooled myself? What have I been doing all this time? Admittedly, there is an insidious tendency nowadays to overstate the extent to which particular texts and histories have been “hidden” or “erased.” (I recall someone on *Twitter* some years ago lamenting how *Invisible Man* had been kept from them by a failed education system.) But I couldn’t shake the feeling, looking at Porter’s draft bibliographies and checklists, that something was amiss.

Take, for example, an earlier and much abbreviated list of Afro-Brazilian poets, a typed document that Porter apparently sent to Arthur B. Spingarn—the Jewish civil rights activist and bibliophile after whom Howard’s research library is partly named—to check against his own personal collection:

Barbosa, Domingos Caldos, See Caldas Barbosa,
Domingos
Barreto de Menezes, Tobias, 1839–1889
Barreto, Tobias, See Barreto de Menzes, Tobias
Brito, Francisco de Paula, 1809–1861
Caldos Barbosa, Domingos, d. 1800
Castro Alves, Antonio de, 1847–1871
Costa, Claudio Manoel da, 1729–1789
Cruz e Sousa, João da, 1862–1898
Gama, José Basilio da, 1740–1795
Gonçalves Crespo, Antonio Candido, 1847–1883
Gonçalves Dias, Antonio, 1823–1864
Gonçalves Teixeira e Sousa, Antonio, 1812–1861
Gonzaga, Thomaz Antonio, 1744–1807
Fontes, Hermes, 1890–1930
Lima, Jorge de, 1893–
Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria, 1839–1908

Rabello, Laurindo José da Silva, See Silva Rabello,
Laurindo José da Rego, João de Deus do
Saldanha, José da Natividade, 1796–1830
Silva Rabello, Laurindo José da, 1826–1864
Teixeira e Sousa, Antonio Gonçalves, See Gonçalves
Teixeira e Sousa, Antonio
(Porter, “Brazilian Poets”)

Who was Domingos Caldas Barbosa? A neoclassical poet born of a formerly enslaved woman and known for innovating forms like the *modinha* (a popular, usually sentimental love song derived from Italian opera) and the *lundu* (a kind of satirical and often bawdy social commentary derived from both Portuguese and Angolan musical traditions) while accompanying himself on the viol (Miranda de Oliveira). Who was Antônio Frederico de Castro Alves? An abolitionist poet and playwright, known widely as “O Poeta dos Escravos” (“Poet of the Slaves”), whose posthumously published long poem “O Navio Negreiro” (“The Slave Ship”) is a major work in the literary history of the Middle Passage (Aidoo). Who was Antônio Cândido Gonçalves Crespo? A journalist, politician, and Parnassian poet who published several volumes of verse, including *Miniaturas* (1872; *Miniatures*) and *Nocturnos* (1882; *Nocturnes*), in addition to a book of children’s stories, *Contos para os Nossos Filhos* (1886; *Tales for Our Children*), with his wife, Maria Amália Vaz de Carvalho.

Experts in Brazilian literature might balk at my surprise; these figures are no secret to those trained in the field (though they may be understudied). But I don’t think it a reckless overstatement to suggest that those trained in Black literary studies in the Anglo-American academy will likely never encounter these names in the course of their research and teaching. And I wonder what kind of intellectual work such an encounter could make possible: What would it look like to teach a course on early Black literature that includes, for example, both Phillis Wheatley and Domingos Caldas Barbosa? What could be gained by teaching a course on the literature of the Middle Passage that juxtaposes poems by Robert Hayden and Castro Alves? What might we learn by reading Gonçalves Crespo and

Paul Laurence Dunbar in tandem? There are a host of intellectual, institutional, and historical reasons why these scenarios for now remain hypothetical, but the major impediment to their achievement is plain as day—namely, the problem of translation.

To my knowledge—and perhaps with a handful of individual exceptions—nothing by Caldas Barbosa has been translated into English, and neither has anything by Castro Alves or Gonçalves Crespo. And neither has anything by Manuel Inácio da Silva Alvarenga (1749–1814), who published erotic poems and the mock epic *O Desertor das Letras* (1774; *The Deserter of Letters*), or by João da Cruz e Sousa (1861–98), the son of slaves and the innovator of Brazilian symbolism whose portrait adorns an entire side of a ten-story building in Florianópolis, his birthplace. We can more or less copy and paste this set of claims for each and every entry included in Porter's lists of Brazilian, Haitian, and Cuban poets of African descent, with some twentieth-century exceptions proving the rule (Nicolás Guillén, for example).

This lack of available English editions for students and scholars, not to mention readers outside the academy, poses a major problem for the project of Black literary studies and its diasporic aspirations. The writer and translator John Keene has perhaps put it best in remarking, “This aporia limits our understanding of the range and complexity of black lives all over the world, and also limits our understanding of forms of living and being, as well as of systems and structures of oppression, based on race (and ethnicity, indigeneity, class, gender, religious affiliation, etc.).” “To put it another way,” Keene continues, “we have a truer and fuller sense of the black diaspora, and thus the globe, when we have translations of the vast body of work out there.”

Keene's provocation and my own experience of archive-induced bafflement both subtend Porter's earlier bibliographic projects: simply put, she was doing (or was on the way to doing) exactly the kind of work we are calling for now. If scanning Porter's incomplete checklists produced a sense of personal and intellectual bewilderment, in retrospect they have also proved quite comforting—after all, the groundwork has been laid for at least

a career's worth of work. Porter already set the agenda; it is our blessing and burden to bring it to fruition. And a major part of that effort, I am urging, is the translation of non-anglophone Black literature across periods and geographies, a necessarily collaborative endeavor with the potential to radically transform what we know (and think we know) about Black literary history writ large.

Returning to Porter's earliest draft of Afro-Brazilian poets, I noticed that even some obvious names are missing. At the bottom of Porter's typed list, Spingarn has added in his own hand a number of authors represented in his own collection, beside which Porter has taken additional notes in pencil. Next to Spingarn's addition of “Getulino,” for instance, Porter notes, “pseud for Gama, Luiz” (“Brazilian Poets”). Gama was a former slave, abolitionist lawyer, and satirical poet who published his *Primeiras Trovas Burlescas de Getulino* (*Getulino's First Burlesque Ballads*) first in 1859 and then in a revised edition in 1861; it has largely remained in print ever since. His father, an unnamed nobleman of Portuguese descent, sold him into slavery to settle gambling debts in 1840. His mother was, according to the poet himself, Luísa Mahin—a formerly enslaved *vendadora* (“street vendor”) said to have played a key role in several slave uprisings in Bahia in the first half of the nineteenth century, including the famous 1835 Malê Revolt. Gama has achieved a kind of legendary status in Afro-Brazilian history: his visage adorns a large painted street mural in Rio de Janeiro; the University of São Paulo Law School has named a classroom after him; and his life was recently dramatized in a major motion picture, *Doutor Gama* (2021), directed by Jeferson De.

Beyond his poetic output, Gama published many satirical, political, and legalistic essays under his own name and the pseudonym “Afro,” in addition to founding several periodicals like *Diabo Coxo* (*Crippled Devil*) and *O Cobrião* (*The Nuisance*). The Projeto Luiz Gama, led by Bruno Rodrigues de Lima—a doctoral candidate at Goethe University Frankfurt—plans to publish eleven volumes of Gama's collected work, including several hundred newly discovered texts. A mammoth and fortuitous undertaking, and perhaps one of the most

significant feats of Black textual scholarship in recent memory, it also reveals another project to be undertaken in its wake: translating it. Indeed, despite his undisputed position at the center of Afro-Brazilian literary history, only a small handful of Gama's poems have appeared in English, almost entirely in older (and quite out of date) anthologies (Jahn 124; Lomax and Abdul 79–80).

In the course of her work on the Brazilian, Cuban, and Haitian checklists, Porter compiled bibliographies, consulted experts, purchased individual volumes, and copied poems published or reprinted in Latin American periodicals and anthologies (some typed and some by hand). For instance, she made copies of several works from the 1916 edition of Laudelino de Oliveira Freire's anthology *Sonetos Brasileiros, Seculo XVII-XX* (1916; *Brazilian Sonnets, 17th–20th Centuries*), including one by Gama entitled "Mote" ("Motto"). I had never previously encountered the poem, and it is not regarded as one of Gama's major works. Since Porter's papers contain several duplicates, though, it remained on my mind for some time thereafter. So, when my colleague Carlos Cortez Minchillo invited me to speak about Gama with students in his first-year seminar on Afro-Brazilian history and culture, I figured it would be a perfect opportunity to put my money where my mouth is. To my knowledge, "Mote" has never been translated into English. Here's my most recent version:

"Mote"

E não pode negar ser meu parente!

Soneto

Sou nobre, e de linhagem sublimada,
Descendo, em linha recta dos *Pegados*,
Cuja lança feroz desbaratados
Fez tremer os guerreiros da Cruzada!

Minha mãe, que é de prôa alcantilada,
Vem da raça dos Reis mais affamados;
—Blasonava entre um bando de pasmados
Certo parvo de casta *amorenada*.

Eis que brada um peralta retumbante:
"—Teu avô, que de cor era latente,
Teve um neto mulato e mui pedante!"

Irrita-se o fidalgo qual demente,
Trescala a vil catinga nauseante,
E não pôde negar ser meu parente!

"Motto"

And yet he cannot deny being my kin!

Sonnet

From eminent stock, of noble line made,
I rightly descend from intrepid explorers,
And soldiers whose lances were life-taking horrors
To infidels conquered in every Crusade.

My mother, arrived on a towering barque,
Descends from illustrious kings known by name;
—So did a tawny fool boldly declaim
Amidst a crowd stupefied by his remark.

Then cries out a rascal to impishness prone:
"Your dear old grandfather, his color unknown,
Yet had a mulatto grandson of his own!"

The imbecile nobleman's patience wears thin,
An abhorrent stench now begins to sink in,
And yet he cannot deny being my kin!

Of course, it's nice to be able to say that I've done something that's never been done before. But it's just as nice to be able to share Gama's poem with a group of students who otherwise would not have been able to read it, since only a few present—those from Brazil, naturally—knew Portuguese. What my translation of "Mote" enabled, then, was a broad discussion about the poem as I had rendered it in English; the original poem, with lusophone students sharing their personal knowledge of the source language with their peers; and the creative and intellectual process of translation itself, which is always a win-some-lose-some bargain.

There's also a way to look at this poem as a kind of allegory for the study of literary history, which is surely not what Gama meant but is convenient for our purposes. In one corner is an "imbecile" who insists on clear ancestral delineations, straight lines of descent, uncompromised purity of origin; in the other stands the poem's speaker (as well as the "rascal" who interrupts the nobleman's boast) insisting

on their shared kinship, the mess and tangle of inherited racial formations. The latter looks more like the kind of approach to Black literature I am advocating here, and which I think is suggested by Porter's decades-long pursuit of materials on Afro-diasporic literature in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Given their incompleteness, these materials function less like a reference guide and more like a to-do list. Another document from Porter's papers, a typed list with handwritten additions, reveals how much work we have cut out for us:

Argentina

Thompson, Casildo Gervasio
Cardoso, Eusedio

Bogota, Colombia

Artel, Jorge
Carabello, Vicenti
Obeso, Candelario

Dominican Republic

Heureux, Belisario
Jimenez, Pedro Creales, 1871
Fiallo, Fabio, 1865
Henriquez Urena, Pedro
Pagan, Bolivar

Ecuador

Silva, Medardo Angel, 1899–1921
Ortiz, Adalberto
Silva, Medardo Angel, 1899–1921

Mexico

Vasconcelos, José

Nicaragua

Dario, Ruben

Panama

Escobar, Federico, 1861–1912
Hernandez, Gaspar Octavio, 1893–1918
Herera S., Demetrio, 1902

Peru

Lopez Albuja, Enrique
Rivas, Simon
Valdés, Jose Manuel
Yerovi, Leonidas, 1881–1917

Puerto Rico

Carrión Maduro, Tomás
Derkes, Eleuterio, 1836–Dec. 21, 1883
Ferrer, José
Figueroa, Sotero
Laguerre, Enrique A.
Pagan, Bolivar

Uruguay

Barrios, Pilar E.
Bottaro, Marcellino
Cabral, Kleno

Uruguay—cont.

Ferreira, Carlos Cardozo
Pena, Liño Suarez

Venezuela

Muñoz, Gabriel, 1864–1908
Rodríguez-Cardenas, Manuel
Tomas, Benito Luciano
(Porter, “Cuban Writers”)

Taking inspiration from Porter's efforts and her apparent eagerness for others to correct and continue her work—and following Gama's jesting speaker who marks a confrontation with shared kinship where it is otherwise denied—I have devised a “motto” of my own to guide whatever future projects I decide haphazardly to pursue: necessity is the mother of translation.

WORKS CITED

- Aidoo, Lamonte. “Castro Alves, Antônio Frederico de.” *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*, edited by Franklin W. Knight and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Oxford UP, 2016, www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199935796.001.0001/acref-9780199935796-e-438.
- Gama, Luiz. “Mote.” *Primeiras trovas burlescas de Getulino*, Pinheiro, 1861, p. 43.
- Jahn, Janheinz. *Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing*. Translated by Oliver Coburn and Ursula Lehrburger, Grove Press, 1968.
- Keene, John. “Translating Poetry, Translating Blackness.” *Poetry Foundation*, 28 Apr. 2016, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2016/04/translating-poetry-translating-blackness.
- Lomax, Alan, and Raoul Abdul, editors. *Two-Thousand Years of Black Poetry*. Dodd, Mead, 1970.

- McHenry, Elizabeth. *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice, and African American Authorship*. Duke UP, 2021.
- Miranda de Oliveira, Genaro Vilanova. "Barbosa, Domingos Caldas." *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*, edited by Franklin W. Knight and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Oxford UP, 2016, www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199935796.001.0001/acref-9780199935796-e-168.
- Porter, Dorothy B. "Brazilian Poets of Negro Descent." Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, box 2, folder 5 ("Poetry").
- . "Cuban Writers of Negro Ancestry." Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, box 1, folder 2.
- . "Latin American Materials on the Negro (An Expanding Section of the Negro Collection)." Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, box 1, folder 15 ("Cuba Selections").
- . Letter to Donald Pierson. 31 July 1943, Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, box 2, folder 5 ("Poetry").
- . Letter to Horace Ashton, 14 Aug. 1943. Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, box 1, folder 15 ("Cuba Selections").
- . Preface. *North American Negro Poets: A Bibliographical Checklist of Their Writings, 1760–1944*, edited by Porter, Book Farm, 1945, pp. 5–6.