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Debate

Lost in Translation: José Martí and the New American Studies

Alfred J. López

Purdue University

In the increasingly imperiled world of scholarly publishing in the humanities, interdisciplinarity is king. Books that can plausibly claim to take an “interdisciplinary” approach to a given subject stand a better chance of reaching more than one academic audience—and thus of selling more copies for their publishers—than more narrowly focused works. If one or more of the disciplines being traversed is also academically in vogue, all the better.

The recent success of interdisciplinarity as a marketing strategy for scholarly work, however, comes at a price: namely, the inflation of the term itself, as publishers apply it whenever possible in the hopes of attracting readers. Savvy would-be authors have also learned to feature the term prominently in their market analysis, in

hopes of attracting acquisition editors on the lookout for the Next Big (academic) Thing. Many books so marketed are not interdisciplinary in the traditional sense, but merely apply the popular discourses of the moment to established subject areas (e.g., postcolonial approaches to U.S. Southern literature, “queering” Beowulf). Not surprisingly, the writers or subjects getting the interdisciplinary treatment are often those that don’t sell as many books—or fill as many seats in seminars—as they used to.

José Martí, the subject of Laura Lomas’s interdisciplinary study *Translating Empire*, is a case in point.¹ Thanks in large part to his discovery and subsequent embrace by postcolonialists and the New American studies, Martí has seen a real resurgence both in the academic and trade markets, as the recent and quite successful Penguin Classics edition of his *Selected Writings* attests. On the academic side, the Martí “boomlet” arguably began over a decade ago with the publication of Belnap and Fernández’s uneven but groundbreaking collection *Jose Martí’s Our America: From National to Hemispheric Studies* (published by Duke, as is Lomas’s book). More recent studies such as Rodrigo Lazo’s *Writing to Cuba*, Lillian Guerra’s *The Myth of José Martí*, and Ada Ferrer’s *Insurgent Cuba* confirm the interdisciplinary promise of that earlier volume, achieving complex, nuanced portraits of Martí and his revolutionary project that the previous century of Martían studies, rooted in one or another nationalist ideology, had proven unable or unwilling to produce.

I regret to say that *Translating Empire* does not measure up to the best recent work on Martí as represented by the above titles. Much of Laura Lomas’s ambitious and admirable project—to demonstrate how Martí’s writings on the U.S. “translate” U.S.-

¹ Laura Lomas, *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

European modernity for readers of both Americas—depends for its success on her own navigation between comparative modernities: namely in its hegemonic European incarnation, and the supplementary or oppositional discourse of modernidad as pioneered by Martí, Rubén Darío, and others. *Translating Empires*'s resulting critical orientation has more in common with recent scholarship in the broader New Modernist and New American studies, as exemplified respectively by Dilip Gaonkar's 2001 edited collection *Alternative Modernities* and Pease's and Wiegman's *Futures of American Studies* (2002), than with recent work in Cuba- or Martí studies. The book mostly succeeds on this broader macro-level, adeptly establishing the context of alternative or oppositional modernities within which Lomas positions Martí's writings as a "migrant Latino" critique of U.S. modernity and/as imperialism.

Translating Empire also suffers, however, from the overarching problem common to most New Americanist writings on Martí. To paraphrase one of my old grad-school professors, interdisciplinarity means claiming expertise in more than one *discipline*. Beyond its explication of Martí's oeuvre as an expression of an alternative modernity, *Translating Empire* also relies for its success on its author's deep knowledge of José Martí's writings—not only of the U.S. crónicas, but also the complete works in all their self-contradictory and ideologically indeterminate glory—as well as of a posthumous critical history every bit as varied and contradictorily coherent as its subject's. But it is not enough for a scholar trained in U.S. American Studies or Euro-modernism even to read a substantial amount of a given author's works—they would also be responsible for that author's contemporaries; knowledge of the history of criticism from that period and region; historical, political, and cultural contexts. Put another way, applying a theoretical apparatus adopted from Said, Fanon, or Spivak to José Martí may qualify as interdisciplinarity in today's publishing environment. But without

careful consideration of how these thinkers' insights about their particular colonial or postcolonial situations in Palestine, New York, Martinique, Paris, Algeria, or London may or may not apply to a nineteenth-century Cuban migrant plotting an anti-colonial insurgency against Spain, such a theoretical application produces neither good scholarship nor particularly efficacious insights into its purported subject. Indeed, the mere fact that Edward Said and W.E.B. DuBois appear more often in *Translating Empire's* pages (four and five, respectively) than Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Rubén Darío (once each) should tell readers all they need to know about its author's knowledge of 19th-century Caribbean Hispanic and Latin American literature and culture: perfectly fine and possibly exemplary for a New Americanist or New Modernist, but below average for a Martí scholar. The result, at least in *Translating Empire*, is an intriguing study of an alternative U.S. modernity undermined by a deeply flawed presentation of its foremost avatar.

Read within the long, wild history of Martí criticism and biography, Lomas's Martí-as-(alternative-)modernist is only the most recent in a long line of such critical and biographical constructions: Martí the proto-Marxist, Martí the ardent pro-U.S. capitalist, Martí the postcolonial pan-American revolutionary, the nationalist, the feminist, the misogynist, the impossibly prolific, the plagiarist, the effete creole intellectual, the Caribbean Caliban, the romantic, the womanizer, the closeted queer, the good father and husband, the failed father and husband—all of these and many more "Martís" have surfaced over more than a century of Martí studies, almost always in texts that demonstrate expertise in one or more areas of his writings at the expense of others. Whatever its strengths as a study of alternative or oppositional modernities in the Americas, then, *Translating Empire* fails to make a compelling case for Martí as an important avatar of such modernities. This is not due to the difficulty of making such an argument: I agree wholeheartedly with

Lomas and others who contend that Martí's North American crónicas stand among the most trenchant and incisive critiques ever produced of nascent U.S. imperial power in the 19th century. Rather, *Translating Empire's* shortcomings roughly correspond to its author's limitations as a reader and interpreter of Martí, his contemporaries, and the broader Caribbean and Latin American cultural and political context out of which his writings emerged. Clearly Martí's writings on the U.S. merit a serious examination of their significance for a truly hemispheric-transatlantic American studies. Regrettably, this is not that book.

The critical and methodological shortcomings I have broadly outlined so far manifest as—or in the book's terms, “translate” into—recurring problems that we may organize into two general categories. Most noticeable for non-specialists in Martí is Lomas's tendency to set up strawmen for Martí—and by extension herself—to knock down. This strategy in turn creates a second, more damning problem that will be most apparent to readers familiar with Martí and his posthumous critics: in order to reinforce Martí's privileged position as deflator/demystifier of U.S. rhetorics of modernity, Lomas's readings of Martí-reading-the-U.S. must necessarily steer clear of the more ambivalent, and sometimes self-contradictory, elements within Martí's own writings. Consistently with the “strawman” category, Lomas also tends to gloss rather than directly engage the more mainstream or orthodox Martí scholarship that she discounts en route to presenting her own analyses. Such moves result in a number of forced fits or outright misreadings that struggle to contain Martí within the oppositional relationship to the U.S. and Western modernity on which the book depends, but which Martí's own writings do not necessarily support.

Translating Empire also suffers from a more widespread—and perhaps more pedestrian—problem: It is laden with factual and contextual errors both minor and major. The second sentence of the

book's opening page refers to Martí's "translations of Anglo-American culture into a Latino idiom"—never mind that such an idiom, as we know it today, did not exist until well into the 20th century (1). The same sentence promises to exhume "aspects of nineteenth-century history that U.S. scholarship is only today beginning to acknowledge" (1). One assumes that these "aspects" would have to do with the U.S. as a burgeoning imperial power in the latter half of the 19th century and its designs on its neighbors to the south. But while it is arguable that U.S. historians have neglected this point, *Latin Americanists* as otherwise diverse as Hugh Thomas and Roberto Fernández Retamar have long taken as axiomatic the U.S.'s nascent imperialism during the Gilded Age. To present such an argument as a radical departure in the book's opening paragraph betrays a lack of awareness of an entire discipline's basic understanding of the era. Elsewhere, Lomas labels Martí as a "proto-Gramscian" (122) and as an example of Saidian "secular criticism" (180), providing no explanation of how Martí's "camouflaged" critiques of Rafael Castro-Palomino and Walt Whitman might be analogous to, say, Gramsci's "The Southern Question" or Said's 1983 critique of deconstruction, respectively. Such misapplications and anachronisms abound throughout the volume.

Lomas also makes a number of questionable claims and assumptions regarding Martí that reveal a lack of familiarity with the larger historical and political context in which he lived and worked. Her opening argument in Chapter 1, "Latino American Postcolonial Theory from a Space In-Between," that "Martí adopted tactics of subterfuge in his criticism and translation because of his formative experiences as a deportee, a political prisoner, and a migrant in an emergent empire" (41), for example, begs the question of why so much of the Martí writings Lomas does *not* discuss are so explicit—indeed, scathing—in their criticisms of the U.S. There is nothing subtle, for example, about Martí's barely-concealed disgust with

North American culture in early New York essays such as “Coney Island” and the closing paragraphs of his 1883 eulogy for Karl Marx, not to mention the fiery language of later political tracts such as “Nuestra América” and “A Vindication of Cuba”—the latter of which he had the temerity to write in English for a North American newspaper (not exactly an act of “camouflage,” to use Lomas’s term). Why would Martí straightforwardly praise Marx, albeit in a qualified way, yet feel compelled to “camouflage” his critiques of mainstream U.S. literary figures such as Emerson and Whitman? Lomas does not explain the discrepancy. The fact that Martí spent almost his entire tenure in New York under surveillance by both the U.S. government and the Pinkerton Agency, under the pay of the Spanish government, and became quite skilled at evading his pursuers at crucial moments, managing to plan and carry out an armed insurgency against Spain under their very noses; that he lived a “double life” in New York with a mistress and illegitimate child, a fact he managed to conceal from his wife in Cuba for years; that he became quite adept at “subterfuge” of a very different kind—going as far as to adopt an elaborate code and equally complex courier system in his communications with fellow conspirators, traveling under pseudonyms, etc.—suggest that his published writings may actually have been the least “camouflaged” aspect of his life during these years. Martí probably did not spend much time worrying about whether his critique of Whitman or Emerson would be deemed too radical by U.S. or Latin American readers, because frankly, he had more pressing things to worry about.

The compounded weight of such misreadings serves only to undermine Lomas’s otherwise perfectly reasonable argument in Chapter 1 that Martí’s writings on the U.S. constitute “an alternative both to U.S. assimilation narratives and to Latin American national insularism” (43). The chapter’s emphasis on Martí’s identification with “displaced indigenous communities, harassed Asian workers,

and Africans in the grip of double-consciousness in the Americas” (42) and corresponding claim that he “disidentifies with his Spanish and Canary Islander parents and, instead, affiliates with the submerged knowledges and historical resistance of pre-Columbian civilizations to the Spanish” (43) overlook Martí’s own strong sense of self-identification as a Creole intellectual—with all of the class and racial baggage such a Creole imaginary entails—and the extent to which that Creole identity is informed, even to some extent defined, precisely by Spanish colonial culture.

It is perhaps arguable—although Lomas does not attempt to make this argument—that Martí was a sufficiently nuanced thinker and a skillful-enough politician to figure out how to forge personal and ideological bonds with the indigenous and subaltern populations whose financial support largely underwrote the 1895 War of Independence despite his own class status and “creole symptoms,” to paraphrase Santiago Colás’s essay of the same name. But it is demonstrably false that Martí ever “disidentifies” with his parents to the degree that Lomas claims (and fails to demonstrate). In at least one of his letters, Martí’s published writings and personal correspondence contain multiple instances where he credits his parents with instilling in him the Creole nationalist values that he would embrace for the rest of his life. Here is one of many such examples, from an 1894 letter to his mother, Leonor Martí: “Let each man, without being scolded, lend what service he holds within himself. And from whom did I learn my integrity and my rebelliousness, or from whom could I have inherited them, if not from my father and from my mother?” Here is another, from the launch issue of his newspaper *Patria*: “The war is not against the Spaniard, but against Spain’s greed and incapacity. In Cuba, the son has received his first counsel on pride and independence from his Spanish father.” To claim that Martí personally “disidentifies” with his parents stretches credulity even in the quotation Lomas offers as

evidence, as Martí quite explicitly refers to his own parents' birthplaces only within the context of a literary essay entitled "Aboriginal American Authors":

What does it matter if we come from Moorish blood and white complexion? The spirit of men floats upon the land in which they lived, and we breathe it [se le respira]. It comes from Valencian fathers and Canarian mothers, and through the veins is felt the inflamed blood of Tamanaco and Paracamoni, and we see as our own [se ve como propia] that which they spilled upon the rough ground of the hill of their Calvary, chest to chest with the iron-clad gonzalos, the naked and heroic caracas!²

As we can see from the passage quoted in its broader context, Lomas misreads not only José Martí's statement regarding parentage but the larger point of the statement. On a technical level, Lomas's initial misreading stems from a mistranslation of the phrase "se le respira" [literally "it is breathed"]. In order to clarify Martí's meaning I have altered the passive-voice construction of that phrase, and the later "se ve como propia" ["it is seen as one's own"]; perhaps the passive voice, and the near-impossibility of reproducing it grammatically in English, is the source of Lomas's confusion. Lomas mistakes the phrase for a reference to the land "that breathes them [the men] still," a move that makes no sense within the larger context of the sentences that follow. It is "the spirit of men" in Martí original statement that "comes from Valencian fathers and Canarian mothers," which Martí then deftly conflates with the indigenous blood that is seen "as our own" [se ve como propia]—*as* (not *is*) our own. Lomas clearly misses the larger metaphoric frame within which Martí places his mixed references to blood *and* spirit as parentage, which in turn functions within an overarching discussion of indigenous literary production.

² See José Martí, *Obras completas [Complete Works]*. 27 vols (La Habana: Centro de Estudios Cubanos, 2001), 8, 336. This and all other translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

I have dwelled on the above passage, not in the spirit of one-upping Lomas's translation, but to demonstrate how heavily the efficacy of this kind of interdisciplinary enterprise—of this kind of “translation” not only across disciplines but across languages—depends upon its author's own translational skills. It is telling, given this and other such translation errors in *Translating Empire*, how much Lomas downplays the importance of literal translation in favor of a broader, more figurative definition predicated on the demystification of imperial rhetorics of modernity. Taking her cue from Angel Rama's much-overlooked essay “La dialéctica de la modernidad en José Martí” [“The Dialectic of Modernity in José Martí”], Lomas sees Martí as representative of a modernidad that “developed an elaborately stylized technique in order to ‘translate’ the economic and political prostration that resulted from the incorporation of Latin America into imperial formations of Europe and the United States” (27).

Although she does not say so—indeed, the above-quoted passage is the closest Lomas comes to disclosing her working definition of “translation” for the purposes of the book—this broader notion of translation-as-cultural-transformation has become increasingly common in postcolonial and related fields (e.g., the most recent edition of Ashcroft et al's *Post-colonial Studies Reader*). The problem with Lomas's own deployment of the term in this manner, however, stems precisely from this lack of a concise *précis* regarding her own application of the term. Most of the examples put forth as “translations” in *Translating Empire* are either already translations in the literal sense (e.g., Martí's translated quotations of Walt Whitman's poetry), and thus not readily distinguishable from the “cultural” translations Lomas avers; or alternately they aren't translations in the narrow sense, which renders them indistinguishable from any such critical act of interpretation or demystification under another name. It is of course axiomatic that

literal translation always implies and entails a simultaneous act of cultural translation. Nevertheless, given the word's prominence in the title, a more forthright discussion early on—preferably in the book's opening pages—regarding the critical genealogy of “translation” in its current usage and how it is to function in Lomas's particular application would have been welcome for those of us expecting a book about, well, translation (e.g., Emily Apter's exemplary *The Translation Zone*, which embraces the broader idea of translation-as-transformation yet is also tightly framed around the act and work of translating).

A second, not insignificant, collateral problem with Lomas's amorphous use of “translation” as a central trope is that it necessarily clashes with the oppositional frame within which she strives to place Martí in relation to imperial U.S. modernity. The translator, as commentators from Walter Benjamin to Edward Said to Emily Apter have noted, is an irreducibly interstitial figure. That is, her placement between languages and cultures renders impossible any attempt to completely embrace one or the other. The choice to focus on Martí-as-translator, in this context, seems a curious one, given *Translating Empire's* simultaneous impulse to posit him as a figure always already opposed to the U.S., Europe, Spain, “the West,” etc. We might say, although I do not have time or space to fully demonstrate the point here, that this tension between Martí-as-oppositional-hero and Martí-as-interstitial-“translator” is precisely the point upon which *Translating Empire*—and, I would argue, almost all new Americanist scholarship on Martí—deconstructs itself.

The rest of Chapter 1 nicely illustrates the irresolvable tension between *Translating Empire's* conflicting impulses, as it strains to fit Martí's writings within an oppositional model of “divergence” from “Spain and the United States” from a “Space In-Between” (42, 41). It attempts to resolve the impasse by imposing two complementary confluences. On the one hand, Lomas posits Martí as a Latino

migrant, as opposed to a Cuban national with a Spanish passport exiled to the U.S. This allows Lomas to simultaneously align Martí not only with “the fruit sellers, the newspaper urchins, and boarding-house renters of Gilded Age New York,” but more importantly with “histories of Amerindian rebellion and African maroonage,” the better to position him in a binary relationship with a corresponding history of Euro-U.S. colonialism abroad and hegemony over its internally displaced subalterns (42). The main difficulty with such a portrayal, from the standpoint of Martí’s lifelong anti-colonial and nationalist project, is that although Martí undoubtedly recognized the threat the U.S. posed for Cuba, his revolutionary efforts were primarily directed towards Spain. Lomas must thus conflate Spain—a country that by the mid-19th century lagged well behind both its European counterparts and the U.S. in almost every economic, political, and sociological indicator of “modernity” (GDP, foreign investments, gold reserves and the stability of its currency, domestic political stability, life expectancy, infant mortality, adult literacy—even the average height and weight of its population)—with “Western modernity,” (46) “imperial modernity,” and “integral and universal reason” (both 47). The elaboration of this argument via references to DuBois, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Ralph Ellison, and even Simon Gikandi—anyone but a scholar specifically versed in Spanish, Cuban, or even U.S. Latino studies—only heightens the suspicion that Lomas’s comfort and familiarity with African-American, postcolonial, and continental philosophy far exceeds her grasp of 19th-century Cuba or Spain. By this double-conflation, Lomas reduces the complex figures of Martí’s deeply divided identifications with Cuba, Spain, Europe, and even his grudging admiration of the U.S. to that of an embedded informant producing “camouflaged” critiques of U.S. imperial modernity. But by simultaneously inflating Spain to represent “Western modernity,” the analysis misses its mark—or rather, misidentifies Martí’s.

Lomas's interpretation of a passage from Martí's 1871 political memoir "El presidio politico en Cuba" ["Political Prison in Cuba"], in which his Spanish father weeps inconsolably at seeing Martí's physical deterioration and many injuries suffered in prison, amply illustrates both of these flaws in Lomas's approach. In her reading the passage, which focuses on Martí's various open wounds, signifies how "[the] subject becomes openings, used and broken parts, and mixtures of elements. Yet it must perform the work of a unified system" (47). Lomas then argues that the broken-down body is analogous to the fragmented colonial subject brought to bear under the demands of Spanish imperial "national integrity" and coherence (48). The prison itself, in a move reminiscent of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, then becomes by extension the site at which, for Martí, "[the] foundation of the edifice of Western modernity, reason, loses its footing" (48). Aside from the obvious conflation of Spain with "Western modernity," Lomas's reading of a fragmented subject—for whom the sting of his father's tears in an open wound reminds him of "his father complicity with the colonial bureaucracy that had imprisoned him" (47)—ignores the insistence of "I" ["yo'] in its various forms throughout the quoted passage: these recur 12 times in the quoted passage, as opposed to nine references to his body or parts thereof (blood, wounds, etc) in the same passage. Read in this way, one could at least argue for a narrative tension between fragmentary and unifying impulses—with the moment of pain when the father's tear enters the wound as a momentary convergence of the two strains (of body and consciousness ["I"]). Such a reading could also plausibly posit Martí's *father* as the truly "fragmented" subject here, given that he is the one visibly tormented by his own unwitting complicity in his son's suffering—with his wounding tear as Martí's highest metaphoric expression of the *father's* torment (and the accompanying sympathy for his father that such a metaphor would imply). Such a reading, however, would necessarily have to

acknowledge what Lomas cannot within her book's self-imposed limitations: That the prison scene she reads through the theoretical lens of the colonized "fragmented subject" under imperial modernity actually harbors multiple narratives that only partly support such a claim. These theoretical and critical limitations, which recur throughout *Translating Empire*, stand as the book's single greatest flaw.

Translating Empire's most problematic chapter, however, where the problems I have been outlining appear in their most concentrated form, is Chapter 4: "Martí's 'Mock-Congratulatory Signs': Walt Whitman's Occult Artistry." The double-conflation I have described from Chapter 1 is on ample display in Lomas's reading of Martí's essay on Whitman, with the key difference being the chapter's reduction of one of the U.S.'s most complex and contradictory figures of the 19th century. This chapter represents for me perhaps *Translating Empire's* greatest opportunity lost, as a sustained and focused consideration of, say, Whitman's "Drum-taps" poems or "Starting from Paumanok" set alongside any number of Martí's writings on war, heroism, or race could easily have produced a reading that exposed precisely the kinds of imperial tendencies and nationalist imperatives that Lomas wishes to demonstrate (and which are undoubtedly there) in Whitman. Doing so, however, would require a similar unpacking of Martí's own ambivalent positions on these issues, and especially the degree to which his manifest identification with Whitman's poetry and persona lie at the root of his inability or unwillingness to explicitly challenge the iconic poet. Such a reading—both here and in the previous chapter on Ralph Waldo Emerson—would also benefit from an interrogation of U.S. transcendentalism itself, which while not explicitly ideological in itself (at least per Emerson), is widely seen as informing Whitman's work. It would be hard to plausibly argue, for example, that Martí did not identify to a large degree with the transcendentalists' leading

figures—beyond Emerson, he also wrote favorably about Amos Bronson Alcott, among others—to the extent that they embodied both a departure from a certain kind of Europeanized thought *and* a new American elite prepared to forge ahead with the task of redefining the (relatively) new nation's literature, culture, and philosophy in their own image.

As a Creole intellectual educated in Spain, however subaltern his class and political status as a U.S. migrant, it would have been easy for Martí to see in the transcendentalists an attractive template for the creation and establishment of a Latin American literary, political, and cultural imaginary most cogently presented in “Nuestra América” (1891), but which he had been articulating in various forms ever since his travels in Mexico and Guatemala in the late 1870s: a movement that explicitly rejects Europe as a normative force in favor of a “natural man,” who nevertheless needs a class of sympathetic educated elites to properly contextualize him in the new America. Whitman's “barbaric” persona actually pre-empts this structure, by presenting *himself* as “natural man”—an endlessly self-recurring signifier of American Nature to which Martí himself could not plausibly aspire. It is no accident that over a half-century after Martí's death, Pablo Neruda—in whose home hung a portrait of Whitman—would not only emulate Whitman's poetic style in his *Canto General* but include him as a character in Part III of “Que despierte el leñador” [“Let The Woodcutter Awaken”]. The speaker invites Whitman, his “hermano profundo” [“my deep brother”] with his “barba de hierba” [“beard of grass”] to gaze with him upon a “resplandeciente Stalingrado” [“resplendent Stalingrad”] filled with post-war hope: “Dame tu voz y el peso de tu pecho enterrado, / Walt Whitman, y las graves raíces de tu rostro / Para cantar estas reconstrucciones!” As much for Neruda as for Martí, Whitman—or rather the iconic *idea* of Whitman—offers an expansive, uniquely American vision attractive enough that his Hispanic admirers either

do not see or choose to downplay its undeniably imperialist elements.

One possibility for such a decision on Martí's part, which *Translating Empire* does not examine, is Martí's own ambivalent relationship to the subaltern populations he celebrates, and famously allegorizes as the "natural man" in "Nuestra América" (1891). Whitman's 1860 vision of a rambling journey by foot across America in "Starting from Paumanok," celebrates the land as much for the products and commodities it produces as for its aesthetic natural beauty (e.g., Part 15: "Land of coal and iron! Land of gold! Lands of cotton, sugar, rice! / Land of wheat, beef, pork! Land of wool and hemp! Land of the apple and grape!" and so on for another 12 or so lines), and disingenuously welcomes "every new brother" as it annexes their lands. Martí's "Los Indios en los Estados Unidos" ["Indians in the United States"] expresses approval and even enthusiasm for the policy, eventually made law by the Dawes Act of 1887, of giving plots of reservation land to individual Native Americans in exchange for the latter accepting U.S. citizenship and renouncing their tribal identity. Martí's 1885 essay echoes Whitman's inverted logic of "welcoming" new "brothers" who were there first, so long as they learn English, renounce their tribal identity, and adopt a "modern" approach to the land that includes private ownership and farming for profit. The essay's closing image of "Lake Mohonk, where... beautiful squares of land, cultivated with elegant care, spread out before the eyes of men worthy to contemplate them, like colossal green flowers" especially echoes Whitman's celebration of America as a "Land of" goods and products, but goes Whitman one better by implicitly invoking "cultivation" and the production of "beautiful squares of land" as a precondition to Native American "worthiness." Such resonances between Whitman's and Martí's American writings, of which there are many, render a reading of Martí's political and economic, as well as aesthetic, kinship with

Whitman much more plausible than Lomas's frankly unconvincing argument that Martí's overt praise for Whitman concealed a "camouflaged" alarm and even rejection.

In her efforts to expose Martí's "subterfuge" in apparently praising Whitman only as cover for a nearly indecipherable critical counter-reading, Lomas again strains against the limits of her own skills as a translator, as this representative moment from Chapter 4 shows:

[Martí's essay?] reacts to Whitman's poetry from a position of impoverished invisibility in American letters, by indicting the way Whitman seems to view the other Americas, as a "pensamiento pordiosero" (beggarly thought), or as a "useless excrescence" that the majestic braggart pushes to one side "with a swift kick" (de un solo bote). Martí inscribes himself in the margins of Whitman's North American world, whose celebrated poets "look upon a minor and short-lived being who suffers in it (mira a un ser menor y acabadizo al que en él sufre). The referent for the pronoun *él* in "el que en él sufre" may be "the world" rather than Whitman. The sentence preceding clarifies: "What haste can drive him [Whitman] on, when he believes that all is where it should be, and that the will of a man must not turn the world from its path?" Rather than a drama internal to Whitman, this suffering of a short-lived being pertains to a writer like Martí, who is in Whitman's world but not in his skin. (182)

Even a cursory examination of Martí's original statements in the broader context of the full paragraph reveals Lomas' grammatical and contextual misreading:

So, Walt Whitman is satisfied: What pride could prick him when he knows he will reach his end as grass or flower? What pride does a carnation have, a sage leaf, a honeysuckle? Why shouldn't he observe human suffering calmly, since he knows that beyond it is an endless being for whom a joyous immersion in Nature awaits? What haste can drive him on, when he believes that all is where it should be, and that the will of a man must not drive the world from its path? He suffers, yes, he suffers; but he looks upon that which suffers *inside him as a minor and short-lived being* [mira a un ser menor y acabadizo al que en él sufre], and feels, beyond the weariness and misery, another being who cannot suffer because he knows the greatness of the Universe. It is enough

for him to be what he is, and impassive and content he watches the obscure or acclaimed course of his life. *With a single gesture* [De un solo bote] he tosses the romantic lament aside, as a *useless excrescence*: I need “*Not ask the sky to come down to my good will!*” [“No he de pedirle al Cielo que baje a la Tierra a hacer mi voluntad!”]....

No, he is not one of those who sends *an impoverished thought* [pensamiento pordiosero] tripping and dragging along beneath the ostentatious opulence of its regal garments. He does not inflate sparrows until they look like eagles; each time he opens his fist he cast forth forty eagles, like a sower sowing seeds. One line has five syllables, the following line forty, and the one after that ten. He does not force his comparisons, in fact he does not compare, but says what he sees or remembers graphically and incisively. Assured of his mastery of the impression of unity he sets out to create, he uses his artistry, which is entirely hidden, to reproduce the elements of his picture in the same disorder he observed in Nature.³

These long passages, both from Martí’s 1887 essay “El poeta Walt Whitman” [The poet Walt Whitman] reveal Lomas’s own “subterfuge” in stringing together several short phrases, out of order and from different parts of the essay, to fabricate an entirely different meaning that exists neither in Martí’s essay nor Whitman’s poems. The second passage above does not constitute the entire paragraph, which runs to almost the end of the essay and which I do not need to reproduce here to make my point: That Martí’s “pensamiento pordiosero,” Lomas’s more accurate translation of the adjective “pordiosero” as “beggarly” notwithstanding, does not *at all* refer to “the other Americas,” as Lomas claims. Her qualification that Whitman “seems to view the other Americas” this way reads in this context as a concession that she cannot, and therefore will not try, to produce any textual evidence to support the erroneous claim. Instead, she doubles down on her “camouflage” strategy by attaching the claim to phrases that appear two pages earlier in the essay:

³ See José Martí, *Selected Writings*, Trans. Esther Allen (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), 191, 193. Emphasis added.

“useless excrescence” [“excrecencia inútil”] and “with a swift kick” [“De un solo bote”], which Esther Allen translates more accurately as “[with] a single gesture.” Here again, neither phrase has anything to do with Whitman’s thinking on “the other Americas”: the “useless excrescence” that the poet sets (not at all violently with a “kick,” as Lomas misrepresents) is “the romantic lament” that the poet cannot ask the heavens to bend to his will. Not only does Lomas incorrectly combine the words out of context and out of order—she flat-out misrepresents what Martí is even *saying* about Whitman.

None of these problems, however, impacts Lomas’s reading as much as her mistranslation of a single two-letter word—“él,” as opposed to “el.” As with the mistranslated phrase “se le respira” in Chapter 1, here too a small translating error derails the reading of a key paragraph, which in turn leads astray Lomas’s overarching interpretation of Martí-reading-Whitman. Towards the end of the paragraph I cite above, Lomas states that the “referent for the pronoun *él* in ‘el que en él sufre’ may be ‘the world’ rather than Whitman” (182). But she is wrong: the accented “é” in “él” categorically distinguishes itself from the unaccented “el”: the latter serves as an article, translatable into English unproblematically as “the,” while “él” is used only as a masculine pronoun—“he” in English. Martí’s use of the masculine pronoun “él” makes his meaning crystal-clear: the “minor and short-lived being” suffering is unambiguously located *inside of Whitman*—“en él” [“in him”]. It may *not* mean “the world” under any circumstances, barring a typo or printers’ error from Martí’s original text. This misreading of “él/el” in turn leads Lomas to incorrectly conclude that “[rather] than a drama internal to Whitman, this suffering of a short-lived being pertains to a writer like Martí, who is in Whitman’s world but not in his skin” (182). As Martí’s use of the pronoun form “él” makes clear, he is referring to nothing *but* “a drama internal to Whitman,” regardless of whether the phrase also “pertains” to its author or his (or Whitman’s)

skin. Only a reader of Spanish who was unaware of the difference between “él” and “el”—or who wished to ignore it as inconvenient for her argument—could make such an erroneous claim. Nor are these isolated incidents within an otherwise useful or productive study: Aside from this and other textual misreadings, Lomas also provides rather eccentric introductions to other texts, and misrepresents key historical developments such as the brief rise of the “Free Soil” Party, an abolitionist political party of which Whitman was an enthusiastic member, and the 1846-7 Wilmot Proviso that would have outlawed slavery in any land acquired or annexed by the United States (Lomas 204-209). After nearly 40 pages of these and other such errors, Lomas’s claim at the end of Chapter 4 that Martí’s essay “encrypts Martí’s judgment of U.S. literature’s complicity in betraying an American revolutionary tradition” rings hollow: Lomas has neither helped me as a reader to “decode” Martí’s allegedly “encrypted” critique of Whitman, nor has she demonstrated that Martí saw Whitman as “complicit” or “betraying” his hopes for a free Cuba. I have no problem with creative catachreses, misreadings, etc. in a deconstructive context designed to expose latent or strategically concealed meanings in texts. One must draw the line, however, at readings that are factually, demonstrably incorrect—and at books that rely on such incorrect readings to establish their author’s authority to make broader cultural and political claims.

Translating Empire is a book as deeply problematic as it is ambitious, its author admirable for her determination to cast Martí’s writings on the U.S. within a larger multilingual and hemispheric frame. In practice, however, the evidence presented in support of the book’s claims, when not factually wrong or the product of incorrect translations, demonstrates little beyond the profound ambivalence of many of Martí’s writings, and the degree to which he remained divided in his own thinking on the U.S. and its most famous and beloved writers. I have dwelled upon this book’s problems much

longer than is typical for an academic book review, not only to point out its particular flaws but also because those flaws are all too common in interdisciplinary New Americanist and postcolonial scholarship on South America and the Hispanophone Caribbean. That *Translating Empire* survived the notoriously difficult review process at Duke tells us less about the publisher, a press renowned for its Latin American studies publications, than it does about the state of the New American studies.

In a review some years ago of Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, I lamented that her woeful misreadings of Martí and W.E.B. DuBois at the end of that book—in Martí's case, again based on mistranslations (she does not, to my knowledge, read in Spanish)—were most damaging because they would be read and accepted by an entire generation of postcolonialists, who would more or less uncritically accept Spivak's readings because of her authority as a postcolonialist and/or comparatist, regardless of her lack of expertise or training in Martí, DuBois, or 19th-century Cuban or African-American studies. This is precisely the kind of thing that gives interdisciplinarity a bad name: A literary scholar making proclamations in areas and on writers outside her field of even secondary expertise—and her equally misinformed readers not only accepting but further disseminating her erroneous critical claims. Eight years later, as I read *Translating Empire* and found Laura Lomas praising her fellow non-Martí specialist for her examination of "Martí's prescient critique and translation of imperial modernity" (74), I thought to myself:

Call me Cassandra.