

*On Crossing Barriers: Contemporary Caribbean Women Poets in  
Translation*

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As Luise von Flotow already emphasized more than two decades ago in her work *Translation and Gender: Translating in the 'Era of Feminism'* (1997), often times feminist translators try to assume the responsibility of offering a critical reflection to their readers about their process, diverse methods and philosophies of translation. From our stance as feminist translators, we offer here a critical reflection on the process of collectively translating the bilingual anthology of poetry *The Sea Needs No Ornament/ El mar no necesita ornamento* (2020), accompanied by a sample of four poems by four of the thirty-three contemporary Caribbean women poets included. In this way, this paper contextualizes and offers a glimpse into the bilingual anthology of contemporary Caribbean women poets we have edited and translated from a feminist as well as a postcolonial perspective.

We believe that the practice of translation can be transformative only when carried out critically. Thus, we hold the social and ethical responsibility of making voices that have been traditionally underrepresented or less critically acclaimed available and resisting homogenizing strategies that erase cultural or linguistic difference. With the more than one hundred translated poems included in our bilingual anthology of contemporary women poets from the English and Spanish-speaking insular Caribbean (the first to be published in more than two decades), we have sought to contribute to breaking not only linguistic barriers but also the barriers women writers continue to experience. Our main objective has been that of favoring and boosting the dialogue – within and beyond the region – between women poets and their readers, separated by geography and language barriers but often impacted by shared global histories and the urgencies of the contemporary moment. The poems speak to women's experiences in astonishing, gripping, powerful, and radical ways, challenging gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, class, historical, and societal orthodoxies and proscriptions of all sorts. We also chose to include poems on an array of subjects, written in a diversity of moods, tones, and poetic styles so as to suggest the breadth of the poets' concerns and writerly approaches.

Due to the nature of our anthology, we were not interested in transgressing or rewriting a text aggressively, intentionally creating ruptures and linguistic changes in the source text that illuminate the prejudices based on gender as discussed by von Flotow (1991). Instead of conducting this type of disruptive translation practices which are intentionally “faithless” to the original texts through “deliberate mistranslation and extension of the source text” (Wallmach, 2006, p. 1), we have sought different ways of transferring the transgressions present in the source text into the target language. Throughout the process we foregrounded the importance to comprehend and express the multiple forms of feminism that can be found in their poetry and that might differ among them. Moreover, our task has not overlooked the complex linguistic context of the multilingual archipelago. Focusing on the poetry from the English-speaking Caribbean, after having observed that traditionally the use of the different island Creoles in literary works has been mostly gone unnoticed or unattended in normative translation practices, we have identified understanding and distinguishing the different island Creoles as crucial for our practice. In order to avoid misinterpretations and achieve nuanced verses that reflect the possible ambiguities that the poet might have consciously or unconsciously conveyed in the original, we have resisted the assimilative strategies found in normative translation theory, which, as Charles Forsdick explains, have been questioned by the postcolonial conceptualization of translation, as they are focused “on a transaction between stable or homogeneous linguistic systems” (2015, p.159).

Right from the start we identified the collaborative dimension of our translation practice as a feature of feminist translation. As Joanna Trzeciak Huss asserts, literary translation is and has always been intrinsically collaborative (2018, p.389). We are no exception, and as “companion collaborative translators”, we comply with most of the ingredients that Trzeciak Huss identifies for them to be successful. We have different origins and mother tongues, both our mother tongues are source and target language respectively – since we translate into and from them – and we have strong shared literary and cultural interests (2018, p. 392). In fact, the collective nature of our translations goes beyond the extremely enriching experience of conducting all translations together, as to a greater or lesser extent, most poets were also involved in the process. Our collaborative translation practice also benefited from their involvement, as we were able to ask them for clarification on lines or words which we were unsure how to understand, discuss the poetic qualities of possible translation solutions as related to the sound, the rhythm or allusive associations and afterwards share our final drafts of the poems inviting them to give us their opinion on them. This has been extremely helpful in order to help us adapt to the idiosyncrasies of thirty-three different poets.

As in the anthology, here we also present the poets in alphabetical order rather than identifying them by Caribbean island(s), the language(s) that they write in, their birthplaces, their current homes, or other descriptors of identity. We leave the process of identification to the writers themselves either in their poetry or their biographies. In the biographies that follow the bilingual poems, some mention their Caribbean heritage or connections. Several of the writers selected for the anthology consider themselves persons of multiple origins, locations, and affiliations. Some identify as non-binary, bisexual, lesbian, or heterosexual, as allies, or speak to life experiences related to sexuality and sexual identity, societal pressures, and justice issues. Most address political and societal agency, discrimination, and the traumas of history in one manner or another. Yet, as the rest of poems included in the anthology, the four writers chosen to be part of this paper

have shown in their oeuvre an on-going commitment to writing poems that address both women's experiences in the most intimate and public realms and Caribbean cultural and social imperatives.

First presented in the language in which they were originally written followed by our translation, we here include one poem by four of the Caribbean women poets featured in the anthology: Thaís Espaillat Ureña, Zulema Leonor Gutiérrez Lozano, Tanya Shirley and Donna Aza Weir-Soley – two from each linguistic context. We see the publishing of these additional unpublished translations as a means of continuing and extending the collaborative translation work that we started in the anthology project. We are particularly excited to present them in this special issue of Coolabah because it is the first time that these poems in translation see the light.

**Thaís Espailat Ureña**

**Tengo sed**

Hoy mis amigos y yo  
descubrimos algo importantísimo:  
En la fábrica de Presidente  
todavía inflan las botellas

Unas filas largas de hombres y mujeres  
soplando el vidrio verde  
una botella detrás de otra botella detrás  
de otra botella  
en la cinta transportadora

Los viernes hacen competencia  
a ver quién puede soplar más botellas  
para ganarse una nevera llena  
de cervezas frías como en los anuncios  
para toda la familia y los vecinos  
Cervezas recién exprimidas  
de la mata de cebada  
Y soplarán  
Y soplarán  
Y soplarán  
botellas hasta quedar la mayoría  
desmayados en el piso  
Y como todos los viernes  
saldrá alguno victorioso  
levantando su última esmeralda  
a la luz blanca de las lámparas  
industriales.

**I'm Thirsty**

Today my friends and I  
discovered something really important:  
In the Presidente factory  
bottles are still hand-blown

Long lines of men and women  
blowing green glass  
one bottle after another bottle after  
another bottle  
on the conveyor belt

On Fridays, they compete  
to see who can blow up more bottles  
to win an ice chest full  
of cold beers like in the ads  
for the whole family and neighbors  
Beers freshly squeezed out  
of a barley plant  
And they'll blow  
And blow  
And blow up  
bottles until most of them  
are passed out on the floor  
And like every Friday  
someone will end up victorious  
raising up their last emerald  
to the white light of industrial lamps.

**Zulema Leonor Gutiérrez Lozano**

**Paisaje rojo**

13 hombres detrás de la puerta con las manos en la entrepierna/ una mujer siente el peso de la sombra/ la punzada del miedo/ la huella dolorosa sobre su vientre/ 13 hombres frente a lo más oscuro de su espíritu/ todo está sucio/ una mujer hace cualquier cosa por volar unas horas/ nunca sabrá que 13 hombres cruzaron el umbral de su carne mientras flotaba en el nirvana/ yo fui la sombra de un perro aquella tarde/ los vi derramarse/ volverse ratas y excremento/ un paisaje rojo después de la batalla

**Red Landscape**

13 men behind the door with their hands on the crotch / a woman feels the weight of the shadow / the pang of fear / the painful imprint on her belly / 13 men facing the darkest part of their spirit / everything is dirty / a woman does anything to fly for a few hours / she will never know that 13 men crossed the threshold of her flesh while floating in nirvana / I was the shadow of a dog that afternoon / I saw them spew/ become rats and excrement / a red landscape after the battle

## **Tanya Shirley**

### **Grandpa in the Departure Lounge**

I  
Black old man  
you are so beautiful  
when you die I will peel the skin off  
your cold bones and wear you  
over my breasts.

II  
At your Nine Night  
I will bathe in white rum  
roll naked in red,  
country dirt,  
rise with death  
in my nostrils.

III  
When you go up in flames  
I will take your charred remains  
brew them with chamomile,  
drink your tea to soothe my grief.

IV  
I will wear black for forty days  
until the colour bleeds  
in my mouth –  
my tongue like tar.

V  
You said dead people  
are calling you,  
read their names out loud:  
Luna, Freddie, Iris, Bunty ...  
eyes closed,  
lips limp,  
rocking – you are ready.

VI  
I am not prepared;  
wear red to bed,  
sprinkle this oil under your pillow,  
walk with salt,  
tell them to go to hell.

VII  
Your domino group dwindled,  
visitors never come often enough,

### **Abuelo en la sala de embarque**

I  
Viejo hombre negro  
eres tan bello  
cuando mueras arrancaré la piel  
de tus huesos fríos y te llevaré  
sobre mis pechos.

II  
Las nueve noches de tu velatorio  
me bañaré en ron blanco  
me revolcaré desnuda  
en el barro rojo del campo,  
me levantaré con muerte  
en las fosas nasales.

III  
Cuando ardas en llamas  
recogeré tus despojos calcinados  
y con camomila te haré en brebaje,  
beberé de tu té para aliviar mi pena.

IV  
Vestiré de negro por cuarenta días  
hasta que el color  
sangre en mi boca –  
mi lengua como brea.

V  
Dijiste que la gente muerta  
te está llamando,  
leíste sus nombres en voz alta:  
Luna, Freddie, Iris, Bunty...  
ojos cerrados,  
labios aflojados,  
meciéndote – estás listo.

VI  
Yo no estoy preparada;  
vístete de rojo en la cama,  
rocía este aceite debajo de tu almohada,  
camina con sal,  
diles que se vayan al infierno.

VII  
Tu grupo de dominó menguó,  
las visitas nunca son lo bastante frecuentes,

the swelling in your legs  
is traveling up,  
the weed concoction no longer  
suffices.  
You are losing sights and sounds.

VIII

Old man are you going  
to make a mad woman  
out of me?

por tus piernas  
se trepa la hinchazón  
el preparado de hierba ya  
no basta.  
Estás perdiendo vistas y sonidos.

VIII

Viejito ¿vas a  
hacer de mi  
una mujer loca?

**Donna Aza Weir-Soley**

**Mama Water**

Mama water,  
protector of women  
riding a blue crested wave  
your flouncing tail  
thrashes the surface of the ocean  
raising a colling spray  
to water the wills of frail  
failing human spirits.

Mama water,  
river mummah, Yemanja  
mother-goddess, nurturer,  
protector of children, fishermen  
washerwomen, mothers  
and would-be mothers,  
accept with grace these offerings  
accept with grace these salted tears  
we women give back  
in gratitude.

**Mama Water**

Mama water,  
protectora de las mujeres  
cabalgando una ola de cresta azul  
tu cola salpica  
y aplasta la superficie del océano  
levantando una refrescante espuma  
para mojar las voluntades de espíritus humanos  
frágiles y menguantes.

Mama water,  
river mummah, Yemayá  
madre diosa, cuidadora,  
protectora de niños, pescadores  
lavanderas, madres,  
y las que querrán ser madres,  
acepta con gracia estas ofrendas  
acepta con gracia estas lágrimas saladas  
que nosotras mujeres te devolvemos  
en gratitud.



## Authors

**Thaís Espailat Ureña** (Santo Domingo, 1994) is a poet and visual artist of the Dominican Republic. She edits and designs zines in her small literary press, Hacemos Cosas. Her first poetry collection *Pudo haberse evitado* was published by Ediciones Cielonaranja in 2018. Her poems have been published in Argentina, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. Her work often deals with the absurd and the search for poetry in weird and small places. Thaís sometimes remembers to update her blog, [saltede aqui.wordpress.com](http://saltede aqui.wordpress.com), with freshly picked poems from the tamarind tree.

**Zulema Gutiérrez Lozano** was born in Holguín, Cuba, in 1982. She is a poet, story teller and promoter of literature. She is a graduate of the Centro de Formación Literaria Onelio Jorge Cardoso, and she is a member of AHS. She is also a writer of children's literature. She has received various poetry prizes, including the Premio Portus Patris (2018), the Premio Nacional for *Adelaida del mármol* (2018), and the Premio de la Ciudad de Holguín. Her poetry collections *Danza alrededor del fuego* and *Metralla* are forthcoming. She has also been published in anthologies and journals within Cuba and elsewhere.

**Tanya Shirley** has published two poetry collections: *She Who Sleeps With Bones* (Peepal Tree Press, 2009) and *The Merchant of Feathers* (Peepal Tree Press, 2014). She is a featured poet on [www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org) and has read her poems and conducted writing workshops in Venezuela, Canada, the U.S.A., England, Scotland and the Caribbean. She was awarded an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland, USA. She taught at The University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, for over ten years and has been writer-in-residence twice at Sierra Nevada College, Lake Tahoe. Shirley is also a proud Cave Canem Fellow. Her second poetry collection, *The Merchant of Feathers*, was longlisted for the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature and shortlisted for the Guyana Prize for Literature, Caribbean Award. In 2017 she was awarded a Silver Musgrave Medal from The Council of the Institute of Jamaica for her outstanding contribution in the field of Literature.

**Donna Aza Weir-Soley** was born in St. Catherine, Jamaica and migrated to the United States at the age of 17. Currently, she is an Associate Professor of English, and affiliate faculty in African and African Diaspora Studies, Women's Studies and the Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University. Dr. Weir-Soley is also the Vice President of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars. She won the Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellowship in 2004-2005 to complete her scholarly work, *Eroticism Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women's Writings* (University Press of Florida, 2009, reprinted in 2017). Weir-Soley is a frequent invited speaker at the annual Woodrow Wilson Foundation Career Enhancement Fellowship Conference where she mentors new Woodrow Wilson Fellows. She is co-editor (with Opal Palmer Adisa) of the anthology *Caribbean Erotic* (Peepal Tree Press, 2010), and the author of two books of poetry: *First Rain* (Peepal Tree Press, 2006, reprinted 2011) and *The Woman Who Knew* (chapbook, Finishing Line Press, 2016). She is the mother of three wonderful young men and lives in Miami.

**Loretta Collins Klobah's** first book *The Twelve Foot Neon Woman* (Peepal Tree Press, 2011) received the OCM Bocas Prize in Caribbean Literature in the category of poetry and was short-listed for the Felix Dennis Prize in the Forward Prize series. Her second book *Ricantations* (Peepal Tree Press, 2018) was a Poetry Book Society

Recommendation and a National Poetry Day selection. It was long-listed for the Bocas Prize. She has been awarded the Pushcart Prize, the Earl Lyons Award from The Academy of American Poets, and the Pam Wallace Award for an Aspiring Woman Writer. Her poems have been widely published in journals and anthologies. She lives in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where she is a professor of Caribbean literature and creative writing at the University of Puerto Rico.

**Maria Grau Perejoan** is a lecturer and a literary translator. She holds a doctoral degree in Cultural Studies with an emphasis on Caribbean Literature and Literary Translation from the University of Barcelona, and an MPhil in Cultural Studies from the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago. She was visiting lecturer at the UWI, St Augustine Campus for three academic years, she then moved on to lecture courses in Translation and Caribbean Literature at the University of Barcelona, and since 2020 she is a Lecturer at the Department of Spanish, Modern and Classical Languages at the University of the Balearic Islands.

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