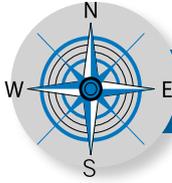




W. George Lovell ◀ Lost in Misrepresentation: A Rejoinder to Marco Fonseca
Christopher H. Lutz and His Critiques of *La Patria del Criollo* ([1970] 2009)



Contrapunto

Lost in Misrepresentation: A Rejoinder to Marco Fonseca and His Critiques of *La Patria del Criollo* ([1970] 2009)

W. George Lovell
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Resumen

The authors engage the extensive critique made by Marco Fonseca of *La Patria del Criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala* ([1970] 2009), an English-language edition of *La patria del criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (1970), the magnum opus of Severo Martínez Peláez. In relation to Fonseca's observations, the authors refer to the limitations within which they had to work when collaborating with Susan M. Neve in the production of the English-language version of *La patria del criollo*. Guided by Walter Benjamin, they assert that a good translation lies mid-way between poetry and doctrine, encompassing the contradictory tendencies between fidelity and freedom of expression. Convinced that there are no definitive translations, just as there are no definitive interpretations of what happened in history, the authors insist on their having given Martínez Peláez a voice in English as distinct as the one he commands and in which he expresses himself in Spanish.

Palabras clave

Translation, historiography, critique, interpretation.



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Abstract

Los autores se refieren a la extensa crítica que Marco Fonseca realizó a *La Patria del Criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala* ([1970] 2009), edición en inglés de la obra magna de Severo Martínez Peláez *La patria del criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (1970). Ante las observaciones de Fonseca, los autores se refieren a las limitaciones con las que trabajaron cuando colaboraron con Susan M. Neve en la producción de la versión en inglés de *La patria del criollo*. Siguiendo a Walter Benjamin, sostiene que una buena traducción se halla a medio camino entre la poesía y la doctrina, abarcando las tendencias contradictorias entre fidelidad y libertad. Convencidos de que no hay traducciones definitivas como tampoco hay interpretaciones concluyentes de lo que sucedió en la historia, los autores aseguran haberse esforzado en darle a Martínez Peláez una voz en inglés tan distintiva como aquella en la que se expresa con total dominio en español.

Keywords

Traducción; historiografía; crítica; interpretación.

The language of a translation can – in fact, must – let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intentio of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself.

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" ([1923] 1996)

Translation is impossible: the best you can do is get close to it.

Gregory Rabassa (2004)

Two recent issues of the *Revista Análisis de la Realidad Nacional* (191/agosto 16-31, 2020 and 192/septiembre 1-15, 2020), a fortnightly publication of the Instituto de Problemas Nacionales de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala (IPNUSAC), carried critiques by Marco Fonseca of *La Patria del Criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala* ([1970] 2009), an English-language edition of the magnum opus of Severo Martínez Peláez (1925-1998), *La patria del criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (1970). The original Spanish-language edition of the book has long been acclaimed, and rightly so,



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as a classic contribution not only to Guatemalan but all Latin American history. We have endeavoured to do justice to the author, and the cornucopia he wrought, in our analysis of his life and work, *Historia sin máscara* ([2009] 2020), based on our Introduction to the English-language edition of *La patria del criollo*. In both these pieces, but especially the latter, we explain to readers the constraints under which we operated while collaborating with Susan M. Neve in producing an English-language version of *La patria del criollo*, for which we were delighted to secure Duke University Press as publisher. The constraints we spelled out, and feel moved to reprise below, appear to have been lost on Dr. Fonseca, whose time and effort in conjuring up the critiques in question – they must have been quite considerable – we acknowledge and appreciate, but which we find to be off the mark. A rejoinder, of sorts, follows, in which we address Fonseca's concerns about how we went about preparing *La patria del criollo* for an English-reading audience.

Let us be clear at the outset, and repeat what we have maintained all along: there is no surrogate remotely akin to reading *La patria del criollo* in the original – to that, nothing can compare. When interviewed by New York Times reporter, Andrew Bast, about his memoir, *If This Be Treason* (2005), Gregory Rebassa – hailed by none other than Gabriel García Márquez as “the best Latin American writer in the English language” – put it succinctly thus: “Translation is

impossible. The best you can do is get close to it.”¹

Let us also be clear, and as succinct as Rabassa, about Fonseca's critiques. They are not, per se, critiques about the English-language version of *La patria del criollo* he was asked to review; they are, rather, formulations about what Fonseca considers a translation of Martínez Peláez's sprawling treatise *should* be. This is a common tendency among reviewers, but

1. Rabassa, interviewed by Bast (2004).



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especially pronounced in Fonseca's pontifications: he does not subject *our* best efforts to scrutiny so much as champion alternatives as to how *he* would have taken on the task – and this despite invoking the tenets of Walter Benjamin, only to misrepresent him as much ourselves. What Fonseca seems to want, and manifestly did not get, is a rendering that constitutes a literal reproduction, to the nth Marxist degree. Instead, we cast our lot with Benjamin, seeking to abide by his operative maxim: "The language of a translation can – in fact, must – let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself." Like Benjamin, we believe that good translation lies "midway between poetry and doctrine," straddling the

"conflicting tendencies" between "fidelity and freedom." Translating the elegance and precision of Martínez Peláez's title, we concluded after much debate, was impossible – hence our decision to leave well alone. Convincing Duke University Press to agree to have a title in Spanish adorn a book of its in English, however, was another matter, one that called for a special meeting of Duke's editorial board to discuss and hold our preference to a vote. Mercifully, it passed.³

Fonseca belongs to that cadre of watchdogs dubbed by Alastair Reid, translator of (among other Latin American luminaries) Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges, as "the translation police."⁴ He holds that *La patria del criollo* is "fácilmente traducible – easily translatable," which it most

3. In his review of *La patria del criollo* (1970), Carmack (1972) writes that its title "may be translated into English as 'The Native Country of the Creole'." Though "native country" may work for "patria," in English "creole" can mean several things besides "criollo," technically a term for anyone of Spanish descent born in the Americas. Alternative titles put forward ranged from the literal, "The Creole Fatherland," which rings too Teutonic, to the more evocative, "Elegy for a Homeland." Duke favoured "Elegy for a Homeland," but we managed to convince the press otherwise, lobbying for the emblematic (and poetic) Spanish original. We trust that our modification of Martínez Peláez's subtitle – *Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* becoming *An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala* – makes clear to any reader what his book is about. The allusion to José Carlos Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* ([1928] 1996) is brought to reader attention in our Introduction to the English-language edition of *La patria del criollo* ([1970] 2009, xviii) and also in *Historia sin máscara* ([2009] 2020, 27).

4. Reid, referred to by Rabassa (2005, 43).



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assuredly is not, and so should be rendered as such in its entirety – without any “painful act of cutting the text to comply with the editorial demands of it being published in English – doloroso acto de recorte impuesto por las necesidades editoriales de su publicación en inglés.”⁵ While, Fonseca grants, “formally the translation is excellent, indeed praiseworthy,” he laments nonetheless it being “geared primarily to a neophyte public of North American Latin Americanists, whose reformist imagination is unable to digest the original text.”⁶ He simply objects to *La patria del criollo*, which he reveres as inviolable, especially its hallmark “political philosophy and praxis – filosofía política y praxis,” being pruned so as to be more readily understood by the masses, the very people with whom Martínez Peláez yearned to share his ideas.⁷ Fonseca justifies his stance accordingly: “We may in fact say

that one of the consequences of Americanizing, or translating for the North American anglophone academy, a paradigmatic text of Guatemalan Marxism – which for some people is canonical – implies the loss of its sense and purpose.”⁸ There you have it.

We have no inclination to take on Fonseca point by plodding point – let readers judge the matter for themselves. By way of responding to his critiques, though, and availing readers of what Fonseca had access to but perhaps not them, allow us to reiterate how *La patria del criollo* in English came to be.

The Vicissitudes of Translation

The project began in 1988, when a nephew of Martínez Peláez, Joaquín Zúñiga, approached

5. Fonseca (2020, Primera parte, 92-93).

6. Fonseca (2020, Primera parte, 95). His words in the original are: “Formalmente es una traducción excelente, incluso loable, pero para un público en gran parte neófito. El texto original no es un trabajo para el consumo de la imaginación reformista que domina la academia latinoamericanista del Norte.”

7. Fonseca (2020, Primera parte, 95).

8. Fonseca (2020, Primera parte, 98). His words in the original are: “De hecho, podemos decir que una de las consecuencias de americanizar o traducir para la academia inglesa norteamericana un texto paradigmático – incluso, para alguna gente, canónico – del marxismo guatemalteco implica la pérdida de su sentido y orientación.”



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one of us (Lutz) at his uncle's bidding about the possibility of translating *La patria del criollo* into English, which was agreed to. Then a professor of philosophy at California State University/East Bay in Hayward, Zúñiga also put us in touch with an acquaintance he thought might be up to the challenge, but that proved not to be the case – as happened with two other translators also. Not until a trusted colleague, Dr. Wendy Kramer, suggested that we contact Susan M. Neve, lecturer in Spanish language and literature at City University and the University of Westminster in London, did the search successfully conclude. Neve wrestled assiduously with Martínez Peláez's titanic text, the result of years of labour being a mammoth manuscript of 1,200 pages. Her more literal "reproduction" (Benjamin's term) is perhaps what Fonseca would have favoured as the final product – if so, we invite him to peruse it at the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica in Antigua Guatemala, whose Archivo Histórico has it filed for posterity. We thought, and moved ahead, otherwise.

First, Neve's full translated text was copy-edited – a stage all too often absent in how university presses in

Latin America operate – by Maureen McCallum Garvie, copy-editor for McGill-Queen's University Press in Canada and the *Journal of British Studies* in the United Kingdom. Following Garvie's attention, another of us (Lovell) engaged with Neve in fine-tuning the translation and editing it down to a more manageable size. The logic behind this step was that any publisher we attempted to interest in taking on the manuscript recoiled at the prospect of working with 1,200 pages of copy, a fact that Fonseca either chooses to ignore or refuses to accept, and so dismisses. Kramer then teamed up with Elisabeth Nicholson, who majored in translation at the Universität Heidelberg in Germany, to check closely the revised translation against the Spanish original, often suggesting alternative wording and recommending that content pared down be reinstated or embellished. The goal of translation, we believe, is not to create from a text in one language a mirror image in another. Just as Martínez Peláez considered his "essay" an "interpretation" of colonial Guatemala, so too do we consider what we offer readers to be a *version* of his interpretation – a faithful version, not (as Fonseca alleges) "an interpretation of an interpretation – una interpretación de una in-



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terpretación," a misreading of what we actually say.⁹ There are no definitive translations any more than there are definitive interpretations of what took place in history. In the end we were guided most by what Mark Fried, translator of the work of Eduardo Galeano, once told us: "You read in Spanish and try to hear what is written in English." That strategy was our rule of thumb—to lend Martínez Peláez a voice in English as distinctive as the one he most resolutely commands in Spanish.

What we undertook, therefore, called for us to make any number of concessions, for the most part related to creating a text that is an offspring of the original but that does not mimic it, word by word, line by line. Above all, modifications had to be made to suit the needs of a North American university press and an English-reading public by trimming Martínez Peláez's lengthy text and discursive notes. This procedure Fonseca rails at, declaring our edits nothing short of "amputation" (*amputación*)

and "extirpation" (*extirpación*) despite him also lauding that "much essential content in the original has been preserved and, in truth, nicely translated."¹⁰ Our model in figuring out how to proceed was Lesley Byrd Simpson, the versatile Berkeley scholar who, in the 1960s, was involved in not one but two comparable translation projects. The first, in which Simpson acted as editor and Alvin Eustis as translator, saw François Chevalier's *La Formation des grands domaines au Mexique: Terre et société aux XVI-XVII siècles* (1952) become *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico: The Great Hacienda* (1963); the second, in which Simpson assumed the role of both translator and editor, saw Robert Ricard's *La conquête spirituelle du Mexique* (1933) become *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico* (1966).

In his foreword to *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico*, Simpson modestly states that he "tried to give some notion of the scope of M. Chevalier's distinguished book."

9. Fonseca (2020, Primera parte, 103-04). He also mistranslates our acting "expeditiously" (meaning in English "efficiently" as well as "swiftly") as solely "rapidly" (*rápidamente*) and confuses "excised" (meaning in this context in English "to edit out") with "extirpated" (*extirpado*).

10. Fonseca (2020, Primera parte, 93, 95 and 104), his precise words being "hay mucho del contenido esencial del trabajo original que sí ha sido preservado y, en realidad, incluso bien traducido."



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He levels with readers that “owing to limitations imposed by cost, I have had to omit the voluminous footnotes and scholarly apparatus, which in any event the specialist will prefer to consult in the original.”¹¹ In *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, Simpson reveals that he had to “economize on space” and so cut Ricard’s treatise to that effect, scissoring with regret “illuminating commentary from the Notes, which in general [are] limited to bibliographical references.”¹² Similar considerations influenced how we grappled with *La patria del criollo*: Martínez Peláez’s equally “voluminous footnotes” were reduced to those that, for the most part, refer to sources from which he quotes in the body of his text. On the other hand, we occasionally took the liberty of removing a key piece of evidence or a choice turn of phrase from footnote obscurity to pride of place in the narrative itself. As with Simpson in relation to Chevalier and Ricard, we steer readers who want to know more about Martínez Peláez’s data base, as well as his evaluation of it, to the massive “scholarly apparatus”

of the original, which in effect is a separate if parallel text to the main discourse.

When, with the assistance of the retinue mentioned above, we embarked on creating an English-language edition of *La patria del criollo*, we did so with Martínez Peláez’s endorsement. He expressed his appreciation perhaps most pertinently in a letter dated March 30, 1991, summing up the project as “an initiative that can carry to one world a few important ideas about another.”¹³ We trust that we honour a great teacher by having more than merely “a few important ideas” of his transcend Guatemalan, Central American, and Latin American confines to reach English-reading constituencies wherever they may be. But the point here is that Martínez Peláez was aware that the enormity and complexity of his work, without some modification of scale, content, and thrust entering the proceedings, would be difficult to convey to the wide audience with which he sought to communicate.

11. Simpson, in Chevalier ([1952] 1963, ix).

12. Simpson, in Chevalier ([1933] 1966, viii).

13. Letter to Christopher H. Lutz from Severo Martínez Peláez (March 30, 1991), the latter’s precise words being “el impulso que con ello se le dará a este libro, que puede llevar a aquel mundo unas cuantas nociones importantes acerca de este otro.”



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Proof of this was unearthed by Edelberto Cifuentes Medina, who shared finding out how Martínez Peláez signed a copy of his book with Guatemalan publisher Irene Piedrasanta. She, in turn, incorporated the finding into her prologue of an edition of *La patria del criollo* ([1970] 2020) “adaptada para jóvenes – adapted for a young readership.” The intrepid Cifuentes Medina, whose doctoral dissertation (2014) on the revolutionary importance of Martínez Peláez’s work is a tour-de-force, managed to access an autographed copy of the first edition of *La patria del criollo* that the author had dedicated to his cousin, Edmundo Vásquez Martínez, rector of the Universidad de San Carlos when the book was published. Alluding to the difficulty he knew the contents of the 786 pages of *La patria del criollo* would have reaching the broad public, part of Martínez Peláez’s dedication runs: “I fear the message won’t reach

them, that it will be lost halfway on the road. If such a thing occurs, then I will have to get closer with another book, one that is smaller and easier to understand.”¹⁴ Paul Worley notes that “Martínez Peláez himself saw his ideal audience as being ‘educated but non-specialist’ (xxii); this translation of his monumental *La patria del criollo* certainly holds appeal for a non-specialist public.”¹⁵ Like *La patria del criollo* ([1970] 2020) “adaptada para jóvenes” by Piedrasanta, perhaps *La patria del criollo* ([1970] 2009) “adapted for an English-reading audience” is the kind of distillation that Martínez Peláez may have had in mind, and would have liked to have seen in print before his untimely death in 1998.¹⁶

Critical Reception

By way of conclusion, and to complement Fonseca’s critiques, we close by offering excerpts

14. Martínez Peláez ([1970] 2020, 12), his precise words being “me hacen temer que el mensaje no llegue, se quede perdido en mitad del camino. Sí tal cosa ocurre, tendré que acercarme más, con otro libro más pequeño y más sencillo.”

15. Worley (2010, 108-09). “Rendering the text into natural and enjoyable English,” he adds, “Neve and Lovell have done an excellent job with the translation, as have Lovell and Lutz [with] the introduction, celebrating the book’s strengths but not shying away from mentioning its weaknesses.”

16. Piedrasanta’s assurance – see Martínez Peláez ([1970] 2020, 12) – is emphatically one we share. “Aunque hemos eliminado un exceso de detalles,” she recognizes, “nos aseguramos de que las grandes ideas y argumentaciones de Severo estén aquí, para que el hilo de su lectura pueda ser seguido con facilidad.”



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from some of the reviews that *La patria del criollo* ([1970] 2009) in its English-language incarnation has received from the scholarly community. Before committing to publishing the book – our contract for it is dated August 22, 2007, all royalties from it accruing to one of Martínez Peláez’s daughters, Brisila Martínez de Kuperus – Duke University Press sent the manuscript for evaluation to two readers. After publication, we learned their identity – Greg Grandin and Diane M. Nelson. Grandin, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian, wrote: “This is a top-rate translation, and *La Patria del Criollo* is a very important book, not just for Guatemalan and Central American historiography but for the broader audience of Latin Americanists.”¹⁷ Nelson, a renowned anthropologist, echoed Grandin’s sentiments. “This outstanding translation,” she observed, “reminds me why *La Patria del Criollo* is such a vital book. To understand the recent civil war and genocide in Guatemala, and also more global struggles, an understanding of the history

that Martínez Peláez portrays is necessary.”¹⁸

In an extended “featured review” in the *American Historical Review*, Florencia Mallon declared “the English edition of this book is both welcome and long overdue.”¹⁹ For Paul Lokken, writing in *A Contracorriente* “this fine translation ... deserves to gain a second life in English-language universities as a provocative introduction for sophisticated undergraduates and other non-specialists to the ‘reality’ alluded to in the title of the Spanish original” and “will allow a wider audience to appreciate its deeply engaged historical analysis.” He notes the inclusion of “an excellent map” and “a glossary of untranslated terms,” two additional features that “enhance the attractiveness of the volume, whether employed as a medium for bringing a distinctive Central American voice to an English-speaking readership or as a companion to the Spanish-language original.”²⁰

Reviewing in Spanish for
Mesoamérica, Leonardo

17. Martínez Peláez ([1970] 2009, back cover).

18. Martínez Peláez ([1970] 2020, back cover).

19. Mallon (2011, 136). For a full rendition of Mallon’s “featured review,” translated into Spanish by Margarita Drake, see Lovell and Lutz ([2009] 2020, 55-61).

20. Lokken (2010, 362 and 369). For a full rendition of Lokken’s review essay, translated into Spanish by Margarita Drake, see Lovell and Lutz ([2009] 2020, 62-70).



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Hernández (like Lokken) appreciates that “la versión inglesa contiene una valiosísima adición de un mapa ubicando los lugares discutidos por Martínez Peláez,” evaluating thus. “Es una traducción no solo fiel al original sino además lúcida en su prosa, en gran parte debido a los cambios y adiciones hechos por los traductores y los editores. No hay duda que la traducción ... hará posible que la obra de Martínez Peláez continúe un recorrido editorial que ya ha visto más de 50,000 ejemplares vendidos.”²¹ Raúl Molina Mejía, writing in the *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, believes “English-speaking social science scholars should highly value the English edition of Martínez’s great contribution.”²²

For the *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Murdo J. Macleod deemed our “abridgement of a classic book in Guatemalan historiography” to be “an excellent translation,” indicating that the original “could not have found an English-language publisher” because of its unwieldy length.

“Most of the summaries and abridgements are judicious,” he states. “The Spanish version is wordy and contains numerous recapitulations and asides. On the whole the translators’ excisions,” which so perplex Fonseca, “yield a tidier, smoother flow and focus.”²³ Douglass Sullivan-Gonzalez concurs. “A deftly edited and sharp translation” is how he describes it in his review for *The Americas*. “The team of translators and editors made tough decisions about cutting the text and rich footnotes,” he concedes, but “in more than one spot, actually improved Martínez Peláez’s prose” as part of “a gallant foray” into “the massive production.” Sullivan-González concludes: “As the Spanish text became fundamental to Guatemalan historiography, this translation will become a staple of Latin American historiography.”²⁴

The Last Word

The final say, as it should, belongs to Martínez Peláez, whose words are as valid today as when they first appeared in print a half-century

21. Hernández (2010, 231).

22. Molina Mejía (2009, 245-46).

23. MacLeod (2011, 400).

24. Sullivan-González (2010, 425-26).



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ago. To afford readers some sense of original and translated text, his closing remarks in *La patria del criollo* are above how we chose to render them:

El examen de la vida colonial realizado en los capítulos precedentes pone al lector en condiciones de hacer una reflexión acerca del significado *actual* de la colonial... El estudio de la colonia pone de manifiesto, ante todo, que no se trata meramente de una época de nuestra historia, un tiempo pretérito en que ocurrieron ciertos hechos por eso llamados coloniales. La colonia fue la formación y consolidación de una estructura social que no ha sido revolucionada todavía, y a la que pertenecemos en muy considerable medida.²⁵

The detailed picture of colonial life I have lavished upon readers furnishes them with all they need to assess its *current* significance. In Guatemala, the colonial period does not pertain merely to one era in history, a time in the past when

certain events occurred that we call 'colonial' in order to denote when they took place. The colonial experience saw the formation and consolidation of a social structure that has yet to undergo revolutionary transformation. To a considerable degree, we still belong to the social structure forged during colonial times.²⁶

An eminent man of letters has spoken.

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25. Martínez Peláez ([1970] 1998, 473).

26. Martínez Peláez ([1970] 2009, 274).



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