

NARRATIVES OF MISTRANSATION: FICTIONAL TRANSLATORS IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE BY DENISE KRIPPER

Narratives of Mistranslation: Fictional Translators in Latin American Literature, Denise Kripper, New York, NY: Routledge, 2023, Hardback £45.99, ISBN 9781032017730

Reviewed by Jorge Sarasola Herrera, University of Warwick

It is a truth universally acknowledged that we have grown accustomed to endless iterations of the self-referential ‘tormented writer’ figure in poetry, prose, and films. Indeed, the worthy receiver of the 2024 International Booker Prize—Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Kairos*, translated from German into English by Michael Hoffman—is the latest award-winning incarnation of this age-old literary trope. For this reason alone, Denise Kripper’s focus on the shrouded figure of the translator as a literary character is refreshing, original, and commendable. The goal of the research project is certainly promising:

Written by translator-writers, the novels and short stories explored in this study of transfiction allocate a leading role to translators and interpreters and explicitly interweave linguistic mediation in their plots as a literary device that foregrounds its practice, offering an opportunity to address the frequent – both perceived and existing – gap between the theorization and the praxis of translation. (111)

Kripper, a literary translator as well as an academic, circumscribes her corpus to Latin American novels and short stories, and seeks to use oppositions between the region of Latin America and Spain/Europe to reflect upon the unique status of translation in the subcontinent. Several of the longstanding binaries in Translation Studies—original vs derivative, faithfulness vs mistranslation, visibility vs invisibility, domestication vs foreignization—are examined in this specific regional context. The running thread throughout the monograph is the active use of mistranslation as a subversive strategy in Latin America which ‘aims at destabilizing its relation to the source and forces the reassessing of the power dynamics involved in the act of translating’ (112). In line with the approach she adopted as co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Latin American Literary Translation* (2023), reviewed by Georgina Fooks for the *OCCT Review*, Translation Studies is analysed with a distinct geographic focus where the theoretical insights often emanate from within the region rather than being superimposed from outside.

Chapter One, ‘Reading Fiction as Theory’, which focuses on short stories by Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Rodolfo Walsh, serves to delineate further the theoretical backdrop of the study. Taken as precursors to concepts which have emerged in Translation Studies, these stories pioneer in examining notions such as ‘the hierarchical dynamics between author and translator, the ontological status of translations, and the instability of originals’ (28). The starting point for Chapter Two, ‘(Mis)Translation in Latin America: A Fictional History’, are texts that engage with the role of translation during crucial junctures in Latin American history, such as the Spanish conquest, the emergence of newly independent nation-states, and the success of the 1960s and 70s literary ‘Boom’. Read in tandem, Carlos Fuentes’s ‘Las dos orillas’ (1992), Néstor Ponce’s *El intérprete* (1998), and José Donoso’s *El jardín de al lado* (1981) propose ‘a historized account of the development of Latin American identity through the lens of fictionalized language mediators’ (43). Chapter Three, ‘Publishing Fiction(s): The Market of Translation’, the most accomplished of them all, centres on two novels which locate the labour of translators within the publishing industry, Salvador Benesdra’s *El traductor* (1998) and Marcelo Cohen’s *El testamento de O’Jaral* (1994). These authors, who also work as translators, present a vivid depiction of the precarious state of the industry in Argentina, the tensions between Spanish publishing conglomerates and independent

Argentine presses, and exemplify through their characters the differences between an erroneous translation—‘the consequence of [...] ignorance or inattention’ (58)—and a creative mistranslation, ‘the carefully selected and crafted weapon of a translator activist’ (58). Chapter Four, ‘Silence Speaks Volumes’, the only one to consider texts penned by women, assesses the relevance of gender in translation through two novels, *Ambactus: (servidor)* (2017) by Nadie Volonté and *Incluyanme afuera* (2014) by María Sonia Cristoff. The chapter begins by considering how translation and women are both perceived to be derivative, and the sexualised way of discussing a translation as either faithful or deceiving. In turn, Volonté and Cristoff’s novels ‘challenge the silencing of women and the subservient standing of translation through an examination of interpreter’s agency’ (82). Finally, in Chapter Five, ‘In Search of an Original’, Kripper resignifies the term ‘translatese’—often used pejoratively to refer to awkward translations—and studies its productive power in novels like Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004, published posthumously) and Andrés Neuman’s *El viajero del siglo* (2009). By including translators as leading characters, Bolaño and Neuman ‘destabilize the concept of original writing by ultimately revealing translation as a form of writing’ (104).

Of the twelve writers analysed in detail the lion’s share are canonical authors like Borges, Cortázar, Fuentes, Bolaño, and Donoso, although there are also well-established writers with less name recognition like Cohen and Neuman, and lesser-known contemporary figures such as Volonté. Considering the length and complexity of many of the novels studied, the author succeeds in producing concise comparative analyses which marry a thorough contextualisation with a literary reading of impressive analytical depth. The detailed bibliographies help set the foundation for future research in Translation Studies within this geographic area. The thematic structure of the book makes it clear, readable, and engaging. As it is written in English, the monograph succeeds in its praxis in foregrounding the role of translators, not just as fictional characters, but also by considering the renditions of these Latin American texts into English. Each chapter concludes with a pedagogical ‘In the Classroom’ section which gives us (teachers) inspiration for how to include these texts in our own university courses.

It might seem trifling to quibble about the title of a study, but the term ‘Latin American Literature’ is certainly being stretched. Out of twelve texts studied in depth, nine were written by Argentine authors. Indeed, Chapters One, Three, and Four focus on Argentine literature almost exclusively, so this could be best described as a study of fictional translators in Argentine literature. True, some of these authors had a complex relationship with their perceived home country and Kripper justifies the over-representation of Argentine authors as ‘coinciding with the country’s leading publishing role in the continent’ (8). But it is not always clear why pivotal texts within this field such as Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Travesuras de la niña mala* (2006, Peru), Laura Esquivel’s *Malinche* (2006, Mexico), and Valeria Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* (2011, Mexico) are briefly skimmed over to favour the close reading of Argentine fiction—or why lesser-known texts such as Tomás de Mattos’s *La fragata de las máscaras* (1996, Uruguay) are excluded from the corpus. A possible danger is that this approach undermines one of the monograph’s theoretical goals: to destabilize the hierarchy between the source and target texts, and by extension, between global publishing centres and a so-called peripheral region (in publishing terms) like Latin America. Within the Hispanic world, Argentina is one of the powerful cultural centres, so this approach risks sidelining the cultural contributions of other nations and reproducing power asymmetries within our continent. The ambiguous title of the book points to a broader issue, namely, that the rationale for choosing this specific corpus could be developed in greater detail. For example, while Latin America speaks many languages, a potentially relevant starting point for a study on translation, it is not explained why all the texts selected were penned in Spanish.

Most of the insights that stem from these contemporary texts are reminiscent of those made by Borges, whose influence in the field is acknowledged in Chapter One. Through his fictions (short stories such as ‘Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote’, ‘The Gospel according to Mark’, ‘The South’), his essays (‘The Homeric Versions’, ‘The Thousand and One Nights’, ‘Kafka and his Precursors’), and his praxis (as a translator of English into Spanish, as co-author with Adolfo Bioy Casares, and in the co-translation of his own works into English with Norman Thomas di Giovanni), Borges pioneered ideas such as the inherent open-ended quality of source texts, he undermined the notion of a single, stable author, and also explored the creative potential of falsifying when translating (and rewriting) from the periphery. These ideas have been expertly discussed by scholars like Efraín Kristal (2002) and Sergio Waisman (2005)—and more recently by Leah Leon Anderson (2024). Many of the selected texts largely seem to illustrate ideas discussed by the canonical storyteller which became part of the conceptual scaffolding of Translation Studies. This is testament to the enduring influence of Borges in Latin American—or should I say Argentine?—literature. The study’s most insightful chapters are those in which the selected literary texts take the debate in other directions. For example, to my knowledge Borges did not consider in detail the role of gender in translation (as Kipper does in Chapter Four), nor the precarious position of translators in the marketplace (the focus of Chapter Three). These provide a convincing blueprint for how to study the contributions that Latin American fiction can make to Translation Studies post-Borges.