

Jorge Mañach y Robato

An Inquiry into Choteo

Translated and with an Introduction

by Jacqueline Loss

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	9
TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION	11
POSITIONING CHOTEO	11
THE VERNACULAR STRANGER	13
MEDIATION: THE SUBJECT AND HIS NATION	21
ON TRANSLATING MAÑACH	28
21 ST CENTURY ASSOCIATIONS	35
INQUIRY INTO CHOTEO	41
AUTHOR'S NOTE	43
IN DEFENSE OF THE TRIVIAL	45
AN INITIAL DEFINITION	51
AN INNER ASSESSMENT	55
CHOTEO IN THE HIERARCHY OF MOCKERY	57
CHOTEO AND ORDER	63

CHOTEO AND PRESTIGE	67
CHOTEO, “GUATAQUERÍA,” REBELLION	71
CHOTEO, HUMOR, WIT, GRACIA	73
LEVITY AND INDEPENDENCE	79
CHOTEO AND IMPROVISATION	87
EFFECTS OF CHOTEO	91
CHOTEO’S TRANSIENCE	98
CHEERFULNESS AND AUDACITY	100

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

POSITIONING CHOTEO

Some years back, an esteemed professor whose seminar I adored brought me into his office to talk about my writing, from which he had gathered I was not a native English speaker. In fact, I am a native English speaker. But I felt obliged to imagine a justification for his query. I have inherited a less than perfect attachment to English idiomatic expressions and, in all likelihood, a few watered-down Germanic constructions that mutated into something else when they came into contact with my mostly elected affinities in Spanish. These characteristics can put me into an awkward position when it comes to translating, since, on occasion, I can be delayed to notice when foreign constructions are not entirely intelligible in English. However, more importantly, I appreciate the discomfort inspired by unusual constructions, taking grammar and style to be a mirror into individuals and the context in which they reside and express themselves. There is much to be said about the value of estrangement. Theorist Lawrence Venuti posed a challenge about fluency, bringing attention to “domestic values” that the translator inscribes within the texts through the decisions she makes. He goes so far as to say that: “A translator may find that the very concept of the domestic merits interrogation for its concealment of heterogeneity and hybridity which can complicate existing stereotypes, canons, and standards applied in translation.”¹

Even prior to translation, texts, in their original, are often wrestling with difference, with that belief in multiple com-

1 Lawrence Venuti, “Translation, Community, Utopia,” *The Translation Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 469.

munities of interpreters in a single nation; some of what interests me in Jorge Mañach's *An Inquiry into Choteo* is the author's own discomfort. As a specialist in Cuban literature, I had prolonged coming to know this essay up close, on account of its cultural centrality and its rhetorical eccentricity. Only through a tedious and multi-step process of translation have I come to better understand why *An Inquiry into Choteo* is one of those essays which many Cubans would say, of course, that they have read, but that likely they have not in its entirety. And yet, the performance of "choteo," the performance of a certain attitude toward sobriety and jocularity, is far older than Mañach's original 1928 essay and continues to constitute an important aspect of Cubanía or Cubanness. The following explanation of Cuban "exceptionalism" provided by Louis A. Pérez, Jr. is important to keep in mind as we get to know Mañach's choteo.

The forms through which Cubans developed the terms of collective self-awareness must themselves be understood as facets of the character of the Cuban: a people confident of a special destiny foretold in their history. At some point in the nineteenth century, Cubans developed the capacity to adopt an external vision as a perspective on themselves, to see themselves from the outside as a way to both contemplate the world at large and take measure of their place in that world. That they belonged they never doubted.²

Mañach's exploration of choteo is one of many such inquiries into the exceptionalism of the Cuban identity, a quest that has not disappeared in the present day.

As persistent as choteo remains in Cubans' collective memory are Cubans' ambivalent feelings toward it, not

2 Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purposes of the Past* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Caroli-

just on the island, but in the diaspora as well. Attesting to choteo's longitude and malleability within global Cuban cultures is José Esteban Muñoz's invocation of it in his 1994 analysis of the queer Cuban-American feminist performers, Ela Troyano and Alina Troyano (whose stage name is Carmelita Tropicana). Muñoz suggests that for these sisters, choteo, like camp, is a strategy of cultural critique that "can be a style of colonial mimicry that is simultaneously a form of resemblance *and* menace." In so doing, Muñoz challenges what he sees as Mañach's "pathologizing" of choteo, viewing it instead as a "strategy of self-enactment that helps a colonized or otherwise dispossessed subject enact a self through a critique of the normative culture."³

na Press, 2013), 7.

3 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 136.

21ST CENTURY ASSOCIATIONS

Ideology, race, and class are connected in the Cuban imagination through complex histories that frequently reside in the nation's footnotes. Despite the fact that today's United States is removed from the particular post-colonial and neocolonial Cuban experience that informed *An Inquiry into Choteo* and that it continues to take pride in political correctness and egalitarianism, the first few decades of the twenty-first century United States are a hotbed of racial and class tensions. I introduce the comparison, as I believe that, as a U.S. American, whose homeland has been in a long, slow war with Cuba, it is essential to think about issues regarding Cuba in a comparative fashion. The U.S.-Cuban problem is one that cannot be solved through geopolitical maneuverings such as "normalization," alone, but rather with studying the

lectura-de-la-satira-en-cuba-indagacion-del-choteo-de-jorge-manach.html.

- 45 I initiated this conversation on my facebook page on October 5, 2016, asking "how might you translate 'parejería' into english?"

intricacies of relationships that emerge, in such texts as Mañach's *An Inquiry into Choteo*.

In March 2016, Barack Obama visited Cuba, the first U.S. president to meet with Cuban officials on the island since 1928. Celebratory and critical portraits of the former president and his family abounded. Some of the impressions he left on Cubans that are not necessarily encountered in the press, but are in everyday life, pertained to Obama's "gracia," that way about him that made him familiar to them. One echo of that notion can be found in the comments section of Fernando Ravsberg's blog in which, after praising Obama's speech and his overall intentions, a commentator states "besides the black guy is an excellent orator and actor, because part of his gracia is natural."⁴⁶ "Grace and class" are actually two words that pervade the most favorable of journalistic impressions of Barack and Michelle Obama in the U.S. press, as well. The former president even praised his wife for her "grace and grit," a turn on the frequently-used phrase to identify the couple, in one of the most emotional moments of his final speech as president.

Warm and sometimes, overly intimate expressions of how many Cuban people felt at the time toward Obama, however, went hand and hand with its "choteada" version, evidenced in the controversial headline "Negro, tú eres sueco?" (Black guy, are you Swedish). The article was authored by Elias Argudín, published in *Tribuna de la*

46 "además el negro es excelente orador y actor, porque parte de la gracia es actuación natural" in Fernando Ravsberg, "El discurso de Obama fue brillante y eficaz de cara al cubano medio," *Cartas desde Cuba: Comments*, March 22, 2016, <http://cartasdesdecuba.com/el-discurso-de-obama-fue-brillante-y-eficaz-de-cara-al-cubano-medio>.

Habana, on March 27, 2016.⁴⁷ The phrase, anything but obscure in Cuba, is utilized here by a journalist of color to undermine through choteo the vision of Cuba toward which Obama was urging the Cuban people to move. Michael J. Bustamante accurately sums up Argudín's use of the joke:

A reference to a comedy sketch from the 1980s, in which an Afro-Cuban attempts to pass himself off as a Swedish diplomat to buy goods sold only to foreigners in special stores, the joke appeared to question the veracity of Obama's blackness. A real black man, the article insinuated, should know better than to preach or believe in the merits of U.S. political 'freedoms' that allow "(white) policeman to massacre at will any Afro-descendent."⁴⁸

Obama's speech at the national theater was thus discounted by Argudín, in his attempt to elucidate Cuban official discrepancy with Obama's diplomacy, once again illustrating why continued attention to the problems set forth by Mañach is important.

In addition to the speech, the Cuban people also got to know Obama, doing his own joking around, through his appearance in skits on one of the most popular Cuban comedy shows, *Vivir del cuento*. And yet, with all of Obama's grace and humor, he is still perceived "officially" as a black guy who has stepped out of bounds, a sense that, I might add, is pervasive within the United States, where it is less

47 Elias Argudín, "Negro, ¿tú eres sueco?" *Tribuna de la Habana*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.tribuna.cu/opinion/2016-03-24/negro-eres-sueco#comment-4934>.

48 Michael J. Bustamante, "Review of Devyn Spence Benson's *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution*," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 48.2 (2016): 296.

easy to qualify such dimensions in terms of “official” discourse. “Gracia,” while simpler than *parejería*, is another word that somewhat confounds translation of Mañach’s essay, since, while in English “grace” and gratitude are linked and can refer to both God’s beneficence as well as a kind of simple elegance, in Spanish, grace’s link to levity and humor is also preserved. After much deliberation, working with my students and provisionally thinking of “gracia” as “comedic gift,” I decided to leave “gracia” in Spanish.

For Mañach, that Cuban comedic gift can be, in fact, closely linked to *choteo*. And yet, Mañach suggests that *gracia* relates to a “certain disposition and clarity of mind, the kind that everything bounces off, without penetrating, without leaving any trace.” He then associates “this form of optimism that smooth[s] over the edges of reality” as “predominantly feminine.” Curiously, this explanation of *gracia* is one of the only moments that Mañach comments upon women directly in his analysis, where the feminine realm is not merely the “other” to “the Cuban” (man), but part of the actual object of analysis. Nevertheless, the phrase “*el cubano*” is not proper to Mañach, but rather, common usage among Cubans. While I did deliberate over changing “*el cubano*” to “Cubans,” much more characteristic of contemporary English, I ultimately decided not to neutralize the phrase in order preserve the subtle shifts in Mañach’s positionality, his emphasis on the specificity of his subject, as well as mark this exceptional moment in which Mañach names the “feminine” in relation to *gracia*.

If *parejería* could be contained, would *choteo*, in fact, move closer to *gracia*? Or might practitioners be subjected to a different kind of vigilance? An excess of *gracia* could be perceived as slippery. In fact, it may spill over into *parejería*. *An Inquiry into Choteo* continues to fascinate, not

solely within the Cuban context, but on the transatlantic spectrum, which even takes into account the United States whose histories of miscegenation were distinct from those of the Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonies, but where issues of diversity and class have hardly vanished.

Jacqueline Loss