

# TRANSLATING 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PUERTO RICAN POETRY

## RICAN POETRY

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### Introduction

Twentieth-century Puerto Rican poetry frequently explores themes of exile, American colonialism, identity, and sexuality. Manuel Ramos Otero is a significant figure within this tradition, particularly for his exploration of queer identity and displacement. However, much of his poetry remains untranslated into English, limiting accessibility and scholarly engagement in fields such as Latin American literary studies and translation studies. This project focuses on translating Ramos Otero's collection *Invitación al Polvo*, which was selected because it reflects many of the author's central themes while showcasing his distinctive lyrical style and references to Puerto Rican culture. By translating more than thirty poems from this collection, we aim to expand access to Ramos Otero's work and contribute to scholarship on 20th-century Puerto Rican and queer literature.

### Methodology

This project used a qualitative translation approach to translate poems from *Invitación al Polvo* while preserving their emotional tone and thematic meaning. We selected more than thirty poems from the original Spanish collection that represent key themes and stylistic features of Ramos Otero's work. Each poem was translated using a combination of literal and contextual strategies, with a primarily colloquial translation style. In this context, colloquial translation means rendering phrases in natural, contemporary English rather than strict word-for-word equivalents in order to maintain the tone and readability of the poems. Culturally specific terms such as *Bolero* and *Plena* were intentionally retained in Spanish to preserve their cultural significance. Our translation decisions were guided by translation theories including Lawrence Venuti's concept of foreignization and Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence. After translation, we reviewed each poem through qualitative analysis to ensure consistency in tone, meaning, and themes.

### Translation Example

No amo tu cuerpo sino el misterio  
que tu cuerpo habita  
la cueva que me arropa de noche  
solamente apacigua la oscuridad.  
Amo tu gesto más que tus ojos  
siempre abiertos cuando la boca besa  
con humedad de mar mi isla irregular  
de costas bravas y rocas puntiagudas.  
Y más que la mentira que todo amor promete  
amo la realidad que nos reúne en la cama  
que nos gasta la piel de la lengua con erizos  
que hace brotar puñales en el jardín de muslos  
cada domingo muerto entre estos cuerpos.  
Cuando te vayas sin plena ni bolero  
cuando regrese al silencio de otra sinfonía  
cuando te vuelvas un hombre de papel  
un espíritu atrapado en el poema  
y ya no pueda volver a definirte en la palabra  
que ahora azota toda la nada  
recordaremos lo que nunca ocurrió  
nos amaremos como nunca nos amamos  
hurgaremos en tumbas de tristeza  
hasta encontrar la libertad intacta  
para quel tiempo restaure lo perdido.

I don't love your body but the mystery  
of your body dwells in the cave  
that tucks me in at night and soothes  
all my darkness. I love your grimace  
more than your eyes, always open  
when we kiss with all the sultry humidity  
of my irregular island's rough coasts,  
its jagged rocks—but more than the lie  
that all love promises, I love the reality  
that brings us back together in bed, that grinds  
against our tongues like a sea urchin,  
that sprouts daggers from the garden of our thighs,  
each Sunday perishing between our bodies.  
When you leave without *Bolero*,  
when you return home to another symphony of silence,  
when you turn into a paper man,  
a spirit trapped in a poem,  
and I can no longer define you in these words  
lashing out at all the nothingness,  
then we will remember things that never happened,  
we will love each other like never before,  
we will plunder tombs of sorrow  
until we find our freedom intact  
so that time restores all that has been lost.

### Translation Decision Making

1: *Bolero*

- *Bolero* is a genre of song originating from the Caribbean, but simply translating it as “song” does not include the cultural importance of the word for Caribbeans. Therefore, we chose to keep it in Spanish to preserve its meaning and allow readers to make connections between culture and translation.

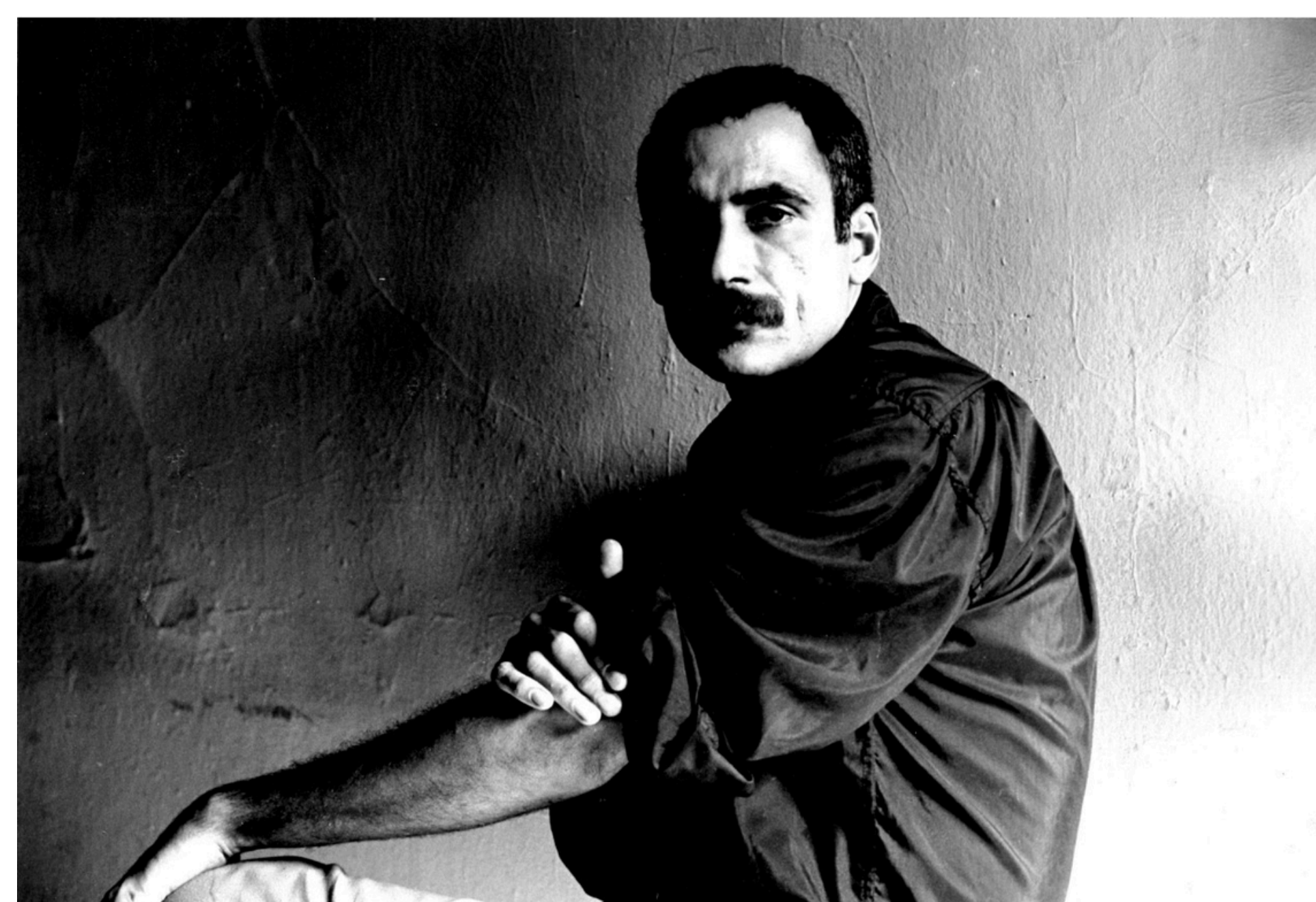


Image 1: Photo of Manuel Ramos Otero via  
Columbia University Libraries

### Results

Through this process, we translated more than thirty poems from *Invitación al Polvo* into English while maintaining the emotional tone and cultural context of the original Spanish text. Our qualitative analysis revealed several recurring themes that were preserved in translation. These include experiences of exile and displacement, reflections on queer identity and intimacy, and expressions of memory and nostalgia connected to Puerto Rican culture. Some poems also highlight tensions surrounding colonial identity and belonging. Maintaining culturally specific language and using a colloquial translation style helped preserve the emotional depth and cultural meaning of these themes for English-speaking readers.

### Takeaways

This project demonstrates how translation can expand access to marginalized literary voices and contribute to scholarship on Latin American literature. Because much of Manuel Ramos Otero's poetry is not available in English, translating *Invitación al Polvo* helps make his work accessible to a wider audience. Future steps include compiling the translations into a digital archive or publication so they can be shared with students and scholars. Making these translations publicly available would further support research and engagement with Puerto Rican literary traditions.

### Acknowledgements

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### References

