

Northwestern



**How to meet strangers over the internet and get academic profit from it. A review of the podcast "Other Caribbean Voices" (2021-23)**  
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Seminary: LET'S HEAR ABOUT IT: Podcasts, Literary Studies, and the Public Humanities  
May 9-10, 2023, Comparative Literary Studies Program, Northwestern University

First, I want to acknowledge that Northwestern campus sits on the traditional homelands of the people of the Council of Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa as well as the Menominee, Miami and Ho-Chunk nations. It was also a site of trade, travel, gathering and healing for more than a dozen other Native tribes and is still home to over 100,000 tribal members in the state of Illinois. The people who speak almost as many different languages as there are Tribes are the contemporary custodians of this land.

## 1- The circumstances

The idea for "Otras voces del Caribe" ("Other Caribbean Voices") was born on May 2021 after reading an email circulating among Spanish-speaking scholars -academics and graduate students- about the New Books Network platform looking to branch out its podcast production to the second more used language in the United States: Spanish. The New Books Network is a consortium of author-interview podcast channels about books. Covering 100+ subjects, disciplines, and genres, they publish 50 to 75 episodes every week. The NBN reaches about a million people every month; NBN listeners download close to 5 million episodes a month. I especially liked the policy of allowing the hosts to pick the books covered, not the editor.

At the time, I was (many people were) mad and sick of COVID-19 restrictions. More than a year after the pandemic hit, I had completed my qualifying exams and started the dissertation groundwork. Yet, the fog in my mind persisted. A side project would allow me to regain my foot in the simulacrum of sanity and productivity the academy demands of its members. I decided to harvest my twenty years of work in literary and academic circles: ask friends and acquaintances about their books and add a fancy line to my CV for the looming job-hunting process.



## *2- The project*

The pitch I sent to the editors Paula de la Cruz-Fernández and Pamela Fuentes was more or less like this:

"Otras voces del Caribe" will feature interviews from the Great Spanish Caribbean region. Each episode will bring a person from the area to discuss their narrative, poetry, essay book, or an author of any origin who had written a book about the Caribbean. With a twice a month frequency, I hope to help the visibility of the region's intellectual production.

They accepted. We had a webinar/introduction meeting with people from all over the world (from Romania to California) and began to work.

NBNEs went live on July 26th, 2021. That day they posted my first episode: where Maria Isabel Alfonso from St. Joseph University (New York) speaks about her book "The Bridge Editions and the Gaps in the Cuban Literary Canon: Post-Revolutionary Cultural Dynamics" (Universidad Veracruzana, 2016). It was unintended but fit: July 26th is National Rebellion Day in Cuba. Between July 2021 and February 2022, I did a first season of thirteen interviews, and now I am well on the execution of the second, which started in October 2022 with twenty chapters planned. On May 1st, 2023, episode fifteen of the second season "aired": an interview with Massimo Di Rico about his book "The damned of the Air. The Journey to Utopia of the Air Pirates of the Caribbean" (Iconos Editorial, 2020).

As we speak, twenty-eight episodes are available on five platforms: New Books Network en Español Official Website, Castbox, Apple Podcast, Stitcher, and Spotify.

### 3- *The ontology of a name*

I named the podcast "Other Caribbean Voices," where "other" stands for unusual or usually absent. Of course, the issue of the Other is problematic in itself.

As a female bisexual child of Western colonialism and Afro-Latin resistance, I am an incarnation of the Other that horrifies and disturbs the discourse of infinite progress and intellectual hierarchies minted by Hegel and Kant. When I dare to speak aloud -like the other three



podcasters in this panel- I punch the wall of rational knowledge and historical facts based on written documentation that perpetuates my (our) exclusion. To add salt to the injury, I fought for my place in academia speaking not about one, but two unworthy topics: non-heterosexual sex and science fiction.

My Otherness is not only born of racial, gender, and ideological traits but also geographical: the Caribbean Sea is often described as a space of confrontation for diverse empires. Violence and greed are protagonists of the hegemonic narrative of poorly concealed racism that presents Haiti, Cuba, Honduras, or Mexico as failed states, examples of how the excellent political theories of the West are corrupted by the heat, the toxic miasmas of the tropics, the constant miscegenation of genes, cultures, and ideas. It would seem that the Caribbean is rich only in so many colonial shipwrecks, mystical practices, and CIA no-so-secret plans that would fulfill Hollywood's insatiable hunger for unlikely plots for a century. A Zombieland that drinks blood and vomits refugees to the North. The stories of political

resistance, constant interchange of goods and services, and cultural and philosophical innovation are silenced, written off as oddities, a pause between the last massacre and the next coup d'état.

That is not my Caribbean Sea. In the podcast "Other Caribbean Voices," "other" represents the memory and defense of a region's cultures (yes, in plural). My podcast is a platform to allow my activism, fiction, and academic colleagues to be visible and heard.



## 4- The content standards

gender equality

regional inclusion



thematic diversity

While thinking about the plan, I decided I must draw some lines besides "I will contact friends and acquaintances from twenty years of work in literary and academic circles to ask them if they want to speak about their books." Of course, they will love to speak about their books, but not all of them would be able to, and I mostly knew Cubans or Cuban Studies researchers. How to avoid the allure of making a podcast about my reading list that would run out of material after six months? Where to find more books to speak about?

It turns out friends and acquaintances not only speak about their work but can share their knowledge about other colleagues' work. Also, New Books Network has a database of available books created from publishing houses' PR team's messages. I went back to check my department's syllabus and the mountain of emails inviting me to zoom my brain out in conferences and book presentations worldwide since the pandemic had hit. Finally, I started to browse publishing houses' catalogs and track authors' emails and social network profiles. Who would know that a good podcaster is, like a journalist, a little bit of a stalker?

Yes, content could be found, but how to sift through it? To fulfill the promise, I kept three elements at the project's core: gender equality, thematic diversity, and regional inclusion.

Gender equality is not that hard when recording two monthly episodes. The first batch of thirteen interviews included five cis women, seven cis men, and one trans man. The plan for the second season is to have half and half of gender representation.

The thematic diversity was achieved following the geographical criteria: the Caribbean is, like any other region, a space for all kinds of creative or investigative writing. So far, the subjects have included:

1. anthropology
2. antiracism
3. economy
4. feminism
5. folklore
6. history
7. LGBTQ issues
8. literary critic
9. media analysis
10. piracy
11. poetry
12. political science
13. religion
14. science fiction
15. social justice
16. testimonial narrative

Surprisingly, the third element was the hardest to achieve: the Great Caribbean is a loose geographical and political term; it usually encompasses the islands within the Caribbean Sea and its coastal territories. The Spanish Great Caribbean includes the nation of Puerto Rico and ten sovereign countries:

1. Colombia
2. Costa Rica
3. Cuba
4. Guatemala
5. Honduras
6. Mexico
7. Nicaragua
8. Panamá
9. Dominican Republic
10. Venezuela

Of course, the question of adding to the list the states of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida depends on how you consider Spanish's importance in their culture. Does anyone remember when that was part of the proud Spanish Empire? Ah! The good old days.

Back to the present: the quest for regional inclusion has proven elusive. After twenty-eight episodes, I only have books from five of the eleven nations: Colombia (3), Costa Rica (2), Cuba (15), Puerto Rico (4), and Venezuela (2). Plus, two books about the Caribbean as a region.

### *5- Promotional strategies*

To be true to the idea of a platform to allow my Caribbean activism, fiction, and academic colleagues to be visible and heard, the podcast must be known. To that end, I use different strategies to share the content and ask each author to share the interview news on their own networks. NBNEs is deeply invested in promoting all its podcasts. This collaboration between

producers, hosts, and interviewed authors is a three-strand braid comprising social networks, blog posts, email lists, corporate webpages, and old fashion mouth to mouth.

The main elements of each podcast promotional strategy are an entry on the NBNEs website and my personal blog. Those two platforms provide the permanent URLs to fuel social media channels (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn) and my email list.

### *6- The impact*

Per the data provided by the platform's coordinators, until April 26th NBNEs had roughly more than twenty-three thousand downloads. Three thousands of them were "Otras voces del Caribe" episodes. The numbers must be taken as grains of salt. The data is provided by Megaphone, which tracks access to the NBN page and the four apps (Castbox, Apple Podcast, Stitcher, and Spotify), but does not do well on cross posting, when an interview goes by two channels, like History and Cultural Studies.

In chronological perspective, the download history has four peak moments between July 26th, 2021, and April 26th, 2023:

1. Last days of July 2021, with the first interview with Maria Isabel Alfonso about *The Bridge Editions and the Gaps in the Cuban Literary Canon: Post-Revolutionary Cultural Dynamics*.
2. The first days of September 2021, when the famous Cuban science fiction writer Erick Mota spoke about his cyberpunk novel *Habana Underwater*.
3. Two chapters produce synergy in the first week of February 2022: Carlos Uxo's *The Detective Genre Cuba. Revolutionary detective novel, neo-police novel, and teleseries*

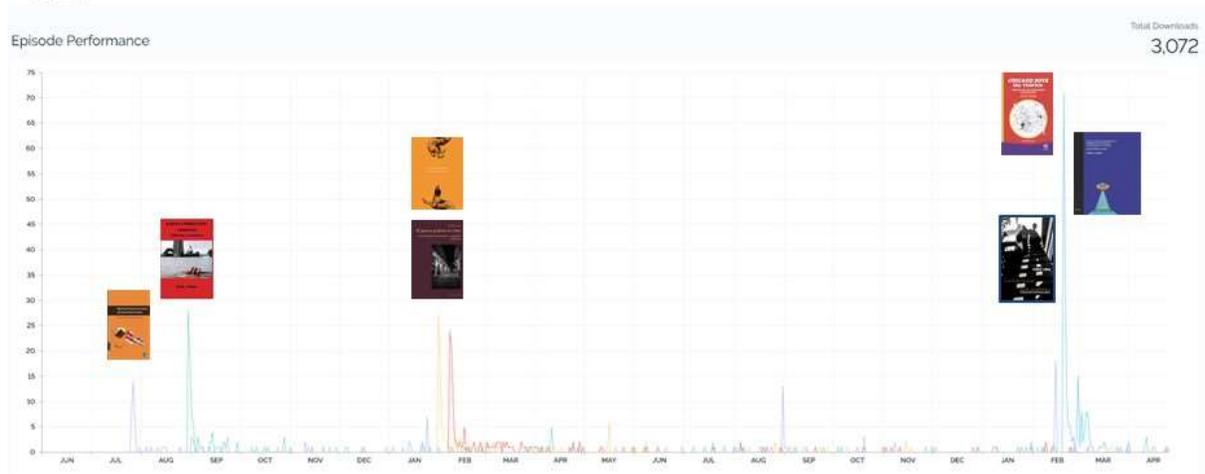
and the novel *Celebrations*, by Leonardo Gil, about the "false positives" scandal in Colombia.

4. In the second half of February 2023, synergy happens again: to the interest in the essays *Science Fiction in Puerto Rico. Heralds of catastrophe, apocalypse, and change*, and *Chicago boys from the tropics. History of neoliberalism in Costa Rica (1965-2000)* adds the passing of Cuban poet Chely Lima on January 22nd, which brings new interest to his interview about the bilingual poetry collection *what the werewolf told them*.

That one is bittersweet for me. I really love Chely, and his work changed my life.



## 6- The impact



Accordingly, "Other Caribbean Voices" top eleven downloaded episodes are the seven I mentioned earlier and four very suggestive titles:

1. *Chicago boys del trópico. Historia del neoliberalismo en Costa Rica (1965-2000)*, David Díaz Arias (2021). February 20, 2023. 196 downloads.
2. *El género policial en Cuba: novela policial revolucionaria, neopolicial y teleseries*, Carlos Uxó (2021). January 31, 2022. 156 downloads.
3. *Celebraciones*, Leonardo Gil Gómez (2018). February 7, 2022. 145 downloads.
4. *Habana Underguater*, Erick Mota Pérez (2010). August 30, 2021. 144 downloads.
5. *Ediciones El Puente y los vacíos del canon literario cubano: Dinámicas culturales posrevolucionarias*, María Isabel Alfonso (2016). July 26, 2021. 142 downloads.
6. *Ciencia ficción en Puerto Rico. Heraldos de la catástrofe, el apocalipsis y el cambio*, Ángel Rivera (2023). February 6, 2023. 138 downloads.
7. *La angustia de Eros. Sexualidad y violencia en la literatura cubana*, Jorge Camacho (2019). December 26, 2022. 136 downloads.
8. *Espantado de todo me refugio en Trump*, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo (2019). September 27, 2021. 135 downloads.
9. *what the werewolf told them*, Chely Lima (2017). November 15, 2021. 134 downloads.
10. *La isla del tiempo*, Alejandro Cuba (2021). December 27, 2021. 130 downloads.
11. *Negra cubana tenía que ser*, Sandra Álvarez (2020). November 29, 2021. 128 downloads.

Those are solid numbers, even considering the lack of data from crossposting. I am proud of being in the top 5% of more productive hosts in NBNEs and helping spread the good news about a singular space in the Americas: the Caribbean Sea and its people.

*7- The future is an undiscovered country*

I hope to finish “Other Caribbean Voices ”’s second season next month. My main objective for the third season is to achieve the regional inclusion I promised myself almost two years ago. I already wrote emails to strangers to set it up. I even received an email from a Cuban American professor stating that his new book is perfect for my podcast! Yes, I feel smug about it.

No, I did not return to academia to become an audio interviewer. Yet, I find that among the existential questions that brings the crisis of neoliberal academia, a project that consists in helping others get the recognition they deserve helps me sleep better. As I said two days ago to a fellow graduate student: we cannot afford to be sheeps in this cutthroat world, but we can aspire to be wolves in a pack. These are my pack’s voices, hear them and celebrate with us.