

Geographies, (M)Other Tongues and the
Rôle of Translation in Giannina Braschi's
El imperio de los sueños

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Yes, because in addition to Saving the Country, Affirming the Culture and Accelerating the Coming of the Revolution, done within the greatest possible limits of originality and orthodoxy, she is also required at every moment of her literary existence to denounce Vile Male Oppression, a somewhat risqué variant of the beloved Class Struggle.

—Ana Lydia Vega
“To Write or Not to Write?”

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

—Edward Said
“Empire, Geography, and Culture”

For Diane Marting, (m)other tongue of friendship¹

In the quicksands of its closing segment, “Requiem for solitude,” *El imperio de los sueños* presents readers a solemn recapitulation: “Mi lectura se ha convertido ahora en mi escritura” ‘Now my reading has become my writing’ (I 229, E 218).² Giannina Braschi’s writerly “I,” in fear of not writing

ever again, remembers that as a little girl she used to love books. But this poetic voice realizes as well that reading has now turned into an empire of dreams in which writing and letters tell their own stories. The statement closes a cycle initiated on page three of *El imperio* where, in minimalist fashion, the "I" had established the position occupied by the letter within this writerly world: "Una letra llega y me visita" 'A letter comes and visits me' (I 15, E 5). This "visiting" letter is a paradoxical combination of complicity and conflict that forewarns the reader both about the problematic issues the book will raise in the areas of semantics, grammar, and phonetics, and about the fact that by the end of the book these linguistic building blocks will have become emblematic representations of questions about geography, history, and politics. This and other genesic passages of Braschi's lettered world review the importance of one's first initial, the beginning of a discussion on proper names that will continue to the end of the book: "No hay laguna más negra ni más blanca ni más llena de superficies planas ni de montañas que la primera letra de tu nombre" 'No lagoon is darker or clearer or more full of mountains or planes than the first letter of your name' (I 16, E 6).

But even proper names undergo severe erosion in the oneiric empire, and they eventually turn into something insignificant as writing takes over reading: "Al fin y al cabo cada nombre es una usurpación de un fragmento de mi vida y de mi obra. Cada nombre es un nombre diferente en la otra historia de la humanidad" 'After all, every name is a usurpation of a fragment of my life and works. Every name is a different name in the other history of humanity' (I 198, E182). Through the letters of a proper name and with a number of different disguises as poetic partners, the authorial figure slides in and out of the textual boundaries: "Tú sabes bien y yo también lo sé que tú no eres Giannina. Tú eres Giannina. Tú eres Adivina. Tú eres borracho. Tú eres bufón. Tú no eres Giannina. Tú eres pastora" 'You and I know very well that you are not Giannina. You are Giannina. You are a fortune-teller. You are a drunkard. You are a buffoon. You are not Giannina. You are a shepherd' (I 112, E 104). In this same dramatized fashion Giannina, resident of New York, phone number 5-4-3-2-1, puts on the hats of Mariquita Samper, Uriberto Eisensweig, Berta Singerman, Anna Mayo, Honorata Pagán, of the "I," the

“she,” and the “it,” among others, to visit over and over again the different times and places where people (writers or not) have recreated their own (literary) universes: chronicles, inner cities, gossip, movies, television, history, newspapers, storytelling, and the countryside. Barbara Morris finds this aspect of the “physical expression of self” and “concrete projection of subjectivity” most remarkable for its ability to “survey the contiguity of self, poetry and the physical world” and for making “words and letters take on material life” (47). This material life, the world of *El imperio*, is divided into three sections: the first two, “Asalto al tiempo” (9-42) and “La Comedia Profana” (43-186), both of which might be labeled strings of narrative poems, and the last entitled “Diario íntimo de la soledad” (187-230), a collection of satiric *viñetas* that preserve the poetic rhythm of the first two, yet venturing into a more narrative landscape.

This kaleidoscope of linguistic, national, and discursive values corresponds to what Morris has called a “multiplicity of positions as a writer.” It also goes hand in hand with the fact that *El imperio* and its authorial voice coexist “both within and outside the Latin-American context,” which makes the analysis and categorization of both text and author a laborious task (45). This difficulty to “fit” in a particular literary and historical canon is due mostly to the peculiar texture of the original language of the book, an act of weaving in with Spanish that superimposes communication over possessions, traveling over fixed boundaries, or in Said’s terms, images over cannons (7). In effect, Braschi’s *lengua materna* is a character representative of different cultural and national frames, a changing medium for both same and otherness that complicates and, therefore, enhances greatly the reading of this text (and reading’s twin, translation), thus making *El imperio* a work about translation of one form of Spanish into another. The present reading will focus on the text’s highly successful performances—linguistic and otherwise—of the text in Spanish. These performances are based on the fact that the processes of reading and writing (in) *El imperio* are not immediate, superficial, or simple moves of word form and contents, but profound works of *trans-latio*, of journeying across different boundaries of texts and contexts.

This literary map of Braschi's *El imperio* has two central coordinates: that of the North, represented in tours of cities and countrysides associated with an Old metropolis (Spain) and a New one (New York), and that of the South, the Caribbean and Latin America. The crossing and passing of that geographic axis design textual areas that cover a wide range of literary, social, and political issues that go from the kitchen to the embassy, connecting media as disparate as television, chronicles, news, gossip, and painting. The performative aspect of Braschi's use of geographies and language thus breeds a (m)other tongue, one that inscribes the three types of translation proposed by Goethe in such two processes of reading and writing:

The first acquaints us with foreign countries from our own vantage point. . . . A second period follows, in which the translator supposedly wants to enter the spirit of the foreign land, but in fact only tries to appropriate that spirit and reconstruct it in his own national one. . . . [In the third type] The translator who associates himself closely with his original more or less abandons the genius of his own nation. (188-90)

By bringing readers into different Spanish-speaking countries, and also into communities whose territorial cores are their use of Spanish regardless of whether their actual "land" is owned and/or ruled by a "Spanish" or "Hispanic" national component, and by finally deserting its author's *puertorriqueñidad* in bold, metatextual gestures, *El imperio* allows the writerly voice and its readers to share in the making-over of the text. In other words, it opens up a critical space for the subject to communicate in Spanish through the process of translation.

This task of the translator is the main doing of Braschi's narrative-poetic voice, much along the lines of Walter Benjamin's literary *réveries*. In the most encompassing frame of the book, that of Braschi's own authorial figuration, *El imperio* marks a literary space in and from which the writer can communicate. Before this moment of writing what Braschi has faced, and still does, is a prefabricated package of literary agendas. Ana Lydia Vega astutely qualifies this battle await-

ing all Puerto Rican writers: "the trappings of social realism stalk us at each step. Our subconscious tyrannically dictates to us the poetic art of our 'historical commitment'" (127). Wandering off this road, attempting to discover "other" artistic venues is to walk astray from the pathos of *insularismo*, the quintessential national trace of cultural solipsism and isolation coined by Antonio Pedreira and stamped on all "true" Puerto Rican foreheads. To detour from it is a blatant act of betrayal to the manifest destiny of all subjects born under that rubric, a fragmentation of a canon of letters and culture that Juan Gelpí recognizes not only in his own work, but on most of the recent literary and critical production in/from Puerto Rico. This predeterminism, however, is not limited to physical boundaries; it constitutes a solid imaginary wall, a rite of passage that Puerto Rican writers have to go through. To cross it is to travel, to read abroad, to trans-locate the limits of this map of cultural and national identity. It is within this frame of a "struggle over geography," as Said calls it, that Giannina Braschi has produced her narrative and poetic ensemble.

In theory, there is one mother tongue in *El imperio*. The material base for its mainframe is academic Spanish, traditionally understood to be Castillian. But this "pure," highly valorized kind of Spanish now becomes a character that performs the role of what Roberto González-Echevarría has labeled "myth and archive." Braschi's mother tongue recreates its present times in an effort to recover historical phenomena separated from them by time or its narrative version, periodization. This performative *castellano*, in other words, acts as the supporting structure for a number of narrative spaces such as agoras, cathedrals, courts, theatres, skyscrapers, or *campiñas*, and brings forth a rich fabric of diversity in what is understood from a "foreign" point of view to be a univocal or homogeneous "Spanish-speaking world," a "harmonious" one in the most romantic reading of this part of the world. Castillian Spanish functions as the foundation stone of Braschi's *El imperio*, creating an illusion of uniformity. But as the reading progresses this safe vehicle turns into a problematic character, a function of poetic language that tells its own story; only this time it is not a dogmatic tale as it was in its beginning academic stages with Antonio de Nebrija. For, when the author of the *Gramática castellana* presented his

rationale for the first handbook of proper Spanish to Isabel, the Catholic Queen, he did so by stating in his "Prologue" that "siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio" 'language has always been the partner of empires' (5). The imperially and grammatically correct slogan "una, grande, libre" 'one, great, free' of the Spanish imperial shield, and the historical *figuras* evoked by it are both represented in Braschi's text as a parody of colonizing enterprises and their many channels of diffusion of the word such as preaching and history-making.

This parodical stance can be seen at work in "La pastoral, o La inquisición de los recuerdos" 'Pastoral, or the Inquisition of Memories,' where the text brings up a reflection on the implications of memory and rhetoric, a commentary on the importance of the *ars praedicandi* which leads to a burlesque writerly act of repentance: "Sermón de los recuerdos y las lamentaciones. Sermón de todo lo negativo. Sermón en contra del senequismo y del hedonismo. Sermón a favor de Baco y de Fausto" 'Sermon of memories and sorrows. Sermon of everything negative. Sermon against senechism and hedonism. Sermon in favor of Bacchus and Faustus' (I 133, E 125). A fictional act of repentance that, in turn, finds a reward in the rewriting of a "New World," that of the substitution of the old metropolis for the new one: "Y camino por las calles de Nueva York sola. Sin recuerdos. Y Giannina le ha quemado los recuerdos al mundo" 'And I walk through the streets of New York alone. Without memories. And Giannina has burned all the memories of the world' (I 133, E 125). Braschi's *El imperio*, a new empire of dreams, proposes a variety of translations of the Spanish hegemonic slogan which, instead of breeding uniformity and being in compliance to the norms of one metropolis, offers a linguistic celebration of cultural differences and growth of the so-called "Spanish-speaking world."

The idea of an only tongue ruling over a considerable number of different nations and peoples is fundamentally questioned in one of the most exaggerated instances of textual buffoonery, one whose seriousness is emphasized in several ways: "*El mundo es un gran sistema gramatical*. Mariquita vuelve a subrayar esta frase" 'The world is a great grammatical system. Mariquita underlines this phrase' (I 194, E 178-79). Deep down, the narrative "I" wishes for a polyglot world,

not only in the literal sense of translating from one language to another, but also as a series of exchanges of meanings and uses between different areas of Spanish. Thus, when this "I" confesses that she "había soñado con construir un edificio bien grande donde se hablaran muchas lenguas" 'had dreamed of constructing a big building in which many languages would be spoken,' the result is what *El imperio* calls "The Building of the Waves of the Sea" (I 219-25, E 207-14). This resulting *viñeta* is a text along the lines of a Borgesian "library" or a Derridian "tour," a structure far from the biblical tower of Babel. The new *imperio*, a process of reading by translating Spanish words from within, reframes the mother tongue by bringing new meanings to words and highlighting the differences that separate communities that historically have been packaged together with a common tongue. Spanish is celebrated, then, as a base for the performance of a variety of subjectivities and citizenships which show explicitly their cultural and political differences.

Geography and cultural history are two principal levels in which the use of the Spanish language in *El imperio* performs the task of a translating voice. There are direct allusions to the Spanish peninsula which, no doubt, revive the time spent by the author in Spain. Some of the characters of the text, like Giannina, for instance, live at one point or another in Madrid. But physical spaces are not the only representation Spain finds in Braschi's poetic empire. In a revisionist gesture of Spain's golden past, the text offers the readers a highly lyricized, mystical countryside where apparent simplicity and idyllic streams of air flow from the narrative voice:

Quiero hablarles del amado. Y de la amada. Y de las preguntas a las criaturas. Y de los prados llenos de verdura. Y del mosto de granada. Y de la campiña. Y de la montaña. Y de la bodega del vino. Y del lecho de los leones. Y de las florecillas de San Francisco. Quiero regresar a mi casa. Quiero llegar a la morada del alba. (I 113)

I wish to speak to you of the he-lover. And the she-lover. And the question put to creatures. And green pastures. And pomegranate juice. And countrysides. And mountains. And the wine cellar. And the bed of lions. And the

flowers of Saint Francis. I wish to return home. I wish to arrive at the dwelling of my soul. (E 105)³

The poetic-narrative “I” is surrounded in this “Pastoral” section by Raimundo Lull’s *arbre d’amor*, the love of two souls and their naming each other, the love of creatures and of peace with nature, of wine, mountains, epic heroes and the power of humility. This textual blueprint is the skeleton that supports the “I” and helps it endure the roughness and exasperation that pave its journey from Europe to the New World. The Spanish language here swings between a faithful commitment to and a flirtatious playfulness with paradigmatic grammatical rules. This linguistic polyvalence offers grounds for translation of literary strategies, geographic mappings and discursive practices, sometimes in explosive mixtures. In the “Book of Clowns and Buffoons,” for example, poetic references follow a command and a curse:

Escúchenlo. Cabrones. No crean ni por nada ni por nadie que habrán de matarme. No, las aceitunas del vinagre. No, los postrecillos de la más amarga esperanza. Cuando después de todo es demasiado tarde. ¿Qué es el hambre? El hambre que me devora. El hambre. No, no les diré a las aceitunas. No, no les diré a los vinagres de las ensaladas. No, no les diré a los bosques de las espesuras. No soy vegetariano. No, no a las legumbres. No, no a los gigantes verdes. No, no a los licores de la ensoñación. Y a los postrecillos del sentirme bien. Y a la barriga inflada. (68)

Hear this. Bastards. Don’t let anybody or anything tell you that they are going to kill me. No, the vinaigrette olives. No, the little desserts of the most bitter expectation. When after all, it’s too late. What is hunger? The hunger that devours me. Hunger. No, I won’t tell the olives. No, I won’t tell the salad dressings. No, I won’t tell the deep woods. I am not a vegetarian. No, no to the vegetables. No, no to the green giants. No, no to the liquors of dreams. And to the little desserts of dreaming. And to the stuffed tummy. (57)⁴

In a swift gesture *El imperio de los sueños* evokes precursors as disparate as *goliardo* Latin, picaresque hunger, bohemian libations, Renaissance *pasos*, tables full of Buñuel's memorable discrete charms of the *bourgeoisie*, of its delicacies and desires, of consumerist memories of Puerto Rican "greens" canned in a not-fresh fashion of anti-veggie diets so popular in Puerto Rico.

The most significant body of input from the mother tongue in *El imperio de los sueños*, then, is not academic, Castillian Spanish, but the versatility and strength of the many dialects and idiolects of the Spanish language. The text takes the readers back and forth, subtly moving between the old and the new, Europe and the Americas, academic and popular Spanish, ultimately creating a flow of self-parody, wordplay and indulgence in linguistic recreation. The channels to incorporate a diversity of lexical uses are numerous, but drinking, eating, and cursing certainly stand out. The first one is associated with *mosto*, wine, beer, or whiskey; the second, with golden nut, popcorn, beets, apples, rice and beans, chick peas, or fish; and the third brings forth expressions such as "Apesta a renacuajo, pedazo de alcornoque, o malandrín, o lagarto" 'You slimy tadpole, you jackass, jerkoff, lizard' (I 104, E 92). Diacritics also find a substantial role to play in this maddening grammatical performance, reverting to complex, subtle lexicon games and sending meanings down Borgesian forking paths: "Hiló muy fino ese hombre. El hilo verde se rompió" 'Man was stitching hope [did a great job]. The green thread broke' (I 106, E 93). This textual level of semantic clashing is possibly the richest referential and stylistic element, but at the same time it presents the greatest difficulty in terms of reading. Vocabulary in *El imperio* makes grammar, rhetoric, style, and phonetics play against themselves, producing a number of possible associations that risk getting lost in both the reading and the translation. At the same time, however, they pose the best possible reward for inquisitive readers and daring translators.

The game of metonymies and synecdoches played by *El imperio* is one instance of its linguistic virtuosity, a subversion of the proper verb-subject relationship in some sentences: "Y la piedra se despierta y dice canto" 'And the stone wakes

up and says, I'm singing [piece of stone]' (I 13, E 3). The delicate balance of the referential process turns semantics into an exercise on the absurd. Chestnuts, in one case, turn into the nut-neck-throat fulcrum around which smallpox propagates: "La vendedora de castañas parece una nuez. Parece un renacuajo, un sapo, un ratón. Está rascando la nuez. Y siente cosquillas. Y siente temblor en la piel" 'The chestnut vendor looks like a nut. Looks like a tadpole, a toad, a mouse. She's scratching a nut [Adam's apple]. And feels a tickle. [And she is feeling a tremor in her skin.]' (I 90, E 78). Later on in the text, another deceptive yet fecund term shows up evoking the classic confusion between a healing (*la cura*) and a priest (*el cura*): "Perdone—Señor Banquero—que lo confunda con un cura pero no es usted el que cura las fallas económicas de la materia" 'Forgive me, Mr. Banker, for mistaking you for a priest, but aren't you supposed to have financial healing powers?' (I 225, E 213).⁵ Some of these terms with multiple-layered meanings reappear so frequently that they form landmark patterns in the textual geography. Thus, the pair [dove-popcorn (little doves of corn)]: "De repente esa misma paloma abre de nuevo el surco de la distancia y a través de la pantalla de cine se ve a Mariquita darle de comer a la paloma mis palomitas de maíz" 'Suddenly, the dove widens the distance again, and Mariquita is back on the movie screen feeding the dove my popcorn [little doves of corn]' (I 194, E 178). This pair, as a matter of fact, reappears so many times it could be read as an emblematic sign of the great lexical game played by *El imperio*: "Deseo ser libre como mi paloma blanca. ¿Quieres unas palomitas de maíz?" 'I want to be as free as my white dove. Do you want some popcorn [little doves of corn]?' (I 212, E 199). The doves-popcorn pair even seems to reproduce via (or, perhaps, along with) the eggs, that other term revisited over and over again in *El imperio*. Exposing the delicate balance between the ridiculous and the sublime, an inherent risk in all poetic work, Braschi's text opens its "Manifiesto de los huevos poéticos" 'Manifiesto on Poetic Eggs' with a critical assertion: "El éxito—dijo el narrador—es el primer huevo poético" 'Success—said the narrator—is the first poetic egg [poetic flaw]' (I 213, E 201).⁶

Not even the proper name, that essential part of the process of self-identification, is exempt from Braschi's semantic mill.

The switching of names mentioned above is already an atrocious game of linguistic performances that subverts the authority of essentialist frames of reading identities. But Braschi does not stop there: she dilutes the univocity of the proper name into a multiplicity of possible meanings: “No me gusta que me llamen Mariquita Samper cuando en realidad estoy ejecutando el papel de Berta Singerman y soy una lesbiana. Maricona-Mariquita” ‘I don’t like being called Mariquita Samper when I’m really playing Berta Singerman, and I am a lesbian. Mariquita, the Drag Queen!’ (I 201, E 186). The pair “Mariquita-Maricona,” shrewdly translated by O’Dwyer as “Mariquita, the Drag Queen!” swings between the diminutive /“-ita”/ and the augmentative /“-ona”/ of the noun “Marica,” a popular nickname for women in the South of Spain and in some places in Latin America. The term “marica” also means “homosexual” or “gay” in a number of Spanish-speaking communities, being most commonly used—like “mariquita”—to refer to gay men, while “maricona” usually signifies a homosexual woman. Hence, the expression is emblematic of the voguing map in which the poetic-narrative “I” has been placed in *El imperio*: as a gay man and/or as a dyke, big or little, depending on the suffix but, ultimately, as a *persona* for whom gender is first and foremost a performance, an attire, a second skin that can be changed with the strike of a simple switch of grammatical endings.⁷ In Spain, the word “mariquita” also refers to the delicate, yet well-shielded Ladybug. The Spanish pair, then, offers a wide range of possible translations: Little Marica-Big Marica, Ladybug-Big Ladybug, Little Gay-Big Dyke.

This linguistic relativity capitalizes on the travels of words and concepts through time and geography: traveling that extends between the historical inception of the Spanish empire, and its representation in Braschi’s Old New World. The blurred national and linguistic borders lead to a sense of confusion which finds at first an ephemeral solution in wandering around the streets of the new home, the new metropolis: the city of New York.⁸ In effect, the Big Apple seems to be the central thematic axis for the narrative-poetic voice of *El imperio*. However, readers of *El imperio* soon realize that the text is not just wandering, praising and blaming, drinking and dancing, talking and perversing in New York, but that the

narrative and poetry go on and about in many other landscapes, urban and otherwise. This is a bohemian space with allusions to the *Quartier Latin*, the *barrios chinos* of Barcelona and Seville, the Borgesian labyrinths of Buenos Aires, San Juan's colonial architecture, and *loci* from literatures and societies of the past and present. All these urban spaces lead to a boiling pot of different cultural systems and manners, and make the text anything but an academic walk: "Y escribí. Y me emborraché. Y amé. Amé sobre todas las cosas a los batanes y a los leones de Cervantes. Y amé a César Vallejo. Y viví en París, en Roma y en Madrid. Y me encerré en un cuarto a escribir" 'And I wrote. And I got drunk. And I loved. Loved most of all the mills and lions of Cervantes. And I loved César Vallejo. And I lived in Paris, Rome, and Madrid. And I locked myself up in a room to write' (I 108, E 100). Being in New York, then, is not a final destination or even a stationary moment, but a dynamic reflection of being in other places of the world at the same time: "yo estoy simultáneamente en Nueva York y en Moscú. . . . Estoy inserta en el horario y en la fecha de Nueva York y de Moscú" 'I'm simultaneously in New York and Moscow. . . . Here I am in sync with New York's and Moscow's time and date' (I 198, E 182). But having arrived in New York is both a sign of her coming to writing, and of wanting to be elsewhere:

Luego que llegué a Nueva York me enamoré de un libro. Escribí *Asalto al tiempo*. Redacté inmediatamente después *La comedia profana*. Retorné a Puerto Rico. Volví a Europa . . . Caminé desconsolada por la ciudad de Nueva York. Soñé todo el tiempo con hacer ese gran viaje a Moscú. Renegué de la ciudadanía americana. Aterricé en Moscú. (199)

As soon as I came to New York, I fell in love with a book. I wrote *Assault on Time*. I immediately wrote *The Profane Comedy*. I left for Puerto Rico. Returned to Europe . . . I walked around New York City dreaming of making that great trip to Moscow. I renounced my American citizenship. I landed in Moscow. (183-84)

Inhabiting the sometimes inhospitable landscape of New York is central to the making of *El imperio*, but the narrative-poetic voice preserves a keen sense of context, an awareness that this is neither the beginning nor the end of the world. In the section entitled “The Things That Happen to Men in New York!,” the “I” makes perfectly clear that “No es sólo en Nueva York donde les pasan a los hombres estas cosas. Les pasan en La Habana y en Berlín. Les pasan en Madrid y en Moscú. Y no sólo les pasan a los hombres. Les pasan también a las mujeres” ‘These things don’t happen only in New York. They happen in Havana and Berlin. They happen in Madrid and Moscow. And they don’t only happen to men. They happen to women, too’ (I 201, E 186).

New York is, no doubt, the narrative voice’s center of operation, that *voyeur* who offers new translations of what it means to be in exile for a Spanish speaker: “Yo caminaba como siempre hago por el mundo ancho y ajeno de la ciudad de Nueva York cuando divisé a lo lejos las luces de bengala que me borraron la distancia y me dejaron en un edificio” ‘I was walking as usual in the wide and alien world of New York City when I saw from afar Bengal lights that erased distance and landed me in a building’ (I 219, E 207). It is also the site of Braschi’s most poetic of wanderings: “Hoy caminaba sola por la ciudad de Nueva York y entré en el edificio del *Diario íntimo de la soledad*” ‘As I was walking around New York City alone today, I walked into the building of *The Intimate Diary of Solitude*’ (I 229, E 218-19). In a pastiche of virtual reality, this rendition of New York is a poetic world invaded by parodies of bucolic voices from the Spanish literary past. In *El imperio* these *pastores* have become a different race of conquerors:

En el último piso del Empire State se ha parado un pastor a cantar y a bailar. Qué cosa más grande. Que la ciudad de Nueva York haya sido invadida por tantos pastores. Que ya no se trabaja y que sólo se canta y se baila. Y que los periódicos, el New York Times, en titulares, y el Daily News, griten: Nueva York. Nueva York. Nueva York . . . Los pastores han invadido Nueva York. Han conquistado a Nueva York. Han colonizado a Nueva York. El especial

del día en el restaurant más caro de Nueva York es bellota de oro. (122)

On the top floor of the Empire State a shepherd has stood up to sing and dance. What a wonderful thing. That New York City has been invaded by so many shepherds. That work has stopped and there is only singing and dancing. And that the newspapers—the *New York Times*, in headlines, and the *Daily News*—call out: New York. New York. New York . . . Shepherds have invaded New York. They have conquered New York. They have colonized New York. The special of the day in New York's most expensive restaurant is golden acorns. (114)

Braschi's shepherds, different from those of Garcilaso de la Vega or the soldiers of Bernal Díaz del Castillo or Hernán Cortés, are a race of *conquistadores* who, above all, fight to free themselves from previous molds of representation: they do not sing in despair the disdainful glance of the beloved; instead, they sing and dance. And they do not battle and kill, or seduce *indias*; instead, they do not work and move on to expensive golden acorns. In sum, these once marginal characters are not ethereal images occupying Arcadian landscapes, but heavy men who display their manliness with pride and joy, even if they make the poetic voice call them names: "Lo siento mucho, señores, pero también en Nueva York los pastores se tiran pedos. Lo siento. Pero son asquerosos" 'I'm very sorry, folks, but even in New York shepherds fart. I'm sorry. But they're gross' (I 124, E 116). These mixed characters of soldiers and shepherds mingle with their contemporary images, the NYPD blues, in a partnership of belching and other delights *macho* men display.

For Morris this is another instance of Braschi's poetic endeavour in *El imperio*, a formula that dialogues with previous canons of poetry: "As opposed to earlier twentieth-century poets who sought to erase the boundaries between poetry and its context by poeticizing the mundane, such as José Hierro in 'Réquiem' or Pablo Neruda in the *Odas materiales*, Braschi crafts her poetry into a pluralistic mundus brimming with the promiscuous display of materiality" (47). And this

material poetic “I” is the one who survives and comes home in the midst of the composition of the text:

Yo acabo de regresar de una larga temporada a Nueva York. Yo acabo de retornar a mi casa . . . No sabía qué hacer. Y salí corriendo despavorido por las calles de Nueva York. Y llegué a la catedral de San Patricio y toqué las campanas. He visto con mis ojos los ojos de mi ciudad. Y salí corriendo y llegué al Empire State y me trepé al último piso y tomé un altoparlante y le grité a los hombres de la ciudad de Nueva York. He visto con mis ojos la ciudad más hermosa del mundo. He visto la ciudad que amo. (125)

I just got back to New York from a trip. I just got home . . . I didn't know what to do. I ran off in a panic through the streets. I went up to St. Patrick's Cathedral and rang the bells. I have seen the eyes of my city with my own eyes. I ran all the way to the Empire State, went up to the top floor, grabbed a loudspeaker, and yelled at the men of New York City. I have seen with my own eyes the finest city in the world. I have seen the city I love. (117)

In a desperate gesture to correspond with her strongest characters, Giannina's poetic “I” raises to the penthouse of the spiritual world of her Catholic roots, Saint Patrick's Cathedral, to converse with these farting shepherds in the Empire State Building. This poetic summit, a grand figment of the poet's imagination, is depicted not as a confrontational political peak, but as a great infatuation of the *voyeur* with the wasteland that so generously has inspired her poetry.

However, not everything is a bed of roses in this love story with New York. As a good New Yorker, the narrative-poetic voice curses when it remembers the day she moved in and finds herself back at the airport, that homebase for the classic Puerto Rican scenario of modernity, “la guagua aérea” or ‘air bus’ that turned her homeland into a commuting nation during the late seventies: “Yo en el huracán del aeropuerto de Nueva York. Al demonio. Con las maletas. Y con los taxis. Al carajo” ‘I'm in the hurricane of New York airport. To hell with suitcases. And taxis. Damn it’ (I 126, E 118). The memories of

the Island, exiguous shards of love in the first two sections of *El imperio*, return with an uncanny poetic strength in the last and final segment of the text, in cohabitation with a different life in the big city of the North:

Yo nací en una isla y cada uno de los personajes que actúan en cada uno de los espectáculos de este edificio dependen también del movimiento de las olas del mar . . . Aunque estamos en invierno en la isla de Manhattan yo estoy en el verano en la isla de Puerto Rico. (I 222)

I was born on an island, so every character acting in any show in this building also depends on the movement of the waves of the sea . . . It's summer for me on the island of Puerto Rico even though it's winter for us on the island of Manhattan. (E 210)

The signifier of the waves, primary material for the construction of "The Building of the Waves of the Sea," revives some of her precursors in both poetic diction and exile, such as Julia de Burgos and Manuel Ramos Otero: "Tal y como yo lo veía después de haberlo construido—dijo el arquitecto—se parecía a la isla de Manhattan sumergida en el movimiento de las olas del mar" 'As I saw it after I was done building it—said the architect—it looked like the island of Manhattan submerged in the movement of the ocean waves' (I 220, E 209).

These waves fuse the Caribbean with other bodies (of water) that matter, as Burgos and Ramos Otero did in their respective texts "Río Grande de Loíza" 'The Rio Grande of Loíza' and *El mar y tú* 'The Sea and You,' in "El cuento de la mujer del mar" 'The Story of the Woman of the Sea' and "La otra isla de Puerto Rico" 'The Other Island of Puerto Rico.' This last one is translated in *El imperio* in a peculiar way, combining an intertextual instance with a sign of self-referentiality:

Yo soy un Odiseo. Y digo como alguna vez dijo Odiseo que no hay mayor bienestar que el regreso al hogar después del largo trayecto a través de la ciudad de los sueños. Mi arte es el arte del destierro. Para no sentirme más desterrado he construido el edificio de las olas del mar. (I 222)

I am an Odysseus. And I say, as Odysseus once said, that the greatest feeling is going home after a long journey through the city of dreams. My art is the art of exile. I've raised the building of the waves of the sea so I wouldn't feel further removed. (E 210)

The community that comes and goes endlessly, within which the reader can recognize Ramos Otero, Braschi herself, Burgos and their characters, finds solace in the image of the epic hero coming home, not by becoming sedentary *personae* but by redrawing the lines in the map and making their national and cultural boundaries mobile and dynamic points of reference.

The central question of this process of writing, reading, and translating emerges then as one of metamorphosis and identity, as a defense of the plurality of linguistic performances, and of how this task can translate itself in turn into a legitimate sense of belonging. A theme that is represented in *El imperio* not only via different names and characters who share an "I" or a "she," as we have seen, but also with the appearance on the textual stage of characters who change within one single identity. For instance, Braschi's rereading of Burgos' poetry becomes emblematic of the letter turning into writing, of the Puerto Rican woman turning into an imperial citizen. The long journey begins with the roots, the river that in Braschi's text becomes that other *río*, the parodic laughter that flows down the waters of the Río Espíritu Santo and the ever classic Río Grande de Loíza: "De repente escucho la palabra río y corre el agua en los espacios de otro río" 'Suddenly I hear the word *river* [I laugh] and water runs in another river's space' (I 15, E 5). After the initial recreation, the complex thresholds of the colonial, eternally touristic references to the architecture of Old San Juan appear, representing and being represented in the smashing dualities that characterize the poetic work of both Burgos and Braschi: "Pero quiebras tú el marco de otro imposible: yo. Y yo rompo el marco de otro pronombre: tú. Y aunque ese marco esté compuesto de un tú y un yo—un imposible, un labio, unos portones, una reja" 'But you break the frame of another impossible: me. And I break the frame of another pronoun: you. And even if that frame be made of you and me—an

impossible, a lip, some gates, a grill' (I 31, E 21). In the end, solitude and death in New York accompany Braschi's mixed feelings towards her precursor: "Que no es posible que exista la nostalgia. Entierro de la melancolía. La pobrecita. Se quedó muerta en la calle tercera. Y no me dio ninguna lástima. No me dio ninguna pena. ¡Ay, qué dolor, qué dolor, qué pena!" 'So nostalgia becomes impossible. Burial of melancholy. Poor thing. It died on Third Street. And I didn't care. I didn't grieve. Oh, woe, woe's me!' (I 133, E 125).⁹ Braschi thus revisits the theme of exile and its companion in the cultural history of Puerto Rico in the twentieth century, the incessant commuting between the Island and New York that is characteristic of the literary maps of many Puerto Rican writers.

But exile, migration and other tragedies of *insularismo* and *puertorriqueñidad* resurface in *El imperio* not as the logical or natural consequence of submission, docility, or other causes of victimization. Braschi turns the tables and represents this traveling to other lands as episodes of "laughter and forgetting" *à la* Milan Kundera, as drives for self-and-national-identification that should be remembered, but not to establish absolute closures. Thus the "I" called Giannina, among other names, proclaims "Soy el grano de arroz y la habichuela. Soy el garbanzo y la cacerola. Soy la manzana roja. Y la sal y la pimienta" 'I am the grain of rice and the bean. I am the chickpea and the casserole. I am the red apple. And salt and pepper' (I 134, E 126). This burlesque gesture brings together images as disparate as Rosario Ferré's "la cocina de la escritura" 'the kitchen of writing,' and the classic "*Sello Rojo*" rice TV commercial where two well-suited grains wed: a rice and a bean, emblematic matrimony of Puerto Rican nationalism and capitalism.¹⁰ And, moreover, this fecund self-proclamation also fuses the classic *mixta* of rice and beans with the more global references to the chickpea, the casserole and the salt and pepper as the seasonings for a new national dish: a gastronomic way out from that also classic Puerto Rican trait of *insularismo*. The sense of self-parody resurfaces later on when she realizes that "Uriberto Eisensweig habla con acento francés, pero su acento francés es un defecto que tiene en la lengua. Se llama '*frenillo*.' Uriberto pronuncia las '*erres*' como '*jotas*' " 'Uriberto Eisensweig speaks with a

French accent. It's not really an accent. It's a speech impediment called "tongue adhesion." Uriberto pronounces his *r*'s like *h*'s' (I 192, E 176).¹¹

This absurd carousel of politics, grammar, nationhood, and citizenship is inscribed in the plot line as well. The *viñeta* entitled "Portrait of Giannina Braschi" tells the story of a Soho gallery where a show was taking place, exhibiting "todos los retratos de Mariquita desde que perdió su virginidad a los quince años hasta que se fue a vivir a Moscú y se convirtió en la primera puertorriqueña en desertar a su ciudadanía americana" 'all the portraits of Mariquita from the time she lost her virginity at fifteen until the time she became the first Puerto Rican woman to forfeit her American citizenship and live in Moscow' (I 208, E 194). In a Cortazarian blow-up of one of those pictures hanging in the gallery, the narrative-poetic voice volunteers the story of one of the canvases, exposing in the process the textual threads of construction of the literary character:

Mariquita pidió también asilo en la embajada rusa. Le escribí una carta a los rusos diciendo que quería hacerse comunista. Se había equivocado. Había comprendido el valor de la ciudadanía rusa, sobre todo siendo puertorriqueña. Mi confusión nace de que soy una triste colonia. No ven que soy Berta Singerman. No ven que estoy confundida. No ven que no sé quién soy. (I 210)

Mariquita had also asked for asylum at the Russian embassy. She wrote a letter to the Russians stating that she wanted to become a communist. She had been mistaken. She had realized the value of a Russian citizenship, especially as a Puerto Rican. My confusion lies in the fact that I'm a sad colony. Don't you see that I'm Berta Singerman? Don't you see that I'm confused? Don't you see that I don't know who I am? (E 197)

These translations of Puerto Rican issues such as citizenship, identity, politics, *familismo*, and imperialism are situated in a poetic landscape that touches upon their most logical context: that of the monumental landmarks of the literary Spanish Americas, among which Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García

Márquez stand out. "The Building of the Waves of the Sea" can be read as a parody of Borges' labyrinthine "Circular Ruins" of fiction, in that the narrative voice proposes an ambiguous representation of the concept of reality within the literary frame. Full of doubles, mirrors and idiosyncratic onomastics, this section of *El imperio* goes beyond the letter, like the Argentinian master's text, and raises the age-old question of life as a dream:

Me había quedado dormido con los ojos abiertos. Había soñado un sueño puro. Y había salido libre de este sueño. Sin el menor sentido de culpabilidad había apretado otro botón y había visto lo que ni tan siquiera me había imaginado que veía. Tumbado sobre la tumba de mi cama, divisé claramente las entrañas del *Edificio de las olas del mar*. No fue difícil penetrar a través de sus puertas movedizas. Me puse mis zapatos de goma y mi capa de agua y a través de las puertas movedizas me deslicé en el laberinto del *Diario íntimo de la soledad*. (I 220)

I had fallen asleep with my eyes open. I had dreamed a pure dream. I had pressed another button without the slightest feeling of guilt, and I had seen what I never had imagined I would see. I envisioned the inside of the building of the waves of the sea as I was lying on the tomb of my bed. I put on my galoshes and my raincoat, and through the revolving door, I slid into the labyrinth of *The Intimate Diary of Solitude*. (E 208)

Another instance in which Braschi's text journeys abroad to Borgesian geographies is "The Intimate Diary of Solitude," the last section of the imperial tryptic, which grows eventually into a parodic reading of "Borges and I" and its incapacity and unwillingness to declare which voice writes the page: "Tengo un problema muy serio—querido narrador. Nadie me toma en serio. Todos aman a Mariquita Samper y cuando yo les digo que Mariquita soy yo no me toman en serio" 'Dear Narrator: I've got a really big problem. No one takes me seriously. They all love Mariquita, and when I tell them that I'm Mariquita, they just laugh' (I 207, E 193).

García Márquez, on the other hand, makes a cameo appearance in the story of “Mariquita Samper’s childhood.” Mariquita and the Buendía boys could very well be next of kin, for she declared her independence from her parents “desde el día en que nació. No me gusta la dependencia—dijo. Mariquita nació hablando. Y todo el mundo se sorprendió. No sólo nació hablando. Nació también moviéndose como una mecedora, de norte a sur y de este a oeste” ‘from the day she was born. I don’t like dependence—she said. Mariquita was born talking. And the whole world was shocked. Not only was she born talking. She was born rocking, from north to south, and from east to west’ (I 209, E 196). The ambiguity of the motion of the rocking chair, a self-referential gesture that represents the travels of the poetic voice between literary, historical and geographical discourses, links Braschi’s text to the world of Macondo. Ursula Iguarán, the Buendía men, the Fellinesque Melquíades, and all the other circus performers who journeyed the landscape of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, like Mariquita with her fellow characters and styles in *El imperio*, they all walk endlessly the tight rope that simultaneously separates and links the ridiculous and the sublime. This “imperial” girl also “Cantaba, leía, reía, lloraba, hablaba, comía, cagaba, orinaba, eructaba, y dormía. Es una niña prodigio como su madre—dijo Berta” ‘sang, read, laughed, cried, spoke, ate, wet, pooped, burped, and napped. She was a child prodigy like her mother—said Berta’ (I 209, E 196). But that doesn’t prevent her from stumbling twice on the same stone: “Después de que su padre la violó a la edad de 15 años, Mariquita se enamoró de otro hombre que se llamó también Uriberto” ‘After her father raped her, when she was fifteen, Mariquita fell in love with another guy, also called Uriberto’ (I 209, E 196).

But this “magical realism,” a dooming reality for many characters in “Spanish-speaking countries,” is not a label that can contain Braschi or any other Latin American writer. She, like the formidable precursors (Puerto Rican and otherwise) with whom she picks her battles, does not follow *ad litteram* the formulas of the masters. Mariquita Samper and Giannina Braschi invent rooms of their own in *El imperio de los sueños*; they reset their geographical boundaries in order to recreate

themselves, both in the sense of being born once more, and in the sense of sheer enjoyment of the literary endeavor. With characters in her text that range from a single, eloquent letter to monumentally complex intertextual and self-referential creations, Braschi redefines the boundaries of what a Puerto Rican writer 'is,' naming other subjectivities, journeying foreign lands and redrawing national and cultural landscapes. The author, the text, and the characters are difficult to fit in canonic formulas, but it is not a question of fitting a mold; they revisit Said's proposed earth, a land of "overlapping territories" where they problematize essentialist readings of concepts such as belonging, possession, identity, and essence. They push the envelope of the mother tongue and make room for new interpretations of otherness within the same language.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Diane Marting and Carlos Alonso for reading different versions of this article and offering me valuable suggestions. María Rosa Menocal inspired many illuminations.

2. *El imperio de los sueños* is the title of Giannina Braschi's first book, a collection of poetic and narrative frames published by Anthropos in Barcelona in 1988. Fragments of the book had been published as earlier collections: *Asalto al tiempo* (1981), *La comedia profana* (1985), and *Libro de payasos y bufones* (1987). The quotations in English come from *Empire of Dreams*, the highly poetic rendition in English by Tess O'Dwyer. The Spanish quotations followed by Tess's English translations in most instances will be identified with the respective initials and page numbers: (I 104, E 92) can be found on page 104 of *El imperio* and on page 92 of *Empire*. In some rare instances I will offer an explicative addendum to the translation, which will be indicated in brackets.

3. There are two points of this passage that seem to have fallen through editorial cracks: "*montiña*," for once, is not the Spanish word for 'mountain,' which O'Dwyer corrected as she translated, but a version of the word "*montaña*," which does mean 'mountain,' with a Galician diminutive suffix *-iña* added, implying both a link to the word "*campiña*" 'bucolic countryside,' and an affectionate diminutive. The second word in question is "*alba*" 'dawn,' which is not 'soul;' its minimal pair, "*alma*," is. O'Dwyer's translations corroborate my reading of this passage as a visit to mystical and *pastoril* landscapes of the (m)other tongue, invoking writers from

Spain such as Lull, Teresa de Jesús, Juan de la Cruz, Luis de León, and Garcilaso de la Vega.

4. I have partially amended this translation. O'Dwyer's editorial hand translocates Braschi's representation of hunger, and adds another perspective to this "Spanish" poetic subject: in the Spanish version, the "I" promises *not* to tell the olives, the dressings, the woods, vegetables, green giants, and the liquors, while in the English translation the "I" promises to say *no* to all of them, thus turning the utterance into a parodic "health-conscious" hyperbole.

5. Braschi's utterance in Spanish deceptively points out to a question, which O'Dwyer incorporates in her translation, but it also suggests a condemning "forgive, Mr. Banker, for mistaking you for a priest, but you are not the one who has the power to cure the economic flaws of matter," a brutal rhetorical question that travels in a poignant manner to the consortium of Church and State which historically has shaped "Spanish-speaking" cultures.

6. *Apropos* of this point it is also worth reading page 100 of *El imperio* (88 of *Empire*), a favorite of Braschi and O'Dwyer in their smashing bilingual performances of the text, since it practically represents a manifesto on poetic eggs.

7. Morris argues that phrases such as these display a "pronominal ambiguity" in the text that mark a relative quality of subjectivities in both author and readers, but that also question fundamental premises of poetic authority and performance (48). In this particular case, the performative aspect that Braschi inscribes in *El imperio* is that of gender, a highly foreign notion to "Spanish-speaking" conservative sexual (and traditionally just "sexed") practices. See Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* for an introduction to the concept of the "discursive limits" of sex.

8. Morris sees the network of references to New York as intrinsic to a process of subject formation, a linking between so-called First and Third World that fundamentally questions such a categorization of literary texts: "Braschi's choice of New York as a poetic locus affirms the primary significance of her work within the frame of a cultural intertextuality in which First and Developing Worlds collide and conjoin, marking the formation of her poetic subjectivity as a voice of Latin America and a poet of New York" (45).

9. The last clause of this quotation in Spanish is the second verse of a children's song that is traditionally part of the girlfriend's ritual of farewell to the soldier as he leaves for the war front. This representative gesture of *El imperio* can be interpreted as a parodic goodbye to the legendary, pathetic texture in which imaginations all over the world (with different

agendas, languages, and discourses), have constituted the historical and literary *figura* of Julia de Burgos. Another (m)other tongue is thus celebrated in Braschi's translative empire.

10. This social, cultural, political and literary commentary is well represented in the collection entitled *La sartén por el mango*—"the pan by the handle" or, more figuratively, "in control of the situation"—published in Puerto Rico by Patricia Elena González and Eliana Ortega.

11. The principle, long held as sacred, that The Best Spanish is Castillian Spanish is still an unquestionable premise to many. Furthermore, tradition has it that when it comes to catalogue the "best" Spanish used outside of Spain, Puerto Rican Spanish usually hits the bottom of the list for three main reasons: one, for being so contaminated by English uses; second, for liquifying single /r/ phonemes in weak positions—such as before a /t/—making them sound as an /l/ (as in "*alteria*" for "*arteria*" "artery"); and third, for pronouncing the double /r/ phoneme guturally, somewhat like French speakers do, instead of articulating them as the correct palatal flaps that they are supposed to be in "good Spanish" usage. The fact that Braschi's Eisensweig is a "professor of French" is thus a ludicrously funny satirical commentary, a serious joke on the condemnation of Puerto Rican pronunciation and its relationship to "respectable" ancestors such as Franco-Castillian heritage.

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