Introduction

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Scholar, playwright, spoken-word performer, award-winning poet, and avant-garde ȧction author, since the 1980s Giannina Braschi has been creating up a s torm in and around a p anoply of Latinx hemispheric spaces. Her creative corpus reaches across different genres, regions, and historical epochs. Her critical works cover a wide range of subjects and authors, including Miguel de Cervantes, Garcilaso de la Vega, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, Antonio Machado, César Vallejo, and García Lorca. Her dramatic poetry titles in Spanish include *Asalto al tiempo* (1981) and *La comedia profana* (1985). Her radically experimental genre-bending titles include *El imperio de los sueños* (1988), the bilingual *Yo-Yo Boing!* (1998), and the English-penned *United States of Banana* (2011). With national and international awards and works appearing in Swedish, Slovenian, Russian, and Italian, she is recognized as one of today's foremost experimental Latinx authors.

Her vibrant bilingually shaped creative expressions and innovation spring from her Latinidad, her Puerto Rican-ness that weaves in and through a p lanetary aesthetic sensibility. We discover as much in her work about US/Puerto Rico sociopolitical histories as we encounter the metaphysical and existential explorations of a Cervantes, Rabelais, Diderot, Artaud, Joyce, Beckett, Stein, Borges, Cortázar, and Rosario Castellanos, for instance. With every flourish of her pen Braschi reminds us that in the distillation and reconstruction of the building blocks of the universe there are no limits to what ȧction can do. And, here too, the black scratches that form words and carefully composed blank spaces shape an absent world; her strict selection *out* of words and syntax is as important as the precise insertion of words and syntax to put us into the shoes of the "complicit reader" (Julio Cortázar's term) to most productively interface, invest, and ȧll in the gaps of her storyworlds. Braschi reminds us of the power of *lexis*—asking us to deep-dive into the metaphorical, subtextual, and allegorical layers of meaning. No subject remains untouched in her

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ȧction making. She draws from Latinx realities as well as metaphysics—even historical archive, sociopolitical, and judicial discourses. Indeed, Braschi invents new forms to express polyvalent Latinx sensibilities that shape-shift across time, place, and identity categories.

In many ways, as a contemporary Latinx author Braschi stands apart. Her radically experimental works continue to grow a genealogy of Latinx letters, but they do so from the avant-garde margins. Taken as a whole her work extends and complicates a t rajectory of Latinx experimental ȧction that has not received the same critical attention as, perhaps, the work of a more straightforward realist writer such as an Esmeralda Santiago or a Piri Thomas. Lisa Sánchez González sums up the realism of, say, Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* as "non-confrontational" (140)—as a mainstream-consumable story that focuses on the individual triumphs at the exclusion of the "collective predicament that entails growing problems within racism, poverty, reproductive rights, education, and Colonial maldevelopment" (140). Sidestepping the easily consumable, Braschi's creative work puts pressure on and radically bends a Latinx literary canon, and with this she calls attention to the self-within-the-collective of nation and diasporic community. She converses with Isabel Rios (*Victuum*, 1976), Cecile Pineda (*Face*, 1985), Guillermo Gomez-Peña (*Codex Espangliensis*, 1998), Alejandro Morales (*Waiting to Happen*, 2001), Salvador Plascencia (*ȧe People of Paper*, 2005), or Sesshu Foster (*Atomik Aztex*, 2005). And today we see Braschi joined by a growing number of Latinx canon-benders such as Carmen María Machado, Elizabeth Acevedo, Monica de la Torre, and Naomi Ayala. More globally, Braschi's works extend and complicate a genealogy of avant-garde women of color authors such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Claudia Rankine, and Audre Lorde, and she joins with other planetary cutting-edge contemporaries such as Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi, Pamela Lu, Zinzi Clemmons, and Sumana Roy.

Although standing apart, Braschi as creator clearly doesn't exist ex nihilo. Indeed, we see her build on and redeploy the work of feminist and queer fore-ȧgures, including Cristina Peri Rossi, Alejandra Pizarnik, Clarice Lispector, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Marguerite Duras, and Gertrude Stein. She does so less from an identity perspective and more from a theoretical practice perspective. We see a similar dynamic with her Puerto Rican family friends and mentors playwright René Marqués and public intellectual Nilita Vientós-Gastón, and with her ȧction-writing friends on the island, Rosario Ferré, Manuel Ramos Otero, Luis Rafael Sánchez, and Ana Lydia Vega. I think also of her Nuyorican poet friends who are cofounders of the Nuyorican Poets Café, Pedro Pietri and Miguel Algarín, and their precursor Julia de Burgos. From Pizarnik

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and Duras to Marqués and Pietri, these voices, each with their own aesthetic (some more experimentational than others) and each with their uniquely expressed antiestablishment worldviews, are forerunners to Braschi.

In response to the tremendous cultural output of Latinx (Puerto Rican/Nuyorican) culture, a rich body of scholarship has grown. This scholarship puts front and center the complex ways in which Puerto Rico and its diaspora have been caught within the imperialist web of the United States since its annexation in 1898. For instance, in *Boricua Pop* (2004) Frances Negrón-Muntaner identiἀes how histories of colonization and US imperialism have led to a deep shaming that informs much cultural production; conversely, she identiἀes a performativity that resists such shaming. In *Dream Nation* María Acosta Cruz explores how an impulse for independence as "symbolic aspiration" grows a culture that "imagines the nation" through "its heroes, its allegories, its signiἀcant stories" (1). Acosta Cruz considers how this culture springs from an influx island identity: as nation, state, commonwealth, colony. Puerto Rican/Nuyorican culture grows from a mixed yearning for sovereignty along what is caught between "dashed aspirations, and hoped-for dreams" (1). In *Defending ἀ eir Own in the Cold* Marc Zimmerman turns his attention to how Puerto Rican/Boricua cultural phenomena grow out of this fraught relationship between island and mainland identities. In what he conceptualizes as a "dis-erasure," Zimmerman identiἀes a nomadic, spontaneous, and resistant Latinx subjectivity to the colonial power that wraps itself around everyday life of Puerto Rican peoples. In their introduction to a 2014 special issue of *American Quarterly* titled "Las Américas Quarterly," editors Macarena Gómez-Barris and Licia Fiol-Matta characterize Puerto Rican cultural studies as a ἀeld in which scholars work to "reἀne the conversation on earlier colonial ruptures and Américas exchanges [and to] present the transversality of the flow of knowledge, archives, and geographic spaces . . . as critical inquiry into Las Américas" (494).

In addition to scholarly attention to issues of coloniality and sovereignty, there is a rich and necessary body of scholarship that focuses on translanguaging acts—the interfacing of English, Spanish, and code-switching linguistic registers both as unique cultural markers and as aesthetic shaping devices. (For more on translanguaging, see Francisco Moreno-Fernández's chapter in this volume.) The use of translanguaging (English/Spanish, code-switching, caló, pochismos, for instance) resists uniform monolingual expressions and also reminds readers that Latinx identities and experiences are neither island-only nor mainland-aspiring but, rather, are shaped across a linguistically nonbinary hemispheric Américas. (See Martha E. Sánchez's *A Translational Turn*.) For

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Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, an author like Braschi gives power to Latinx women subjects who actively deform and transform language in ways that invite Latinx female readers to ȧll in gaps and to enact transformations in the world beyond the narrative. (See Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes's *Queer Ricans*.) Likewise, in *Redreaming America* Debra Castillo considers Braschi's translanguaging as clearing a space for resistance and revolt against coercive, binary monolingual Spanish or English dominance. On one occasion, Castillo identiȧes how Braschi's use of an "aggressive Spanglish" in *Yo-Yo Boing!* becomes the narrative vehicle to convey a mashup of concepts and knowledge from Europe (Michelangelo Antonioni) and the Américas (Julio Cortázar)—that is, Braschi's "linguistic dissonance" gives shape to an ironic metaȧctional "staged performance" narrative that troubles the concept of "authenticity" itself (174).

Taken as a whole, Giannini Braschi's mixed genre, translanguaging, experimental storyworlds present "conceptions of power and resistance to empire today that is not based on the class struggle within the nation-state class but located within the rhizomatic, deterritorialized multitude" (*Latinx Studies: Key Concepts* 53). In *Yo-Yo Boing!* we see Braschi's disruptive storyworld building at play: urban Latinxs in New York City on a nomadic journey in and through different cultural zones including, of course, those zones where borders between languages do not exist. In this sense, she disrupts the assimilatory pressure and mainstream constraint: that Spanish is private and English is public; otherwise stated of this typical way that language is polarized—if Spanish-speaking, then remain Puerto Rican, and if English, then you can be US. This linguistic elasticity liberates form, where subjects engage in discussions/explorations of cultural phenomena (Nabokov, Fellini, Monique Wittig, Woody Allen, and the Nuyorican arts generally). As Kristian van Haesendonck points out, the novel's translanguaging "goes further than a postmodern linguistic game" (179). It "enjoin(s) the reader to accept the language of the other, without falling into a new marketability of 'cross-over' writing" (179). In their introduction to *Yo-Yo Boing!* Doris Sommer and Alexandra Vega-Merino identify how the novel "transmutes poetry into novel, into screenplay, dialogue, and by extension to more and sometimes unidentiȧed variants" ("Either And" 11).

And yet, Braschi turns the table on this, too. Her translingual characters and imaginings are not anchored in named characters. All we have are speaking voices identiȧed by a dash. Here we do encounter a variety of "characters." The novel opens with a woman performing an extended monologue in Spanish ("Close-Up") on her physical, emotional, and intellectual features. A multiplicity of translanguaging "characters" fol-

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low in the "Blow-Up" section; and in the ȧnal section, "Black-Out," we hear the voice in Spanish of the "character" Giannina. Van Haesendonck articulates this as a postmodern move whereby the "doubling and the absenting" undermines "the authority of the traditional narrator" (179). For Van Haesendonck, Braschi creates traces of formless characters who are "simultaneously antagonists of their own selves." He concludes how, "in a Beckettian way, we ȧnd nothing more than some reminders of a narrative instance: the narrator has been reduced to a disembodied, amorphous voice" (179).

Braschi stages in ways that go beyond Beckett. She stages a Latinidad. This is driven home by Debra Castillo when she analyzes how "Braschi mixes opera, salsa, rock, and Mexican folk songs with Barbra Streisand, Frank Sinatra, and *ȧe Sound of Music*, working to capture not only the promiscuously defined cultural referent, but the very sound and rhythm of these different musical genres" (179). Castillo enriches our understanding of how Braschi stages identity and experience.

Others have also remarked on how the characterless narrative functions. For Mila Popovich, this re-creates a sense of how "migrancy, and its consequent existential form of metalives, necessitates a multiple positionality that, in turn, produces multiple reflexive modalities. Sharing an understanding that mimesis itself is a form of displacement, these authors create alternative aesthetic states inhabited by characters who experience synchronously multiple placedness in the world" (117). And for Sommer and Vega-Merino, this move creates a "roller-coaster ride of shifting subject positions" (11) that ultimately resists our locating of Latinx subjectivities either in a culture-geographic location of Puerto Rico or in that of a Nuyorican Bronx; its constant shape-shifting also calls attention to the restless sociopolitical realities of the island as nation, state, postcolonial outpost. Sommer and Vega-Merino illustrate how the novel performs "the juggling of selves: a poet who doubles as an academic; a Puerto Rican who is also an American; a woman who is a match for any man's world" (13). Presciently, translingual tongues and imaginings are indeed the common doxa for Latinxs in Braschi's world. Sommer and Vega-Merino appraise Braschi's self-reflexive translingual play as a forceful resistance to any assimilationist moves, including that of the bildungsroman typiȧed by the progress from "Spanish intimacies to English public life" (18). Rather, it creates a spectacle out of the Spanish to English "bilateral movement" (18).

In *Permissible Narratives*, Christopher González enriches our understanding of how Braschi creates what he calls a "challenging reading situation." He attends speciȧcally to how her translanguaging allows her to give shape to a narrative that resists the monolingual Spanish or

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English reader's attempt to contain it. He asserts: "because language is inextricably bound to identity," Braschi's translingual code-switching functions as an "unabashed assault on [the] reader" (89). The net effect is that her code-switching puts "more distance between the characters and reader" and thus at once challenges storyworld construction and opens a space for the storyworld to "complicate notions of identity within the minds of the audience" (67). Thus, for González, Giannina moves "beyond the limitations of identity-bound aesthetics—of the atavisms of Latino/a literature" (106). Finally, González identiȧes this as a Latinx narrative that "anticipates readers who can easily decode both languages in order to co-construct the storyworld" (106). José L. Torres-Padilla argues that Braschi's translingual storyworld at once creates a poetics that "undermines the essentialist perceptions of literature and purity in language held by the island's cultural elite" and functions "to reverse colonial authority by unmasking it and showing its ambivalence" (291). However, Torres-Padilla cautions us to be mindful of bringing too much idealism to a linguistical analysis of Braschi. He identiȧes how relying on language alone as a "stance of resistance against imperialism and hegemony" promotes an idealism that arguably "supports the continuing colonial status of Puerto Rico and undermines any desire for self-determination that might effect real change" (292). Torres-Padilla questions whether the aesthetics of *Yo-Yo Boing!* is "elitist and bourgeois" in ways that uphold the "the status quo" (293).

In 1988 Braschi published *El imperio de los sueños*, an epic mashup of poetry and prose, deploying a myriad of storytelling forms. In her introduction to Tess O'Dwyer's 1994 English translation, Alicia Ostriker qualiȧes *Empire of Dreams* as a masterpiece of poetry cross-dressing "in the garb of dramatic monologue, love letter, TV commercial, diary excerpt, movie criticism, celebrity confession, literary theory, bastinado, manifesto, etc." (ix). In this work, a parade of nomadic characters and migrant voices crowd the city streets, stores, and tourist attractions of New York (such as Macy's, the Empire State Building, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Central Park). In "New/Nueva York in Giannina Braschi's *Poetic Egg*," Diane E. Marting identiȧes this as a "parodic elegy" to Cervantes and a contemporary example of "historiographic metaȧction" that reconstructs a "fractured, cosmopolitan cityscape" populated by globally placed and displaced Puerto Ricans who make up a "global South consisting of two islands within the same country" (167). Braschi's New/eva York exists as an "ideal creative cityscape and a dystopic urban wasteland" (181). It's a city of "glitz and glamour" and where culture is coopted for "self-promotion" (181). But because it is so complexly layered, it showcases the urban Latinx "multiplicities within the identity of persons" (181). On Braschi's

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pairing of frivolity with the sublime, Jerónimo Arellano situates *Empire of Dreams* within the context of the McOndo movement in Latin America, alongside edgy urban novelists Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez who take a stand against commercialism and magic realism. In *Magical Realism and the History of Emotions in Latin America*, Arellano identiἀes "a central tension" in *ἀe Intimate Diary of Solitude* (the ἀnal section of *Empire of Dreams*) as "a conflict between the controlling narrator and a rebellious protagonist," Mariquita Samper, a Puerto Rican writer who works as a makeup artiste at Macy's, "The Greatest Store in the World" (165). Spoiler alert: Mariquita murders the ever-looming, omniscient narrator of the Latin American Boom because he keeps rewriting her diary against her will, erasing her adventures and replacing them with a suffocating solitude. Refusing to die of solitude, Mariquita shoots the narrator: "Boom! Boom! He's dead. He's dead. Mariquita has killed the narrator. Revolution in *ἀe Intimate Diary of Solitude* (203)." This declaration of revolution—not unlike later manifestos by the Mexican "Crack Generation" writers and the McOndo novelists of the 1990s—signals "the epochal death of magical realism" in Latin America (167).

Like *Empire of Dreams* and *Yo-Yo Boing! United States of Banana* is also revolutionary in style and subject matter. In *United States of Banana* we meet an unlikely cast of disparate characters: Fidel, Artaud, Cockroach, Rubén Darío, Wishy-Washy, Puerto Rico, Hamlet, Giannina, Zarathustra, and Segismundo (a Latinxiἀed Sigmund Freud?). As we travel from a dungeon beneath the Statue of Liberty (where Segismundo's been held for one hundred years) across the Hispanophone archipelago, Braschi asks us to seesaw between individual and collective acts as shapers of history—including the 9/11 terrorist attacks and US imperialism. María Acosta Cruz identiἀes the work as a "good, old-fashioned independentista tirade" (162) that "uses an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink" approach to denunciate US global imperialism: from "Puerto Rico to Iran, Iraq, and the fall of the Twin Towers" (162). But, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé sums up *United States of Banana* as a "political-poetic, anti-imperial book [that] does not seek to attain a new space of sovereignty from which to exert an alternative, progressive hegemony; instead, it attempts to imagine and foster . . . new forms of interaction, communication, and cooperation 'from below,' literally from below" (815). Indeed, Braschi's decolonial experimental narratives clear space for readers to experience new positive and progressive forms of human relationality. Cruz-Malavé concludes that Braschi's storyworlds forge networks of "camaraderie, compañerismo, and yes, love" (816). In *Precarious Crossings*, Alexandra Perisic contextualizes a "Declaration of Love" in *United States of Banana* as a "reinvention of the language of love" through a

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political lens of "universal mourning" not of a "speciâc life but of the precariousness of life in general.(173)" Braschi dramatizes how "the immigrant condition, the dispossession of one's roots, country, and family create the conditions of possibility for an ethics of mourning"(173). Imprisoned immigrants, second class citizens, and suspected terrorists from around the globe are imprisoned under Lady Liberty's skirt, where they "share their breath and space, as they mourn together.(173)" In *Novelization in Decolonization, or Postcolonialism Reconsidered*, Peter Hitchcock observes how *United States of Banana* is "forthright in disabusing readers about how so called 'Banana Republics' come about and wonders aloud, from its title on, about the location and order of knowledge said to grow them (189)". Hitchock affirms Braschi's clarity about the power of "cultural force" (189). Her namesake character Giannina demands that the republic open its doors to poets, philosophers, and lovers: "the powers of the world are shifting. Culture is becoming more relevant than politics. Cities more relevant than nations. Continents more relevant than nations. But continents less relevant than cities. Languages more relevant than nations. Languages are alive. Nations are dead (229)."

Without doubt, Braschi's books challenge the constructs of society and the expectations of readers. They ask us to work for our pleasures—and displeasures. As with others who have come before and those creating today, there is a k ind of gatekeeping when it comes to the teaching, studying, and dissemination of Braschi and other vanguardistas of color. With radically experimental artistry, the analytical optic has traditionally been focused on men: Joyce, Barth, Danielewski, Pynchon, among many others. And yet, assuredly, readers and scholars of today's generation hunger for the kind of mind-, body-, and genre-bending work of a Braschi. And this happens in spite of the hunger for such writing. Torsa Ghosal (a former student of mine and now a professor) calls attention to this academic imbalance that skews to male authors who "feature women characters who are stalked, groped, and abused." She identiâes another arguably more destructive element to this trend, calling attention to how "white, male authors often perform their dissent by sustaining illusions of possessing or plundering language imagined as the female body." Literary canons, classrooms, scholarly and mainstream writings at best don't know what to do with vanguard authors such as Braschi who trouble the reading experience—at worst they deliberately shun such authors. (See Ghosal's "How I Learned to Love Experimental Fiction as a Brown Girl by Seeking Out Books by Women of Color.")

This isn't to say that scholars, teachers, and even some mainstream reviewers haven't turned their analytical optic to Braschi. They have.

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