

***Yo-Yo Boing!*: Giannina Braschi on Translation, Temporality, and the Future**

The title of Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!* (1998) is a bilingual pun. On the one hand, a yo-yo is of course a children's toy: a wooden, terra cotta, or metal axle or bobbin with weighted disks on either side, to which a string is attached such that, when the string is wound and unwound through movements of the hand manipulating the free end, the axle rises and falls, spinning as it comes and goes. Skilled players can direct the device's kinetic energy to perform a whole range of tricks. Yo-yos are found almost everywhere—there are also diabolos or “Chinese yo-yos,” for which the string, which here has two rods or sticks tied at either end, is not attached to the axle, which can therefore for instance be thrown high into the air—and the toy has a long pedigree. Ancient Greek vases show children playing with them as long ago as 440 BCE. On the other hand, in Spanish “yo” is the first-person singular subject pronoun: “I.” So “yo-yo” could indicate either an insistent affirmation of the self (“Me, me!”), or two selves, two “I”s, perhaps one self split in two, in dialogue back and forth, to and fro like a yo-yo, out and back, driven by their own pent-up energies. What is more, “Yoyo Boing” is also a cultural reference, probably unfamiliar to many readers: it is the nickname of comedian and actor Luis Antonio Rivera, a mainstay of Puerto Rican TV in the 1960s and 1970s. Rivera came up with his moniker when playing in a radio adaptation of the Archie Comics: he picked Yoyo as a sort of translation of “Jughead” (Archie's best friend and sidekick in the series), mangled and reborn in the relocation of white-bread, small-town Riverdale to the Hispanophone Caribbean. Braschi's novel, too, is concerned with the transformations forced by linguistic and cultural mobility, and their repercussions: with what can and what cannot be translated and assimilated across borders or even just between two people, two “I”s. It is interested in what goes out but does not necessarily come back, at least not in the same form.

Yo-Yo Boing! is full of movement and motion and yet, like a yo-yo, in some ways it never seems to go anywhere or end up much further on from where it started. The book lacks anything like a conventional plot or plot development. It consists almost entirely of dialogue, or a series of dialogues, between characters who are never fully fleshed out but who seem to be graduate students, writers, artists, teachers, and young professionals living and working in New York. Many of those who speak (or are spoken about) come

from outside the United States, and they are still defining themselves, still trying to navigate the social complexities of the urban United States, at the end of the “American century” and at the cusp of the new millennium. They are mindful that they are more privileged (and more ambitious) than many others, but they are equally aware that they remain still somehow outsiders. The future is open and indefinite; this is before 9/11, before the long wars (on terror and in the Middle East and Central Asia) that would scar the next couple of decades, putting paid to this brief window of US geopolitical confidence and generalized potentiality. It is before the “blowback” by which the world’s sole superpower reaped the consequences of its neo-imperial mistakes in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Soon the fun and games would have to stop. But Braschi shows the anxieties embedded even in the otherwise swinging late nineties: some of the characters she ventriloquizes or describes will make good on all the swirling potential that energizes this book; others fear that they will be among those who burn out or are left behind. Above all, *Yo-Yo Boing!* portrays a moment in time, when one narrative had come to an end, but another had yet to begin.

1. Translation, Movement, and Nonsense

There is an English translation of Braschi’s novel, and while I have no doubt that the translator, Tess O’Dwyer, has done an admirable job, the very idea seems perverse or to miss the point of the novel. For the book is constitutively split between languages, never coming to rest entirely in Spanish or entirely in English. There are whole sections or pages in one language or another: the brief first and third sections, for instance, have English titles (“Close-Up” and “Black-Out” respectively), but are otherwise more or less fully in Spanish. In the much longer second section, aptly entitled “Blow-Up” (surely a nod to the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni’s London-set and English-language film version of a short story by Argentine writer Julio Cortázar; more cultural border-crossing and hybridity), Braschi puts a dynamite stick to such monolingualism.

In the book’s long middle section, the prose slips constantly back and forth between the two languages, sometimes in the middle of a paragraph, or even in the middle of a sentence. Here is how the section starts: “—Abrela tú. / —¿Por qué yo? Tú tienes las keys. Yo te las entregué a ti. Además, I left mine adentro. / ¿Por qué las dejaste adentro? / —Porque I knew you had yours. / —Por qué dependes de mí? / Just open it, and make it fast” (21). In just seven short lines (43 words), there are seven switches between the

languages, sometimes for just one word (“Tú tienes las keys”). At times one of the speakers picks up on the other’s choice of language (“adentro” stays “adentro”); at times, they translate the other’s word into the other language (“I left mine” becomes “las dejaste”). All this interlingual movement adds vitality to the argument we are witnessing: at stake is also, in part, very literally the terms of the debate, the language in which it is to be expressed. By contrast, the English translation is inevitably much more drab: “— You open it. / —Why me? You’ve got the keys. I gave them to you. Besides, I left mine inside. / —Why did you leave them inside? / —Because I knew you had yours. / —Why do you depend on me? —Just open it, and make it fast” (19). It is not the same. . . because it is the same, because in the translation (unlike the original) sameness triumphs over difference. Much of the original vitality is thereby left behind, like the keys.

What is the effect of this bilingualism—or translingualism? What, if anything, is the logic of these shifts from one language to another? (If you yourself speak two languages, and sometimes do something similar, for instance in conversation with friends, you might ask yourself how and why you do so.) Why are the first and third parts of the novel solely in Spanish? And what impression is given by the constant switching in the long second part? If you were asked to translate the book, how would you go about it? Pause the video and write down some ideas in your notebook. While you do that, I’ll have a piña colada, but I’ll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Piña Colada

The piña colada—a mix of rum, pineapple juice, and coconut milk or cream—is claimed as Puerto Rico’s “official drink.” One of its origin stories suggests that it was invented in 1954 by Ramon “Monchito” Marrero, bartender at the Caribe Hilton in San Juan. At the time, the hotel had only just been built: it had been a project of the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company, a government-owned agency that helped to engineer “Operation Bootstrap,” the post-war transformation of the island’s economy from plantations to industrialism. Signalling this imagined bold move into an industrial future, the hotel’s architecture rejected gestures to the past (such as the Spanish Revivalism popular in Southern California) in favour of embracing the Modern Movement; at its opening, the hotel bar in particular was noted as a striking example of modernist styling, celebrating Puerto Rico’s arrival as a destination for the nascent jet set. But Operation

Bootstrap also led to unemployment in the countryside, and mass migration both to the island's cities and further afield, above all to New York and its surrounding area. Today, almost two-thirds of all Puerto Ricans live in the continental United States: 5.5 million, compared to the 3.5 million who live on the island itself.

One way to translate *Yo-Yo Boing!* might be to retain its bilingualism, but to switch the languages: to translate it into English *and* French, say, to conjure up the texture of urban Montreal; or into French *and* Arabic, mimicking the linguistic mixture of the Parisian *banlieus*. But such mixtures are no doubt different in these other contexts. Or what about translating the English elements of the novel into Spanish, at the same time as translating the Spanish into English? A monolingual English or Spanish speaker would have to consult both the translation and the original simultaneously in order to piece the book together. But that would beg the question as to whether the shifts from one language to another are unmotivated (contingent), or whether Spanish is used in particular circumstances to particular effect, better to express (say) the intimate and the personal, with English reserved for other uses and situations.

The point about bilingualism is that a speaker could, in theory, speak wholly in one language or the other. But they switch codes when somehow it feels right to say something in English rather than Spanish and *vice versa*. It is not that they have no preference for one language over the other, but that when they combine the two, those preferences are (in)constantly changing, sometimes from one word or phrase to the next: better in English for this; better in Spanish for that. On the one hand, the fluidity of the repeated transitions between languages is itself a form of translation, not least if we consider the root of that word, from the Latin "*trans*" (across or beyond) and "*latus*" (the past participle of *ferre*, to carry or bear): to carry across. The characters in *Yo-Yo Boing!* are incessantly in translation as they make the conversation yo-yo between linguistic codes and registers, not only from English to Spanish (and back again) but also from philosophical musing or aesthetic self-reflection to mundane domestic disagreements, from high-minded talk of art and literature to gossip and complaint.

On the other hand, beyond all this, there is a scatological register, a language of the body, a body also in constant movement (as the novel opens, becoming elephant, becoming giraffe) that resists the fixed categories of codification or categorization as either one thing

or the other. This is the “boing” of the title, the onomatopoeia of a word that seeks to be pure sound, to shrug off meaning to comic effect just as Luis Antonio Rivera (the original Yoyo Boing) would supposedly insert the (non-)word “boing” into conversational lulls, siphoning off seriousness in a play with but also against language itself. Braschi’s novel resists translation both because it is already in translation—and translation cannot be translated—and because it touches on the untranslatable, on the limits of language and meaning. It dares us to pick up a signal from what is otherwise mere sound, and asks what is the tipping point where sense suddenly (if precariously) prevails.



Yo-yo performer, “Black,” in action

2. *Kairos and the Future Event*

There is so much movement, and yet nothing quite happens in Braschi’s novel. As critic Kristian van Haesendonck observes, there are resonances between *Yo-Yo Boing!* and the (likewise bilingual) Irish-French dramatist and novelist Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for*

Godot, not least in that in both texts there is perpetually the promise that we are on the cusp of something, but the anticipated event never quite comes: “The only thing that happens in *Yo-Yo Boing!* is precisely the negation of all action,” van Haesendonck suggests (187). In the meantime, while they await whatever it is that may be coming, there is conversation within confines that none of the characters seem able to break. Compare the famous lines from *Godot*, “Well, shall we go? / Yes, let’s go. / *They do not move*” (Beckett 54), with Braschi’s “I’m sick and tired of you and I don’t want to hear your voice again. / —Okay. I won’t talk. / —But you continue. / —And you” (31). Beckett’s play is even explicitly referenced in *Yo-Yo Boing!* as one of the novel’s voices describes her writer’s block: “The problem comes when I realize I have done nothing and I’m still in bed rocking-waiting for Godot or a change of climate. I get so angry at myself that I stand up and write my rage and feel good again and I change, and I change, and I change, but I never really change” (23). Constant transformation, to and fro, but not enough—at least as yet—to make a real difference.

Alternatively, we might think that the book itself is the event to which the many conversations it contains are ultimately leading. From this perspective, the story that the book tells is the story of its own writing, as its author shakes off her doubts about register and language, turning a self-reflexivity that might otherwise be disabling into the subject of (something like) a novel. In the words of critic Ellen Jones: “*Yo-Yo Boing!* is largely about the experience of writing (or trying to write) a work like *Yo-Yo Boing!*” (295). The book’s publication would be triumph of the authorial “I,” fixing and transcending the constant movement of the multivocal oral discourse on which the novel draws, by committing it to print. The novel’s squabbling multiplicity would be radically terminated with the “black-out” with which it ends: the curtain descending, the drama put to bed. Nothing particularly resistant would remain, and we might even question whether the translingual hubbub had been all that radical in the first place. As José Torres-Padilla puts it, “the text is rife with bourgeois fetishes, frivolous talk about material things and a cloying concern with name-dropping” (299). This is a harsh judgement, but understandable in so far as the book’s many characters seem to be almost exclusively young cultural professionals—writers, editors, graduate students, professors, literary agents, and the like—who chat loftily (pun intended) about Fellini or T. S. Eliot, while

envying each others' successes and anxiously scrambling both for critical appreciation and for the grants that underwrite their precarious lifestyles.

But perhaps something else may happen in a future to which the characters are necessarily blind. Another version of the plot would focus on how the book starts with a notional unity—the woman examining herself in the mirror in the novel's opening section—that very soon multiplies, first into the split subject, fractured by her own reflection, then with the dialogue between the two roommates (also lovers?) arguing about their apartment door, who in turn take on multiple names (Kiko, Kika, Chipi, Chipi, Chipa) before being joined by a multitude more who come and go, back and forth, intervening and interrupting until the "I" declares that she "can't bear being myself, the person I just was, the one I no longer am, the one who escaped with the moment that no longer is" (232 [226, translation modified]). The "I" escapes like a yo-yo that breaks from its string and rolls out of sight as the curtain comes (now) crashing or bouncing down without putting an end to anything. . . Boing!

The difference between these three readings of the novel—one in which the book is a portrait of suspended animation, awaiting an event that never comes; another in which the published text puts an end to the restless vitality on which it feeds; and a third in which something unpredictably escapes—may be ultimately undecidable. But each references different ways of conceiving what the novel is doing with time or temporality, which are all at stake in one particularly dense passage almost exactly at the midpoint of the text (page 122 of 247). In the first case, we have a permanent conversation or multilogue that may range back and forth but always returns to an eternal present, arrested development that never comes to any climax: "*arrested / arrested / libido*," the book tells us a character quotes someone else's phrase. In the second case, the classic temporality of the novel form belatedly imposes itself, ensuring there is a beginning, a middle, and an end, putting a stop to things with a conclusion that reasserts the writer's authority: "She had explained that arrested meant *delayed, retarded*, but I thought *arrestada*, like *confined, imprisoned, like halt, you're under arrest*" (122). This is writing as police action, taking down speech as evidence to determine agency, responsibility, blame. Finally, there is the notion of *kairos*, the Greek term for a temporality that stands in contrast to the measurable, divisible clock time that is *chronos*. It means "the right time for action, the critical moment" (Liddell and Scott), indicating an openness to the future,

to an unknowable event that may still arrive, like a thief in the night. In the novel, *kairos* is linked to repetition and to the surrender of authority, to a persistence that survives even constant translation: “—You have no right to transform my words, especially when I am dictating what I’m hearing from the blind. Just write every word I say. That’s *kairós*. That’s what I do. I’m just repeating what I hear. What authority do I have. None. Whatsoever.” Here this voice, that of the writer who is in fact revealed to be merely a mediating instance between orality and its transcription, addresses her editor, who is seeking to smooth out the text’s translingual “mistakes.” But she may as well also be talking to us, the novel’s readers: “Now I can lay down like the dead,” she tells us, “and wait till you make the writing work. The misspellings and the nuances, after all, what do I care, I see in them, your future trademarks. You are going to be, by all means, an original” (122). In this version, Braschi puts the novel’s fate in our hands. A change is coming, if that is what we want.

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Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BLACK_at_TED_conference.png

Song: "Sonido bestial" (Ricardo Ray and Bobby Cruz)