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Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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Latin American Literature in Translation

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

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The title of Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing!*
(1998) is a bilingual pun.

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.

Braschi's novel 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 future is open and indefinite; this is before 9/11, before the long wars that would scar the next couple of decades, putting paid to this brief window of US geopolitical confidence and generalized potentiality.

Soon the fun and games would
have to stop.

Yo-Yo Boing! portrays a moment in time,
when one narrative had come to an end,
but another had yet to begin.



TRANSLATION, MOVEMENT, AND NONSENSE

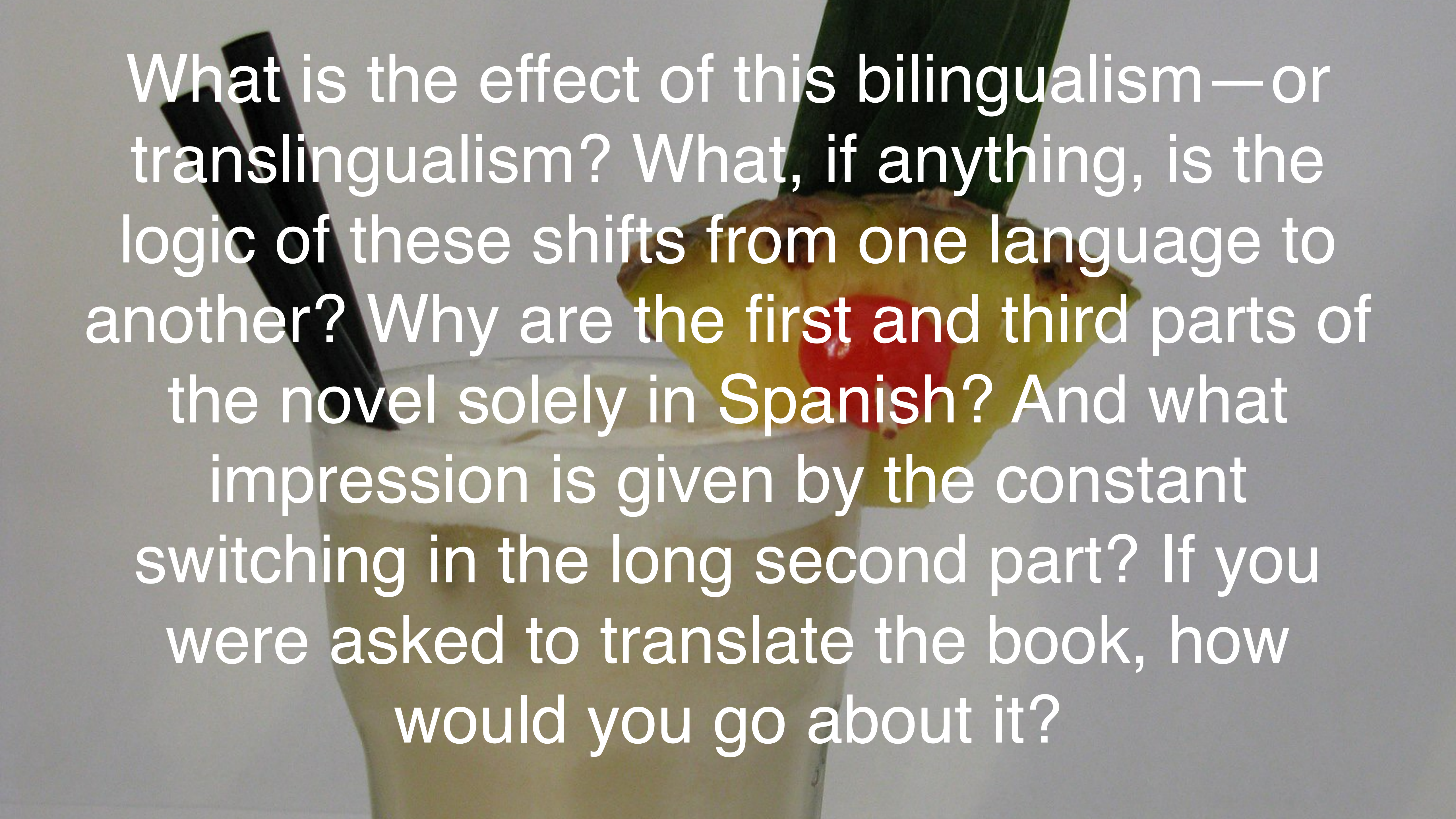
The book is constitutively split between languages, never coming to rest entirely in Spanish or entirely in English.

Braschi puts a dynamite stick
to monolingualism.

“—Ábrela 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)

“— 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.”

What is the effect of this bilingualism—or translingualism? What, if anything, is the logic of these shifts from one language to another? 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?

A glass of beer with a thick head of foam. On top of the beer is a slice of pineapple with a red cherry in the center. Two black pens are resting on the rim of the glass. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

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One way to translate *Yo-Yo Boing!* might be to retain its bilingualism, but to switch the languages.

The question is 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.

It is not that bilingual speakers 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.

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, and so on.

On the other hand, there is a language of the body, a body also in constant movement that resists the fixed categories of codification or categorization as either one thing or the other.

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 prevails.



KAIROS AND THE FUTURE EVENT

There is so much movement, and yet
nothing quite happens in Braschi's novel.

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“The only thing that happens in *Yo-Yo Boing!* is precisely the negation of all action.” (Kristian van Haesendonck)

“Well, shall we go? / Yes, let’s go. / They do not move.” (Samuel Beckett)

“Well, shall we go? / Yes, let’s go. / They do not move.” (Samuel Beckett)

“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)

“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)

The book itself is the event to which
the many conversations it contains
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The story that the book tells is
the story of its own writing.

“*Yo-Yo Boing!* is largely about the experience of writing (or trying to write) a work like *Yo-Yo Boing!*” (Ellen Jones)

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 text is rife with bourgeois fetishes,
frivolous talk about material things and
a cloying concern with name-dropping.”
(José Torres-Padilla)

Another version of the plot would focus on how the book starts with a notional unity that very soon multiplies.

“I 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!

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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.

“She had explained that arrested meant *delayed, retarded*, but I thought *arrestada*, like *confined, imprisoned, like halt, you’re under arrest.*” (122)

“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.

Kairos (καιρός) is the Greek term for a temporality that stands in contrast to the measurable, divisible clock time that is chronos (χρόνος). 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.

“*Kairòs* is the quality of time in the instant, the moment of rupture and opening of temporality. It is the present, but a singular and open present [. . .] the modality of time through which being opens itself, attracted by the void at the limit of time.”

(Antonio Negri)

“— 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.” (122)

“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)

Braschi puts the novel's fate in our hands.

Braschi puts the novel's fate in our hands.

A change is coming, if that is what we want.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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¡Don't leave it to mañana!

