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## **Embracing alternate discourses on migration: Giannina Braschi's and Luisita López Torregrosa's multi-dimensional literary schemes**

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### **Resumen**

Lecturas y análisis crítico de los trabajos literarios de varios escritores contemporáneos de la diáspora tienden a complicar la presunción hegemónica que forma parte integral de los discursos nacionalistas sobre la migración caribeña. Estos trabajos muestran una multiplicidad de representaciones de identidades nacionales a la vez que se enfocan en cómo estas identidades se construyen y se interpretan. Este ensayo analiza los trabajos de dos escritoras puertorriqueñas, que residen y escriben en los Estados Unidos, y quienes se apartan de las tradicionales historias de migración caribeña y políticas de identidad y superación socio-económica. Por el contrario, las escritoras interrogan el significado mismo de la palabra diáspora al esbozar su inserción como escritoras cuyo alcance literario cruza fronteras nacionales, culturales y lingüísticas a la vez que contempla una experiencia de vida más ecléctica y una tradición literaria más multifacética.

Palabras clave: diáspora caribeña, nacionalismo, escritoras puertorriqueñas, tradición literaria multifacética

### **Abstract**

Close readings and critical analyses of several contemporary diasporic writers' works demonstrate an increasing tendency to complicate the presumption of homogeneity at the heart of most nationalist discourses on Caribbean migration. These writings showcase a multiplicity of representations of national identities while focusing on how these identities are construed and interpreted. This article analyzes the works of two Puerto Rican authors, living and writing in the US, who deter from depictions of traditional Caribbean migrant stories of identity politics and socio-economic upward mobility in the host culture. Rather, they interrogate the very meaning of the term diaspora and delineate their particular insertion as writers whose literary range crosses national, cultural, and linguistic borders to embrace a more eclectic experiential mode of living and a multi-faceted literary tradition.

Key words: Caribbean Diaspora, nationalism, Puerto Rican writers, multi-faceted literary tradition

Caribbean migrations and diasporas, alongside the concept of multiple textualities and the examination of cultural identities in constant flux, have long been the study of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics. When considering the myriad interpretations and reconceptualizations of these terms, two diasporic Puerto Rican authors come to mind: Giannina Braschi and Luisita López Torregrosa. I use the term diasporic loosely here to distinguish these authors, both of Puerto Rican descent but currently living and writing in the United States, as prime examples of how their use of multiple textualities elucidates and at the same time complicates the incorporation of multidimensional literary schemes. Braschi and López Torregrosa are precisely that: schemers on a mission to destabilize preconceived borders of all kinds--geographic, cultural, linguistic, gendered, between the autobiographic or fictionalized, perceptible or imaginary, whether they realize it or not. Both writers propose a kaleidoscopic view of Caribbean intersections and interconnectedness, one that provides a broader sense of national identities and thought processes transformed into literary representation through spatial and temporal fragmentation.

If Charles V. Carnegie (2002) urges Caribbeanists to question the inflexibility of nationalist dialogues that construct West Indian identities as he criticizes the apparent limitations of nationalism in conceiving and constructing West Indian experiences, then the works of Braschi and López Torregrosa do precisely that by disrupting traditional perspectives of nationalist politics and aesthetics. Moreover, both writers articulate a transnational poetics directly related to socio-historical and linguistic merging. Historically speaking, both authors participate in fluctuating patterns of migrations initiated in different eras though they shy away from labels such as “migrant” and “diasporic.” Both writers currently live, work, and write in the United States and have done so in other parts of the world while maintaining ties, albeit at times troublesome and contentious, with Puerto Rico. Linguistically speaking, Braschi, in particular, and López Torregrosa, to a lesser extent, engage in bilingual, bicultural practices defined by Lourdes Torres (2007) in her essay “In the Contact Zone: Code-switching Strategies by Latino/a Writers.” Torres remarks:

Through strategies that range from very infrequent and transparent use of Spanish to prose that requires a bilingual reader, Latino/a authors negotiate their relationships to homelands, languages, and transnational identifications. The strategies they use lend themselves to multiple readings and different levels of accessibility. (p. 76)

Primarily writing in English, though often relying on code-switching and lexical borrowings within the physical and metaphorical realms of transmigration, Braschi's and López Torregrosa's works characterize the fluid and flexible mobility between geographic, cultural, and linguistic spaces that blur the lines separating originary and host cultures. In so doing, they create a *transmigratory subjectivity*, a term coined by Mary Jane Suero-Elliott (2008) that she claims is "integrative rather than assimilationist or separatist. This identity is contestatory in its transformative properties: it has the potential to change the host culture proactively through home cultural influence" (p. 333) and, evidently, vice-versa (home culture influenced by returning migrants with new cultural practices). This bi-directional ebb-and-flow results in a distinct form of diasporic experience, one that reflects contemporary trends and movements and challenges traditional concepts of unidirectional migration. The authors showcase, through their life experiences in Puerto Rico, in the United States, in their journeys between both places and also to other parts of the world, that national constructs are constantly renegotiated or recoded in their lives and artistic works.

To speak of Braschi's and López Torregrosa's writing, then, is to speak of a broader awareness of cultural and national identity, of historical merging and linguistic hybridity. The dialogue involves an understanding of their birthplace, Puerto Rico, as a commuter nation in constant transition and evolution, a "nation on the move" as sociologist and anthropologist Jorge Duany (2008) aptly describes:

Contemporary Puerto Rican migration is best visualized as a transient and pendulous flow, rather than as a permanent, irrevocable, one-way relocation of people. *La nación en vaivén* ... might serve as an apt metaphor for the fluid and hybrid identities of Puerto Ricans on the island and in the mainland. ... I have therefore chosen that image ... to suggest that none of the traditional criteria for nationhood—a shared territory, language, economy, citizenship, or sovereignty—are fixed and immutable in Puerto Rico and its diaspora but are subject to constant fluctuation and intense debate, even though the sense of peoplehood has proven remarkably resilient throughout (p. 2-3)

The study of Braschi's and López Torregrosa's works equally implies a nuanced scrutiny of the host country, primarily but not limited to the United States, as a space increasingly transformed by the amalgamation of cultures, histories, and languages into what Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1988) refers to as a process of *amasamiento*. Anzaldúa defines this process as: "the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet ..., an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that has produced ... a creature that questions the definitions of light and darkness and gives them new meaning" (p. 81).

Braschi's writing begins with poetry in Spanish, an aesthetically mature poetic voice that reveals her humanistic erudition and vast knowledge of literature, art, philosophy, and universal history. *El imperio de los sueños* (1988), was published in Barcelona and combines three of her poetry collections (*Asalta al tiempo*, *La comedia profana*, and *El imperio de los sueños*). The English translation of the work by Tess O'Dwyer, *Empire of Dreams*, appeared in 1994. Subsequently, the University of Puerto Rico Press released a new edition of the collection in 2000 with an introduction by renowned philosopher Francisco José Ramos.

Braschi's next publication is a hybrid, experimental narrative titled *Yo-Yo, Boing!* (1998). Juxtaposition of genres (narrative, poetry, dramatic dialogue) and languages (Spanish, English) in this work challenge and defy its categorization. The reader is obliged to constantly shift from one narrative form (verse, prose, dramatic dialogue, internal monologues, free indirect discourse) and from one language to another, while simultaneously trying to keep up with the spatial and temporal fragmentation expertly construed through intuitive and sharply critical narrative voices. In *Yo-yo, Boing*, the narrator remarks:

Why do you tantalize me, and leave me panging? Then for a little  
smack in the head, you fall down and play dead at my feet.  
-It was supposed to be a coma.  
-I don't want to talk to you.  
-My lungs were pumping and my heart was beating.

-I took you for dead. Not one second, not two, not three.  
Agony was climbing inside my head. *Como una misma*  
anormal—volveré a tener control sobre mi misma. Podré  
*recuperar mi reposo*. No, no estaba fuera de mí. No estaba  
dentro de mí. Me había ido de mi misma. Then you bellied up  
with a grin on your face. And I got so angry, I ran out, cold as  
it was, without any coat. I told you:  
-*Ahora sí que se acabó*. Now I really got your number. Don't  
think I didn't get it this time ...  
I can always start over, another day, another book. (p.42)

Doris Summer analyzes Braschi's self-reflection as a "structural principle ... from the mirror- image title that bolts back and forth, from Spanish to English, from one subject position to another (yo and you). Not pendular, not melting to a middle ground, but bolting from one ground to another in the daily self-juggling that bilinguals perform with the pride of their agility, with the richness of excess" (p. 14). To read Braschi's work is an act of defiance that demands a reconsideration of the significance of literary creativity and the writer's role in instigating a movement and flow of ideas in a proactive and dramatically different manner than the one we are used to seeing in print. This is no passive reading, rather it is interactive, energetic, and defiant. To follow the shifting voices, characters, settings, ideological and philosophical postures in her works results in a fascinating yet agitated task. In her writing, Braschi is the epitome of resistance, a fierce voice of confrontation and change in a constantly evolving literary landscape. She defies fixation on homogeneity of any kind in the articulation of Caribbean diasporic experience. Her multimodal texts stretch the boundaries of nationalist discourses, of genres and disciplinary studies in ways that astonish reading audiences and invigorate contemporary writing.

In a recent interview that appears in *Op-Cit: Revista del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas*, Braschi reflects on her writing process and critical stances when she asserts:

Desde la torre de Babel, las lenguas han sido siempre una forma de divorciarnos del resto de la humanidad. [We] must find ways of breaking distance. I'm not reducing my audience. On the contrary, I'm going to have a bigger audience with the common markets—in Europe—in America. And besides, all languages are dialects that are made to break new grounds. I feel like Dante, Petrarca, and Boccaccio, and I even feel like Garcilaso forging a new language. Saludo al nuevo siglo, el siglo del nuevo lenguaje de América, y le digo adiós a la retórica separatista y a los atavismos. (Rivera, p. 286)

Laura Loustau sees Braschi's work participating in "un bilingüismo e identidad nomádica. Huye del concepto de permanencia y arraigo, definiéndose en sus personajes como un ser errante y proponiendo una yuxtaposición lingüística propia" (p. 437).

Most recently, Braschi's writing continues to address and further develop the multiplicity of voices and characters that cross historical eras and literary movements through a transnational, postmodern lens. This is the mayor proposal in *United States of Banana* (2011). Artistically speaking, Braschi strays away from the traditional story of the im/migrant confronting his/her identity in search of the American Dream. Her writing focuses on the construction of characters and the development of philosophical postures that constantly confront notions of empire and question the imposition of ideologies that prevent a person's growth and intellectual development. In her interview, Braschi pokes fun at the seeming contradictions in her latest work when she claims:

Más que nunca soy transnacional y transgeneracional, rompiendo los bordes de los géneros literarios. Camino a la Estatua de la Libertad con Hamlet, un príncipe danés que habla inglés, y con Zarathustra, un alemán con raíces hindúes, para liberar a Segismundo, que representa al pueblo puertorriqueño atrapado debajo de la Estatua de la Libertad. Se casan Gertrude, la madre de Hamlet, y Basilio, el padre de Segismundo, un príncipe polaco que habla español, con el deseo de unir lo anglosajón y lo hispano –o las dos Américas. Si Segismundo siente pesar, Hamlet se inquieta –dijo mi maestro Rubén Darío. ¿Tú quieres algo más transnacional que esto? (Rivera, p. 284)

At the heart of Braschi's work there is a demand for respect and acknowledgment of an individual's inalienable rights within and outside the contexts of the United States. Indeed, her work is often about the hypocrisy of a nation's hegemonic constraints over other territories and peoples under the guise of a Bill of Rights that does not extend equal accessibility and opportunity for all on its own land.

Luisitía López Torregrosa, on the other hand, is less antagonistic than Giannina Braschi but equally adamant about portraying her own rendition of experience and ideas beyond the limitations or constraints of nationalist discourses. In fact, López Torregrosa has repeatedly resisted labels such as diasporic. As a Puerto Rican journalist whose life

story departs from the generalized view of Puerto Rican migration, a life she alludes to in her memoir *The Noise of Infinite Longing* (2004) and expands upon in her second publication, *Before the Rain* (2012), López Torregrosa forms part of a large family of journalists (Angela Luisa Torregrosa), radio commentators (José Luis Torregrosa), artists (Clara Lair), as well as renown Puerto Rican politicians (Luis Muñoz Marín). Product of an educated, privileged class professionally trained in the United States, her story departs from the larger waves of working class migrants who left the island as her contemporaries primarily for economic reasons or push-pull factors. She first made her way to the US through boarding schools and later universities to broaden and enrich her academic and professional erudition. The result has been a successful career in journalism and an impressive repertoire of job assignments and articles for the *New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Politics Daily*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Conde Nast Traveler*, among others, which have taken her to different parts of the world (Europe, China, Japan, the Philippines, and Latin America).

After more than three decades away from Puerto Rico (she left at the age of 16), López Torregrosa speaks candidly and critically about her life and often problematic relationships with her family and the island, but also about the many ways that circular migration has enriched her. In a passage from *The Noise of Infinite Longing* (2004), she describes a particular moment of awareness when she experiences an unexpected connection to and remembrance of Puerto Rico while on assignment in the Philippines in the late 1980s:

For so many years I hadn't remembered much about the place ... and the noise that fills those spaces in those towns, the noise of people who explain their lives ... the noise of infinite longing. I had moved farther and farther away from it, until this night ... the island of my childhood, the island I had abandoned, came back to me in fragments, fleeting, elusive, raw like the rain, like passion. ... Can you ever return to Puerto Rico? ... I had grown new roots ... reinventing myself as if there had never been that old soil beneath me, and in me ... Now I am here, home, but perhaps it's too late. Perhaps the island won't take me back, perhaps my place in it was erased by the years, and I have no markers left. (p.270, 274, 281)

Yet once she finds herself back in Puerto Rico, she remarks: "the years fall away, and there's no sense of time having passed, of the distance I have traveled away from the island" (p. 273).

Just as López Torregrosa's experience indicates, Puerto Rican migration continues to broaden in scope and cannot be totally understood without the unequivocal reality of revolving- door and reverse migration and without the evident imprint of these migrations on the host and home cultures. Certain periods of migration can be identified throughout history, especially the one just documented by the 2010 US Census on the increasing number of migrants in the last decade in the particular case of Puerto Rico. Critics such as Virginia Sánchez-Korroll, Edna Acosta-Belén, and Carlos Santiago have produced in-depth studies of the phenomena in works such as *From Colonia to Community: the History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (1983) and in *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait* (2006).

Critical analysis of revolving door and reverse migration is only now beginning to flourish. Acosta Belén and Santiago define revolving-door migration as "an intensified bi-directional flow, exchanges and interactions between Puerto Rico and the United States [that] have created a transnational socio-cultural system that allows Puerto Ricans to reconstitute their lives in New York City (and other places as well) and affirm a separate cultural identity while maintaining close ties with their country of origin" (p. 30). While the main focus of Puerto Rican migration studies continues to be on those who leave the island and the reasons for doing so, especially when the 2010 US Census confirms that there are more self-proclaimed Puerto Ricans living outside the island, it is also true that there is increasing interest in examining the cultural and demographic shifts that give way to reverse migration of Puerto Ricans back to the island after many years living abroad, a movement that originated in the 1960s and early 1970s. The following interrogations are among the main concerns of this research: Why do Puerto Ricans return to the island? What generations do they belong to? What is their impression upon return and resettlement? And, most importantly, do they remain or will they eventually form part of the ebb and flow of a nation on the move? Reverse migration is precisely the focus of Juan Flores' publication *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (2009), which compiles twenty-two personal life stories of return along with a theoretical discussion of diasporas and migration.

Lopez Torresgrosa's story is a prime example of the malleability and heterogeneity of the experience of Caribbean migration and its consequent influence on perceptions of national identity, an experience that should never be essentialized nor encapsulated as *the experience* but rather seen as an individual process that frequently involves shifts in familial and cultural ties, socio-historical forces, and a degree of uncertainty, improvisation, and unpredictability. Neither Braschi nor López Torregrosa can be classified as return migrants, though they frequently visit the island for work-related issues and for pleasure. In any case, they would more likely be considered as participating in a form of revolving-door migration, one that they can never entirely relinquish as part of their inherent nomadic experience and that keeps them living in *vaivén*. Nor are they entirely uncomfortable in that zone. López Torregrosa prefers to be seen as a citizen of the world enriched by the myriad voyages that have marked her life and her writing; Braschi embodies the story of migration, literally and metaphorically, as her physical transpositions and creative allusions know no boundaries.

Much less critical analysis, nevertheless, appears on Lopez Torregrosa's work. The only critical article readily available particularly stands out for its compelling thesis: Lourdes Torres' "Queering Puerto Rican Women's Narratives: Silences in the Memoirs of Antonia Pantoja and Luisita López Torregrosa" (2009). Torres' premise situates educator and social activist Antonia Pantoja and journalist/memoirist Lusitia López Torregrosa as pioneering figures in the social and literary worlds of the cities they inhabited, particularly New York City. At the same time, however, Torres denounces what she considers the downside of their respective memoirs when she claims that "with their silences, understatements, and selective revelations, [both writers] provide a site from which to consider how shame influences the articulation and/or silencing of sexuality, race, nationality, and class" (p. 85). Torres concludes that, though both writers delve into the convoluted spaces of migration and reveal far more complicated lives than those of other diasporic Puerto Ricans, neither writer positions herself as queer, nor does either of them particularly champion the gay and lesbian movements that have formed part of the last decades. While Torres remarks that Pantoja concentrated on her socio-political advocacy, López Torregrosa also distances herself from restrictive categorizations, as her statements in a 2004 interview with David Kennerley clearly show: "First I am

woman. Second, I am writer. Third, I am an American. Fourth, I am Puerto Rican. Fifth, I am gay. I am proud of all my identities,” which leads López Torregrosa to conclude that she tells “a universal story, it’s not a Latino story, it’s not a gay story” (qtd. in Torres, 2009, p. 103). Torres, however, provides her own take on the issue when she asserts that:

Clearly, as persons who occupy multiple identity categories, Pantoja and López Torregrosa prioritize different identities for strategic reasons depending on context; not everyone may be comfortable with their choices. (p. 103)

Torres’s critical article appeared before López Torregrosa’s second publication, *Before the Rain* (2012). This work renders precisely what Torres declares is missing from López Torregrosa’s first memoir. *Before the Rain* is an evocative and compelling rendition of her career as a journalist and her controversial decision to leave the comfortable reassurance of a salaried profession to embark on her writing career on a full-time basis. At the beginning of her work she states: “I have begun this story a hundred times, and each time I was afraid” (p. 3). Her story is marked by early displacement (to boarding school and later college in the United States) and family rupture (her parents’ divorce). Later, during her travels on assignments as a correspondent, López Torregrosa would broaden and enhance her worldview, and this eclectic perspective would deeply infuse her writing. The journalist and the memoirist merge to perfection in this work; no detail is lost upon her critical eye as she delves deeper into the recesses of her memory, often painstakingly so, to reveal what was not disclosed (according to her out of conscious choice) in her first work.

But above all, *Before the Rain* is first and foremost a powerful story of the intricate ways in which human relationships develop, thrive, and transform into unforgettable and often fleeting memories of an ever-present and lingering past. In language that is lyrical and intimate, highly descriptive and passionate, López Torregrosa brings to the forefront her troubled relationships with women and her love for one woman in particular. She also highlights the pains and turmoil these relationships produce, but also the clarity and awareness of character formation under duress, compromise and surrender. At one

point toward the end of the work, López Torregrosa internalizes the reality of a relationship's demise:

We know how passion disintegrates. There are thin cracks, coded words. A distance that we cannot quite measure grows silently, steadily. Sometimes, too often, it happens when we are most comfortable, when life becomes routine, and the touch that once burned no longer stirs our blood. I have had loves that died when I wasn't looking, when I had forgotten, when the love became something I had misplaced. (p.200)

But she also makes peace with the knowledge that comes from having loved passionately, having fled to foreign lands in pursuit of a woman and in that flight having to come to terms with her own flaws and phobias, with her own beliefs and misconceptions. She realizes:

How little we know about passion. How wretched it is. How imperfect. We don't understand the transfiguration it brings, the delusion, and we shudder at its harrowing pain ... and yet I know that there is no life without it. ... We are all fractured, broken somewhere, and passion, this passion of ours, that moment when for once we feel at one with the other, is the only refuge, the only peace we can know. (p. 225-226)

As Bob Morris readily points out in the book's back jacket reviews, "*Before the Rain* is an epic travelogue of the heart. It has the urgency of a front-page news story, but then, no matter what is happening in the world, love is always revolutionary when it happens to you."

From a sociological, socio-historical, anthropological, and demographic perspective, the stories of those who leave and return from one country to another, or the realities of those who continue leaving and returning, are at the very heart of transformative and evolving migratory interstices that do not seem to be disappearing any time soon. Through their works, both autobiographic and fictional, Giannina Braschi and Luisita López Torregrosa have and will continue to tap into the source of this bi-directional (and often multidirectional) flow of Puerto Rican migration, now even going virtual through technological communication and advances (e-books, blogs, webpages, etc.). Contemporary reading audiences welcome these writers' artistic creativity and the transdisciplinary approaches that give way to broader and more complex notions of Caribbean experience rather than accept any monolithic nationalist interpretation of

what that experience actually comprises. Reed Way Dasenbrock (1987) alludes to this innovative writer-reader interaction and confronts universalist critics who argue that barriers to intelligible reading (such as the use of other languages, idiomatic phrases, and cultural codes within English language narrations) produce flawed texts. Dasenbrock states that “the work a reader does when encountering a different mode of expression can be a crucial part of a book’s meaning, since the book may have been designed to make the reader do that work” while he concludes that “a full or even adequate understanding of another culture is never to be gained by translating it entirely into one’s own terms. It is different and that difference must be respected” (p. 14-15). It is, therefore, also the reader’s responsibility to acquire the necessary knowledge to engage in a productive reading experience with the text. Through their writing, Braschi and López Torregrosa prove that migratory movements are constantly reshaping and redefining Caribbean lives in multifaceted and ingenious ways, and their transformative effects result in richer, more meaningful literary works. Edward Said’s compelling statements in his memoir *Out of Place* (1999) summarize and align with Braschi’s and López Torregrosa’s literary proposals:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are 'off ' and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion . . . in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I’d like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. (p. 295)

Giannina Braschi’s and Luisita López Torresgrosa’s works offer unprecedented opportunities for intercultural and transdisciplinary studies that examine the intricacies of multiple textualities. Their multidimensional literary schemes and shifting linguistic codes combine to form a rich array of literary output influenced by constantly evolving migratory movement. Their works will stand the tests of time and certainly provide for more thought-provoking critical analyses.

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