

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Giannina Braschi, *United States of Banana* (Amazon Crossing, 2011)

Poets have the toughest job in literature today. In the loosest terms, regarding success in any of its measures, poets receive a slice of the pie so thin as to be virtually translucent. Bestselling novelists carve out huge, dripping chunks of the market, filling their plates with prizes, speaking engagements and shampoo commercials (probably). Writers of non-fiction, romance and the now-all-encompassing 'speculative' fiction all carve off their own portions. A stroll around any library or bookshop where the physical objects are still kept available will account for the rest of the pie. It's a hard-working booklover who locates the poetry, at the bottom of a corner shelf, all raw paper and unfamiliar publishers' logos. But they're worth searching out. These are the bravest, hardest-working artists committing words to paper in the whole field. No writer does it for the money, but the love and talent it takes to put poetry between some covers, to actually get it there in the first place, means that simply opening a book by a poet is a rare and special experience.

Part of the reason you don't see too many poets driving Bentleys is that poetry as a consumer product is hard work. Airport novels are a thing. Airport poetry collections are not (they could be!) Poetry is demanding and intellectually vigorous in ways most readers aren't used to. You can actually become exhausted after a few pages of good poetry. Great poetry can, with just a few words, last its reader a lifetime. But there is a trade-off. Imagine a stern ballet director, gathering her new dancers around for a pre-rehearsal pep-talk before breaking out the slippers and toe-plasters. 'I ask a lot. I expect more,' says our director. Someone coughs. They are immediately sent home. 'But it will be worth it,' she continues once the sobbing cougher has left the building. The best poetry is always worth it. Giannina Braschi is such a poet. She is the stern ballet director, her readers crouched in silence at her feet. Braschi's command of the English language is formidable. Open any page of *United States of Banana* and there will be at least one passage which could be carved into a concrete monument and left for future generations to contemplate.

*United States of Banana* is set in post-September 11 New York in which the author, accompanied by Hamlet and Zarathustra, sets out to free the Puerto Rican prisoner Segismundo. The king of the United States of Banana imprisoned Segismundo one hundred years ago for the heinous crime of being born. When the king frees his son and makes Puerto Rico the fifty-first state, this has a huge effect on the international community, with superpowers new and old suddenly struggling for power in the new world order. Braschi is a deeply political writer, and the twisted world of *United States of Banana* vibrates with anger at oppression. This is an author who has lived within the United States as a latina outsider and her position as insider/outsider makes her the perfect protagonist and messenger for this fanciful, metaphor-rich story of Latin America rising up as the United States begins its long tumble from supremacy.

If only poetry didn't get in the way.

The text is broken into two parts; Part One is a series of short essays, setting the scene for Part Two, which is written entirely as a play. Braschi's abilities as poet are massive. Her command of language and meaning is whip-sharp, and her style folds and repeats and sings. The text often seems restricted by the very page it's printed on, as though it was written to be performed, rather than merely read. Part One's essays are all first person, spoken from Braschi's authorial perspective and the only way to place the narrative voice is onstage, holding forth to a room full of performance poetry enthusiasts.

This crowded, monologic style remains much the same throughout, with em-dashes acting as the bulk of pause-points, barely allowing the reader time to draw breath in the face of the relentless oration. While much of the poetry is fine and there are some beautiful gems to be

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discovered, the torrent of ideas is so dense that reading *United States of Banana* becomes an exhausting experience. Before long, impatience sets in. Braschi's stern ballet director demands huge swathes of time and thought, sadly delivering only the odd pirouette in return.

For example, making the bulk of the narrative a play encourages the reader to conjure their own setting, but Braschi consciously provides almost no stage directions and only the most cursory set-descriptions. This would be manageable if the text itself weren't so deliberately free-wheeling. Characters come and go, leaving the impression of an experimental play reading, with the players walking onto an empty stage, delivering a line or two and leaving.

Some sections have the effect of pages and pages of sums which must be solved in the reader's head. Concepts float and flit past, but stopping to consider them loses the thread. The repeating themes and ideas sometimes offer a familiar landmark, but after half way, begin to have the same effect as finding the same letter in a bowl of alphabet soup.

*United States of Banana* is a thick, ambitious text. It's not impenetrable, but it seems designed to be. The obscurity of the prose consistently trips up the message. It is doubly frustrating when Braschi alludes to this tendency, almost a need, to cover up her own work:

*Sometimes my words are poor in thoughts and rich in fantasy. Poets like to muddy the waters and then they want to see through those muddy waters. ... They see the dirty waters and they don't know what to do with the dirt—because they prefer the waters crystal clear—and only an editor can separate good from evil—clean from dirty. But the nature of the poet is to see through the mud. To throw dirt in people's faces—without distinguishing a king from a beggar. The clumps must fall where the chips do—in everybody's face—without distinction. All of them should feel the mud—and smell it—and find a sapphire in a pig's shit. (63-4)*

It's a fine treatise on poetry that disrupts, that must be worked for, but it also exposes a huge contradiction in the purpose of the text. Its political themes – post-September 11 US and an impending new world order – are inspiring. They consistently bubble to the surface throughout, each time adding to the promise of meaning. This is Braschi's world and the West, the US in particular, needs to see the path she travels. It's a compelling vision of the future, but it's badly muffled. It is as if the overall purpose of the text is to demonstrate how truly obfuscated these talented, alternative latino voices are in the contemporary United States. This is certainly borne out by some initial sections on the complexity of speaking Spanish in the US:

*It is my desire to express my native self with my foreign tongue and to make my foreign tongue part of my native self. The fact is that speaking my foreign language I have become more distant. I hardly remember the tongue I first spoke—and as I grow and mutate in this language—day after day—I observe that some days I regress to the memory of the day I was born but my cradle is empty. (39)*

A hundred pages later the reader is still clawing through Braschi's beautifully tangled prose, searching for sapphires and coming up with pinches of Shakespeare. What began with the thrill of a loud, intelligent poetry performance, dwindles to the polite frustration of being trapped in an elevator with a genius performance poet. You are drowning in ideas and you cannot escape, you cannot complain and you cannot contribute.

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