CHAPTER 12

"Like in the Gringo Movies": Translatorese and the Global in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

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Were one to dare, situating Roberto Bolaño in one specific national literary tradition would be a hard if not impossible task, as well as an insult to his beliefs about exile, which he conceived "not so much a circumstance as an ethics of life and writing."[1] Bolaño was born in Chile but moved early in life to Mexico, to move again years later to Europe, where he settled in the 1980s in Barcelona, Spain. As a Spanish-language author, Bolaño would be more easily placed among cross-Atlantic writers of the literary caliber of Gabriel García Márquez and Ramón J. Sender. Detached from a particular national tradition yet participating in a number of them at once, Bolaño avoided composing reductive, essentialist narratives of authenticity rooted in a given country's national culture. Instead, he succeeded in circumventing them by deploying an exilic prose style with which to elicit a distinct global authenticity that is grounded precisely in the dispersion of such narratives. In a novel like *2666* (2004), Bolaño presents in his writing certain features that are symptomatic of the global world that he sought to portray so ambitiously yet, as Grant Farred puts it, with "no epic pretentions."[2] Bolaño assembles a complex arrangement of perspectives, voices, and techniques in the five sections that constitute his widely acclaimed and perhaps most famous novel, a crime narrative that inhabits the liminal space between the global and the local. The main thread of the novel revolves around the mysterious murders of young women in the remote Mexican border town of Santa Teresa, whereas multiple sections are set in countries like Italy, Chile, or France.

The global undertones that populate *2666* emerge in very inventive ways in the third section of the novel, *The Part About Fate* (*La Parte de Fate*, in Spanish), a narrative written in the style of the American hard-boiled crime story. In this part, we follow Oscar Fate, an African American journalist from New York who is sent to the fictional town of Santa Teresa to cover a boxing match between Count Pickett, an American, and Merolino Fernández, a Mexican. Bolaño combines in it the highly political narration about the murdered women, the Mexican-American border, and the *maquilas* (factories in which foreign investors employ cheap local labor to manufacture products that are then exported to international markets) with scenes featuring some of the most recognizable and stereotypical conventions of hard-boiled crime storytelling and crime narrations. We read, for example, about tough men in bar brawls and street squabbles, self-important sports journalists opining about the boxing match while they go to parties and in the company of prostitutes, and even a mysterious murder case in which Fate sees himself indirectly involved.

On the level of craft, Bolaño complements the thematically intertextual and transnational links in *The Part About Fate* with a mock translation style with which he emulates what is known as "translatorese," or the unidiomatic rendition of words and expressions that results from mistranslation. In creating the effect that his writing is (mis)translated from the English language, Bolaño presents us with a highly creative narrative in Spanish that contributes, by reversal, to such an American tradition as the hard-boiled crime story while criticizing, through parody, the entrance of a very specific type of translatorese language into Spanish. As a result, Bolaño constructs a text that operates against the grain of Walter Benjamin's conception of authenticity. If for Benjamin "the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced," the authenticity of *The Part About Fate* hinges precisely on its transmitting the essence of a text that is, however, nonexistent.[3] We only have access, if we continue using Benjamin's terminology, to its very "aura" of authenticity by means of mistranslation, which permits the nonexistent text's "reproduction to meet the" reader in his or her "particular situation," thus "reactivat[ing]" itself as it is reproduced.[4]

In "Translation is an Anvil," Bolaño asks: "How to recognize a work of art? How to separate it, even if just for a moment, from its critical apparatus, its exegetes, its tireless plagiarizers, its belittlers, its final lonely fate? Easy. Let it be translated."[5] It is precisely through translation that the originality of Bolaño's style in *2666* becomes most visible, particularly in *The Part About Fate*. As Natasha Wimmer has noted about her translation of the novel into English, this section "was easily the trickiest—try channeling an African American narrator as imagined by a transplanted Chilean who never set foot in the United States."[6] Wimmer, in fact, carried out an exercise in meta-translation in that she would have to translate the style of the crime movies that Bolaño presumably consumed in translation during his years in Spain since, as he admitted in a 2000 speech, he did not know English.[7] Interested in "bad translations" as he often claimed to be, Bolaño could be said to have written sections of *The Part About Fate* as a parody of those translations.[8] By comparing the novel's original against its English version, I will render visible the mock translation style with which Bolaño constructs one of the many layers of his particular global narrative.

WRITING "LIKE IN THE GRINGO MOVIES"

Over the last few decades, the kind of "bad" translations we can find in *The Part About Fate* have become emphatically ubiquitous in the audiovisual culture of Spain in the last decades. Despite the multiple institutional and commercial efforts to make original-version films and TV shows available to a wider audience, Spain remains very conservative in this regard as foreign movies and TV content are still mostly consumed translated and dubbed by voice actors. As a result, a certain trend has developed in the translation of some words and expressions that has made a very specific type of translatorese extremely pervasive in the Spanish television and cinema cultures.[9] Words and expressions that once sounded "different" because they were the product of mistranslation (most frequently Anglicisms, i.e., unnecessary borrowings from the English language) and the technical constraints of lip synchronization are now part of everyday speech in Spain.

This is one of the main conclusions that Frederic Chaume Varela and Cristina García de Toro draw from their study of the translation of Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction* into Spanish. In particular, expletives, which are freely and profusely used in the film, have often become part of this (mis)translation trend. Adjectives like "goddamned" or "fucking," for instance, are usually translated as adjectives and not, as one would say in Spanish, as "an interjection after a comma."[10] As Varela and García de Toro reflect, "together with the indiscriminate abuse of possessives, these kinds of loans have been adopted most remarkably among the younger population: they have ceased to sound strange amongst the young and their use in everyday [Spanish] language is undeniable."[11] These forms, which I should say are no longer exclusively adopted by young Spaniards but by other generational brackets as well, have entered the language to the extent of becoming a subcode. In echoing the translation style of previous crime films of global import as Tarantino's, they become authentic as they relate linguistically to the short but definitely distinct translatorese subcode that has emerged over the recent years. Proof of the popularity of this subcode is its reproduction for aesthetic purposes in *The Part About Fate.*

This type of translatorese manifests most clearly when a translator opts for a "formal" (or "word for word") translation over a more "dynamic" translation. In his seminal text, Eugene Nida defines a dynamic translation as one "in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors."[12] This, in fact, refers to a more general rule according to which the theorization of the workings of a language ultimately relies on whether speakers of the language would admit an example or a structure as grammatical or ungrammatical, acceptable or unacceptable, as expressed naturally in their language or not. Thus, one way we can open a metalinguistic space to discuss Bolaño's translatorese is to contrast it against Natasha Wimmer's fine translation to see how Bolaño deploys in *The Part About Fate* what I read as a parody of American crime film translatorese in Spanish.

Much of this type of translatorese appears in dialogue sections of *The Part About Fate.* Before Fate goes to Mexico to cover the boxing match, for example, we hear a nameless African American character calm down a tense situation in the street by saying "[t]ranquilo, tómatelo con calma, hermano," translated as "'Relax,' said the man. 'Easy, brother.'"[13] In this example, "tómatelo con calma" is the direct (or formal) translation of "take it easy." While not ungrammatical or unidiomatic, this structure is, in fact, excessively wordy in reflecting the same syntactical structure—one doing something in a specific manner. Later on we hear a man complain to Fate saying "[d]etesto esta mierda," a direct translation of the English, which is indeed translated as "I hate this shit" (312; 245). The word "detesto" is a somewhat formal and dramatic term in (Spain's) Spanish, whereas "odio" (also translated as "hate") is the most common form to express one's strong disliking or aversion toward something or someone. Finally, the use of the compound "this shit" (again, as a direct translation) in this context rings contrived and unidiomatic in Spanish; one would perhaps say, in a less direct fashion, "esta situación es una mierda" (literally, "this situation is a shit").

As Chaume Varela and García de Toro assert, the word "jodido" is the most common mistranslation of the term "fucking," mostly because both work syntactically in the same position—that is, as adjectives. Accordingly, Bolaño makes references to this example of mistranslation on multiple occasions, as in "la impresión que causa en los jodidos mexicanos," translated into English as "the impression he makes on the Mexicans," with the interesting disappearance of the term (359; 283), or "los jodidos asesinatos son como una huelga, amigo, una jodida huelga salvaje," which is translated as "the fucking murders are like a strike, amigo, a brutal fucking strike" (362; 286). In a reverse reference to the fictitious original from which Bolaño playfully pretends to work, Natasha Wimmer most frequently translates the translatorese "jodido" as "fucking," although sometimes she chooses to translate it otherwise. For example, Wimmer renders "el jodido ambiente" as "shit man, the atmosphere" (359; 283). These choices, which often seem to pursue the "dynamic" rendition as Nida conceives of it, result in the loss of the translatorese to which Bolaño alludes in his writing. In other moments, however, Wimmer recreates the ungainly phrasing of the translatorese in the original. For example, we find "Es un jodido paisaje para mujeres" rendered as "It's a goddamn landscape for women," which reflects the awkward ring of the original (350; 275).

Bolaño parodies the artificiality of translatorese most powerfully in moments in which a speaker who uses it and another who does not have difficulties to communicate with each other. This is the case with the common translation of an expression as linguistically specific of English as "you know," a formula employed to keep communication between interlocutors open (what linguists refer to as a "phatic" expression) rather than conveying meaning proper. As a culturally specific construction, "you know" is difficult to translate into many languages, including (European) Spanish. Rendered word by word, an expression like "tú sabes" or "lo entiendes," as Bolaño writes it (literally "you see" and "you understand"), may cause in the interlocutor a quizzical response.[14] Yet we often hear it coming out of the mouths of certain American characters in *The Part About Fate*, as in the conversation between Fate and Chucho Flores, a Mexican journalist who takes him to parties and tells him about the mysterious murders. For example, speaking of Merolino's masseur, Flores says "nunca sale al patio, es un tipo ciego, *¿lo entiendes?*, un tipo ciego de nacimiento," which Wimmer translates as "he never comes out into the yard, he's a blind guy, *you know*, he was born blind," echoing back the language from which (351; 277; emphasis added). In this example, a Spanish speaker would wonder what there is to *understand* (which is English for the verb "entender" in "lo entiendes") about someone's blindness.

Finally, Bolaño switches to rather idiomatic writing in a number of scenes in which (American) English and (Mexican) Spanish speakers interact in order to emphasize the artificiality of translatorese. When a Mexican journalist talks to Fate after his conversation with Chucho Flores, he says (in English, since Fate can't speak Spanish): "Nada... ese hijo de la chingada sólo ha aprendido a decir insultos en español," rendered as "Nothing, all the son of a bitch knows are curse words" (351; 277). Here, the Mexican journalist's use of explicitly Mexican Spanish expletives ("ese hijo de la chingada") establishes a clear demarcation between him and the American characters in the novel, who curse in turn in translatorese. In another passage, we hear in the Spanish version another Mexican character saying "cállese de una chigada vez, güero, dijo Farfán desde su camastro," which translated as "shut the fuck up, güero, said Farfán from his cot" (634/507). In this case, the translator decides to maintain the word "güero," which has an unmistakable Mexican connotation to both European Spanish and English-speaking audiences. Whatever Wimmer's decisions are as to how to translate them, these idiomatic expressions clearly reveal the double structure that emerges in Bolaño's mock translation device, as different languages and nationalities are assigned different registers.

THE CRAFT OF TRANSLATORESE

The creative use of translatorese works against the grain of theorist Lawrence Venuti's famous assertion that "[u]nder the regime of fluent translating, the translator works to make his or her work 'invisible,' producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated texts seems 'natural,' i.e., not translated."[15] Of course, Bolaño does not claim to be the translator of the novel and *The Part About Fate* is never presented as a translation. Yet, the influence of bad translations (according to Varela and García de Toro and many others, translatorese has a visible presence in today's Spanish) is underscored in the novel as Bolaño's references to the specific translatorese subcode I am exploring here. Bolaño operates as a creative translator of sorts, turning translatorese into a highly inventive technique with which he can exploit the assumed bad quality of other works for the enjoyment of his readers. Thus, *The Part About Fate* gains an aura of authenticity as it participates in such a recognizable style while simultaneously being an original text crafted by Bolaño.

Bolaño's use of mock translation to establish intertextual links is in no way a new literary device. Cervantes's *Don Quijote* may be the most well-known example of this technique. The entire work, we are told, is a translation of Cide Hamete Benengeli's original in Arabic made by an unknown *morisco*, a Muslim who has converted to Christianity to be able to remain in Spain.[16] Cervantes's use of this device to frame his narrative allowed him to play, on a structural level, with the fine line that divides fiction and reality. Other authors have resorted to the recreation of translatorese in their mock translations in order to craft their works. As Max Saunders argues about the creative force in Ezra Pound's translatorese in "Homage to Sextus Propertius," a mock translation of the Latin poet,

> Most of Pound's work…is maniacally intertextual…*Propertius* is a dramatization of someone translating, awkwardly, ineptly, but in a way which allows us to glimpse a better work within or behind or beyond or above

> the one in front of us...That is, it is an example of imaginary authorship: the work of an imaginary translator of an inept kind, which Pound uses in a cunningly triple-jointed fashion to mock the literary ineptness of bad translators, and the tone-deafness of classicists unattuned to Propertius' wit, while also drawing our attention to that quality of wit.[17]

The recreation of translatorese, as Saunders notes, can be a highly creative technique. As Pound's poem, Bolaño's writing becomes a medium that allows him to parody bad translations and translators of American crime films, criticize the acceptance of those translations by their audiences, and entertain his readers with a style that echoes those recognizable examples of (mis)translation.

By identifying this particular style, the Spanish reader understands *The Part About Fate* as an authentic work of fiction both due to and despite the fact that it originates as a result of mistranslated words and expressions. As Linda Hutcheon asserts, the "pragmatic and formal requirement" for parody to be effective is that "there must be certain codes shared between encoder and decoder...for, if the receiver does not recognize that the text is a parody, he or she will neutralize both its pragmatic ethos and its doubled structure."[18] The familiarity of many of Bolaño's readers with the translatorese that has now invaded much of commercial television and film in Spain brings them together as a temporary community. In this regard, translatorese works in a similar manner to translation if we read, once again against the grain, Venuti's interesting claim about the sense of collectivity that lies behind a translation. In "Translation, Community, Utopia," Venuti writes:

> The domestic inscription is made with the very intention to communicate the foreign text, and so is filled with the anticipation that a community will be created around that text—although in translation. In the remainder lies the hope that the translation will establish a domestic readership, an imagined community that shares an interest in the foreign.[19]

If we relocate these thoughts in the context of the present discussion of *The Part About Fate*, we can see how, under the double structure of mock translation (as a reference to a foreign text that is nonetheless expressed in the original) and parody (as both a critique and a celebration), Bolaño constructs an extremely rich transnational narrative that allows him to render this particular type of translatorese visible. By repurposing such a residual and flawed code, Bolaño establishes a connection between the linguistic and cultural transference that occurs in the translation of those American films, thus drawing his readers' attention to the ubiquitousness of such films (at least in Spain) and their impact on the cultural landscape.

With the section devoted to Fate, additionally, *2666* expands intertextuality between media through a communal network of readers/spectators that recognize the references to the specific type of translatorese that Bolaño employs. As Aoyama and Wakabayashy assert, "mere imitation of the style of the source does not suffice for parody... Parody may pretend to be 'faithful' to the source text but its *raison d'être* is not the similarity but the difference."[20] In this sense, the reader identifies a code that establishes its difference as it originates in other media, namely, film and television. This doubled structure results in the overlapping of the figure of the reader, who deciphers the text, and the spectator, who recognizes the translational references. As a consequence, we can arrive to the conclusion that, contrary to Edith Grossman's claim, that "translatorese... has no reality in any linguistic universe," *The Part About Fate* in fact deploys translatorese in very creative ways.[21] Thus, *The Part About Fate* is an exercise of intertextual parody that adds to the multiple distinctive layers of meaning that converge in the novel as a whole, such as the blind academicism of the critics in *The Part About the Critics*, or the excessively digressive subterfuge the novel becomes at times, especially in the fourth part, *The Part About the Crimes.*

Thus, the parodic intertextuality of *The Part About Fate* contributes to the transnationality of the novel in a reversed relationship with the global world in which it, indirectly (i.e., through translation), emerges. Although the mock translation's doubling structure implicitly connects the semantic and cultural baggage of (European and Mexican) Spanish and (American) English, we must also bear in mind that Spanish is the only language used in the novel. This complicates the novel's global nature. Some of the undertones in Bolaño's writing can be kept as the translation of certain cultural markers that he echoes are returned to an identifiable "origin." In these cases, a "back translation" seemed to be the suitable solution to render these phrases and expressions into English. Forms that have entered Spanish such as the specific use of "brother" I pointed out "come back" to their original in English. In other cases, however, translatorese cannot be translated (or, rather, translated *back*) into English. The translator does not (or simply cannot) choose to "return" them to English. The specific connotations of the translatorese that Bolaño deploys are, then, lost because what Bolaño crafts in Spanish has nothing to do with the English, but with the rendition in Spanish of other texts originally composed in English.

Ultimately, one could argue that the mock translation style of *The Part About Fate* makes it a postglobal narrative whose authenticity is rooted in its double relationship with the translatorese subcode that it reproduces. On the one hand, the story can be said to be authentic insofar as it relates back to the corpus of films in which the translatorese originated. On the other, precisely because the text from which it pretends to originate does not exist, *The Part About Fate* becomes an authentic piece in its own right, instead of a derivative version of another. Thus, while its characteristic doubling effect is paradoxically only possible, thanks to its similarities with a prior set of texts transferred from English into Spanish, it practically disappears when we "return" from Spanish into English. Therefore, despite the intertextual connections that it establishes, the singularity of the Spanish version's parodic hints upends the global reach of American culture, since the references to the kind of translatorese found in American crime movies translated into Spanish are often untransferable to other languages, not least English itself.

NOTES

1. Alberto Medina, "Arts of Homelessness: Roberto Bolaño or the Commodification of Exile," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 3 (2009): 547.
2. Grant Farred, "The Impossible Closing: Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño's *2666*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 4 (2010): 692.
3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 221.
4. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 221.
5. Roberto Bolaño, "Translation Is an Anvil," in *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles, and Speeches (1998–2003)*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: New Directions Books, 2011), 241.
6. Alan Page, "Natasha Wimmer on Translating Bolaño's *2666*," *Vulture* November 14, 2008. http://www.vulture.com/2008/11/natasha_wimmer_on_translating.html (accessed April 20, 2013).
7. Roberto Bolaño, "Literature and Exile," in *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles, and Speeches (1998–2003)*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: New Directions Books, 2011), 38.
8. See, for instance, Roberto Bolaño, "Bukowski," in *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles, and Speeches (1998–2003)*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: New Directions Books, 2011), 229.
9. My unfamiliarity with how foreign films are translated in other Spanish-speaking countries forces me to concentrate exclusively on Spain.
10. Frederic Chaume Varela and Cristina García de Toro, "El Doblaje en España: Anglicismos Frecuentes en la Traducción de Textos Audiovisuales," *Rivista Internazionale di Tecnica della Traduzione* 6 (2001), 130 (my translation).
11. Chaume Varela and García de Toro, "El Doblaje en España: Anglicismos Frecuentes en la Traducción de Textos Audiovisuales," 131 (my translation).
12. Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 202.

13. Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (New York: Vintage Español, 2009), 309; Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Vintage, 2004), 243. Henceforth, page references will be included in the text separated by a semicolon, indicating page numbers first from the original and second from the translation.
14. It is interesting to note here the direct translation of the expression "you know" ("tú sabes") exists in many varieties of Spanish in the Americas, particularly in areas near or in direct linguistic contact with the United States like the Caribbean countries.
15. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.
16. Miguel de Cervantes, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha I*, ed. John Jay Allen (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1986), 180.
17. Max Saunders, *Self Impression, Life-Writing, Autobiography, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 416.
18. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 27.
19. Lawrence Venuti, "Translation, Community, Utopia," in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature. From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 373.
20. Tomoko Aoyama and Judy Wakabayashy. "Where Parody Meets Translation," *Japan Forum* 11, no. 2 (1999): 219.
21. Edith Grossman. *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 69.

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