

On Mediation and Fragmentation: The Translator in Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingrávidos*

Teniendo en cuenta las voces narrativas que traducen, la estructura y la geografía, el presente artículo examina la función de la traducción en la novela Los ingrávidos (2011) de Valeria Luiselli. Luiselli representa a los traductores de la novela como personajes liminales y efímeros que median el intercambio cultural; en el proceso de la traducción, el lector puede ver que la identidad de los tres narradores se fractura al incorporarse a las vidas y los espacios geográficos de otros personajes. Las múltiples capas de traducción representadas en Los ingrávidos, destacan, pues, la fragmentación y transformación de identidad experimentadas por estas figuras intermediarias.

Palabras clave: *traducción, identidad, geografía, intertextualidad, fragmentación*

In consideration of narrative voices that translate, structure, and geography, this article examines the function of translation within Valeria Luiselli's novel Los ingrávidos (2011). Luiselli represents translators in the novel as liminal and ephemeral characters that mediate cultural exchange; in the process of translation, the reader can see that the identity of the three narrators fractures as they are incorporated into the lives and spaces of others. The multiple levels of translation represented in Los ingrávidos, then, highlights the fragmentation and transformation of identity that is experienced by these intermediary figures.

Keywords: *translation, identity, geography, intertextuality, fragmentation*

With echoes of Pierre Menard resounding in contemporary literature, the figure of the translator has increasingly crept into Latin American fiction; one might think of Andrés Neuman's enigmatic Hans who travels through Germany in *El viajero del siglo* (2009), the Texas-based woman who is tasked with rendering a Mexican woman's family letters into English in Cristina Rivera Garza's story "La alienación también tiene su belleza" (2002), or Mario Vargas Llosa's Peruvian character, Ricardo Somocurcio, who works for UNESCO while living in Paris in *Travesuras de la niña mala*

(2006). It is no coincidence that each of these moments is happening outside of Latin America and such geographic displacement speaks to the linguistic intersections that determine the contemporary global landscape. In consideration of the proliferation of the literary representation of translation, it is valuable to reflect on the ways that such processes function in these texts. As such, this article examines the ways that translation operates in Valeria Luiselli's novel *Los ingravidos* (2011).¹

A translator herself, much of Luiselli's work revolves around themes of translation. With Christina MacSweeney's English rendering of the three books that Luiselli has thus far published (*Faces in the Crowd*, 2012; *Sidewalks*, 2013; and *The Story of My Teeth*, 2015), the Mexican author has become something of a literary phenomenon in the United States.² Walking the line between the local and the global, she has been marketed as a writer who is both Mexican and cosmopolitan, and her characters, many of which are translators, often reflect these conflicting, intermediary identities.³ *Los ingravidos* is split between Mexico, New York City, and Philadelphia and is composed of multiple narrative voices that have folded out of a single voice: a melancholic woman trying to understand her new identity as a mother in Mexico, an unnamed, young translator working for a small publishing house in New York, the Mexican poet Gilberto Owen, who occupies the same New York space as the young translator, and the dying Owen who lives in Philadelphia.⁴ Much like other Mexican writers, such as Cristina Rivera Garza, Juan Villoro, or Rosa Beltrán, Luiselli uses writing to revive the figure of a forgotten artist, in this case, Owen.⁵ Over the course of this highly intertextual novel, the young translator-narrator takes an interest in the Mexican poet and imagines the life he might have led in New York. The narrative conveys his experiences to the reader – in a sense translating his life to the written page –, but also recreates some of the acts of translation that dictate his life. Through many moments of translation, the voices of the three narrators fracture over the course of this ghost-filled novel, suggesting that, at its core, this novel is about the shift and diffusion of identity.

With an understanding of the term "translation" to signify the process of moving, or "carrying across" (as the etymology suggests), something from one place to another, a critical focus on the mechanisms and representations of the process reveals significant textual dynamics of certain works. The literary representation of translators highlights this process of meaning making and the multiplicity of ways to do so. In a world that is becoming both more fragmented and more connected due to technological advances and the movement of people, translators are of ever increasing importance (Bassnett 15). As such, it is a fruitful line of

inquiry to examine the literary representation of these figures as they become more visible in the global landscape.⁶ Luiselli's novel consists of multiple layers of translation that can be seen both in the individual narrators and the production of the text itself.

With such levels in mind, this article will first examine the three narrative voices as distinct translators, then will look at the overall structure of the novel, and finally will consider the implications of geography in the novel as they relate to processes of intercultural dialog. The characters in *Los ingravidos* are represented as liminal, ephemeral characters that mediate literary cultural exchange. In their mediation, however, the identities of all three narrators diverge over the course of the novel, only to converge at the end as each are incorporated into the lives and geographic spaces of others. *Los ingravidos* is ultimately about the fracturing of identity, and translation is implicated as a mechanism that leads to this reshaping and loss of identity. At the same time, though, the fictional focus on the translator in the novel serves to counteract that very phenomenon of invisibility.

In recent centuries, translation tends to be fictionally represented as untrustworthy, as expressed by the oft-cited Italian phrase "traduttore, traditore," and discussed in terms of fidelity. The practice and its unreliable nature plays a central role in the foundational text of Hispanic literature, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, which incorporates pseudotranslation into its narrative construction. A pseudotranslation, as defined by Gideon Toury, is a text that is presented as a translation, but that has no original. For Bassnett, "this can be a literary device used to create an impression of authenticity, or it can be a deliberate attempt to deceive readers" (165). In the way that the narrator of *Don Quixote* claims to be presenting a translated manuscript that he found, the pseudotranslation is foregrounded. Continuing to play with popular notions of translation on multiple levels of his text, Cervantes introduces a conversation between Don Quixote and a book vendor in which Quixote famously compares the reading of a translation with looking at the back of a tapestry:

Me parece que el traducir de una lengua en otra, como no sea de las reinas de las lenguas griega y latina, es como quien mira los tapices flamencos por el revés, que, aunque se ven las figuras, son llenas de hilos que las escurecen, y no se ven con la lisura y te de la haz. (979; vol. 2 ch. LXII)

Much like the pseudotranslation, this analogy points to a hierarchy of authenticity and fidelity that is repeated throughout literary history.

Several centuries later, however, Borges's story, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" suggests precisely the opposite, that a translation can potentially be better than the original. In his translation of selected chapters of *Don Quixote*, Pierre Menard produces a text that is infinitely richer than Cervantes's original text because of the accumulated layers of meaning in it. Echoing similar anxieties over fidelity and the authenticity of the translator in the Mexican context, La Malinche, held responsible for Mexican *mestizaje*, is portrayed as the nation's traitor because she translated for Hernán Cortés, thus allowing the Spanish conquest of Mexico.⁷ In dialog with recurring tension of faithfulness and betrayal, Luiselli's novel, too, features translators that often betray their texts by falsifying documents or twisting the meaning of another poet's words. In *Los ingravidos*, Luiselli problematizes fidelity as her characters produce pseudotranslations, rewrite history, and transform themselves in an exploration of the ways that translation impacts the lives of these characters.

While the above examples all refer to linguistic forms of translation, either between two languages or within the same language, in Luiselli's novel the spectrum is broadened to include multiple kinds of translation. In his essay "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Roman Jakobson opens the possibilities of what can be considered under the umbrella term of translation, proposing intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic as three categories of the practice, thus creating the possibility of understanding it as a semiotic act and using it as a synonym of interpretation (114). Umberto Eco returns to Jakobson's essay, accepting his model as a good start, but offering one that better describes a more complete range of types of interpretation, as he explains it: "translation is a species of the *genus* interpretation, governed by certain principles proper to translation" (80). As such, for the purposes of this discussion, the term "translation" is used to signify the transformation of form and the movement of meaning and will be employed primarily as metaphor.

In recent years, scholars have taken an interest in the "fictional turn" of translation in literature, or works that feature translators. The figure of the translator is of particular interest, as the practice requires the individual to be familiar with multiple cultures and distinct languages, to be a skilled writer, and to be comfortable with a career in which he or she will never enjoy literary fame. Perhaps it is the chameleon-like existence of the translator and the geographic displacement that make these figures so appealing. In consideration of the contribution of translation to national identity formation at the beginning of the 19th century, Friedrich Schleiermacher argues that a valuable translation is one that moves the

reader into the foreign context and that the translator must do so by immersing him or herself in the foreign culture in order to recreate it for the reader (49). In other words, the translator moves into a self/other binary role, much like the characters in Luiselli's novel. In her discussion of the task of the translator, Spivak furthers this discussion, arguing that a translator must intimately engage with a text, "surrendering herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text" (189) and cultivate a knowledge of the source-language literary landscape so as to be able to discern its literary value. Furthermore, she echoes Schleiermacher, suggesting that sometimes the best way to produce something original is to look to and become the foreign:

One of the ways to get around the confines of one's "identity" as one produces expository prose is to work at someone else's title, as one works with a language that belongs to many others. This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating. It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self. (179)

The space between the self and the other that the translator must occupy, following Schleiermacher and Spivak, can be understood as a liminal space. The term "liminal" has been used to discuss various iterations of the in-between; in particular, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner first use it to discuss a step in universal rites of passage, specifically the transformative stage that takes place beyond societal norms. Since such discussions, the term has been applied to debates on gender or racial politics, globalization, or performance. Here the term is used to refer to a bracketed social space that encompasses gender, sexuality, language, and national identities. This idea of becoming the other ultimately leads to a loss of self, or invisibility of the translator, as can be seen in *Los ingravidos*. With such an understanding of this practice, it should come as no surprise that the translator has come to be such an alluring and complex literary figure.

Critical readings of literary representations of translation tend to underscore the role of the practice as a cultural mediation or as a symptom of the shifting global landscape. In her reading of a series of Italian novels that feature translators, for example, Rita Wilson highlights the ways that the translator mediates communication between the Self and Other. "In these texts," she suggests, "'translation' is a symbolic trope, evoking the concept of a crossing of borders, an interaction between seemingly separate and disjunctive cultural and linguistic entities. Translation ... comes to stand for the act of communication between Self and Other" (382). Also concerned with contemporary politics, Heather Cleary, who focuses on the phenomenon in the Latin American context, argues that writers are

turning to the translator as a way of “addressing centrist models of cultural geopolitics that continue to haunt discussions of creative production at the ‘periphery’” (125). Martín Gaspar, too, examines the Latin American context, suggesting two ways of reading these figures: on a historical level to speak to certain cultural anxieties and experiences of colonization, or on a formal level as a literary technique that allows the author to examine linguistic negotiations on an individual level (14).

With similar questions in mind, Emily Hayman considers Luiselli’s novel in comparison to Rabih Alameddine’s novel *An Unnecessary Woman* (2014), proposing that both texts “suggest that the translator is at once absorbed into and radically separate from her work, a figure profoundly necessary in a polyglot world and yet tragically ‘unnecessary,’ peripheral, and – to adopt Lawrence Venuti’s term – all but invisible in the grand story of artistic achievement.”⁸ Indeed, the figures in *Los ingravidos*, in their work, their migratory status, and their family lives, are invisible. The New York-based translator reflects on the futility of literary translation in the beginning of the 21st century and, in an act of literary falsification, renders – but credits Louis Zukofsky for the work – Gilberto Owen’s poetry into English. As the novel progresses, this figure reimagines Owen’s experience in New York, thus performing yet another act of interpretation in her literary recreation. The second narrator, the mother in Mexico, in her rewriting of her own past in New York as well as her role as a mother, continues the younger woman’s work as a translator. Owen’s narrative reveals his role as a linguistic mediator for his contemporary poets as well as his participation in modernist literary games based on interpretation and rewriting. Finally, the intertextual aspect of the novel implies an act of translation. In a novel that takes place in New York – a multilingual, cosmopolitan city where these characters occupy a space between linguistic, temporal, and cultural worlds – the translator occupies a liminal space in which she or he can move between groups of people, but never quite belong to any of them.

The dominant narrative voice in the first half of the novel, supposedly created by a mother in Mexico City, is that of a translator originally from Mexico, who lives in New York. Like the mother, this voice is never named in the novel, further reflecting the invisibility of the translator.⁹ Her living situation and the people that move through it define her as a character. As a migrant, she is an outsider in the city and as such is able to fluidly navigate it; many people inhabit her apartment, she has a tendency to find alternative places to sleep, and she has made a habit of carrying furniture around the city: “No era mi costumbre llevarme las cosas que no me pertenecían,” she explains. “Sólo algunas cosas. A veces, bastantes cosas”

(32). Like a translator, she takes objects that do not belong to her and moves them through space, carrying them from one place to a new destination. For Wilson, it is this invisibility that makes the translator such a good literary character, that it is the translator's ability to "substitute the author's discourse with his/her own that signals the translator's inherent invisibility, the result of which is that the translator is banished from the domain of co-authorship; relegated to the position of 'the Other,' and can then be represented only indirectly as, for example, theorist or literary character" (381).

The translators that move through Luiselli's novel come to represent "the Other" to which Wilson refers. The young woman in the novel works under a man named White in a publishing house dedicated to literature in translation. Through her professional work, the narrator reveals some of the politics that determine the publication of international literature in the United States; critical of the contemporary literary world, she suggests that while translators are dedicated to creating modes of communication between cultures, the receiving culture is not particularly open to such connections: "Trabajaba como dictaminadora y traductora en una editorial pequeña que se dedicaba a rescatar "perlas extranjeras" que nadie compraba – porque al fin y al cabo estaban destinadas a una cultura insular donde la traducción se abomina por impura" (12). In her attempt to translate Owen, she articulates the politics of the publication of translations, understanding it to be based on paratextual elements, such as names, that create literary prestige: "Así es como funciona el éxito literario, por lo menos a una escala. Todo es un rumor, un rumor que se reproduce hasta convertirse en una afinidad" (43). Despite her awareness of the futility of her work, though, the young woman seems to enjoy the time spent in libraries throughout the city, "buscando libros de escritores latinoamericanos que valiera la pena traducir o reeditar" (24) and she signals the names that dominate the United States perception of Latin America: "White estaba seguro de que, tras el éxito de Bolaño en el mercado gringo hacía más de un lustro, habría un siguiente boom latinoamericano. ... Inés Arredondo, Josefina Vicens, Carlos Díaz Dufoo Jr., nada le convencía" (24).¹⁰ White even goes so far as to express utter dismay that his Mexican employee might be the only Latin American who was not a friend of Bolaño's. In her work environment, it seems that this translator's individual identity is subsumed into a larger understanding of Hispanic identity.¹¹

Of particular interest, and perhaps most revealing of the process of translation that is conducted between the narrator and her editor, is the scene in which these characters discuss their translation of San Juan de la

Cruz's "Cántico Espiritual." In their translation and thus revival of the Spanish mystic poet's work, this pair is able to re-insert the poet into the contemporary literary landscape, much like this novel attempts to do with Owen's work. Significant here, though, is that at this point the process of translation is put on display – much like when Lorca and Owen's translation game is narrated later in the novel – and it becomes clear that when translating this poem, contrary to Spivak's call for an intimate engagement with the text, they approach it from a distance:

Llevábamos el texto con nosotros porque la editorial iba a hacer una edición bilingüe y comentada del poema. Habíamos pasado la tarde memorizándonos los versos, los valles solitarios nemorosos, y se nos hizo de noche pidiendo whiskies, los ríos sonorosos.

¿Qué prefieres? – preguntó White –, ¿"sonorous rivers" o "roaring torrents"?
 Ninguna de las dos.
 Y qué tal lo de los valles: ¿"wooded valleys" o "bosky valleys"?
 No sé, pero lo de "amorous gales" es horrible.
 Tienes razón: "amorous breezes". (38)

This particular scene underscores the peculiarities of the narrator's work. While of the two characters she is the translator, it is noteworthy that her voice disappears in the exchange; she makes no suggestions, only judges his. Much like this young translator moves through New York, she appropriates the words of others in her narrative as several pages later, in a drugged daze, she draws on phrases from the "Cántico:" "Las calles y las piernas: las ínsulas extrañas. En la lógica del enfermo, del idiota, del loco, los ríos sonorosos, todo está a punto de caer en su lugar. Las medias, las banquetas, pasos y polvo, calles y piernas: el silbo de los aires amorosos" (40).

The narrator's most significant act as a translator is the falsified work she undertakes with Gilberto Owen's poetry. Whereas the pseudotranslation of *Don Quixote* operates more to "create an impression of authenticity," as Bassnett puts it, the young translator's is performed with the intention of deception as she works to introduce a lost poet's work. During one of her library sessions at Columbia University, she finds a collection of Owen's work and is immediately convinced of his literary potential. Of particular interest for her is the geographic space that the two Mexicans share; Owen lived within a few blocks of the narrator's current apartment, and such a spatial juxtaposition is immediately compelling for her. While her boss rejects the forgotten writer at first, she is given the

green light to pursue Owen's work when she tells White that she found transcripts of Louis Zukofsky's translations of Owen's poetry, which, of course, she had invented. Such inventions serve to underscore those implicit in any translation. What follows is her rendition of a transcript of the translations, which she herself produces. She describes her initial sharing of the text as follows:

La primera entrega de la falsa transcripción fue un éxito. Llegué el viernes con un manojo de hojas escritas en Word, a espacio medio, Times New Roman. White las leyó frente a mí y se mostró convencido, incluso entusiasmado. Si se trataba de traducciones de poemas de Owen hechas por Zukofsky, habíamos dado con un tesoro. (51)

Significantly, that initial document, which she claims is a transcript of the original manuscript she had found, exists in a sort of limbo; as a transcript, the text is just a copy, a reference to an original, much like the translation that it represents, but, in reality, the document is a text that the narrator has created, a pseudotranslation, thus endowing it with a certain originality. Her friend Moby's eventual fabrication of the original manuscript implies multiple levels of falsification and authorial distancing from the work. As a translator, she is never given authorial status but instead is seen as a mediator. She then passes the authorship of the translation to another, to Zukofsky, and with the subsequent falsification of the manuscripts, she imposes temporal significance on these documents. Such acts of distancing and play with authorship rings of "traduttore, traditore," as it raises questions of textual fidelity, but its representation in the novel suggests a certain agency on the part of the translator. Furthermore, the way that this character has distanced herself from the translation suggests that her individual identity has dissipated in the act.

It is worthwhile to mention one more act of translation that this narrator performs throughout the text: in her reimagining of Owen's life, she is enacting a sort of translation in the way that she rewrites his story. It is clear that the character carries out extensive research on the poet and on his relationships with other poets sharing the same geographic space, however, she has taken liberties in her narrative by creating affiliations that were never actually documented. As she tells her upstairs neighbor, Owen, Lorca, and Zukofsky, among others, all lived around Morningside Park in the late 1920s and they all worked on some of their most well-known projects during the period. What she finds particularly puzzling, though, is that there is no textual evidence of their paths crossing: "Por lo que dejó escrito sobre esa etapa, da la impresión de que Owen odiaba

Nueva York y vivía más bien aislado de todo aquello. Es probable que apenas se haya cruzado una o dos veces con Lorca, ninguna con Zukofsky, y que nunca haya visto tocar a Duke Ellington” (51). Based on the things that the young narrator knows about these characters, she imagines the interactions and collaborations that could have taken place between them. For both the translator and Luiselli, reformulating that information into a different type of a narrative – fiction – is a way of mediating meaning. For Hayman, such a translation is a way of re-contextualizing and imposing meaning on historic figures:

Luiselli suggests that we never really get outside of our own voice, even in translation, and that her protagonist’s rendering of Owen is just as much her own story, her own words, as Owen’s. Luiselli endows her translator-forger with vast power, as the latter demonstrates by creating in Owen precisely the poet that she wish him (or, perhaps, herself) to be.

Considering the way that the narrative voices become indistinguishable by the end of the novel, it seems that less than recreate Owen or herself, these narrative voices have dissipated in their retelling. Paralleling the way that the young woman recreates Owen’s life, the mother rewrites her own history, bringing the past into the present while erasing herself from it.

While never explicitly articulated in the text, it is possible to read *Los ingravidos* as three separate iterations of the same narrator; the mother rewrites her past self while her past self rewrites the story of Owen. While the second narrator is the only one not to explicitly translate at any point in the novel, her (possibly) autobiographical narrative and her role as a parent can be considered as functions of a translator. The occasional interjections made by her husband as he starts to read his wife’s work most strongly suggest the textual translations that she is performing. By reading the pieces she has produced through the interpretation of her past and the production of text, her husband is moved back to this woman’s past, which is made clear through the way that he questions her. Following a scene in which a female friend spends the night in her bed, the husband interjects, asking: “¿Te acostabas con mujeres?” (46). Soon he gets angry about the things that he reads and he begins to question the extent to which they are autobiographical: “Mi marido está enojado. Por descuido mío, ha vuelto a leer algunas de estas páginas. Me pregunta cuánto hay de ficción en ellas, cuánto de verdad” (57). The lack of a response about the fictional elements of this text suggest that the question of a faithful representation of her past is insignificant to the narrator, who is more concerned with her ability (or lack thereof) to sit down and write.

Much like the younger woman's predilection for stealing furniture symbolizes the movements of translation, this character's struggle with writing and her body further points to the way that a translator exists in an interstitial space and always in reference to an original text and target audience. Oswaldo Estrada traces the relationship between the body and writing in Mexican female writers that include Nellie Campobello, Elena Poniatowska, and Cristina Rivera Garza, noting the ways that this relationship determines literary production: "En este pacto literario hecho de cuerpo y escritura no sólo se ratifica la relación de las escritoras mexicanas con la cultura y el poder, sino la existencia de subjetividades femeninas que buscan reivindicarse y subvertir el orden establecido" (22). Echoing these same dialogues, the mother in Luiselli's novel spends much of her narrative expounding on the ways that upon being married and having children, she has struggled to find the time and space to work. She complains that "en esta casa tan grande no tengo un lugar para escribir. Sobre mi mesa de trabajo hay pañales, cochecitos, transformers, biberones, sonajas, objetos que aún no termino de descifrar. Cosas minúsculas ocupan todo el espacio. Atravieso la sala y me siento en el sofá con mi computadora en el regazo" (13). Constant references to breasts – her own as well as those of other characters – further highlight the significance of the body and its movement in the novel. Furthermore, like other Mexican women writers such as Margo Glantz or Rosario Castellanos, she recognizes that her body is now shared with her children and husband:

Ahora escribo de noche, cuando los dos niños están dormidos y ya es lícito fumar, beber y dejar que entren las corrientes de aires. Antes escribía todo el tiempo, a cualquier hora, porque mi cuerpo me pertenecía. Mis piernas eran largas, fuertes y flacas. Era propio ofrecerlas; a quien fuera, a la escritura. (13)

As she relives memories from her past self, she struggles to find the time to sit down and write. Like her body, though, her memories are no longer her own once she externalizes them; her husband constantly reads and questions what she has written, as noted above, while her children require her maternal attention. In much the same way, once in translation – even once written – a text no longer belongs to the author. Luiselli poignantly articulates such a phenomenon through the voice of the mother, noting: "Lo que pocos entienden es que uno deja una vida para empezar otra" (61). In her writing and intermediary life, this woman has become distanced from her former self and her present self splits, as can be seen by the challenges she faces in her marriage, or the multiplication of her narrative

voice. A younger woman who reimagines the life of a forgotten poet replaces her narrative.

The final translator in Luiselli's novel is Gilberto Owen. Owen emerges through the younger woman's narrative recreation, but also as an anachronistic transformation of the mother's husband. While Owen is known in literary history for his association with the Mexican group "Los contemporáneos," he has been little read beyond such a context or outside of Mexico. In *Los ingrátidos*, however, Owen is put on the literary stage as a protagonist who inhabits intermediary spaces. Like the female characters already discussed, Owen is also a liminal, mercurial figure that is able to move between linguistic and cultural groups, but is never able to truly belong to any one in particular. Christopher Domínguez Michael describes Luiselli's representation of Owen, Salvador Novo, and Lorca as peripheral figures, suggesting that such a depiction is directly connected to shifts in technology: "pálidos y remotos, rebeldes notas al pie de página que luchan por encontrar su lugar en el cuerpo de la ficción. ¿Qué otra cosa se puede esperar de una fantasma amable en la época no digamos de electricidad, como lo apuntaba Benjamín, uno de los favoritos de Luiselli, sino del teléfono inteligente?" (68). These ghosts that Domínguez Michael identifies float throughout the narrative; they add yet another liminal image, this one between the living and the dead, and the past and the present. Ghosts in the novel also recall Benjamin's claim that a translation becomes a sort of afterlife of a text (73).

Further underscoring this intermediary identity, Owen works in the Mexican consulate where he mediates political and cultural relations between Mexico and the United States. A poet in his own right – as the young narrator wants to show through her falsified translations – in his role as a translator he is negated artistic or authorial credit; he is seen by his contemporaries as nothing more than the intermediary. His peripheral experience can perhaps best be seen in his association with the Mexican literary world:

Era flaco y le tenía fe a las antologías de poesía. Le propuse al maestro Alfonso Reyes una colección de poetas norteamericanos. Quería traducir a Pound, a Dickinson y a William Carlos Williams. ...Hablé de la importancia de incorporar a nuestra tradición las voces de estos tres gigantes. El maestro se entusiasmó con la idea. Traduje más de 200 poemas de Dickinson al vuelo. Se los envié en un sobre destinado a Brasil que probablemente nunca cruzó ni el Suchiate. (89)

Just as Owen suspects that his translations never crossed the Mexican border, his work, too, has remained on the edge of the literary world. His

experience living outside of Mexico in the United States as well as the grotesque and solitary illness he suffers at the end of his life further inscribe his marginality. Luiselli's depiction of Owen's work as a translator points to his literary and social position in his own context while her rewriting of him is a way of paying literary homage to a forgotten figure.¹²

Cultural mixing in New York in the 1920s necessitated the work of translators, as exemplified by the geographic proximity of the nationally diverse group of artists that would come to define a certain branch of modernist poetry in the novel. Owen, Lorca, and Zukofsky quickly form a friendship based around literary interests and gossip, and Owen is the one that mediates this relationship. It is significant that Owen first begins to translate not out of a desire to share his native Mexican culture – he shows more interest in U.S. and British poets than those writing in his native language – but from an inclination to use his mother tongue in his personal life. Upon Lorca's request that he participate in a film project, Owen agrees because "era un modo de hablar español con alguien afuera del consulado una vez por semana" (91). When Lorca and Owen discover they have little to discuss, they add a third member to their group so that they can critique him. The poet they choose is named Louis, but they call him Z and language is a significant impediment for the group, as Owen explains: "Federico no entendía una sola palabra de lo que decía Z, que hablaba inglés como si estuviera dando misa en yiddish, así que yo hacía de traductor entre los dos. Y no es que yo entendiera mucho" (91). Describing the social dynamics as such, Owen highlights the linguistic barriers as well as his own – often failed – attempts to navigate them.

In the young translator-narrator's recreation of Owen's past, the poet is included in events with his contemporary artists not as another poet, but as a translator. Much like the scene in which the young woman and White meet in a bar to work on their rendering of San Juan de la Cruz, Owen's narrative, too, puts his process of translation on display. When first interpreting for Zukofsky and Lorca, Owen narrates a moment in which Zukofsky describes his current poetry project and Owen explains to Lorca as follows:

The poem will be called "A", nos explicaba el poeta, because a little boy, when he's learning how to talk & enumerate the World, always says: "A dog", "A lolly-pop", & so forth and so on. Dice que su libro se va a llamar "A", le explicaba yo a Federico, que porque un niño chiquito siempre dice "A perro", "A paleta", y algo así. (91)

Much like the New York translator's experiences, these moments subvert conventional practices in their distancing and twisting of the original text.

While the translators of San Juan work with a text that they recreate in their minds rather than a material copy, Owen works with an oral text that he only partially understands; he finishes by saying “algo así,” suggesting a lack of full understanding, and the use of “a” in the Spanish no longer functions as an article, as it does in the English, but instead becomes a preposition. As such, it is clear that Owen moves between several linguistic worlds, but does not actually belong to any of them. He goes to literary gatherings not as a poet, but as a translator who gives Lorca a voice, as he explains: “No sé por qué me prestaba a la tortura de las tertulias de Harlem a las que yo acompañaba a Federico como un chihuahua faldero, y en las que nunca fui más que una presencia remota que no sabía ni cantar ni bailar; sólo traducir y ladrar un poco” (125). In his act of translation, Owen is essentially denied an individual identity, and here is even dehumanized in his comparison to a dog. Such negation of the self is essential to the faithful translation, but Luiselli’s novel is significant as it shows that these moments of mediation imply a loss of self.

While for all three narrators the act of translation – in practice or metaphorically – implies a fracturing of identity that distances them from a sense of authorship, in Owen’s narrative the reader is also introduced to the productive and creative side of translation, even if only momentarily. In his book, *After Translation*, Ignacio Infante highlights the function of translation, arguing that its ability to transnationally circulate poetry was fundamental to the creation of modernist aesthetics. While Luiselli’s novel does not focus on the influences and tendencies of a movement, she, like Infante, highlights translation as an integral process to literary creativity. At one point, Owen and Lorca come up with a literary group that they call “Los Ojetivicios” (107). Their one and only project consists of the following: the two listen to Zukofsky recite one of his poems in English, then Owen, based on a loose understanding of the original meaning, translates this into Spanish, favoring a phonetic equivalence over anything else. Lorca subsequently rewrites Owen’s translation and prepares his own version of the poem. In their performance of the piece (which takes place only once, on a subway platform) Lorca recites his Spanish version and then Owen translates it back into his own rendition of English. The translations carried out are reproduced on the written page and suggest a play with both sound and meaning. For example, Z’s original “These, each in itself is saying, “behoove us” (108) becomes “Aquí le pica y dice / “hooveréanos” (116) in Lorca’s version, and “These, itching and saying, / “behoover us” (116) in Owen’s final translation.¹³ Furthermore, the two bring objects—specifically, a vacuum – to the reading in order to illustrate the text, thus adding to it in their interpretation. Through the phonetic word play and

performance, this poem, originally written by Zukofsky, is ruptured and reformulated, much like the fate of the individual narrators in the novel. It is through an understanding of these moments in conjunction with the overall structure of the novel that such fragmentation becomes clear.

Considering the many narrative voices, the references to other literary figures and texts and textual recreations of these figures, it is worthwhile to discuss the structure of *Los ingrátidos*. The novel itself, in its intertextuality and aphoristic, fragmented narrative style, is a form of rewriting the past and reviving forgotten characters, as well as expressing Luiselli's literary baggage.¹⁴ While, as Julia Kristeva posits, all literature is intertextual as it is created from a pre-existing knowledge of other works – “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (37) – Luiselli's novel is particularly rich in references to other artists. That idea of transformation directly connects to the idea of translation as a writer reformulates preexisting literary knowledge. In his discussion of translation in which he rejects the idea of the untranslatable text, Octavio Paz indirectly moves Kristeva's idea one step further, not claiming that every text is the transformation of prior texts, but arguing that literature – because of the nature of language itself – is always a translation (154).

Considering, then, the many moments of intra- and intertextual references in the novel – such as references to Quevedo, Woolf, Pound, William Carlos Williams, Dickinson, Charles Olson, Inés Arredondo, Borges, Rulfo, etc. – it seems that Luiselli has absorbed and transformed – translated! – these preexisting literary voices to produce a new text. For example, the young narrator formulates a theory that she can impose meaning on certain spaces. She draws on literary texts but transforms them and imposes them on spaces in the city as a means of reformulating the meaning of that place:

Los espacios públicos, como las calles y las estaciones del metro, se iban volviendo habitables a medida que les asignara algún valor y se les imprimiera algunas experiencias. Si yo recitaba un pedazo del *Patterson* cada vez que caminaba por cierta avenida, con el tiempo esa avenida sonaría a William Carlos Williams. (26)

Cardoso Nelky argues that such a stacking of time and space that is so central to the narrative construction of the novel is one way that Luiselli engages with Owen's writing (78). As the critic notes, Luiselli wrote a piece on Owen for *Letras Libres* in which she describes the poet as follows: “despliega un conjunto de eventos simultáneos – un mito, un sueño, una vivencia íntima, un evento concreto – en un mismo espacio narrativo” (59).

The juxtaposition of text and space creates new meaning for this character. Considering the New York spaces, then, it is possible to see that the individual moments of translation that compose this referential novel point to a particular geographic experience.

Los ingrátidos takes place in New York, Mexico, and Philadelphia. Both the young narrator and Owen are foreigners in New York and they are able to move through and succeed there because of their ability to translate. It is the geographic space around Morningside Park that links each of these characters, who all lived there during different periods in history. Notably, it is the subway where the characters (meta)physically cross paths; both the young woman and Owen see ghosts of the other on the subway: “Se detuvo un tren. Detrás de Dakota me pareció ver el rostro de Owen entre las muchas caras del metro. Fue sólo un segundo. Pero estuve segura de que él me había visto también” (44). Later in the narrative, Owen mentions the ghosts that he sees, effectively describing the same woman: “Me di cuenta un día, entre mis idas y vueltas del consulado, de que llevaba un tiempo viendo a una serie de personas en el *subway*. ... Entre esa gente había una mujer de cara morena y ojeras hondas que vi en repetidas ocasiones; ... Siempre llevaba un abrigo rojo” (92). The scenes in which ghosts appear on subway platforms, too, is a reenactment of another story, which the young female narrator’s boss tells her regarding an interaction between Ezra Pound and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (23). The New York subway can be read as a metaphor for translation in the novel as it serves as a means of spatial and temporal transportation and urban connection, but is located underground, or out of sight. In its displacement, the train itself – like the translator – disappears. In a particularly apt description, Luiselli’s narrator describes the moment when two trains cross paths as follows: “esos momentos en que dos trenes andan por vías paralelas a la misma velocidad durante unos instantes y uno puede ver a los demás pasar como si viera correr los cuadros de una cinta de celuloide” (93). As foreigners in New York, both the young woman and Owen are able to navigate the city and some of the groups that compose it, but they are never able to fully integrate. As such, like the subway system, they remain on the periphery where they function as synapses, or connectors in this narrative of linkages and ruptures. This intermediary identity, however, is central to the novel’s examination of these characters.

Despite Luiselli’s public negation that the novel is about New York, it is clear that the geographic space is vital to the overall significance of the novel.¹⁵ Again, in consideration of the role of the city, the literary references reveal key aspects of its significance. The novel begins with a side note that “(Hubiera querido empezar como termina *A Moveable Feast* de

Hemingway)” (11). Hemingway’s autobiographical novel ends with a discussion of the memories associated with Paris, suggesting the significance of the physical space to creating and accessing memories.¹⁶ For Luiselli, too, the space in which one writes influences the process; as the young mother sits down in Mexico to recall her past self, she finds that she is unable to do so as she would have liked: “Todo empezó en otra ciudad y en otra vida, anterior a ésta de ahora pero posterior a aquella. Por eso no puedo escribir esta historia como yo quisiera – como si todavía estuviera ahí y fuera sólo esa otra persona” (11). Throughout the novel, the geographic context emerges as central to the experience of these individual characters.

As foreigners in New York, both the young woman and Owen are able to navigate the city and some of the groups that compose it, but they are never able to fully assimilate. As such, like the subway system, they remain on the periphery where they function as synapses, or connectors. This intermediary identity, however, is central to the novel’s examination of these characters. In his analysis of a selection of Brazilian novels about translators that live and work beyond national borders, Gaspar suggests that the fictional representation of these foreign translators serves to focus the discussion on individual identity: “Mediante la salida del país y la consecuente exposición a lenguajes extranjeros, Noll y Buarque ubican a sus personajes en situaciones que repercuten en lo más íntimo: su identidad” (158). The same thing can be seen in Luiselli’s novel as it is through the experience of the foreign that Luiselli’s characters are able to negotiate – and lose – a sense of an individual identity.

The mercurial figures of Valeria Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* easily move through urban space, literary history, personal memory, and linguistic groups. In the acts of translation discussed throughout this article, however, there is a blurring or loss of individual identity. What stands out most in this novel that explores individual identities and literary recreations is the way that through the intersections and mediations of multiple cultures, the individual is fragmented. In a particularly poignant moment after the young woman admits to her literary falsifications, she comes to the following realization:

Me había calado, me di cuenta unas horas después, saber que White nunca había creído en mí. Tampoco en Owen. Si íbamos a publicar a Owen era porque White había creído que Zukofsky lo había traducido. Si me había contratado a mí era porque olía al mismo tabaco que su mujer. Yo era un rastro, una estela, una exhalación de humo. (73)

This is perhaps one of the most illuminating statements in the entire novel as it becomes clear that the fate of the translator, in Luiselli's world, is to constantly exist as an intermediary, a substitution for another. Notably, however, these fragmented, transitory figures subvert cultural binaries and fixed identities; in the ways that the narrative highlights the invisibility of the translator, it calls attention to and re-centers the process of translation and those who do it. Whether it is a gloomy, melancholic meditation on the loss of self or a celebratory examination of performative possibilities, a fictional focus on translation in the contemporary literary scene reveals the plurality of possibilities and participants in the literary world as well as the complicated intersections of insularity and cosmopolitanism inherent in contemporary society. Luiselli adds a compelling portrait to this tradition.

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NOTES

- 1 Considering the significant revisions that Luiselli and her translator made in the English version of the novel, it is important to clarify that this reading refers to the Spanish text published as *Los ingrátidos*.
- 2 In interviews, such as the one conducted by Ezio Neyra for *Asymptote*, Luiselli frequently talks about her international experience growing up; she was born in Mexico but has lived in South Korea, South Africa, India, Mexico, and New York City. Much of her public life – primarily education – was in English, but her home life was navigated in Spanish. Because of the linguistic duality of her childhood, she has spoken to the fact that she does not truly fit anywhere; with her peers in Mexico she speaks the language of her grandparents and struggles with the linguistic games in Spanish, but English was never the language of intimacy for her. She writes primarily in Spanish.
- 3 Luiselli continues to demonstrate an interest in these intermediary figures in her most recent novel, *La historia de mis dientes*. The novel was born as a commissioned piece for a catalog meant to accompany an exhibit at the Galería Jumex. She wrote the novel in collaboration with workers at the Jumex Factory, and, in the English version, worked closely with her translator, MacSweeney, who wrote and included an additional chapter in the translated version. Intended to connect the factory and art world represented by Jumex, the novel is about the ways that objects acquire meaning through storytelling and revolves around a character who, in his forties, decides to become an auctioneer. The intermediary aspect of this character, who creates meaning

around objects in order to sell them, becomes clear through the protagonist's teacher's description of the profession: "Los subastadores somos meros heraldos asalariados entre el paraíso y el infierno de la oferta y la demanda" (34).

- 4 See Regina Cardoso Nelky's article for a discussion of the duality of voices in the novel, which she suggests contributes to the constant play between past and present that drives the narrative.
- 5 Gilberto Owen (1904-1952) was a Mexican poet, novelist, dramaturg, translator, and diplomat. He is associated with the *Contemporáneos* group. In 2009, Luiselli published an article on his work in *Letras libres* in which she focuses on his sense of space and unique outlook, suggesting that these elements are what drew her to his work. All references to Owen throughout this article refer to Luiselli's narrative representation of him rather than the historical literary figure.
- 6 In his seminal work, *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti outlines the history of translation studies and the invisibility of the translator. In his words, "A translated text ... is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities make it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the 'original'" (1). In general, a good translation has traditionally been considered a text in which the reader is unable to sense the presence of the translator, yet this has meant that translators frequently do not receive credit for the work they do.
- 7 For example, Carlos Fuentes's representation of La Malinche in his story "Las dos orillas" is indicative of a popular perception of this history. In her article on Fuentes's story collection, *El naranjo*, Carrie Chorba argues that the way that Fuentes represents La Malinche in "Las dos orillas" reflects a cultural perception of the woman and her status as the nation's traitor (487). Chorba points to the ways that La Malinche was named in the story as indicative of such a perception. In Fuentes's story, Aguilar describes La Malinche as follows: "Se llamaba Malintzin, que quiere decir 'Penitencia.' Ese mismo día el mercedario Olmedo la bautizó 'Marina,' convirtiéndola en la primera cristiana de la Nueva España. Pero su pueblo le puso 'La Malinche,' la traidora" (Fuentes 41).
- 8 *An Unnecessary Woman* tells the story of an elderly widow in Beirut who selects and translates a classic work of literature every year but then leaves her work packed away in boxes.
- 9 Luiselli has been particularly active in promoting the visibility of the translator. In her relationship and collaboration with her English translator,

MacSweeney, Luiselli claims in *The Story of My Teeth* to be subverting the invisibility of the translator. The English edition of the novel includes a chapter written by MacSweeney and in the author's final note she explains, in language that echoes that of Schleiermacher, that such collaboration between author and translator "destabilizes the obsolete dictum of the translator's invisibility and suggests a new way of engaging with translation; one that neither relies on bringing the writer closer to the reader by simplifying or glossing the translated text – nor on bringing the reader closer to the writer – by means of rendering the text into a kind of 'foreign English'" (195).

- 10 In *Bolaño traducido* (2011), Wilfrido Corral argues that the translation of Bolaño has significantly changed the international market, making it more receptive to translations from Latin America. He asserts: "Con la traducción de su obra a varias lenguas pasó de una marginalización en el mundo internacionalizado de las letras a la cacofonía de ser el representante sin par de la literatura latinoamericana" (10). Corral argues that the international appeal of Bolaño's work can, in part, be attributed to the variety of themes about which Bolaño writes – violence, death, love, friendship and writing. Sarah Pollack also expounds on the Chilean's international appeal, arguing that it is his personal, national, and literary identity that makes him so irresistible and that "all contributed to 'produce' a Bolaño well suited for U.S. reception and consumption" (355). While Pollack argues that the popularity of Bolaño only adds an alternative stereotype of Latin American literature, Corral argues that the international success of Bolaño – the "revolución Bolaño" (16), as he calls it – signals an increasing interest in international literature. Based on Luiselli's narrative, the author seems to be more in line with Pollack, suggesting the insularity of the United States market in regards to Latin American literature.
- 11 It is well-known that the terminology – i.e. latino, Hispanic – used to describe people of Spanish-speaking origin is highly controversial; both terms used in the United States context, however, erase national identities, lumping together nationalities as diverse as Mexican, Brazilian, and Peruvian, into the same category.
- 12 In recent years, various Latin American writers have rewritten "forgotten" literary figures. One might think of Juan Villoro's rewriting of Ramón López Velarde, Jorge Volpi's rendition of Jorge Cuesta, or Cristina Rivera Garza's homages to Amparo Dávila and Alejandra Pizarnik.
- 13 Christina MacSweeney's translation of this part of the novel further plays with the acts of translation that exist in the novel. The original text displays Lorca's Spanish poem alongside Owen's English one (116). In English, however, MacSweeney erases this linguistic game by translating the Spanish into English and including a note that it had originally been written in Spanish.

- While the translation does maintain the syntactical word play, the reader here is asked to imagine what was a multilingual game between two languages.
- 14 In regards to the writer's literary baggage, Eleonora Federici discusses the textual baggage of the translator and the way such background knowledge dictates the choices that the translator makes. She explains: "The translator's baggage of literary, linguistic and cultural archives has been filled in a precise place and time, and is connected to the translator's location. It is a baggage filled with his encyclopedic knowledge and cultural background, a baggage of tools that permeates his 'rewriting' of the original" (152). Such an understanding highlights the subjectivity and individuality of the translator rather than negating him or her as performing a mechanical process of equivalence.
- 15 According to Neyra's interview with the author, Luiselli was living in New York City at the time of writing the novel, though she was less interested in writing about the city and more so in writing a novel about Gilberto Owen, it just so happens that the piece of Owen's life that she wanted to write about was when he was living there.
- 16 Hemingway's novel ends as follows: "There is never any ending to Paris and the memory of each person who has lived in it differs from that of any other. We always returned to it no matter who we were or how it was changed or with what difficulties, or ease, it could have reached. Paris was always worth it and you received return for whatever you brought it. But this is how Paris was in the early days when we were very poor and very happy" (211).

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