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Ania Spyra
Butler University, aspyra@butler.edu

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LANGUAGE, GEOGRAPHY, GLOBALISATION: SUSANA CHAVEZ-SILVERMAN'S REJECTION OF TRANSLATION IN *KILLER CRÓNICAS*: *BILINGUAL MEMORIES*

ANIA SPYRA

And me, trotting out my rusty português, worsened by the intervention of Italian, on a Grail-like quest for la colonia brasileira que olí en esa mujer en Tigre... Time and again ensashé my pathetic little patchwork speech: “Estou procurando uma colonia brasileira...” Y me sacaban cheap, high-alcohol “deo-colonias”. (Chávez-Silverman 2004, 113)

The ephemerality of Susana Chávez-Silverman's desires for a very specific scent, remembered well although smelt only once on a stranger in passing, meets the disappointment of the un-searched for, the inauthentic, the reality of cheap cologne. Maybe precisely for its lack of fulfilment the search remains a quest, and the latter term does not seem too exaggerated for as frivolous a search as this one, because it functions as a metaphor for many other searches. The Brazilian cologne is not the only grail that Chávez-Silverman quests for on the pages of her 2004 memoir: she searches for an authentic Argentina and an understanding of its culture and literature, for the Mexico of her childhood annihilated by the McDonaldisation of the US influence, for the lost relationship with her father, for an experience unmediated by expectations born from literary representations of reality, and finally she searches for a language to describe them all.

The language grows out of the necessities of travel. It is rusty, impure, mixed with other languages half-remembered: English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian at a time. It is the familiar language of the marketplace, precisely the polyglossic form that Mikhail Bakhtin envisioned in medieval and Renaissance markets (Bakhtin 1984, 203). It is a language of communication

in spite of the lack of a language in common. It is a utilitarian pidgin, a “pathetic little patchwork speech” which despite the ostensible communication does not lead to an exchange of goods, but to the impossibility of fulfilment. Moreover, the language of the memoir accentuates what is usually lost in the monologism of official writing: accents. In Chávez-Silverman’s memoir they assert their real importance as markers of difference and indelible traces of otherness. They emerge in the playfulness of *ensashé*, which stands in for the Spanish *ensayé* (attempted), written down with its Argentinean pronunciation of the *y* or *ll* sound as “sh”; in the capital letters of *procurAndo* and *colOnia*, which mark the exaggerated pronunciation of nasal vowels of Brazilian Portuguese.

Such linguistic experiments and the confusion inherent in mapping their location make Chávez-Silverman difficult to pinpoint in terms of national identification. Clearly, she refuses to translate her multilingual life into just one language and one accent. Through evoking her multiple national and linguistic alliances, she creates a text interstitial in both language and genre. I propose to describe this generic in-betweenness and formal experimentation with language as cosmopolitan poetics: cosmopoetics. Cosmopolitan, because by emphasising the creative resilience of the foreign within any national or linguistic community, it transcends the national. Poetics, because through mixing languages within one text it achieves what only the poetic use of language can: it brings out its literariness and rejuvenates language by overturning common and expected moulds. Cosmopoetics aims at expression of what happens to language in the age of globalisation: global travel patterns, migrations, and instantaneous communication now prove that languages rarely resist mixing. As it refuses the monolingualism of translation, cosmopoetics underscores the reality of linguistic diversity against the monolingual norms of nations and homogenising claims of global English. Writers who mix languages at the level of syntax, as Chávez-Silverman does, respond to globalisation with a radical politics of language that refuses to admit monolingualism even at the level of subjectivity, let alone of a national literature. If comparative literature so far has depended on comparisons between literatures conceived as national and linguistic monoliths, cosmopoetics can be seen as staging comparison within one text. Could it thus become a new ethos of world/ly literature, one that synecdochically represents the reality of a globalised planet in its mixed genre and languages?

In terms of genre *Killer Crónicas* avoids easy classification and fits many generic categories: it is an autobiography or memoir, a journal in

poetic prose, code-switching prose poetry (as she refers to it herself in an interview), a travel narrative in epistolary form, a blog, and finally a collection of *crónicas*, both in their historical and contemporary form. Chávez-Silverman evokes the historic imperial connection of the latter genre, when she admits that the title evokes “the chronicles of the so-called New World” (Chávez-Silverman 2004, xxi). Usually referred to as *crónicas de Indias*, because they described the encounter between Europeans and the new colonised territories, chronicles, as Mary Louise Pratt observes, acted as “the main writing apparatus through which the Spanish presented their American conquests to themselves” (Pratt 1991, 34). Chávez-Silverman thus clearly situates her own writing in the New World, and gestures towards an understanding of all travel writing as akin to the narratives of conquest. However, her narrative breaks with the chronicle’s generic expectation of a chronologically described series of events. Rather, it goes back and forth between places and times, even while each *crónica* clearly specifies the date and place of its writing under the title. The *crónica*, however, purposefully quoted in Spanish, refers also to the contemporary journalistic genre practiced commonly in Latin America, which Esperança Bielsa describes as a “hybrid genre” that arises as “a point of convergence between popular culture and literature” (Bielsa 2006, 31).¹

Additionally, apart from Spanish conquistadores, among the authors of *crónicas de Indias* there were also *mestizo* and Native American writers who narrated their side of the conquest. Thus, the *crónica* in the title may harken back also to the 1613 *Nueva Crónica* written by an Andean, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, as a letter to King Philip III of Spain. Some formal similarities between the two texts are striking. The letter, like Chávez-Silverman’s epistolary memoir, incorporates a mixture of two languages: Quechua and ungrammatical, expressive Spanish (Pratt 1992, 2). Since Pratt reads Guaman Poma’s work as autoethnography, it provides not only an additional generic link to the New World but also another term to approach Chávez-Silverman’s writing. As an autoethnography, the memoir responds to the ethnographic narratives of Latinidad in the United States.

Killer Crónicas’ epistolary form reflects its origins in the e-mails Chávez-Silverman dispatched to friends from her cosmopolitan settings in the global cities of Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, and Johannesburg. Chávez-Silverman explains that she chooses the epistolary form primarily because she needs to feel that she is talking to a particular person while writing. Every *crónica* is addressed to a particular person or persons, thus creating a community of readers; the more personal, oral dimension of this

communication is expressed by transcribing the pronunciation and accents of a particular variety of a language. Even though the epistolary genre seems to her dated, associated more readily with the eighteenth century, the epistle in the twenty-first century is an e-mail rather than a paper document, which puts the memoir in the context of electronic communication of the World Wide Web. The genre also arises as a response to the travel and dislocations of multitudes on a global scale; most communicate through the fastest and cheapest form available. Unlike letters, e-mail can be more easily bulk mailed, which makes for a certain formality of the message and gives it a more general focus. The linguistic mixtures within the e-mailed *crónicas* might additionally function for Chávez-Silverman as a way to invite and incorporate all the worlds she inhabited and all the circles of her friends.

Killer Crónicas demonstrates a condensed vision of the world where people from different places can connect electronically to form as closely-knit communities across great geographical distances. Thus Chávez-Silverman suggests a new cybernetic geography of and for her acquaintances. An Australian and a Spaniard can share the same literary space here, as she describes it to one of them “mi colega australiano, quien te comparte la crónica, in my weird cyber-geografía” (Chávez-Silverman 2004, 82). The presupposed audience of distant friends contributes to the globalised geography the memoir sketches with its constant transnational comparisons and metaphors based in divergent continents. For example, in the last paragraph of the first *crónica*, Chávez-Silverman draws a map – because cartography plays as important a role as geography in the book – of her experiences and expectations. When she asserts that she cannot live far from the Ocean, even if there are rivers, the rivers she mentions flow all over the Americas: “camel-colored Río de la Plata, or my beloved Mississippi, or the icy Charles” (4). She compares her current interior location in Southern California, the so-called Inland Empire, with a number of places that draw a wider circle, such as Madrid and Pretoria. The map thus outlined applies to most of her book: the Americas as a unit figure here beside the European and African locations. She also talks of her own “destino cartográfico” (7) as located in the whole extent of a latitude rather than a particular place, because it is the same species of trees, jacaranda, that keeps her company and makes her comfortable wherever she lives, whether in Claremont, Cape Town, or Buenos Aires. If one can feel “at home” in the entirety of the tropical to subtropical zone, the idea of what constitutes one’s “place” transforms and expands significantly. It is no longer limited to a particular location, but instead related to climate and vegetation, and thus mobile.²

Through evocation of multiple toponyms and geographical references – another feature that globalises the text – Chávez-Silverman emphasises the travels that lead to her globalised view of the world and language. Just as comparisons to places previously seen or experienced come back to haunt the present, the language previously known or accents previously heard mark the language as it is spoken now. Geography finds reflection in orthography. Inflecting her language with the accents and vocabulary of places that influenced her provides the only appropriate method of writing the globe: a “transcultural ortografía” (Chávez-Silverman 2004, xix).

The complexity of that idiosyncratic language made her editor, Paul Allatson, suggest that Chávez-Silverman provide a glossary at the end of her book. Instead, she decided to open the book with a “Glossary Crónica” (written in 2004, significantly later than the other crónicas), where she provides a self-conscious description of her linguistic choices: “Me han pedido que (me) explique aquí. I mean, que ehplique mi lengua, my use of language. My odd oral, transcultural ortografía” (Chávez-Silverman 2004, xix). She admits that she was asked to explain both herself and her language, and already here gives both the correct spelling of *explicar* (to explain) and then repeats it in a spelling that reflects its aspirated Argentinean pronunciation. The keywords Chávez-Silverman chooses to describe the complex transnational circumstances that give rise to the cosmopoetics of her memoir are orality and transculturalism. Her language can be described as oral because the orthography does not reflect the usual official spelling, but rather mirrors the pronunciation with its regional variations, or what she calls “la realidad fonética” (xix). This attention to the local realities of pronunciation, local accents, and idioms aims, perhaps paradoxically, at globalising the language. No longer does she simply write Spanish, but instead *speaks it* in writing, emphasising its global reach. In her personal use of it, Spanish becomes a borderless yet localised language: a cosmopolitan vernacular.³

Regional variants do not preclude Chávez-Silverman from considering the entirety of a language her own. Many languages and their varieties constitute part of her identity. She lays claim to some part of her personal history happening in many of the local varieties of Spanish. She draws on the idioms of Chicano Spanglish, because she grew up and lives in California, and also uses Mexican Spanish and Madrid Castilian, because her family lived in both countries when she was a child. The Buenos Aires sibilants come with the research trip to Argentina, and the Puerto Rican vocabulary and speed from numerous friendships with Puerto Ricans during graduate school. During a trip to Chile she hears another accent, which she again appropriates to write in detail attentive to its

characteristics: the clipping of sounds in “La vó-en (pronunciación shilensis de La ‘Bohème’)” or the interjection of *poh* in “Nai que ver, poh, con Buenos Aires” (Chávez-Silverman 2004, 59). She defiantly proves that one speaker can use all accents at the same time, thus rejecting the one nation, one language (or even language variety) prescription, while simultaneously esteeming the particularity of each cultural tradition.⁴

Significantly, the place where she writes does not necessarily or directly influence her choice of accents. She does not focus her attention on writing the “appropriate” accents in their respective locals, but rather writes whatever variety “returns” to her at a particular moment: “en Buenos Aires I often wrote con la ‘th’ for the final Castilian ‘d’: fond remnants (reliquias?) de mi infancia en Madrith” (Chávez-Silverman 2004, xix–xx). Since accent plays an important role in establishing legitimacy in a particular place, such conscious de-localising of accents breaks with the idea of accent as a prime marker of local belonging, offering instead a playful patchwork of remnants and relics.⁵ Jacques Derrida meditates on the importance of accent when he asserts that only on condition of losing it could a foreign writer – for example one born in Algeria like himself – enter French literature. Monolingualism – without even a trace of difference – remains in his view so powerful a marker of belonging that it causes an “anxiety of disguise, the recurrent fear of being unmasked, of being troubled in the anonymity of accentual equivalence” (Derrida 1996, 48). Because a particular national or ethnic alliance imagined in the form of purity of language does not represent in *Killer Crónicas* the highest value, Chávez-Silverman avoids the discomfort of accentual passing for a native that Derrida describes, and suggests a different, more inclusive understanding of literature in the age of globalisation.

Instead of a single language with a single accent, Chávez-Silverman offers a patchwork – to evoke the opening metaphor – of influences that does not limit itself to Spanish, Spanglish, and English; the memoir also includes an occasional Afrikaner or Portuguese phrase, Yiddish dedications, words in Nahuatl, and even one in Zulu. Consequently, the particular use is rather an issue of re-surfacing or re-memorising: “otros ticks y quirks began to surface” (Chávez-Silverman 2004, xx). The very structure of memory, particularly of a transnational subject, is multilingual: memories are written in many languages and accents. Much as the places she lived in mix in her memory, so do the languages. She describes this process with an unusual simile: “it is – my language – cual homing pigeon on acid [which] circles back [...] to the last port en el cual eché ancla” (xix). If a homing pigeon is one that is trained to return home from a great

distance, the hallucinogen makes it unable to recognise its location. Or maybe the category of home itself connotes for her such an unstable place that the language returns to the last place in which she put down her anchor. That Chávez-Silverman describes this voluntary resettling as sailing and setting the anchor clearly distances her from the usual imagery of genealogical trees and growing roots, and evokes rather the nomadism of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome.⁶ Although the rhizome suggests a stronger alliance than an anchor does, it connotes the same break with the stability of a place as home.

The unsettling of the value of rootedness is in *Killer Crónicas* coupled with the unsettling of the connection between language and place, and further between the signifier and the signified, especially in translation, where signifiers become interchangeable even though the signified remains the same. In her work on bilingual aesthetics, Doris Sommer describes precisely this mechanism: "when more than one word points to a familiar thing, the excess shows that no one word can own or be that thing" (Sommer 2003, xix). The interchangeability of signifiers in multilingual situations often leads to confusion, which cosmopoetics deliberately exploits to create puns for rhetorical effect, whether humorous or serious. Sommer describes the endless variety of both fun and frustrating language games available to bilinguals and multilinguals in terms of "overloading" "mono systems" (Sommer 2003, xii). Such mischievous unconventional uses of language, where one language is read through another to suggest divergent meanings, heighten the aesthetic value of speech and writing, even if they lead to incomprehension or embarrassment. Hence Chávez-Silverman advises the reader, "Go on, *lánzate*. Lance yourself" (Chávez-Silverman 2004, xxi), playing on the false friends similarity of *lanzar* (to throw) to the English word "lance". In Buenos Aires, *la avenida Las Heras* becomes for her and her family "The Hairs" (13); "tenure" becomes *ternura* (tenderness) because of its sound similarity and because it is "a more gorgeous word for the thing than the real word for 'tenure,' *la permanencia*. No, I refuse the 'real' translation" (45). Even names of authors provide fecund ground for puns: Sarmiento is Sarmy, Amado Nervo becomes "Beloved Nerve" (xx), bell hooks becomes *campanita ganchos* (53).

Such refusal of "real translation" points to Chávez-Silverman's unwillingness to admit a simple one-to-one equivalency of languages. For one, she does not give into the monolingual dictates of the publishing market; even though she repeatedly heard from her superiors that one day she would just have to choose one of the languages and translate her book into either English or Spanish.⁷ Her insistence on a multilingual text

situates her in a long tradition of Latino/a resistance to English in the United States, their experiments often bringing Spanish into English texts. Gloria Anzaldúa's pioneering *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) argued for the inescapability of speaking and writing many languages. Even though the languages she listed did not go beyond various forms of English and Spanish, Anzaldúa aimed to validate what linguists would call varieties of language as languages.⁸ While it is useful to see Chávez-Silverman in the Chicano context, her *crónicas* go beyond the Mexican-US border and forge connections hemispherically with other American nations, as well as globally with Europe and Africa.

That is why she prefers to refer to her book as code-switching rather than Spanglish, which she sees as a trendy marketing term, not particularly appropriate to describe her language. Spanglish would put her inescapably into the confines of the category "Latino", which would situate her only in the Americas and compromise the actual planetariness of her language. In the foreword, the editor proclaims "a potentially huge reading audience" (Chávez-Silverman 2004, xi) for the book, and he does not see it as limited to the Americas. He supports this claim with an anecdote about a sample of readers in Sydney: his non-native English-speaking friends who speak English as a second language yet no Spanish. What made them a perfect target audience for Chávez-Silverman's memoir was their own linguistic inventiveness, which habituated them to switching among multiple languages. Thus, they "have greeted these chronicles with absolute delight" (xi). Indeed, many people now live between languages and thus are used to the same sort of multilingual creativity and code-switching life. Their openness to such experiments creates a new global audience for cosmopoetics.

The study of cosmopoetics, in turn, promises to revitalise the field of comparative literature by bringing into scholarly attention texts that resist monolingual concepts of national literatures and stage comparison within the text itself; several national languages and their respective literary traditions illuminate and interanimate each other, to use Bakhtin's terminology. It becomes relevant to the contemporary discussions of linguistic boundaries of many academic disciplines. Repeated calls for foreign language instruction have been coming not only from area studies and comparative literature, but also from the ethnic studies and American studies departments. Modernisers of American studies perceive multilingualism as a way of overcoming parochialism of the discipline, as well as a chance to draw attention to the imperialist equation of the United States with America. But even though we have long heard the calls for multilingual study of literature, very few critics actually pay attention to

texts that are multilingual in themselves rather than translated and circulated in various markets, or collated into anthologies together with literature from other linguistic traditions. Cosmopoetics is not just another form of immigrant literature that resists assimilation, but a way of describing the global.

That is why in an article that asks what Bakhtin would say about the changes that globalisation and the fall of the Iron Curtain had brought, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Epstein suggests that Bakhtin would describe this process as a transition “from the multicultural to the transcultural (or from *difference* to *interference*)” and “from translation to polyglossia (or stereotextuality)” (Epstein 2004, 44). With a focus on multilingual literature that celebrates mixing, comparative literature would abandon its interest in difference and admit the value of an interference of foreign accents in a written text. Although I would not like to see an end to translation – and objectively there can be no end to it – a focus on polyglossic, multilingual texts will lead to an emphasis on “untranslatability and nonequivalencies” among languages (Epstein 2004, 51). If one of the greatest fears of those who care about literature is that globalisation will bring a global dominance of English, cosmopoetics can actively engage and resist its levelling forces.

Notes

¹ For a more extensive discussion of the *crónica* genre, see Bielsa (2006), or the collection of essays edited by Ignacio Corona and Beth E. Jörgensen (2002). All theoreticians stress the liminality of the genre.

² With such a redefinition of the idea of place and belonging, Chávez-Silverman contributes to the feminist critiques of a family home as an oppressive space for women. On the other hand, her mobility obviously points to her privileged class position. The “new cosmopolitans”, as David Hollinger collectively dubs them, share a discomfort with both the expression “being at home in the world” and the term “cosmopolitanism” for their inherent class bias. Hence the multiplying critical vocabulary usually consisting of cosmopolitanism modified with an adjective: “vernacular cosmopolitanism, rooted cosmopolitanism, critical cosmopolitanism, comparative cosmopolitanism, national cosmopolitanism, discrepant cosmopolitanism, situated cosmopolitanism and actually existing cosmopolitanism” (Hollinger 2002, 228). My understanding of the “cosmo” in cosmopoetics owes more to the recent rethinking of cosmopolitanism that try to unite opposites than to the Stoic or Kantian meanings of the word.

³ Such reuniting of the opposites evokes Homi Bhabha’s vernacular cosmopolitanism and the blending of the global with the local that it posits.

⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder’s notion of *Sprachgeist*, which influenced the Romantic ideal of a nation as a unity of territory and language, has long provided the formula

for imagining nations. Still, in a treatise from 1924 on nation and socialism, Otto Bauer sees linguistic differences as the most significant factor in the creation of national particularity.

⁵ Michael Cronin noticed the relative invisibility of accent in translation as compared to its importance as a marker of belonging (2000). There has been more critical attention to accent recently; see for example Apter (2008) and Chow (2007).

⁶ The full quotation reads: “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance.” (25) For a critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s imagery of displacement, especially of the appropriation of the figure of the nomad, see Caren Kaplan’s “Becoming Nomad: Poststructuralist Deterritorializations” (in Kaplan 1996).

⁷ Chávez-Silverman talks about the challenges of publishing her multilingual text in a radio interview with Veronica Rueckert; Spanglish was the only term relatively known in the publishing industry (Chávez-Silverman 2005).

⁸ Anzaldúa enumerates eight languages that are spoken by Chicanos, with Standard English and Standard Spanish being only two of them: “Because we are complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages ...: 1. Standard English, 2. Working class and slang English, 3. Standard Spanish, 4. Standard Mexican Spanish, 5. North Mexican Spanish dialect, 6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations), 7. Tex-Mex, 8. *Pachuco* (called *caló*.” (Anzaldúa 1999, 55)

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