



Falling for debt: Giannina Braschi, the Latinx avant-garde, and financial terrorism in the *United States of Banana*

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Abstract

Puerto Rican writer Giannina Braschi's 2011 novel, *The United States of Banana*, although brilliant and insightful, has been largely under-examined by literary critics. This may be partially attributed to the complexity of her writing and her predilection for utilizing a dizzying array of avant-garde literary techniques at the service of her trenchant critiques of social issues. In this essay I combine scholarship on the avant-garde with research on the economic devastation wrought by the 2008 market crash to examine Braschi's dense, profound novel. I argue that amid her strategic use of avant-garde techniques, Braschi links post-9/11 fears of terrorism with the daily suffering that stems from a changing, debt-ridden economy to offer a scathing critique of neoliberal economic and social reforms.

Keywords Latinx avant-garde · Neoliberalism · Debt · Terrorism · Marginalization · Latinx literature

Caída ante la deuda: Giannina Braschi, la vanguardia literaria latina y el terrorismo económico en *United States of Banana*

Resumen

The *United States of Banana*, la novela de la escritora puertorriqueña Giannina Braschi publicada en 2011, aunque brillante y perspicaz, por lo general ha sido poco analizada por la crítica literaria. Esto podría atribuirse en parte a la complejidad de su estilo y su predilección por el uso de un vertiginoso despliegue de técnicas literarias de vanguardia al servicio de sus agudas críticas sobre los problemas sociales. Este ensayo combina el trabajo académico sobre la vanguardia literaria con investigaciones sobre la devastación económica producida por la crisis financiera de 2008

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para examinar la novela intensa y profunda de Braschi. Planteamos que, en el marco del uso estratégico de técnicas de vanguardia, Braschi vincula el temor al terrorismo después del 9-11 con el sufrimiento diario que surge de una economía cambiante y acosada por la deuda para ofrecer una crítica mordaz de las reformas económicas y sociales del neoliberalismo.

Palabras clave Vanguardia latina · Neoliberalismo · Terrorismo · Marginalización · Literatura latina

Giannina Braschi's brilliant, complex 2011 novel, *United States of Banana*, purposefully masks itself as a story about trauma, memory, and 9/11 in order to articulate a subtle, but scathing, indictment of neoliberalism's ongoing role in the entrenched disenfranchisement of marginalized communities in the US and beyond. By considering the ways in which US society has shifted from one of frugality to one increasingly reliant on debt, alongside theories that seek to understand the mechanisms by which avant-garde movements (artistic and otherwise) make cogent, *social* arguments, I argue that Braschi's use of disorienting avant-garde literary techniques are central to her impassioned rebuke of the neoliberal social norms that constitute a form of day-to-day terrorism. This essay maps Braschi's literary and philosophical engagement with the stark new social reality premised on debt and isolation. Looking first at alternative ways of conceptualizing the impact of artistic avant-garde movements, I move through economic theory regarding the changing role of debt in US society in order to articulate the ways in which Braschi's novel highlights neoliberalism as a source of both existential and financial terror.

(Mis)remembering 9/11

It is easy to mistake Giannina Braschi's *United States of Banana* as simply a novel about 9/11. Braschi constructs an opening to this deep, puzzling work that is as harsh as it is visceral, an opening that demands her reader sit up and pay attention. At first glance, *United States of Banana* seems focused exclusively on ideas regarding trauma and memory. We have, after all, been exhorted for the last 19-plus years to "never forget." The truth, however, is that we do forget. Collectively as a society, we *have* forgotten the horror that was 9/11 because, as with emotional/psychic pain of all kinds, in order to move forward—to live—we are *obliged* to forget.¹ Looking

¹ I would like to quickly, perhaps superficially but also importantly, draw a distinction between two distinct kinds of forgetting. On the one hand is the kind of forgetting that is related to the process of healing that trauma survivors engage in. In this case, I am thinking about soldiers struggling with PTSD, or rape victims, or communities whose lives have been shattered by war. On the other hand we have the kind of forgetting enacted in shameful ways by elected officials who have forgotten, in deeds if not in words, the courage, valor and sacrifice of first responders during the first hours and ensuing weeks of 9/11. See for example the 8 December 2015 appearance of Jon Stewart on Trevor Noah's *The Daily Show* (Jon Stewart Returns 2015), in which he takes Congress to task for failing to renew the Zadroga Act, which provided health care for the 9/11 first responders who got sick working under conditions that the government deemed "safe." The Zadroga Act, which provided coverage for 5 years, had not been reaffirmed,



back at footage of the events of 9/11, one is struck by the sheer magnitude of the chaos and destruction, the palpable and overwhelming shock and fear that expanded like a wave far beyond the epicenter of Ground Zero. The collapse of the twin towers evinced a disbelief in the unfolding events that live footage revealed as too surreal to put into words. Firsthand observers were simply stunned, barely able to process what their eyes were seeing. Those who did attempt to narrate the destruction found themselves forced to use language and narrative strategies associated primarily with fiction. The tumbling, burning debris and the terrified victims engulfed in a catastrophic, rolling cloud of ash were like scenes out of a Hollywood film. Again, too surreal, too unbelievable, to be believable.

Consequently, it is safe to say that we collectively do not, *cannot*, live in this perpetual state of intense remembrance. What to do then if, like Giannina Braschi,² you are a writer who wants to tell the story of 9/11 to an audience that has forgotten in their so-called remembrance? If you are Braschi, you begin with the visceral, the concrete, the *material* reality of bodies falling impossibly from the heavens:

I saw a torso falling—no legs—no head—just a torso. I am redundant because I can't believe what I saw. I saw a torso falling—no legs—no head—just a torso—tumbling in the air—dressed in a bright white shirt—the shirt of the businessman—tucked in—neatly—under the belt—snuggly fastened—holding up his pants that had no legs. He had hit a steel girder—and he was dead—dead for a ducat, dead—on the floor of Krispy Kreme—with powdered donuts for a head—fresh out of the oven—crispy and round—hot and tasty—and this businessman on the ground was clutching a briefcase in his hand—and on his finger, the wedding band. I supposed he thought his briefcase was his life—or

Footnote 1 (continued)

and so Jon Stewart took to the air to point out the hypocrisy of politicians' exhortations to "never forget" while simultaneously clearly forgetting the lives of first responders affected by 9/11 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L11Bxolo44>).

² Braschi's reputation is curiously difficult to pin down. On the one hand, she is highly regarded within the field of Latinx studies. She is perhaps best known for her early novel *Yo Yo Boing!* (1998), which was among the first works of fiction to employ Spanglish in a concerted and consistent way. In these same circles, she is known for her poetry, her thoughtful engagement with philosophy and poetics, and for the restless nature of her work. Yet, perhaps for these very same reasons, her work is not as well-known as it might (or should) be. It is fair to say that her fame as a writer doesn't extend out into public consciousness the way the work of writers like Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros or even Julia Alvarez has. I would argue that this is, in part, because Braschi is a different kind of writer—fiercely experimental and profoundly intellectual—understanding her work is hard. In addition, lest I be misinterpreted, this is not to say that the work of Díaz, Cisneros and Alvarez (among others) is not intellectual or thoughtful. They are brilliant storytellers whose writing is accessible in ways that Braschi's is not. Put differently, when you read a work by Braschi, she makes you work for it. This same dynamic can be seen among the critical engagement with Braschi's work. Critical reviews have been positive, frequently recognizing the power and complexity of her writing. In comparison to canonical writers, however, critical engagement with her work is harder to come by. The vast majority of this engagement has been dedicated to her novel *Yo Yo Boing!* whereas very little has been written about *United States of Banana*. There are several excellent scholarly pieces about Braschi's work, but if there is an identifiable "must-read" essay, it is without a doubt Arnaldo Manuel Cruz-Malavé's essay in the September 2014 issue of *American Quarterly*.



his wife—or that both were one because the briefcase was as tight in hand as the wedding band. (Braschi 2011, p. 3)

Fearlessly engaging the awful, almost imperceptible line between the real and the surreal, Braschi's opening paragraph grabs our attention with its uncomfortable mix of the gruesome details of the businessman's head converted metaphorically into soft powdered donuts alongside the casual banality of the man's crisp white shirt, pressed and ironed, we presume, for a routine day at the office. With startling efficiency Braschi captures the shock of seeing tumbling bodies falling *impossibly* from the burning windows of the twin towers, but this too she mixes with a dose of reality made sharper by virtue of its ordinariness: the businessman's ringed hand still clutching the briefcase, married to his wife but also his job. Like it or not, Braschi's juxtaposed images transform the man's horrifying "disembodied" torso into a *person*, one who, as he made the inconceivable decision to leap from the window ninety stories up, likely clutched his briefcase in this same way that he had while stepping off the subway or picking his briefcase up off his kitchen counter before leaving for work. Braschi's visceral, unflinching opening blurs the comfortable line between the real and the surreal in ways that refuse complacency.

In this way, Braschi's novel announces itself as a sustained meditation on 9/11. Until, suddenly, it isn't. Or rather, it is, while at the same time being much more. The opening paragraph simultaneously signals another of Braschi's techniques as a writer: the rapid intermingling of the literary with the popular (ducats to Krispy Kreme), the corporal almost scatological, with the cerebral,³ as well as carefully composed prose juxtaposed with a writing style that teeters on the edge of impulsive ephemerality. Although the genre of the book jacket summary—with its almost exclusive focus on marketing—does not typically lend itself to critical analysis, the plot summary of the original 2011 edition is worth mentioning. It states,

United States of Banana takes place at the Statue of Liberty in post-9/11 New York City, where Hamlet, Zarathustra, and Giannina are on a quest to free the Puerto Rican prisoner Segismundo. Segismundo has been imprisoned for more than one hundred years, hidden away by his father, the king of the United States of the Banana, for the crime of having been born. But when the king remarries, he frees his son, and for the sake of reconciliation, makes Puerto Rico the fifty-first state and grants American passports to all Latin American citizens. This staggering show of benevolence rocks the global community, causing an unexpected power shift with far-reaching implications. (Braschi 2011).

Given the complexity of the work, it is an impressive achievement to have so succinctly summarized the events of such a far-ranging, profoundly intellectual novel. For readers, however, familiar with the work, what is entertaining about the summary is how straightforward it is. Although the summary is technically accurate, the work itself is bigger, more philosophical, more intricate and much, much harder to

³ No pun intended but one that, I gather, Braschi might see as fortuitous.



pin down than the summary suggests. Part novel, part fragmentary stream of consciousness, part creative nonfiction, part essay, part manifesto, part play, Braschi's *United States of Banana* is frustratingly, maddeningly, brilliantly, and ambitiously challenging. In quick succession, Braschi engages issues of Puerto Rican colonialism, the philosophical roots of oppression, suicide bombing, terrorism, issues of language and identity, and the false path of freedom via liberty and consumerism. All of this before page 50.⁴

Returning to the scene that opens the book, Braschi's stark and unflinching language foregrounds two of the key themes that run throughout the novel: disembodiedness and terrorism. The spectacle of 9/11—with its falling bodies, destruction, and fear—was made visible via the live footage of the moment the towers collapsed but also through the video loop broadcast ceaselessly in the days and weeks that followed. Those images, like Braschi's description, were paradoxically both comprehensible and incomprehensible: on the one hand incomprehensible because of the shock—victims, *people*, falling from the sky, “a torso with no head, no arms, no legs.” Impossible. The unnaturalness of death and destruction (in the United States!) on a bright, sunny Tuesday morning. Yet, simultaneously, all of this now clearly *comprehensible* as a product of terrorism. Moreover, terrorism, unlike the bodies falling from the sky, suddenly becomes comprehensible as a palpable fear rooted in the sudden, intimate knowledge of acts committed with no larger purpose than to instill terror. Braschi's rough, brutal opening pushes us to understand, through sustained consideration, the *idea* of terrorism even if that comprehension amounts to little more than an ability to catalogue and judge terrorism as *incomprehensible*.

Debt, power, and the avant-garde

Although it is easy to zero in on the horrific details of the opening scene as a way of foregrounding the theme of Braschi's work, it is also equally important to understand that the opening, staged in this way and with the particular language that it employs, is simultaneously rooted in a long-established tradition of avant-garde cultural production. Braschi makes her intentions clear, but without the fanfare or even, frankly, the associated arrogance that is often ascribed to avant-garde art. Instead, Braschi's opening asserts a claim to the *potential* of avant-garde techniques to make urgent, *democratic* meaning out of chaos and confusion.

⁴ There is no doubt in my mind the *United States of Banana* deserves a much larger critical engagement. The complexity of the novel and the origami-like structure of its various themes and arguments merit the kind of chapter-length engagement best suited to an academic monograph. Although many of the themes weave in and out throughout the novel, it is fair to say that the novel's two distinct parts function both independently and together. Part 1 reads more like a creative essay, almost a manifesto that sets the stage for the “play” in Part 2. Moreover, Part 2 tells the story of “the characters” Giannina, Hamlet and Zarathustra, who set out together to free Segismundo, a metaphorical representation of the island of Puerto Rico, and who has been imprisoned under the skirt of the Statue of Liberty. Because of word limits, this essay will focus exclusively on the first half of the book. Readers interested in an examination of Part 2 might consider Riofrio (2020).



Working within the framework of educational leadership studies, Samier (2012) offers insight as to how leaders might take note of the aims and techniques of avant-garde movements. Her distillation of the avant-garde as both intellectual and intentional resonates with our discussion here. She writes that, “In the same manner that the artistic-political and intellectual avant-garde struggle with new ways of seeing and doing things, avant-garde educational leadership strives for original, and therefore unconventional, roles and relationships. In effect, it has to rewrite power, culture and political economy” (p. 49). In addition to Samier’s effort to revise educational leadership by borrowing liberally from the arts, of particular interest is her understanding of the avant-garde as enabling a new way of seeing, one that through struggle and the establishment of “unconventional relationships” seeks to rewrite culture and *power*.

This idea, that the avant-garde centers itself on new ways of seeing and doing in order to revise established norms, frames Braschi’s sudden narrative shifts as potentially less jarring. Out of the horrific turmoil of the novel’s opening, Braschi spontaneously posits this one, clear idea that quickly becomes central to Braschi’s overall project: “Familiarity,” she writes, “doesn’t bring nearness—it breeds stagnation—ease” (Braschi 2011, p. 40). And so, before the reader rests comfortably with *United States of Banana* as a work about 9/11, Braschi turns abruptly to a meditation on speaking and writing. Shifting to a discussion of language in order to break down the comfortable binaries between the foreign and the native—but also to assess the perpetual discomfort that stems from writing in a language and in a culture that is both hers and decidedly not hers—Braschi writes,

I want to misplace myself. When I am misplaced—I am noticed—as a misplacement—and I like to be figured out—as somebody you have to keep misplacing, and changing the view you had, because the foreigner is invading the native—the native is becoming foreign—and in a country where foreigners become natives—and natives become foreigners—languages must be demolished and rebuilt. (Braschi 2011, p. 40)

With language that echoes and invokes the destruction and rebuilding of the twin towers, Braschi urges us to consider the meaning and value of *reconsidering*. Purposefully disrupting the generic expectations that a book “about 9/11” would employ, Braschi demands that her reader “misplace” this (in)comprehensible idea of terrorism alongside equally “understood” notions of freedom and liberty. These we presume to understand in simple, unmarred, and uncomplicated ways because freedom and liberty, we tell ourselves, are *who we are*. Seen in this light, *United States of Banana* signals 9/11 as a key moment, perhaps the defining moment, in that it opens up daily life in the US to reinterpretation, or rather, finally, interpretation from a different perspective. This too resonates clearly with established expectations of avant-garde cultural production. Again Samier, here quoting the art historian Simon Schama,

The power of art is the power of unsettling surprise. Even when it seems imitative, art doesn’t so much duplicate the familiarity of the seen world as replace it with a reality all of its own. Its mission, beyond the delivery of beauty is the



disruption of the banal. Its operational procedure involves the retinal processing of information, but then throws a switch and generates an alternative kind of vision: a dramatized kind of seeing. (2012, p. 49)

Braschi's novel, signaled sharply by her opening, enacts precisely this sustained "disruption of the banal," an effort heavily reliant on avant-garde art's power to surprise and unsettle.

Consider for a moment how the US (and arguably the world) shifted and changed in the decade between 9/11 and the publication of *United States of Banana* in 2011. The research economist James L. Jennings, in his book *A More Imperfect Union*, draws precise attention to how debt has shifted in these intervening years:

Total public and private debt in the United States in 2009 has been estimated at \$34.6 trillion. This figure is 2.83 times larger than national income of \$12.3 trillion for 2009. The absolute level of debt itself or even in reference to national income portends less significance than does the rate of its growth. Debt expanded 50.3 times from 1959 to 2009, compared to a gain of 26.9 times for national income. (2012, p. 3)

Jennings's research speaks directly to the ways US society has been transformed, over the last several decades, from a society of relative frugality to one premised on ever-increasing and previously unimaginable amounts of debt. Jennings astutely singles out the ubiquity of debt but also the palpable sense that this debt is both treacherous and unsustainable. Put more emphatically, these debt-ridden times are dangerous times, particularly for those whose finances might best be described as "day to day."⁵

Relatedly, and lest we forget, in the introduction to their 2013 book, *Debt: Ethics, the Environment, and the Economy*, Paik and Wiesner-Hanks offer a stark reminder of the sheer scale of the 2008 market crash:

The sudden collapse in housing prices in the United States, triggered by a wave of foreclosures in the subprime mortgage market, wiped out the investment bank Lehman Brothers, which has proven to be the largest bankruptcy in history. The contagion threatened to spread to other financial institutions and was met by massive infusions of taxpayer money to prevent further meltdowns. ... The tense and unnerving days of the crisis, when the contagion of defaults and bankruptcies brought the global economy to the edge of collapse, have given way in many places to a diffuse and inchoate sense of despair. Although official economic indicators state that the recession came to an end in mid-2009, rates of joblessness have remained stubbornly high, the already vast income

⁵ The statistics regarding the new reality of living paycheck to paycheck are startling. Long considered the purview of the poor and the working poor, the kind of economic insecurity that accompanies a lack of savings is now a hallmark of a large portion of the population of the US. Robert Reich, former Treasury Secretary under Bill Clinton, in a July 2018 piece for the *Guardian*, shared the shocking news that almost 80% of the US population currently lives paycheck to paycheck (Reich 2018). Although the details of how this happened are too broad to engage with here, the reality of this shift highlights the deep consequences of this reality in relation to debt as a strategy for *day-to-day* existence.



disparities have continued to widen between the super-rich and the middle class, and declining tax revenues have forced governments to make painful cuts to social programs. The global financial system may have been saved by government intervention on a massive scale, but in the United States, efforts to help the poor and the middle class in the form of mortgage relief and job creation have proven paltry and inadequate. The global economy continues to lurch forward into this strange recovery, in which taxpayer funds have not only rescued the financial sector but enabled the banks to reap enormous profits, while increasing numbers of people in the United States fall out of the middle class into low-wage jobs that leave them exposed to the possibility of penury in the event of an accident or a health emergency. (2013, pp. 1–2)

I have chosen to quote their work at length because their summary of the events of 2008 elegantly captures the terrifying enormity of the crisis while simultaneously outlining the ongoing calamity that has since befallen the bulk of the US population. Paik and Wiesner-Hanks's use of words like "wave" and "contagion" to describe the initial events of the 2008 crisis articulates the way the speed of the crisis—the rapid failing of banks large and small—felt and, indeed, *was* exceptional. Further, Paik and Wiesner-Hanks accentuate two key dynamics that are a direct result of the 2008 market crash. The first is what they describe as the "diffuse and inchoate sense of despair" that has lingered on in the years since the crash of 2008. Linked to both the "painful cuts to social programs" and "the possibility of penury in the event of an accident or a health emergency," this despair has not been evenly distributed and is directly related to their second key point: the undeniable fact that there has been a sharp distinction between the rapid, almost immediate recovery of the market and the lingering malaise of the larger US economy. This distinction is not merely semantic. It is significant in that it reveals what Paik and Wiesner-Hanks have described as the clear, growing disparity between "the super-rich and the middle class." This "recovery"—which purportedly pulled the US economy back from the brink of ruin⁶—has been imbalanced and, more to the point, uneven in ways that fly in the face of our cherished, long-held narratives about equity and opportunity.

Although much of US society had some experience in other, earlier economic crises, the 2008 crash felt calamitous in ways that defied both sense and logic. This is, in part, because the only substantive corollary to the 2008 crash—the 1929 crash that led to the Great Depression—had taken place almost 80 years earlier and was thus experienced firsthand by a very small portion of the existing US population. The 2008 market crash was, in this sense, unprecedented because, for almost everyone alive in the US at that moment, it was, in fact, *unprecedented*.

⁶ The discourse of the economy "on the brink of ruin" was ubiquitous during the 2008 crash, with far too many iterations to detail here. However, more to the point for this essay are the celebratory narratives that, in the subsequent years, suggest that the economy was saved at the last moment and is now, no longer, "on the brink." Salient examples include an article that appeared as early as November of 2009 (!) in VOA (Top US Advisor 2009); a 2015 article in CNN Money, <https://money.cnn.com/infographic/economy/the-us-economy-to-the-brink-and-back/index.html>; and, incredibly, a 2014 *Huffington Post* article that claimed that the US economy found itself on the brink ... of a boom (Connelly 2014).



The shock and awe of the 2008 market crash,⁷ like the terrifying and beguiling sight of the twin towers crashing to the ground, forced a revision of narratives that at the time seemed inviolable: narratives about the unassailable strength of the US, the solidity of the world's biggest economy, or the infinite, always-rising value of real estate. And, again, like the calamitous rolling cloud of ash produced in the wake of the falling towers, the only narratives that seemed to fit the collapse of our market seemed straight out of Hollywood. This confluence—the Hollywood-esque efforts to narrate the collapse of the twin towers and the collapse of our financial system—is at the very heart of the extraordinary, complexly layered *United States of Banana*.

Bureaucratic terrorism and the fear of everyday life

What makes Braschi's novel both timely and urgent is that it insightfully recognizes how this lingering despair wrought by the (near) financial collapse is rooted in something deeper while also being intimately connected to the terror and fear evinced by the falling towers. Put succinctly, the first half of *United States of Banana* makes the implicit argument that the fear that floats in and out of the lives of the poor and the middle class is *the same fear* that marked 9/11. For Braschi, this is neither melodrama nor exaggeration: in a globalized, market-driven world populated by managers and “the managed,” terrorism and fear of financial ruin are one and the same.

Moreover, in the worldview revealed by the novel, the highly publicized coverage of the overwhelming visual spectacle of 9/11—as an easily identified act of terrorism—ultimately obscures the entrenched, insidious *everyday* terrorism that Braschi describes as “bureaucratic terrorism.” This form of terrorism is not spectacular and as such remains invisible even though it too dismembers. Conceptualizing the monumental towers of finance and industry as emblematic of the contemporary workplace, Braschi writes,

There's a mole here and there's a rat. The mole works in the basement and the rat works in the attic. I work in between. The mole and the rat are married. The mole informs the rat and the rat informs the boss of everything that happens at work at 5:00 p.m. sharp. ... Their job is to create instability on all floors except the basement and the attic because that is where they work. They keep the pressure on me—and I keep dreaming of tarantulas biting my feet—blood spilling and teeth falling. What am I supposed to do? / —*Look for another job.* / —*The market is shaky.* / —*You have no time to complain. Run for your life.* / I saw a head rolling. With no news of what was to happen. Just like that. In front of the entire staff. They didn't give any warning that the head would roll. The

⁷ I use the phrase “shock and awe” purposefully to bring prominently to mind the destruction that the US military intended in its various conflicts in the Persian Gulf. Although too big a topic to address here, the confluence of the enthusiastic use of our military might abroad, the symbolic and material attack against the US via an attack on the twin towers, and the collapse of the economic system *for the US lower and middle class* are, in my mind, intriguingly connected through the simple phrase “shock and awe.”



head just rolled, and blood was spilt. And the head that had cut other heads had to wonder: was this karmic payback for the heads I cut? Some rejoiced. Others were sad. Ding-dong. The wicked witch is dead! Who will be next? Head honchos. Prepare your résumés. Your head will be next. (2011, p. 27)

Braschi's passage is dense and chaotic, and although it is not technically a riddle, it does, to a degree, function enigmatically in ways akin to the work of riddles. In his brilliant essay on philosophical materialism, poetic obscurity, and medieval Anglo-Saxon riddles, poet and literary scholar Daniel Tiffany explores the specific role that obscurity plays as a critical concept: "What precisely," he asks, "does obscurity yield in the act of reading—in the absence of clear, cognitive meaning—if not a sense, strange indeed, of poetic *materials*?" (2001, p. 83). Again, Braschi's passage is not, strictly speaking, a riddle. It does not seek to obscure its meaning the way that, to use Tiffany's example, a medieval cross inscribed with a riddle does. However, the purposeful stream of consciousness and the seemingly overwhelming juxtaposition of images, ideas, and discourse function as a form of obscurity. This kind of disorientation, managed with highly literary precision, forces the reader to grapple with a complexity of ideas made manifest, in part, via giving up on the comfort of clarity. Instead, what remains—amid the juxtaposed images, internal thoughts, and interspersions—is precisely a lingering *sense* of Braschi's deeper meaning.

This vague sense of the world as experienced, in contrast to its conceptualization through cherished, coherent narratives, is precisely Tiffany's point about obscurity. His essay further argues that "Literature—and more precisely the literary image—... constitutes a second moment of negation, destroying the world as we know it and exposing us to what cannot be fully grasped" (2001, p. 83). Tiffany's assertions about poetic obscurity, particularly in relation to Braschi's writing, underscore the role that destruction plays in the service of revelation. Framed in this manner, Braschi strategic "destruction" of the comfortable (and comforting) norms of narration allows her to string together a dizzying series of rapid-fire associations and connections. In turn, these connections spur on a frenzied discourse that shakes free the unseen inner workings of a modern society rooted in terror.

Situating the scene in a dungeon-like workplace complete with moles, rats and gnawing spiders, Braschi emphasizes the "torture" wrought by constant fear of unemployment in order to transform the ubiquitous, cartoonish corporate turn of phrase "heads will roll" into a macabre scene of actual decapitation. The ambivalent reception of the grotesque decapitation suggests an audience of laborers long since numbed to the possibility, and reality, of bureaucratic violence. The earlier, flippant—frankly gross—description of the falling businessman's brains as Krispy Kreme powdered doughnuts mirrors in thought-provoking ways the casual reception of the decapitated head rolling along the corporate office floor. Here too, Braschi's use of a kind of informal, semi-scatological language fulfills a more philosophical end, one closely related to the complex relationship of beauty to art.

In a thought-provoking essay on the work of the influential art critic Arthur Danto, philosopher Jonathan Gilmore addresses the centuries-long efforts to "tame" art of its revolutionary potential. He details Danto's argument that over time beauty, as an aesthetic characteristic, comes to function as an expectation of art, one with



profound consequences for the range of possible intentions and meanings of artistic objects. The imposition of aesthetic beauty, in other words, domesticates art's potential to address issues that are moral and political, and not simply aesthetic. In an effort to understand the function of beauty in avant-garde movements that were often decidedly anti-aesthetic, Danto divides artistic beauty into "external" and "internal" beauty. Explaining Danto's theory, Gilmore writes, "One way of describing the distinction is to say that external beauty is the sensuous beauty that is paradigmatically discovered in nature where not much more is required to see beauty than to be able to see at all. And internal beauty, by contrast, is the beauty that belongs exclusively to the domain of art, wherein the beauty is bound up with a work's content" (2005, p. 147). In Danto's conceptualization, the internal beauty of a work functions as an "inflector." Gilmore explains the inflector as "a feature of the work intended to dispose viewers, through engaging their feelings or emotions, to respond in a certain way to what the work displays" (p. 150).

For Gilmore, the various avant-garde movements had a profound impact on art by disentangling the internal inflector of a work from the expectation of it as beautiful. In this way, avant-garde artists began to consider how *other* inflectors might shift both the reception and the meaning of art. Chief among the inflectors used in the place of beauty was disgust. As the avant-garde artists understood it, disgust was capable of provoking reactions and responses that took art well beyond the confines of the aesthetically pleasing.

Braschi's novel, with its references to Shakespeare and Alice in Wonderland but also Krispy Kreme doughnuts, stakes a claim for its own originality while simultaneously inserting itself into a long-standing tradition of avant-garde literature, a tradition that is as much European as it is Latinx and Latin American in origin.⁸ Like many of her Latin American and Latinx peers, Braschi's writing forgoes simple, transparent narrative in favor of strategic disorder. Braschi shares with her avant-garde contemporaries an interest in pushing beyond the individual lives of her

⁸ The confines of this essay do not permit a full engagement with Braschi's place in what we might call the Latinx avant-garde. There is, however, a rich and burgeoning body of work that testifies to Latinx writers' abiding interest in the avant-garde as a means for engaging ideas of material, social relevance. Although there are many, three writers in particular, spanning more than thirty years, come immediately to mind: the Chicano writers Ron Arias and Salvador Plascencia, along with the Cuban American writer H. G. Carrillo. Taken together, their collective novels represent a vast landscape of both avant-garde techniques and topics of engagement. Arias's beautiful 1975 novel, *The Road to Tamazunchale*, intersperses moments of implausible unreality alongside surprising, but plausible, events to make an explicit argument for the way in which narratives (as iterations of power) shape our daily, *lived*, experiences. By contrast, H. G. Carrillo's *loosing my spanish* (2004) utilizes Spanglish as a tool for defamiliarizing Spanish and English. This, coupled with the rapid movement across historical periods and between individual histories, allows Carrillo to acknowledge the fragility of memory and its intimate relationship with a community's sense of both place and belonging. Finally, and again by way of brief comparison, it would be incomprehensible to begin to discuss a Latinx avant-garde movement without considering Salvador Plascencia's brilliant 2005 novel *The People of Paper*. In this irrefutably most adventurous of the three novels, Plascencia experiments with typography, page layouts, and simultaneous perspectives to craft a deeply self-critical and self-referential work, one that seeks to interrogate the under-acknowledged tension between honoring a community while profiting off its suffering. Like Braschi, all three writers mentioned here are emblematic of a commitment to complex ideas and a refusal to be constrained in their efforts to press at the very edges of how we understand and articulate these ideas.



characters to consider deeper, extant systems of power and inequity. By contrast, however, Braschi's novel invests far less in the notion of a traditional plot-driven story, for that too would bind and constrict her efforts to dig at deeper truths. This distrust of straightforward narrative connects to Braschi's notion that memory is distinct from remembering for, in Braschi's understanding of our new social reality, you cannot remember what you have never seen. Put differently, our collective inability to recognize the subtle forms of daily terrorism limits our ability to process or even realize the real source of apprehension that marks daily life.

Bearing this in mind, we return to the earlier scene of the manager's "downsizing" via decapitation. Braschi's use of avant-garde discursive techniques evocatively juxtaposes the newly decapitated office manager's head with the falling torso that opens the novel. These mirrored images amount to a subtle but blistering indictment of the structural violence inherent in a global society that has lost its way. By surreptitiously linking bureaucratic terrorism—the terrifying arbitrary nature of unemployment and the calamitous loss of income and livelihood—with the stark terror of planes and bodies dropping out of the sky, Braschi inverts our understanding of the natural order of things: collectively, we strive for success because success, we are told, confers contentment and happiness. Terror reverses this belief in the rational order of things and overturns the comfortable narrative that if we just follow the rules we will be properly recognized and compensated; we will, in other words, be safe.

The neoliberal golden age: Inequity, excess, and fear

How, we can't help but ask ourselves, did we get here? Part of the answer, undoubtedly, rests in the rise of neoliberalist policies.⁹ Here in the US, over the last four decades, the advent of these policies has eliminated the social safety net meant to protect the most vulnerable members of society and replaced it with a rampant, merciless form of individualism. In turn, the unchecked resurgence of a new gilded age of excess and ostentation, accompanied by a seemingly vertiginous acceleration of the forces of globalization, automation and privatization, has made profit the *sole* hallmark of success. Although neoliberalism's changes are widely felt—albeit less widely acknowledged and understood—often unremarked are the connections between neoliberalism and sharply reconfigured notions of debt and its place in modern society. In ways that are striking, neoliberalism, with its loss of humanity—the practice of actual, palpable concern for the plight of others—mirrors the shift in our cultural understanding of debt. Economist Richard Wolff, in reference to the US, has suggested that “a nation that had a long history of celebrating frugality and savings changed into one with stunningly low savings rates among its people

⁹ The introduction to Henry Giroux's *Youth in a Suspect Society* (2009) is an excellent primer on neoliberalism. In the past, other texts that I have found eminently helpful include David Harvey's *The Enigma of Capital* (2010), Zygmunt Bauman's *The Consuming Life* (2007), Lisa Marie Cacho's *Social Death* (2012), and Arlene Dávila's *Culture Works* (2012).



and exploding, unsustainable debt levels for its consumers, enterprises, and governments” (2013, p. 22). Similarly, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholar Mary Poovey contends that the once social and human nature of debt (“social” because debt used to be a *human* contract between mutually interested parties) “[comes] to seem less like an aspect of the human condition and more like the outcome of a series of choices either voluntarily or inadvertently made” (2013, p. 42). Debt, then, in the intervening decades and even centuries has become a choice. And not just any choice.

In the period subsequent to the aftermath of 9/11, George W. Bush famously proposed that one way to combat terrorism was to “go shopping” (Bush 2001; President Bush’s 2006).¹⁰ The exhortation to shop was not a mere banality; consumerism in the age of global terror was touted as akin to patriotism. The problem, of course, is that in a US where wages have been in actual decline since the 1970s, debt has become the only path to consumerism. Moreover, in this equation, repeated infinitely over the last four decades, indebtedness *is* patriotism. This notion of debt as a kind of noble collective action, however, obscures the fact that debt has also become rife with inhumanity. Returning for a moment to Jennings’s research, he takes as a point of departure the notion that once, not so long ago, our society operated under the general presumption that all members of society were morally indebted to present and future generations via our collective moral obligation to protect the environment and to treat others with dignity and respect. He goes on, however, to make a salient point about the way the idea of debt as a moral obligation has long since vanished:

Debt, as moral obligation, ought to strengthen the social fabric, make individuals aware of needs and goods beyond their immediate interests, and sustain a network of reciprocity that stretches across generations and transcends social, economic, and ethnic differences. The fact that it does not, while nevertheless keeping us in a state of dependency and heteronomy, is perhaps the defining philosophical and political dilemma of liberal capitalist societies, for which the recognition of their long-term interests no longer amounts to a sufficient condition to pursue them. (2012, p. 4)

Consequently, at the heart of this shifting understanding of debt is the idea that members of what was once a semi-collective society are now free to interpret debt as an *individual* claim to *individual* satisfaction via material goods in lieu of prior conceptions of debt that emphasized social networks and human relationships.

Tuned in to the siren song of indebtedness, Braschi captures perfectly the fevered, all-consuming need to consume while simultaneously drawing attention to the human costs that accompany the collective addiction to material satisfaction. She writes,

¹⁰ A YouTube clip of Bush’s press conference, 20 December 2006, is found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxk9PW83VCY>; the *New York Times* transcript of the press conference is found at <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/20/washington/20text-bush.html>.



I was a smoker and a spender. And I miss it. I miss my three packs of cigarettes a day and my shopping sprees through Bendel, Bergdorf, and Saks. I flew through those stores on a snort of cocaine—on a sniff of a roar of the bull of Broadway—charging expenditures that sounded like splendiferous—splendid hours spent in shopping sprees—eyeing and buying the reverence of objects that bowed me into silence. With each new sofa to fuck on, a new lover to fuck with, to feel young and fresh and sassy, to fill the hole of experience—and to feel new every day ... to keep the eyes of the world on my extravaganzas—avoiding eye contact with the poor and the thirsty. I have my own hunger and desires that keep flaring up like red neon lights. And how do I fill the hole in my stomach when I have the urge to buy, and I have no money to pay my credit cards? Like a repentant sinner who won't repent, I'll spend more money and time shopping for the new and sassy—distracting the mind—consuming the time. (2011, p. 25)

Moving frenetically from image to image, the subtle shift of “expenditures” to “splendiferous” to “splendid” drives the narrative forward, plunging the reader deep into the consumptive frenzy. As readers, we feel the rush and the urge to buy! Buy! BUY! Yet, just as quickly, and with similar urgency, the tone shifts, making us cognizant of the trap. The assertive, penetrative language of fucking and filling holes (of experience but also of hunger) inevitably brings to mind connotations of frantic, passionate sexual encounters—encounters, however, that should be understood as fleeting in that they leave us feeling less, not more.

Shopping, like casual sex, becomes a feeble attempt to stave off the advancing reality of aging, economic insecurity, and especially loneliness. Nevertheless, this is not just any loneliness, this is an isolation wrought by the rejection of sustained, even uncomfortable, human contact: “Keep the eyes of the world on my extravaganzas—avoiding eye contact with the poor and the thirsty. I have my own hunger and desires that keep flaring up like red neon lights” (p. 25). Throughout, Braschi accentuates hunger and emptiness as being both economic and social while simultaneously lingering painfully on words easily taken for granted: “terrorism” and “fear” but also “new” and “liberty” in order to force her reader to look at them from a dramatically divergent perspective.

This predilection for both drama and divergent perspectives marks the entirety of Giannina Braschi's masterpiece. In the latter half of the novel, through its invocation of Puerto Rico's endless status as a colony, *United States of Banana* redefines liberty in order to indict the US for having usurped and degraded the word, the concept, the *ideal* of freedom. Simultaneously, Braschi's novel is a flag in the ground, a marking of territory that claims lineage with the pantheon of white male writers, all the while decrying and rejecting a marketplace that would force her to write like “a Latina,” or worse, force her to produce the bad writing that marks the “sacred cows” of literature.

Giannina Braschi dares us to read *United States of Banana*, but only on her terms. Want a straightforward plot? Go read what she might describe as a tired, late-in-life García Márquez novel. Want a book that rests comfortably on the small shelf reserved for Latina writers who write in Spanglish? Move along. For as she says,



“originality is going back to the origin and finding an empty chair. Would you gladly sit on it? No thank you. It is empty for a reason. That’s where my ass was. Not where my head is now” (p. 51).

Ultimately, Giannina Braschi’s remarkable *United States of Banana* hinges on a powerful argument. The terror of 9/11 springs from the same well as the terror of a marketplace that threatens us daily with obsolescence, that keeps us running with our heads cut off or that keeps us distracted and shopping in the hopes that we won’t find ourselves the stunned victims of global downsizing. The torture of terrorism is the torture that comes from laboring under constant fear and that is, in turn, part and parcel with the torture of constant consumption—the empty (un)fulfillment of desire through the monotony of online purchases and the vapid consumption of goods instead of ideas. In so doing, Braschi obliges us to pass on the comfortable “empty seat” of willful ignorance in order to grapple with the hypocrisy of our long-held narratives and our long-held oversimplifications.

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