

# perspectives

## Meruane and the Borg

*Debra Castillo*  
*Cornell University*

In some sense this paper is a working through of the story of a failure. I consider myself an excellent teacher but, like most of us, have suffered pedagogical disappointments. I have twice attempted to teach Lina Meruane's brilliant and densely allusive "Tijeretazos" (2000), first in a class on Latino/a literature in my home institution, and again during a visiting stint in California.<sup>1</sup> To my mind, Meruane's highly stylized bicultural and transnational work—which begins with an epigraph from a Joyce Carol Oates story ("How can I live my life without committing an act with a giant scissors") and relies explicitly on a central metaphor drawn from the *Star Trek: Voyager* television series—highlights this hemisphere's increasingly globalized circuits in the production and consumption of culture both high and low while reminding us of the difficulty of drawing the line between "US" and "foreign" versions of US-American studies.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the Chilean- and New York-spiced Spanish of the story, the narrator's memories of her life in Santiago, as well as her alienation from her New York City environment, implicitly point out the challenges to our neat disciplinary models of study, in line with what Saskia Sassen calls the "multiple spatiotemporal (dis)orders" of transnationality (221). The only student, so far, who has been as appreciative as I of this story, is a science-fiction fan from Chile who has lived in New York City. And he was a graduate student, besides, which means he was exposed to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as a kid, and appreciated it later for its philosophical content. In both classrooms, my enthusiasm for the story was met with puzzlement, and efforts to provide the necessary background put me in an awkward and exasperating position similar to someone having to explain the punch line of a joke.

If my students in the US found Meruane puzzling, she is, apparently,

equally hard to categorize in Chile despite repeated efforts to pigeonhole her as a specific sort of feminist experimental writer. The edgy New York Latina quality seems to go totally unnoticed, perhaps because readers in Santiago lack the context necessary to understand it. The relatively short secondary bibliography on her work consistently puts her in a genealogy that begins with Diamela Eltit, and although there are legitimate grounds for comparison, especially with Eltit's later novels where her globalized consciousness is highly developed (I'm thinking of *Cuarto mundo* [1988]), reviewers seldom take this step.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a well-meaning interviewer, who mostly focuses on Meruane's unstable position between two nations, asks her about potential parallels between her work and Eltit's intensely claustrophobic first novel, *Lumpérica* (Dracos); more recently, in a 2006 article in *El Mercurio*, Meruane herself blasts the anonymous cultural reviewer who had satirically called Meruane and several other young Chilean women writers "diamelitas," blind imitators of Eltit's famously complex and highly literary style.

The challenges for comparative inter-American studies of highly bicultural texts are well reflected in this short story and my abbreviated history of Meruane's reception; they include semantic, conceptual, cultural-historical, and disciplinary elements. For students of popular culture, we share an additional challenge: the rapid obsolescence of the body of references that adds dense allusivity to the work we are reading. One of the reasons that classics are classics (universal and for the ages, we often say), is they can be easily cross-referenced with other texts in the small club of mostly white, western men: Joyce's *Ulysses* and Marechal's Adán *Buenosayres* both speak about urban reality, and both reference Homer—that's the classic Greek poet, not Homer Simpson.

Reality check time. We all know who Homer Simpson is, right? And if we all are familiar with this long-running TV series, what does it say about the penetration of US cultural artifacts into the rest of the world, such that they become the very definition of universal popular culture (as opposed to, for instance, "cultura popular", which always seems to have a localist tinge)?

If for Meruane, in general, "literatura es esencialmente un estado de incomodidad" (Dracos), it would still be fair to say that the kinds of intellectual demands made by "Tijeretazos" are more specific than this statement of authorial intent to unsettle her reader would suggest. My students' puzzlement and the Chilean reviewers' responses to Meruane's work reminded me of other legendary cross-cultural missteps: Cuban-American Dolores Prida's one act play, "Coser y cantar", a highly successful staple of New York's Repertorio Español, bombed in Puerto Rico, where the audience found it incomprehensible. Mexican-American Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*, brought to Broadway after popular acclaim in Los Angeles, closed almost immediately after very disappointing attendance. The world shrinks, but communication does not

always expand, and, sadly enough, we Latin Americanists are not always prepared to grapple with the real consequences of taking seriously the work of this transnational literary generation that has advanced so quickly and so far beyond the range of our critical parameters, so we resort (I've done it too) to astonishment and the reiteration of clichés.

In *The New American Studies*, John Carlos Rowe perceptively notes that “often what US specialists in American Studies overlook is our tendency to universalize our own interests and to appeal, however unconsciously, to our own ‘nativist expertise’ as implicated in a larger agenda of cultural imperialism.” He continues: “the border dividing ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ versions of American Studies is increasingly difficult to draw” (55), and, I would argue, the same is true of the writer who is the object of this study, as well as other transnational and immigrant authors like her who continually challenge narrowly-conceived, identitarian national boundaries. A more appropriate response to this work comes down to what Haun Saussy calls “the politics of the adverb”, an intense focus on *how* we read (23), in this case, not solely of/from imperialist USA, but of/from the commodity “America” read transnationally, as a discursive nexus for cultural flow.

This politics of the adverb opens out, as both Rowe and Saussy warn us, onto a theoretical horizon with strong institutional implications, including—in this country—rising to the challenge of the immense practical problems of rethinking university organization and curricular structure. Local American Studies, suggests Rowe, need to be reconsidered in the global perspective, an imperative made even more salient in the post 9/11 regime, equal parts terrorist-threat codes and Walmart consumerism. “America,” in this context, is both historical/geographical and virtual/viral. This is very much the case for Djelal Kadir, who claims that “the global repercussiveness of America makes it imperative for us Americanists to be international Americanists, to look at and examine America not only on a national scale, and not only on a hemispheric and transnational scale, but also on a global scale, Failing this, [we serve] as unwitting instruments of nationalist unilateralism, exceptionalism and incomparability” (26).

It has long been noted that the rhetoric of US exceptionalism, including its early manifestations in the hemispheric watchdog language of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, have typically cloaked imperialism in a vehement disavowal of empire (Kaplan 3). Unsurprisingly, this dominant political mode closely aligns itself with an insufficiently examined and deeply engrained intellectual practice, even when those intellectual positions seem to reject imperialist ideologies. From the vantage of empire's others, what scholars have in recent years increasingly critiqued as “Theory” writ large—post-Enlightenment Euro-American high theory—reveals its unstated underpinnings in a curious

local practice that has for far too long confounded itself with a universalizing ideological perspective. In this respect, the most salient theoretical turn from within the empire in recent years is to learn from the others formerly excluded from this politics and from this theoretical discourse, to turn to the adverbial, the viral, to theory writ small, with a focus on transactions and unresolved transcultural confrontations, double consciousness, and pluriversality.

Walter D. Mignolo calls this resistant theoretical project “border thinking,” and in his *Local Histories/Global Designs* makes a radical proposition about the future of academic work, suggesting that if the ideal concept of the university was formerly grounded in the values of reason, culture, excellence and expertise, the university of the future “shall be envisioned in which the humanities will be rearticulated on a critique of knowledge and cultural practices” (xii). In a more recent elaboration of this concept with Madina Tlostanova, the authors begin from the premise that “the modern foundation of knowledge is territorial and imperial” (205), and explicitly articulate border theory as emerging from and responding to the violence inherent in this longstanding epistemological stance. Border thinking, they argue, “brings to the foreground different kinds of theoretical actors and principles of knowledge that displace European modernity,” adding that, “it also moves away from the post-colonial toward the decolonial, shifting to the geo- and body-politics of knowledge” (206-7).

While theorizing from the body has long been at the center of feminist and gender studies, Mignolo and Tlostanova emphasize politics rather than the body in their elaboration. To fill this gap we need to turn elsewhere. Donna Haraway has long been famous for framing an alternative border-transgressing project in her explicitly socialist-feminist “Cyborg Manifesto.” Like Mignolo’s border theorist in her pluriversal analytic, Haraway’s cyborg is nevertheless a resident of a more blasted and antihumanist border zone than Mignolo’s, willfully locating her thought experiments along boundaries that have come to seem foreign and dysfunctional. Haraway writes: “by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. This cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (150), and later, “the cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code” (163). In her elaboration of this “ironic political myth” (149), Haraway promotes feminist science fiction authors like Octavia Butler, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree Jr. as the “theorists for cyborgs” (174). Their works serve as a particularly congenial genre for her playful analysis, in that speculative science fiction offers a model for simulation without nostalgia, privileging extreme versions of diasporic figures in disarticulated worlds.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, while Mignolo focuses on epistemology (though with a recent turn to biopolitics), Haraway's biologically inspired theory hinges on ontology (though attentive to transcoding of language); Mignolo's examples come from philosophy and high culture, Haraway's from technology and popular culture. Both find that their theoretical positions resonate with prominent Chicana thinkers (Anzaldúa in Mignolo's case; Saldívar and Moraga in Haraway's). Despite his avowed interest in bodies, Mignolo has nothing to say about gender or sexuality, and pays little attention to race; for Haraway the feminist category of sister outsider is critical, but queer ontologies have little significance in her text. To these rather abstract considerations, Rowe and Saussy would add a reminder of the academic institutional parameters that shape the conditions of intellectual exchange.



Figure 1: *Soldier in Iraq* (left). Figure 2: *Hugh of the Borg* (center).  
Figure 3: *Edward Scissorhands* (right).

Popular culture provides another vector for thinking about cyborg bodies and border thinking. There is an uncanny similarity between photographs of US soldiers in Iraq, images of the Borg collective from the *Star Trek* series, and Johnny Depp's punked-up and profoundly misunderstood antihero Edward Scissorhands, from the movie with the same title (see fig. 1, 2, 3).

All three of these disturbingly antihumanist figures inhabit a cultural boundary between native and foreign, all reference the violence that seems an inherent consequence of such intimate contact zones. Because Meruane's story explicitly references the second of these figures (though it reminds us uncannily of the third and anticipates the first), I will pause a bit to discuss the Borg.

An eminently rational culture, the Borg expand their influence and numbers through assimilation rather than reproduction.<sup>5</sup> They are, then, perfectly predatory since their survival as a collective can only occur by means of the continual violent extinction of other cultures. The bodies of these other peoples are absorbed into the cyborg meld of biology and machine, and their

individuality is submerged in the group mind. This loss of life and culture leaves them entirely indifferent, but they do give warning of their intentions. Before taking over any large, highly developed population, they transmit a standard announcement: “Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated.”

The *Star Trek* scriptwriters have always left the origins of the Borg unclear; fans of the series first hear of them when they already control thousands of planets in the Delta Quadrant. Thus, one of the more fearful qualities of the Borg is that they come from nowhere, they belong nowhere, and exist entirely in the interval of their busy movement between the rich culture they have just obliterated and the equally rich culture they are about to destroy. The Borg are terrifyingly adaptable, and completely singleminded—their only goal is to expand the Borg collective through assimilation of other cultures, and they have no other interests or pursuits whatsoever.

As one perceptive fan writes in an anonymous internet posting, the Borg is the perfect monster for the end-of-the-twentieth-century United States because it so closely reflects our projection of the not-us, while at the same time mirroring our deepest fears about US national identity: “the Borg represent more than our fear and loathing of large, organized groups. Their horrible sameness may reflect a growing disquiet over the whole issue of the American ‘melting pot,’ the loss of cultural heritage, the continuing debate over political correctness, . . . their complete abandonment of their racial ‘origins’” (“The Borg: the enemy or us?”). By flanking the image of the Borg unit with the US trooper on one side (fig. 1) and Edward Scissorhands on the other (fig. 3), I am suggesting not just a visual homology, but also the tracings of a cultural continuum that returns obsessively to the hardened/obscured/partially deconstructed/non-reproductive body (especially the male body) as a familiar metaphor for our time. Furthermore, the fact that this hardened male body has blurred all signs of race as well as culture, makes it extraordinarily apt—in a neoconservative political climate—as the rejected sign of our repressed desires.

### **Resistance Is Futile: The Insula**

Meruane’s short story follows the onomatopoeically named Zec as she traverses the “insula” (a word that necessarily evokes Sancho Panza) of Manhattan from the tropical uptown Washington Heights elevator on the Red line at 191st street station<sup>6</sup> to the NYU hospital near cold, grey Washington Square. She meditates on her previous experience in the hospital, where, instead of treating her vaginal infection, she is certain that “le habían metido el mal al cuerpo” (341-2), and she is convinced that since that moment the nanites have been reproducing, turning her into a Borg—“había sido *asimilada* en ese

*voyager*” (342). She calms herself on her trip downtown with the “chaschás” of a scissors she surreptitiously opens and closes; on her arrival at the hospital she goes up to the wards. The story ends with her cutting life support tubes, which she imagines are the service conduits of a Borg ship: “entraría a las salas silenciosamente, salas largas como laboratorios, donde otros como antes ella, niños todavía, estaban siendo asimilados, y en una nada, sacó las *sissors* y fue cánula a cánula, despilfarrando, chaschás” (344).

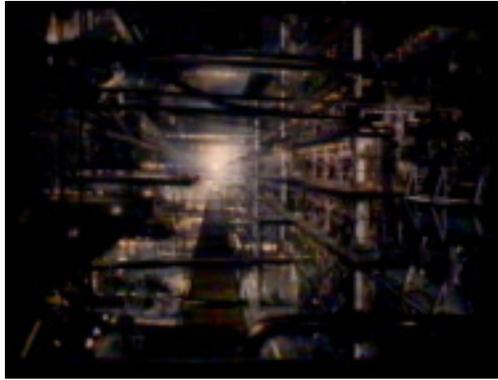


Figure 4: *Borg Cube Interior*.

The seeming circularity of the trip—Washington Heights to Washington Square—belies the highly allusive quality of this journey, which, while accurately described in terms of Manhattan geography, is also heavily symbolic. Zec is wary of “metaforones como los de su padrastro” (342), but the term seems accurate to describe the highly wrought and overdetermined quality of the prose in this story. Zec’s world, her correlative to Sancho Panza’s *ínsula Barataria*, is circumscribed by “Washington,” and the implications of that name include the familiar metonymy of using the name of the first US president (and national capital) as a shorthand for US national politics. There are fundamental instabilities to this Washington, however. Ironically, the heights are defined by an elevator that provides access to Manhattan’s deepest subway station, at 180 feet below street level (“191st street”); going downtown will paradoxically mean going up (into one of the “torreones,” the tall buildings of the medical complex). The trip also involves traveling from the northern tropics of the Dominican community to the cold, grey, Caucasian (Borg) South—again, an accurate depiction of Manhattan demography but one that cleverly and subtly takes advantage of a southern-hemispheric bias in geographical perception, wherein the tropical landscapes are comfortably and normatively located in the North, and the frozen icelands of the Pole are the penguin-inhabited South rather than Santa Claus’ North.

Knowledge, as we have already noted with reference to Mignolo and Tlostanova, is territorial and imperial, and the epistemological system in this story involves the metaphorical appropriation of the *ínsula* Manhattan through the purposeful quest of the Chilean explorer, resulting in her unstable reading of Washington. Furthermore, Manhattan is already overlaid with memories of another *ínsula*, the “ínsula mapochina” of Santiago de Chile, and Zec’s shaky appropriation of the Manhattan geography functions by antinomy with respect to this other insular space. Manhattan, in the first instance, is understood by what it is not: “una isla sin palmas ni cordillera de la costa, una isla sin volcanes ni ríos sucios como el del Mapocho” (339). Reingard Nethersole may help us theorize this cultural sleight of hand. She notes that each of us inevitably speaks from within a certain, differentially defined repository of knowledge, and that the ability to speak across and between two or more knowledge systems relates to their degree of convergence, which often is defined as the ability to share vocabulary and structures of organization. The others who inhabit the margins of the system “break up the grammaticality of the system that draws attention to, but cannot give a representation of, their own agrammaticality and the imperial violence of grammar as the criterion of rational discourse.” She conceptualizes this operation through the figure of the interval, “a space of *ontological* and *epistemological* interdependency [...] and as a generator of, rather than as (grammatical) limit for, thought” (52). The interval, then, is a metaphor for the temporal relations of distance, pause, succession, duration (drawing from music), as well as the spatial concept of in-between (drawing from the Latin *intervallum*, a site between fortifications). This overlay of the musical concept of the interval with the *intervallum*, rhythm and the fortification, reminds her reader that the in-between is always a hazardous space, though sonically coherent (54).

Strikingly, the particular interval in this story coincides with a highly relevant historical palimpsest. Washington Heights gets its name from Fort Washington, a protective fortification built by the Continental Army during the US Revolutionary War, and Washington Square was originally the site of a burial ground. Zec does not acknowledge this historical substratum, but it neatly defines her trajectory as an immigrant subject-in-process (of assimilation) between the two endpoints marking this interval. Her subjectivity, limited and contingent, extends only insofar as she is traveling between these two Washingtons and is acknowledged by inhabitants of this space. Yet, even this partial and problematic subjectivity is burdened by an inexorable process of loss, the leaching away of her mysterious previous life in Santiago—the one alluded to as enjoyed before “el accidente aquel” (339)—the prehistory preceding her assimilation to the Borg collective.<sup>7</sup> The New York doctor diagnoses her problem: “hablaba de *fungi*, de *yist*,” and the tearful girl imagines

mushrooms and cauliflowers growing between her legs—a terrible fate, but at least an organic one, something she sees as perhaps a natural result of her masturbatory practices. The unwanted alternative to her overly vegetative self—injection with Borg nanites—follows upon a feverishly imagined simulacrum of a medical rape with an impersonal, latex-gloved finger (342). The consequence of this medical intervention, of course, must be to abandon metaphors altogether and turn into a coldly rational Borg soldier.

Like many highly regarded transnational perspectives on the imperial other and like the body of narrative produced by minorities within the US, Meruane's outlook tends to be overdetermined and overcharged. In this sense, her story serves as a veiled echo of other tales of displaced peoples and of refugees, and it reminds us that for many stateless peoples "home-land," the imaginary *ínsula* of origin, is the interval itself, which defines the condition of certain (exotic) ethnicities. Washington Heights is frequently referred to these days as "Dominican Heights" because of its large concentration of "Dominicanyorks," and the story recalls the more general displacement from one homeland to another of exiles and refugees (Dominican, Mapuche, Zulu), where territory is insecure, in dispute, and inaccessible.

The question almost inevitably arises, then, as to what kind of agency, if any, is Meruane proposing here? It clearly has something to do with the relation of affect and the cybernetic imaginary. Within the logic of her own construction of this interval, Zec recognizes that resistance is futile, but nonetheless chooses to utilize her remaining shreds of individuality to short-circuit the reproduction of more Borg units from helpless children, a rational and coldblooded decision. Yet, as any *Star Trek* viewer knows, incoherence and madness rapidly descend upon Borg units isolated from the collective—as a solitary unit, Zec is already teetering on the cusp between assimilation and death. This cyborg body overcharged with anxiety leads only to annihilation. In the larger context of the traversal between the Chilean *ínsula* and the US *ínsula*, and within Manhattan, from Washington to Washington, Meruane's critique of globalized US imperial pressures is patent.

Yet, unlike many of the more familiar and celebrated versions of anti-US sentiment, which rest upon a shared and clichéd indignation, Meruane's reminder is that cutting the cables is no solution. Resistance is futile, the other is already (if imperfectly) assimilated within the globalized collective, and madness is not effective as a rational alternative. The virulent transnational leveling of cultures will continue to reproduce itself, and, just as allusions to US cultural forms like Joyce Carol Oates and the Borg overwhelm references to *Don Quixote* in this story, it follows from these plot points that the single most pertinent role of the transnational intellectual in the early 21st century is to announce the collective self-annihilation of her historical

cultural identity. This is an aesthetic concern, and if it has ethical implications, they are reduced to a logic of abstraction while surveying/occupying the hospital space, the metaphor of a US globalized culture as Borg ship, of the homeland as one more lost and assimilated member of the collective.

Let us pause here briefly to remind ourselves of a comparative American Studies perspective on this claustrophobic story. As I noted earlier, like all the best and most terrifying monsters, the Borg are fearful not because they are alien, but because they are, in some intimate sense, recognizably us. Their lack of a clear origin except in the assimilated bodies of conquered peoples perversely reminds us of the traditional image of US national identity as mobile and adaptive. In setting her story in the most cosmopolitan city of the United States, and in using the encounters with a wide range of city dwellers on Zec's trip downtown to survey this rich diversity, Meruane reminds us of this point. At the same time, ironically, "New" York, retains echoes of a not-so-distant colonial nostalgic usage (the anchoring with Washington and the Revolutionary War emphasizes this point) when homeland was still defined as elsewhere, in Europe, and local identity merely a secondary and imperfect simulacrum. In her presidential address to the American Studies Association, Amy Kaplan would go even further. "Homeland," she argues, is "a recent addition to the lexicon of US nationalism, which gained currency along with empire, after 9/11, in the concept of homeland security. If empire insists on a borderless world, where the United States can exercise its power without limits, the notion of homeland tries to shore up those boundaries" (8).

The twin towers were still standing when Meruane published her story, but the fable of Zec's terrorist scissors is almost unbearably prescient, foreshadowing the complex intertwinings of homeland and empire that have sent our own Borg soldiers into the Middle East, the heart of a famous ancient empire, to singlemindedly cut violent swathes through other confusing and complex understandings of culture and territory.

### **You Will Be Assimilated: Translation**

If "resistance is futile" points most strongly to the inevitability of violence, and its consequent legitimation in an imperial enterprise, "you will be assimilated" more strongly speaks to the individual's fear of loss of culture, hence loss of self. Mignolo and Tlostanova bring together epistemology and ontology in their statement that "epistemology is woven into language [...]. And languages are not something human beings *have* but they are part of what human beings *are*. As such, languages are embedded in the body [...]" (207). Following this line of argument, we might say that the "mal" that has been injected into Zec's body is primarily a linguistic one—not the diagnosis that she suffers from an

infection by “fungi, yist,” but the secondary infection by the alien sounds of the English terms. In Zec’s world the sounds of English are a crucial marker of the assimilating process, but in the context of the story also represent her distance from full incorporation into this alien life, since this foreign language is not yet stably embedded in her body.

Variations on these jarring sounds accompany her on her journey downtown; invading her ears in a series of greetings and courtesy phrases. The relatively meaningless phrases appear on the page as distorted through Zec’s Spanish: “Gud mornin leidis” [...] “Men, jau yur duin” (339) [...] “Java gud dei, pip!” (340) [...] “Dount ster at gim, joni” (343). There is a kind of transient and minimalist community created in these words which the reader (other beings already assimilated into the Borg collective) can be expected to understand and find comforting as part of the background murmur of social interaction. Zec, however, does not comprehend them, or does not admit she understands, staving off further linkages with the metaphorical *chas chas* of her scissors. And yet, of course, the scissors, that metallic appendage, is already the first sign of the human–machine meld, the cyborg limb that in her case replaces both mouth and hand.

At the same time, the reader will immediately note that Zec’s subway ride, her brief solo incursion into the US milieu, exposes her to a wide range of people that is anything but homogeneous. She specifically encounters African Americans, Dominicanyorks, and Caucasians, with professions ranging from elevator operator to physician. Her subway car is occupied by legendary beings like the Mexican mythic figure, *la Llorona*, sitting on the floor in the corner and weeping; walking down the street she encounters a locally famous homeless person, the birdman. She is not fooled. The Borg, as she well knows, are an always already mixed collective, hybridized, the product of multiple galactic encounters with different races and cultures. What defines them is not their original race or culture, but the pasty grey complexion, the mix of human and machine, the lack of individuality, the drive to assimilate others.

The birdman is the one person she wants to dialogue with, so she attempts to do so in his own language, through the *chas chas* of her scissors, what she calls the “pájaro agazapado” (340) in her pocket. The birdman pays her no attention, and Zec decides his disinterest in, or inability to communicate, is the result of his assimilation process: “tal vez, maldito borg, te lavaron la memoria en el torreón, y Zec se cansó de seguirlo, y se detuvo y le dijo, a grito pelado, porque nadie le entendía, nadie le prestaba atención siquiera: de todos modos no tienes pico, pajarraco, y no vas a poder defenderte a picotazos la próxima vez, oíste? Yo en cambio tengo mis tijeras” (343).

This explosive outburst is one of only two statements Zec makes orally in the present tense of the story, and it is followed almost immediately by the

second. In her reaction to the birdman, Zec uses Spanish, a language which (foolishly, given the reality of New York) she assumes no one will understand, and her use of this supposedly incomprehensible language frees her to express herself fully and honestly. In the second instance, Zec uses English, and misdirection. She enters the hospital and utters the alien sounds “am lukiŋ for mai moder, sic, verisic” (343), hence gaining access to the hospital wards, where she is able to complete her liberating mission.

Reading Meruane’s “Tijeretazos” within the US literary tradition reminds us that the United States was never monolingual. Likewise, her use of English within her mostly Spanish text counters US monolingual literary expectations, especially in polyglot New York City. At the same time, while the reader is expected to be able to decode the various linguistic and cultural references within the story, for the character herself, the jostling of languages does not give rise to mutual comprehension, but rather, an awareness of cultural incommensurability. There is no translation for the phrases Zec hears on her subway trip, and the English in the text appears already deformed. This is quite the opposite of the romantic vision of translation, and points out that which is inadequate, untranslated, mistranslated, unheard, misunderstood, ignored. Paradoxically, the text underlines the imperative to learn English, to forget the past and assimilate to the US through use of the language of empire. One of the few translations in the text is a literal one, where a well-known landmark becomes defamiliarized as “el edificio ‘estado del imperio.’” Zec is not convinced, but “el tío toca-que-te-toca [...] insistía en traducirle lo intraducible” (343).

In the larger sense already alluded to, Meruane highlights the inadequacy of language when it slips across borders, an inadequacy which, turned on its head, is also an opportunity for a fresh vision: the Empire State Building becomes an objective correlative of the state of the empire. In this sense, as in others, her story makes common cause with Nethersole’s discussion of “agrammaticality.” Breaking up the grammar of empire reminds us that language itself is the site of resistance as well as the point of submission/assimilation. There is a broken and syncopated rhythm to this inflection of one language with the other in Meruane’s story, and that interval is further marked out in percussive effects, with the repeating onomatopoeic sounds in the text: the “tac tac” of subway trains, the *chas chas* of scissors.

Dark humor is a familiar quality in Meruane’s other narratives as well as in this short story, and here it is used to complex purposes, to recall and metaphorize the dark side of globalization. Perhaps that is why the story seems so much like an elaborate joke, and why my students were not wholly receptive to the punch line. At the same time, as I have been at pains to suggest in this reading of her story, US-based Americanists, in the classroom and out of it,



live my life without committing an act with a giant scissors?” (85). It is almost certainly overreading to see in Meruane’s citation a sly allusion to the grey Borg complexion, but the coincidence is striking.

3. In addition to the work cited in this paragraph, see also Epple, who—in all fairness—has a more nuanced reading of her novels, although his discussion is brief, since the article does not focus exclusively on Meruane.

4. Haraway’s analysis includes special praise for Vonda McIntyre, whose 1983 novel *Supertluminal* helps her think about the relation between cyborgs and monsters. McIntyre, as Haraway notes, was also one of the more prominent and prolific writers in the original *Star Trek* series (179-180).

5. I confess I have long been a fan of the series, and comments in this paragraph come from too many hours watching *TNG* with my children. For readers who would like a quick tutorial, the Star Trek online universe is understandably vast. Two excellent sites for the newcomer are the official Paramount/CBS site at <http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/index.html> and the very complete, hyperlinked wiki fansite, “Memory Alpha”: <http://memory-alpha.org/en/wiki/Portal:Main>. The coffee table book, *The Star Trek Encyclopedia* remains a standard reference work.

6. Zec calls it “la guan nainti” (341).

7. It is the vague reference to this accident, after which Zec never removes her hands from her pockets, compulsively opening and closing her purloined scissors, that most forcefully brings to mind the image of Edward Scissorhands.

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