Introduction
Translation is a complex matter of transferring not only linguistic forms, but also denotative meanings and style. Translation loses the vitality of the source text if it merely finds equivalencies for source words in a target language. Matters of form must be addressed, especially in poetry, but also in prose and drama. The style of an author, if misunderstood, can wreak havoc on a translation. For instance, failing to understand a pun or a joke in the source language, or failing to recognize a broadly ironic attitude can drastically reduce a translation's validity and interest. Perceptions of personality can even play a role. Tess Gallagher recounts what happened when translator François Lasquin saw a photograph of Raymond Carver. Lasquin had completed the translation of one volume of Carver’s work before he saw the photograph, and he told Gallagher that he “looked at the face” and knew he “had made a terrible mistake” (Gallagher 105). Lasquin continued, “I had translated the book in a rather ironic, skeptical tone and the man before me, I realized at once, would never set himself above his characters” (Gallagher 105). Even with sensitivity to these issues, the translator still must make decisions about whether to shape the target language to match the source language or attempt to make the source language fit into the target language. The translator has to judge how much one can or should alter the languages to achieve any goal. The ability to comprehend culturally-bound denotative and connotative meanings in a language and transfer them effectively to another language and readership is an art.

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1 An abbreviated version of this paper was delivered at the American Comparative Literature Association Annual Conference, Austin, TX, March 28, 1998.
In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin posits an important question: “Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?” (71) If so, then what is the task of a translator? Should the translation be made absolutely understandable or intelligible to the target audience? What if there are elements which are indeed untranslatable? Are there some texts which cannot – or perhaps should not – be translated? Benjamin states that the task of the translator “consists in finding that intended effect (Intention) upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (77). While some matters of word choice and other linguistic elements may be easily solved, the issue of cultural references greatly affects the possibility of Benjamin’s echo.

A number of translator-scholars have tackled issues of translating texts between disparate cultures. For Umberto Eco, this is the core issue of translation. As he states, “translation is always a shift, not between two languages, but between two cultures” (Eco 17). Susan Bassnett surveys problems of language (in)equivalence, which often turn up while dealing with idiomatic expressions or grammatical incompatibilities (23-37). Problems of regionalisms, double entendres and ambiguities should be anticipated (Rabassa 1991:39). Lawrence Venuti noted that translation is often “regarded with suspicion” because it changes “linguistic and cultural values” of the work in order to make it intelligible to another non-native audience (1998:67). Venuti has also remarked that the “ethnocentric violence of translation is inevitable” since translation itself involves the “reduction, exclusion and inscription” of foreign texts, cultures, and languages (1995:310). Suzanne Jill Levine has tackled the “untranslatability” of puns, slang, parodies and allusions in her many translations of Cuban, Chilean, Argentinean and Mexican writers. Like many translators of "living" texts, Levine has often collaborated with the original authors (see Levine 1989; 1991; 1992). These collaborative efforts have greatly affected the
techniques of translating cultural and linguistic aspects present in the originals into the target language and culture. This paper will address some of the choices made by Levine in Heartbreak Tango, her collaborative translation of Manuel Puig's Boquitas pintadas.

Translating Across Cultures

Translation perhaps is best viewed as a transmutation or trans-representation of a text and all it carries with it into a new environment. Gregory Rabassa, in pointing out that translations should strive to "approach" the original rather than be equivalent to it, has suggested that translators must create a new metaphor to fit the old (1989:2-3). This is easier said than done. Rabassa offers an excellent example of a problem text: Shakespeare's "A drum! A drum! Macbeth doth come" would be literally rendered into French as "Un tambour! Un tambour! Macbeth vient" (1989:2-3). If the translator privileges rhyme and meter, then a different instrument will have to be substituted, or perhaps an entirely different method of announcing Macbeth will need to be introduced. If the drum is considered important for any historical or social reasons, or for cultural context, rhyme and meter must then be sacrificed. The translator is faced with taking the responsibility for determining what is most crucial.

Susan Bassnett launches her study of translation with issues of language and culture, reminding us that the simplest words (hello, for example) can be the most difficult to translate due to usage and cultural context (16-18). Greetings are a major source of miscommunication, mostly because their meaning is defined within a specific context. Mary Snell-Hornby recounts her own troubles during a trip to India: she did not realize she was being greeted formulaically and answered the opening question of "Where are you going?" literally, instead of with the proper response, "Just up there" (91). Her responses ("to the bus station," "off to the bazaar") elicited reactions ranging
from blank stares to indignant looks; she was chagrined by her mistake but had no idea what she had done wrong (91).

Problems with ignorance of languages pose a threat to those who translate texts between cultures. Since language is an integral part of cultural expression, a translator must be fluent in both (not only languages but also cultures). Remember that Snell-Hornby's problem was not a lack of competence in the language -- it was a failure to recognize formulaic greetings.

Always to be counted on for a humorous example, Rabassa addresses a lighter side of language incompatibility: sexual references. While translating Jorge Amado's *Tocaia Grande*, Rabassa notes that in translating a sexual term, he had to begin repeating himself after seven or eight tries, "while Jorge went merrily along through fifteen or sixteen versions, all good, common usage in Bahia" (1991:43). Rabassa decides to "stick to translation in this case and leave interpretation to the anthropologists" (43). This is funny, but there is a more serious point here. We should remember that it is too easy to dismiss problems of interpretation when the topic is sexually, politically, or religiously controversial, even moving into taboo areas. These are exactly the cases which require the most attention to interpretation, in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings and to best transmit meaning and style.

As translators attempt to transform a culture or a text into a document for sharing with a new audience, they must consider a variety of viewpoints. Snell-Hornby addresses the importance of perspective -- "the viewpoint of the speaker, narrator or reader in terms of culture, attitude, time and place" (97-8). As translators negotiate viewpoints of the narrator and perhaps the author, along with their own readings and projected readings for an audience, a number of decisions are made which can influence a myriad of people, perhaps negatively. Lourdes Martinez-Echazabal questions the authority of translators and editors who inscribe a text which represents or generalizes a single
person or a whole culture, urging a consideration of whether anyone can reach a decision about "truth" (textual or otherwise) and produce a translation which will remain viable for all time and for all people (59). Piotr Kwiecinski’s analysis of the translations of English language television shows and news magazines into Polish illustrates the aforementioned positions of Martinez-Echazabal and Venuti. Kwiecinski notes that the standard in Polish television is to leave in cultural references, such as Oprah and Denny’s, in episodes of sitcoms, meaning that the accompanying laugh tracks leave native Poles thoroughly confused (192-193). Kwiecinski points out easy alternatives that would have removed the specific references but preserved the humor of the dialogue.

**Levine as "Subversive Scribe"**

In addition to her translations, Suzanne Levine has also written various essays and has written a book called “The Subsversive Scribe.” She views translation as a process of transporting meaning and as a critical reading of a text (1991:xiv, 9). She views her own practice as political, as giving a voice to "the `other' America, alienated from the United States by a tortuous political history" (1991:xiv). She also views her work as a service to English speakers who are ignorant of other cultures (1991:xiv). Levine places herself in the role of bringing the "Other" back home, but to do this effectively, one must understand the self as well as the other. My questions lie in whether Levine fully understands her target audience will be examined below.

Levine has most often chosen to translate works riddled with puns and alliteration. She finds writers like Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, and Reinaldo Arenas to be more marginal, more dissident than writers commonly perceived as politically dissident, such as Mario Vargas Llosa (1992:79). While language can act as a means of expressing, or even as writing against
political realities, language itself can be a political act. The use of subversive wordplay is indeed as rebellious as an explicitly political piece of writing.

In an essay about translating Cabrera Infante’s *Habana para un infante difunto*, Levine discusses the search for "the similar in the dissimilar, where wordplay is inscribed in the language of the translation and yet brings to life the language of the original" (1992:76). The translation, which is entitled *Infante's Inferno*, includes a scene in which two characters named Olga and Branly are discussing the pet goldfish.

Olga and Branly's conversation is filled with puns and alliterative wordplay. For instance, Olga refers to the fish as "peces pecadores," or in the English, "fiendish fish." Branly asks the fishes' names and learns they are Debussy and Ravel. Branly wonders about whether they are from the impressionist school of fish. Mention of "flaxen scales" brings on a pun on Algas-Olgas, translated as Algae-Olgae (the English pun doesn't work as well -- for one reason, it requires knowledge of Latin plural forms, and for another, the English especially suffers in terms of sound). The works of Debussy and Ravel also offer Cabrera Infante fodder: Debussy is credited with *La mer* while Ravel is credited with *La pavana para un gracioso difunto*, or in English: *Pavane for a dead punster*. Branly gets the last "wordfish" by supposing that Debussy will contribute *L'apres-midi d'un poisson d'or* (which remains in French in both the Spanish and English versions).

Levine alters quite a bit of the wordplay in the translation. For instance, she embellishes having the last word into having the "last wordfish" and creates the "dead punster" counterpart for the pun on *Pavane pour un infante difunte*. Cabrera Infante's "gracioso difunte" is closer to "grateful dead," a phrase which Levine may have wanted to avoid using with an American
This is an interesting example because it reminds us that the translation itself cannot be blamed if these puns and allusions are missed or misunderstood. The puns and allusions involving Debussy and Ravel require some knowledge of classical music. In this case, the puns and allusions are not dependent primarily on an understanding of anything particularly Cuban or anything related to the Spanish language. Perhaps these puns could even be viewed as class-bound, which raises a different set of issues. However, Cabrera Infante discusses the fact that Debussy "has had a striking influence on Cuban popular music...popular music, not classy classical or false folklore..." (1984: 110). Luckily, Cabrera Infante does talk about the significance of Debussy within his text. If he had not done so, though, the translator would have faced a tough dilemma of deciding how to explain this to an audience which has not experienced Debussy through the popular realm, and would probably never expect to.

Although many of her approaches and choices are solid and thoughtful, her work with Manuel Puig's *Boquitas pintadas* deserves closer attention. *Boquitas pintadas* is subtitled as "a serial" and employs a variety of texts, including letters and pages from memo books, as well as unusual spacing and typography. Levine makes certain decisions that undermine the meaning of the original work and which illuminate her assumptions about her target audience. Although she made these decisions in consultation with Puig, she has done a certain violence to the text in the name of cultural understanding.

My major area of concern is the epigraphs, which are all completely changed. Puig's original epigraphs are quotes from tango lyrics. These could be translated into English and be

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2 Since she does not discuss her choices in the essay, I can only speculate about avoiding the reference to the Grateful Dead. Perhaps she thought "dead punster" was a good match for "infante difunte" (if one might translate it as "dead youngster.")
meaningful, but Levine alters them all. While her selections do evoke popular culture in the spirit of Puig's epigraphs, one may question whether the changes needed to be made or add a great deal to the meaning.

When one examines the epigraphs, one may notice that many of Puig's epigraphs are taken from the same source. In fact, fourteen of his sixteen chapters (called "episodes") have an Alfredo le Pera lyric as an epigraph. It is not clear whether Levine considered the effect of removing that, nor is it entirely clear why she felt the le Pera quotes were inappropriate.

As discussed in *The Subversive Scribe*, the tango itself lies at the core of many of her decisions. Levine is correct to posit that a non-Argentinean audience may not have the understanding of the tango that Puig's original target audience would likely have. However, Levine invokes the tango in her translation's title, and also changes some epigraphs into other tango lyrics. For instance, Levine discards the le Pera lyric which serves as the epigraph for the first chapter, but replaces it with a longer excerpt of a tango lyric by Manzi.

Puig's epigraph reads:

\[ \text{Era ... para mí la vida entera ... (he/she was my whole life)} \]

Levine's substitution is credited to H. Manzi, from the tango called "His Voice."

\[ \text{The shadows on the dance floor,} \\
\text{this tango brings sad memories to mind,} \\
\text{let us dance and think no more} \\
\text{while my satin dress has a chance} \\
\text{to shine like a tear shines.} \]

If one agrees with Levine that the audience does not know or is incapable of understanding Alfred le Pera's tangos, then one may wonder why Levine feels Manzi would resonate. The "sad memories" of the Manzi lyric certainly fit in thematically with the events of the chapter, but the original le Pera lyric also fits the scenario. In her commentary, Levine states that literal
translations of such "poetic clichés" would "ring hollow" (1991:127). What is left unclear is whether she finds the line to be poetically cliched in Spanish as well. This might be an insight to her motivations.

Another puzzling use of tango comes in Levine's thirteenth epigraph, which is a longer excerpt from the same tango Puig uses for chapter four. If she is attempting to shift the references into the target sensibilities, then all reference to tango should be eliminated or transformed. If she is willing to use le Pera lyrics, and extensively hunt for additional tango lyrics to add, then why not retain and translate Puig's originals?

Puig's original epigraphs will be "foreign" to the US audience, but the lyrics do translate and do carry meaning into the episode. The particular epigraphs she changes may not be so culturally remote as to be unintelligible (in the way Donald Keene discusses in Landscapes and Portraits). The pair of epigraphs from chapter three are also worth examining.

Puig's epigraph, another from Alfredo le Pera reads:

Deliciosas criaturas perfumadas,  
quiero el beso de sus boquitas pintadas ...  

(literal translation: Delicious perfumed creatures, I want a kiss from your painted lips)

Levine's substitution is from the poster for the movie Red Dust, which starred Jean Harlow and Clark Gable:

She fought with the fury of a tigress for her man!  
He treated her rough -- and she loved it!

In my opinion, Puig's epigraph evokes a softer sense than Levine's substitution. Puig's reference brings to mind a sense of softness, a perfumed, beautiful lady, while Levine conjures up a tough woman who likes it rough. Levine mentions this particular case in her defense of the selection of
substitute epigraphs:

"The solution … was to translate some tango lyrics which were essential to the plot, but to substitute at least half of the epigraph quotation with either taglines from Hollywood movies or Argentine radio commercials … that is, artifacts relevant to the original context but which rang a funny, familiar, exaggerated bell for American readers. The *Red Dust* tagline, for example, glamorizes sexism, machismo, and feminine submissiveness: an appropriate epigraph to episode three, which introduces main male lead Juan Carlos, with whom women are always falling fatally in love." (1989: 39)

A possible problem, though, is that the substitute epigraphs will be just as distant to the American audience. Does she mean to suggest an Argentinean toothpaste ad from the 1930s might be less arcane than the whole genre of tango? Members of the American audience may have seen the movie "Red Dust," but this reference might confuse rather than enlighten. The question that remains: is tango so out-of-reach of American readers? Or perhaps the question is: why does Levine think tango is so far removed from Americans? *Heartbreak Tango* is rather literary fiction, and I would imagine its audience might not be solely comprised of best seller/mass market kinds of readers. So while members of the American reading audience might not be expert in Latin American studies or have read any of the works by tango scholars like Donald Castro, I would posit that anyone reading *Heartbreak Tango* would at least know that the tango is a music and dance form from Latin America, and would probably also have somewhat stereotypical knowledge of it as dramatically slow and lamenting. Translating literature from one culture to another becomes even more problematic when the translator seems to be underestimating the target audience.

It is worth pointing out that the translation was done more than twenty years ago, and tango has had some popular invocations in recent years (e.g., “Scent of a Woman”). But I still stand by
my suppositions about the potential US readership and what they might know.

There is another crucial element of the tango that we need to remember, namely that an Argentinean reader would likely have heard the tango being quoted, and make a certain connection based on the words and music. Levine suggests that the musical allusions also set the tone for each episode (126). I suspect this would be especially true in the case of the epigraph for chapter three. By switching to a movie trailer, though, that whole element of the music is removed. Levine is certainly correct to point out that in Argentina, the tango is like jazz and blues are for US audiences. Yet she dismisses the idea of substituting in lyrics from Billie Holliday as "absurd" because "the original culture would have been completely erased … the translation would have been an imitation." (1989:39).

Many of Levine's substitutions are based on her assumptions about U.S. readers. Her explanation of how the title came to be illustrates these assumptions. Heartbreak tango is a phrase in one of the Manzi tangos she used for her epigraph substitution, and this was chosen for the title because "heartbreak resonates with indigenously North American associations, country and western, Elvis Presley's `Heartbreak Hotel'." Levine states that keeping "tango" in the title marks it as "culturally different" even though the translation makes Puig's humor "intelligible" (1989:44). Levine strives to reproduce the "remote" in an intelligible way. According to Donald Keene, it is important to avoid "infections" when translating remote languages while not sacrificing meaning (325). Keene mentions a version of the Analects that places Confucius at a harpsichord (324). While naming the instrument in Chinese without any explanation might be meaningless to many

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2. Although she again concludes with this “remote but intelligible” idea in the revised edition (1991), she no longer cites Donald Keene as she does in the earlier version (1989).
readers, offering a Western substitute that is chronologically or stylistically inaccurate is equally meaningless. I fear that the logic behind the "Red Dust" epigraph substitution and the assumption that all US readers will identify closely with country-western music veer perilously close to Confucius playing the harpsichord.

Literal translation problems also played a part in the decision about the translation's title. She finds the literal translation of "little painted lips" to sound silly. Plus, as one of her students pointed out, it can suggest a wrong connotation in English -- a "painted lady" might suggest a prostitute (1989:45). Levine has not only decided that US readers are incapable of understanding the concepts of tango, but she has also decided what they can understand. It may be true, though, that many readers will not be any closer to country-western music than to the tango. Also, attitudes toward country-western music in some regions of the US might produce something beyond than the "corny effect" Levine strives for (133). One could question whether Puig really aims for "corny," for her own comments and other scholars' works about Puig and his invocation of popular culture would suggest that "satirical" is a more likely destination.5

Bassnett reminds us that once we agree that "sameness cannot exist," we can (and should) evaluate loss and gain in translation (30). Heartbreak Tango leaves us with some questions: does the reader lose too much of Puig's original? Does the translator replace too much? Can the translation produce a negative gain? Rabassa's advice to "approach" the original rather than producing something equivalent to the original is certainly sound advice, but can perhaps be taken too far. Is there a measurable degree of closeness which keeps a translation from becoming an

3. I think I might lean toward “lipstick kisses” instead of “painted lips.”
5 Puig has been sensitive about his work being labeled as parody, because he does not intend to mock the speech of the lower classes. "The point is that the ordinary speech of these people is already a parody. All I do is record their imitation." (quoted in Levine 1989:35)
adaptation? Do good intentions outweigh the ill effects? In the case of *Boquitas pintadas*, Levine correctly recognizes that a cultural element of the original, namely the tango, may be problematic for outside audiences. In trying to correct that situation, though, Levine ends up offering a translation that may be an enjoyable read for a non-Latin American audience, but may actually make the original less intelligible and more remote.

**Bibliography**


