



## “Here the Sun’s for Real”

The Language and Politics of  
Translating José Eugenio Sánchez

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*The following essay looks at original translations of “underclown” Mexican poet José Eugenio Sánchez to explore the way that attention to postcolonial undercurrents can enrich the reading and translation of world literature.*

**I**n José Eugenio Sánchez’s poem “the day of the guacamayas,” all manner of birds, not to mention cows and the narrator, dress up as guacamayas. Why do they dress up as guacamayas? Because it was the day of the guacamayas. What is a guacamaya? A macaw. And why have I not translated the word *guacamaya* into its convenient US-English counterpart? Because it was the day of the guacamayas. The logic of the poem

is not logical, per se, but predicated on the playful sound and mouthfeel of a Spanish word. The poem is about the reassuring pleasure that comes from repetition, insisting on it in defiance of logic. The word *guacamaya* is the poem’s reason for being, and to translate it into the comparatively flat and lifeless “macaw” would spoil the game.

To retain *guacamaya*, however, opens the translator to a barrage of suspicions and accusations: of

linguistic inadequacy, of elitist obfuscation, of premature surrender, of privileging the source language over the target. In a poem like this, translation becomes a central and unignorable fact, the translator visible in a way that courts controversy. Moreover, it is not only the translation and translator that become uncommonly visible, but the original text. By capitalizing on the particularity and poetry of this Spanish word for a bird native to Latin America, Sánchez resists letting his poem be fully transplanted, forcing both the translator and the foreign reader to participate actively in his choice and in the poem's transcendence of their own linguistic or cultural spaces. This can be read as a political choice whereby Sánchez, keenly aware of his country's post- and neocolonial position, playfully pushes back against easy consumability as he depicts the raiding of guacamayaness and derision of the guacamayas themselves. It is difficult for the English-language reader to encounter this poem without, to some extent, considering its language of origin, the significance of the word in the original Spanish, the mediation of translation, the odd word choice, and the decision to translate such a resistant or "untranslatable" poem at all. Thus, the reader's experience of the poem has the potential to be translatorly and worldly in ways that "macaw" would bypass completely. It is this translator's hope that, just as the mocking, dismissive eagles, blue-footed boobies, and little parrots are won over by repetition, a persuasive speech about flying, and the beautiful word and bird that drive the poem, so too will readers be won over by the politics of reading that guide my translation of "the day of the guacamayas."



Originally from Guadalajara, José Eugenio Sánchez lives, writes, and performs in the northern industrial city of Monterrey. His most recent book, *galaxy limited café*, was a finalist for the 2010 Jaime Gil de Biedma International Poetry Prize. Though little known in the US, Sánchez is a favorite of Mexican poetry fans, who pack his readings like rock concerts—an aesthetic he sometimes reflects in his highly polished, multimedia performances and music video experimentation. The language of his poems

## el día de las guacamayas

cordonices disfrazadas de guacamaya  
 avestruces disfrazadas de guacamaya  
 águilas disfrazadas de guacamaya  
 tucanes cóndores palomas mariposas disfrazadas de guacamaya  
 pájaros bobo de patas azules disfrazados de guacamaya  
 cuervos pelícanos gorriones cenizos cardenales disfrazados de guacamaya  
 mi periquita y yo disfrazados de guacamaya  
 era el día de las guacamayas

las cotorritas disfrazadas de guacamaya  
 les daban cortón a las guacamayas que no llevaban disfraz  
 las urracas disfrazadas de guacamaya picoteaban cualquier grano  
 mazorca o calva que espulgar  
 los marabúes disfrazados de guacamaya rondan  
 las vacas disfrazadas de guacamaya no sabían qué hacer  
 era el día de las guacamayas

mi periquita es una parava de hermosura  
 y algunas pajarracas disfrazadas de guacamaya  
 nos fruncieron el pico al vernos

pero una guacamaya disfrazada de guacamaya  
 carareó un discurso sobre volar sobrevolar  
 y el plumerío festejó hasta alzar el vuelo  
 y admiró a la guacamaya disfrazada de guacamaya

era el día de las guacamayas

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is intensely contemporary, inflected with the slang, pop culture, diction, and grammatical cadences of both Mexico and the United States. While their tone often leans toward the quotidian and comical, closer reading reveals a free-wheeling experimentalism and fragmentation that reflects his position on literary, cultural, and linguistic borders. Cheerfully disruptive and defiant, Sánchez identifies himself as an "underclown" a playful subverter of both underground and mainstream cultures. His aggressively playful and irreverent work regularly takes up rock bands, pornography, soccer, and drug culture at the same time that it interrogates art history, epidemiology, and classical music as well as political history and corruption.

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As Sánchez's translator for the past seven or so years, I have approached his poems not just with the traditional (and somewhat problematic) goal of creating equivalent effects but with a cautious awareness of postcolonial thought and how it might help me to understand and convey levels of complexity in work that is itself uncompliant and politically conscious.

with the traditional (and somewhat problematic) goal of creating equivalent effects but with a cautious awareness of postcolonial thought and how it might help me to understand and convey levels of complexity in work that is itself uncompliant and politically conscious. As theorists such as Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Tejaswini Niranjana, and Gayatri Spivak have shown, bringing translation practice into conversation with postcolonial theory can lead us to a deeper understanding of the pivotal position that translators occupy in terms of cultural and literary power: simultaneously policing and subverting norms. It is indicative of the persuasive power of normative cultural values that this insight is often resisted by readers of world literature and even translators, who may miss opportunities for literary density by underestimating the flattening power of their mediation. "El día de las guacamayas" is of central interest here because it so squawkingly resists assimilation, thereby throwing light on the pervasiveness of subtler resistance throughout Sánchez's poems and demonstrating the urgency that their translator attends to that resistance with care.

Translation scholar Maria Tymoczko argues that postcolonial writers and translators mirror one another in this balancing of power, explaining that "an author can choose a fairly aggressive presentation of unfamiliar cultural elements in which differences, even ones likely to cause problems for a receiving audience, are highlighted, or an author can choose an assimilative presentation in which likeness or "universality" is stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work" ("Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation," in *Translation and Power*, 2002). These two approaches are commonly referred to within translation as "foreignizing" and "domesticating," and it is the former, the "aggressive presentation of unfamiliar cultural elements," that more closely describes Sánchez's pointedly disruptive work. This means that translating Sánchez necessitates recognizing and valuing the ways in which his original texts are already translations or "rewritings" of what Tymoczko calls his "cultural metatext" by privileging instances of unfamiliarity, difficulty, and disruption.

A strong example of Sánchez's cultural metatext can be found in "aquí el sol es algo

serio," or "here the sun's for real," which paints an idiosyncratic landscape of the poet's Monterrey:

**aquí el sol es algo serio**  
(como el sol de monterrey)

la arquitectura es un caldo de res  
y una zanahoria sobresale en el macro plato

la gente suda con una leve sonrisa  
en la fábrica unos tacos de harina se  
desenvuelven del aluminio  
mañana temprano varios harán fila  
y en la esquina guacharaca puntera antena  
parabólica  
una mano como orden de gerente en el  
trasero de una gorda  
gafas oscuras solvente tostadas de la  
siberia  
y otros opinan que deberían penalizar el  
aborto  
correr al técnico bailar hasta caer  
prohibir los avistamientos en la puerta  
del sol

mientras tanto  
los magnates venden los cerros en bolsitas  
chicas en bikini llenan la cajuela de cerveza  
celso piña toca para nosotros  
y según stella (hostess del parthenon)  
los soldados tardan 12 minutos en eyacular  
los meseros tres en atenderte  
y los millonarios en helicóptero  
7 en cruzar la ciudad como spray sobre  
la barda

**here the sun's for real**  
(like the sun in monterrey)

the architecture is beef stew  
and a carrot juts onto the macroplate

people sweat with an easy smile  
in the factory some flour tacos unful  
from their aluminum wrappers  
folks will line up early tomorrow  
and on the corner guacharaca steel-toed  
boots a parabolic antenna  
a hand like the manager's orders on a fat  
woman's bottom  
dark glasses paint thinner siberia's fried  
tortillas

and others think they should criminalize  
abortion

fire the coach      dance till they drop  
outlaw advertisements in puerta del sol

meanwhile

tycoons sell the hills in little bags  
girls in bikinis fill the trunk with beer  
celso piña plays for us  
and according to stella (hostess of the  
parthenon)

soldiers take 12 minutes to ejaculate  
waiters three to get to you  
and millionaires in helicopters  
7 to cross the city like spray paint across  
a wall

The title compares Monterrey to a second, unnamed place, signaling the speaker's pleasure in being able to relate that place to his home as well as to describe that home to the listener. One of the things that interests me about this poem is the way in which it seems to explain the city to an outsider but in the local, intimate terms that invite the insider—perhaps the poet working out his own understanding of place to himself. The casual American reader will not know that “macroplaza” is the name for an enormous public space at the center of Monterrey; furthermore, Sánchez has twisted this reference by referring to the plaza as the “macroplato” or “big plate” instead of “big plaza.” Translating it as either of these would efface the reference to a major landmark as well as its subversion.

Due to this density of cultural and literary effects, I have chosen to keep the apocryphal place name, “macroplate,” in the hope that this oddness will tickle the English-language reader (as it does the Mexican one) at the same time as it tempts the reader with a mystery that a bit of research on Monterrey can quickly solve. Another immediately apparent choice has been my decision to retain the word *guacharaca*, an indigenous instrument from Colombia derived from the trunk of a small palm tree. While it might be possible to gloss this with “Colombian drum,” “palm trunk drum” (though it does not resemble a drum), or something like “percussion players,” “local music,” it is the cultural specificity that I read Sánchez as emphasizing—not to mention my sadness at the loss of a word that

## the day of the guacamayas

quails dressed up as guacamayas  
ostriches dressed up as guacamayas  
eagles dressed up as guacamayas  
toucans condors doves butterflies dressed up as guacamayas

blue-footed boobies dressed up as guacamayas  
ravens pelicans sparrows mockingbirds cardinals dressed up as guacamayas  
my parakeet and I dressed up as guacamayas  
it was the day of the guacamayas

the little parrots dressed up as guacamayas  
snub the guacamayas who didn't bother dressing up  
the magpies dressed up as guacamayas were pecking at every little grain  
cob and bare spot  
the storks dressed up as guacamayas circled  
the cows dressed up as guacamayas didn't have a clue what to do  
it was the day of the guacamayas

my parakeet is a flock of beauty  
and some big nasty birds dressed up as guacamayas  
knit their brows when we came into view

but one guacamaya dressed up as a guacamaya  
clucked a speech about flying flying about  
and the assemblage of feathers celebrated till it rose in flight  
and admired the guacamaya dressed up as a guacamaya

it was the day of the guacamayas

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**José Eugenio Sánchez** is an acclaimed poet and performer and the author of numerous poetry collections, including *Physical graffiti*, *La felicidad es una pistola caliente*, and *galaxy limited café*, which was a finalist for the 2010 Jaime Gil de Biedma International Poetry Prize. Originally from Guadalajara, Sánchez lives and writes in Monterrey, Mexico.

plays so wonderfully in the mouth and transports the reader so swiftly to an undeniably Spanish-speaking street scene.

I have not sought to change, clarify, or footnote such references, in large part so that a foreign (and particularly US) readership will have some work to do, will not be spoon-fed an easily assimilable vision of a Mexican city, and also because many of Sánchez's references are

challenging to his original audience as well. This is a strong example of that aggressive unfamiliarity which Tymoczko cites as a feature of postcolonial writing and which my training in translation studies has taught me to attend to with great care, first as a reader, but also as a translator working to keep it in careful balance with legibility. This further plays out via deliberately opaque or misleading allusions throughout Sánchez's work, as in the multiple meanings of the restaurants called "siberia" and "the parthenon"—or just the gleeful piling up of incongruous images: "dark glasses paint thinner." The confusion these engender I

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read as a kind of claiming, appropriating foreign names and signaling to the reader that things are not to be taken for what they seem to be, that there are inside jokes and layers of cultural and geographical specificity that they will have to work to understand. There are important similarities between Monterrey and the unnamed, second place ("the sun," an overall atmosphere or literal sweaty heat is slangily "for real" in both places), but thereafter comes an invocation of the particularity of this city that charmingly reminds readers that not everything is theirs to recognize and assimilate, or perhaps dares them to spend the years in Monterrey necessary to fully understand its evocation.

My reading of "here the sun's for real" as insisting on these moments of opacity is further shaped by the remarkable amount of political and social commentary that has been compressed into this brief poem. Sánchez describes the sweating but upbeat populace enjoying the "fried tortillas," "girls in bikinis," and Celso Piña's cumbia music while "others," perhaps in air-conditioned government buildings, debate controversial topics—Sánchez's derision and deflating of their power made clear when he juxtaposes

"criminalize abortion" with "dance till they drop." It is of particular note that the spurious political arguments transition into a mention of "puerta del sol," the corollary landmark in Madrid to the "macroplaza" of Monterrey. This allusion to the plaza that holds Spanish government officials and whose name derives from a medieval gate built in the golden age of the Mexican conquest implicates Spanish colonial rule and continued postcolonial influence in the noisy, daily life of Monterrey. The broader contemporary world of international capitalist corruption is likewise made flesh by the "tycoons" who sell off the physical stuff of the city itself as well as those "millionaires in helicopters" who leave the spray-paint stain of their disproportionate wealth as they fly safely above the noise and grit of the street. In all these ways, the poem presents itself as self-consciously postcolonial; the emphatically hot sun being "for real" might even be understood as Sánchez's marker of the place of his city in the third world or Global South.

Nonetheless, reading Sánchez's work through the lens of postcoloniality is politically complex, implicating the United States as much or more than historic Spanish rule, and complicated by Sánchez's personal position of privilege and his frequent appropriations of US culture. It is also theoretically problematic, risking a different sort of reductiveness or marginalization. That said, an awareness of postcoloniality sharpens the translator/reader's ability to recognize the ways in which Sánchez's poems are pervaded by questions of power, national identity, economic injustice, and literal colonialism, sometimes asking them earnestly, but most often playing with or puckishly upending them. Thus, his work is not just in certain ways postcolonial but frequently about postcoloniality and even the problematics of translation itself. This thematic tension, along with the poet's relentless humor, charm, and inventiveness, fuels my desire to bring Sánchez's poems to US audiences in a way that invites empowered, conscious engagement with their inherent heterogeneity and with the fact of my mediation, with the ultimate goal of contributing to a more critical and translatorly world literature.

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