In 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 guacamayanness 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 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 freewheeling 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.

As Sánchez’s translator for the past seven or so years, I have approached his poems not just

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 pelicanos gorriones cenzontles 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

(continued on page 27)
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.

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 sudá 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 ballar 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 unfurl
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 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

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.
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 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.

Anna Rosenwong (formerly Anna Rosen Guercio) is a translator, poet, and higher educator. She holds an MFA from the University of Iowa and a PhD in comparative literature from the University of California, Irvine. Her first book of poems, By Way of Explanation, is available from Dancing Girl Press, and her work has appeared in numerous journals. She is the translator of José Eugenio Sánchez’s Suite Prelude a/H1N1 (Toad Press) and Rocío Cerón’s Diorama (Phoneme Press).