CHAPTER 7

Historias for the Empire

Indigenous Translators and the Reproductions of Linguistic Conquest

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Imagine what it would take for a conqueror to learn a new language. The proposition isn't as ludicrous as it sounds, so long as mastery over a language itself is regarded as key to a conquest's success. Conquest narratives in International Relations (IR) are few and far in-between, but scholarly interpretations of conquests have almost always invoked a rhetorical continuity to their unique vocabularies. From Athens to the Soviet Union, empires are often represented in the political languages of ambition, growth, or, more simply, *might makes right*. Similarly, studies on the New Imperialism of the nineteenth century—read as inaugurating the "civilizational mission" of modern political domination—have only recently drawn attention to the power of rhetoric and the imagination in Europe's creation of its others (Jackson 2006; Daggett 2019). Yet despite sustained efforts attending to the agency of the oppressed in relations of domination, most histories of past empires remain written by, for, and in the vernaculars of imperial rule. What would it look like to render those silenced words, stories, and worlds intelligible?

Casual observers might assume that the language of a conqueror is something experimentally imposed from the outside, a feature increasingly recognized as part of the West's unique style of subjugation (Barder 2015; Manchanda 2020). What is less acknowledged, however, is the role that translators have played during major global historical transformations. That

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is to say, how have translators helped to establish the standards of memory, history, and forgetting that allow for future interpretations of politics? As more than intermediaries, translators often hold the keys to what Einar Wigen describes in his chapter in this volume as a broader network of agents who “shape the scope of action that political actors have.” Indeed, translators were central to the colonial infrastructure of the early modern Spanish Empire in the Americas, making possible several strategic goals of imperial rule: negotiations, trade networks, surveys, medical practices, naturalist inquiry, religious indoctrination, and multiple other facets of everyday life during and after the military and spiritual conquests. So what difference would disclosing the *interlingual memories* behind such moments entail? What kinds of agency begin to emerge for imperial translators through a study of the interlingual encounters that challenge conventional historiographies of conquest?

My aim in this chapter is threefold. First, I seek to unpack the interface at which languages meet not just as a feature of interlinguality but also of historical relationality. Rather than thinking of imperial encounters as one-directional moments, I look at the memories of conquest and their reproduction in distinct linguistic and rhetorical settings to interpret the Spanish Empire’s evolving meanings in the New World. Specifically, to what extent was the question of domination in the Spanish Empire a problem of translation as much as one of violence? Once the fervor of military and spiritual zealotry subsided, so began the long task of writing and retelling the story of conquest, a task made possible by the very subjects who were forced to adopt a strange tongue. Examining the competition between linguistic meanings in such historical context shows how different communities rely on those interlingual exchanges in crucial ways. In other words, taking apart the historical contingencies of interlingual relations interrogates the extent to which concepts such as relationality and assimilation are regarded as always progressive (Inayatullah 2014; Kalaycioglu 2025).

Second, I aim to reconfigure the scholarly understanding of the indigenous interpreter as she moves from her role as native informant to that of colonial subject. Rather than thinking of colonial knowledge as ready-made for an imperial audience to consume, I examine how the various layers of myth, encounter, description, translation, and (re)interpretation converge around the figure of the native translator as subject. For IR scholars, such matters were once taken up by Tzvetan Todorov’s (1999) analysis of Spain’s subduing of the Aztec Empire. Key to Todorov’s story was the deft manipulation of rhetoric that Spaniards employed to allegedly outwit the Aztecs by means of signs (Todorov 1999, 62). Yet there is more to say about the historiography of conquest in the New World and how relationality was, can, and *has been used* as a means of domination. A particularly important episode in this history of conquest was the conscription of the Nahua woman Malintzin (otherwise known as La Malinche) into the services of the conqueror Hernán Cortés and how her trajectory mirrored other stories of translational conquest across the Americas (Scully 2005). Malintzin's story serves as a kind of origin myth for a plethora of rival conceptions of indigenous agency (or lack thereof) under the duress of domination. I propose to read this same myth as an example of how indigenous translators—particularly women—became colonial subjects as a means of survival, as well as an example of empowerment within inhospitable conditions.

Lastly, I reflect on the cultures of translation within IR's historiography as an entry point to examine the lives of subjects that live *in-between worlds*. In recent decades, historians and theorists of colonial Spanish America have debunked the image of a monolithic indigenous experience during the wars and trials of conquest (McDonough 2014; Brian 2016; de la Puente Luna 2018). Specifically, greater attention to schools, material culture, and the interplay of religious and scientific knowledge production has focused on the vital role that translation played in the everyday workings of colonial life (Sigal 2011; Caraccioli 2018; Bigelow 2020). But translators have only been featured in the archive of colonial conquest through a privileging of the written text. In the spirit of Gayatri Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), I propose in this chapter a contrapuntal account of the relation between hegemony and who gets to speak on behalf of power, focusing instead on the back-and-forth exchanges between imperial and subaltern appropriations of language, particularly in oral traditions that have survived in counterintuitive ways.

I begin the chapter by examining the first Castilian grammar book as a "tool for empire" and civilizational mandate, a theme with rich insights into the cultures of conquest born on the Iberian Peninsula and exported across the Atlantic. Looking at how the Spanish conquests of the New World were aided by the translation of indigenous languages, I go on to show how studying what indigenous translators *actually did* (and do) strengthens our scholarly understanding of *interlingual memories* as frameworks for how we think certain political events took place at all. Translators, I maintain, not only mediate meaning, but *create the standards under which meaning endures over time*. Drawing on the story of Malintzin, my broader aim is to rethink the archive through which historians and theorists can grasp the meanings of lifeworlds under duress. Doing so not only interrupts the imperial imaginary through which knowledge about the past and its afterlives is re-created anew every day; it also provides a glimpse into how our daily acts of translation can embolden us to keep the prose of old worlds alive and in view. I conclude by arguing that the *history of translation as conquest* reflects not only the motivations of the powerful but also presents a more relational view of the lifeworlds and meanings that conquest has allegedly destroyed and left behind.

Grammars of Violence: From Alhambra to Tenochtitlan

Translation has long been a pillar of imperial conquest, both on the ground and for the historical record. When historians recount the formative moments in an empire's rise and fall, their task is twofold: to reconstruct events, and to make intelligible how new realities are superimposed on the old. IR scholars have similarly taken on this interpretive charge, yet have hardly reflected on the various assumed acts of translation that inform the field's conceptions of conquest and domination. What happens if in recounting our preconceptions about the imperial past, we add interlinguality to long-standing paradigms of conquest?

For example, having formally overtaken the Caliphate of Granada (the last Moorish kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula) in January 1492, the Catholic monarchs, King Fernando of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile, were said to have marched into the city in full Moorish garb, a custom of respect and transitional authority rooted in Islamic legal conventions (Irigoyen-Garcia 2017). The gesture was a visual expression of the broader linguistic norms that shaped Christian-Moslem relations during the period of warfare Spaniards dubbed La Reconquista. Borrowing from Islamic norms of war and governance, Spanish conquerors translated the component parts of the ritual demand for submission (*islam*) into a practice known as the Requerimiento. Part performance and part improvisation, Patricia Seed describes the Requerimiento as "the principal means by which Spaniards enacted political authority over the New World during the era of their most extensive conquests" (Seed 1995, 70). Upon arrival at the outskirts of a settlement, the Requerimiento would be read as a means of ordaining the Spanish right of possession under the eyes of God, with any defiance by the indigenous inhabitants being used as grounds for enslavement and "just" warfare. The ritual was thus an expression of how Spaniards used familiar rules of war to first justify their domination over the Iberian Peninsula and later translate their rhetorical normative assumptions into their encounters with indigenous lands and peoples of the New World (Seed 1995, 69–99).

While medieval norms born from battle were changing, so too were customs around the textual authority of vernacular languages. For instance, the famed humanist scholar Antonio de Nebrija ceremoniously dedicated his *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (a bilingual dictionary also known as *Grammatica Antonii Nebrissensis*) to a victorious Queen Isabella on the eve of Granada's surrender. As he famously wrote in the prologue to the grammar book, "language always accompanies empire, both have always commenced, grown and flourished together" (Kamen 2002, 3; Nebrija 2014, 11). Nebrija's words have been the subject of much interpretation, no less by critical scholars of global politics (Jahn 2000; Krishna 2001) who have seen the consolidation of an imperial grammar as an admission of criminal intent for the centuries of conquest that Spain inaugurated in 1492. The Requerimiento is very much an extension of that grammar, but one that roots conquest in the localized meaning of (failed) linguistic exchanges, not just an expression of rapaciousness nor a mere historical contingency.

Grammar books may have helped fuel the metropole's confidence in the authority of their political claims, but domination would remain incomplete without a proper basis on which empire could be imposed on new linguistic worlds (Mignolo 1992). Here I want to propose a more nuanced understanding of the broader interlingual character of Spain's encounter with the Americas, particularly as imperial grammar books generated new vernaculars. From Columbus's letters during his first journey across the Atlantic to the epic plights of conquistadores like Hernán Cortes and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the conquests of the New World are typically presented as a monolithic venture, most notoriously under the slogan "God, Gold, and Glory" (Dussel 1995; Restall 2003). Yet these kinds of tropes are a common shorthand for conquest narratives, particularly those produced as polemics against an imperial power (Greer, Mignolo, and Quilligan 2008). As a genre of historical and political literature little studied by IR scholars, conquest narratives are central to many of the field's founding myths. As the contemporary historiography of the conquest genre shows, however, early debates between chroniclers have increasingly given way to the perspectives and voices of the allegedly vanquished (Adorno 2007; Rabasa 2011). Just as the subjugation of Iberian Moors depended on the translation and appropriation of Arabic, Spanish colonial rule depended on its adaptation to the Nahuatl, Quechua, Guaraní, and Yucatec languages, among nearly a thousand more.

It seems impossible to believe that testimonies of the encounter's first decade could escape the melding of words and worlds that gave birth to new political languages, in particular those that relied on using Castilian itself as a means of resistance (Karttunen 1994). The Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, for instance, long held a monopoly on these testimonies with his polemical *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (2003). The product of his many travels, experiences, and masterful translations of hearsay and laments alike, the book gave a uniform vocabulary to critics of Spain's early tenure in the New World, even as it professed an ecclesiastic imperialism of its own (Castro 2007). At the same time, the work was translated across the European continent, serving as ammunition for Spain's enemies from the Low Countries to the Ivory Coast (see Costa Lopez's chapter in this volume). Yet despite the contentious and colorful trajectory of Las Casas's narrative, his legacy belies a wider range of endeavors that missionaries and explorers were engaged in, particularly as they fought conquistadors and bureaucrats alike for the knowledge produced by indigenous peoples (Herzog 2015).

Indeed, today's popular and scholarly attention to these narratives is also largely possible because one of these missionary figures, the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, took a page out of Nebrija's book to better understand the peoples and cultures around him. From 1530 to 1590, he lived among the peoples of the Valley of Mexico, not far from the old imperial capital of Tenochtitlan. Sahagún effectively used this location to found the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, a missionary school charged with the spiritual education of young indigenous noble children, survivors of the wars of conquest. The colegio also served as a clearinghouse to train them in the Castilian language and European arts. Using his sojourn to learn, document, and reproduce the intricacies of the Nahuatl language, Sahagún encountered fundamental conceptual, political, and cosmological dilemmas that were emblematic of the Spanish missionary experience (Caraccioli 2021). As he sought to make sense of the veritable "Forest, Garden and Orchard of the Mexican Language" (Sahagún 1963, 88), he documented how indigenous idioms operated, as well as the spiritual opportunities that could emerge from this interlingual exchange. Yet that immersion came at the price of the perceived religious and cultural accommodations of indigenous beliefs, ultimately leading to censure.

What for Sahagún began as a rooting out of idolatry evolved into a profound immersion that generated the first grammars, translations, and ethnographies of the Nahuatl language and its people (León-Portilla 2002). Such constitutive moments form part of an ostensibly more *relational* civilizational narrative than what is typically referenced, one that took conscript indigenous scribes and translators as interlocutors to make imperial rule possible. The spread of empire via the mutual imposition and study of language thus shaped both indigenous and settler colonial subjectivities alike.

In this spirit, translation is not just a part of early modern global politics, it is the core of why global politics matters at all. As agents of the Spanish Empire sought to make sense of new landscapes and cultures, they seized and relied on the skills of go-betweens that could effectively demystify entire societies. Mobile and often excluded from their original communities, interpreters were both indispensable and highly coveted. They were often women who were forced into positions of sexual codependence with European men, serving later as foils within grand narratives of national origins (Faery 1999). And although the loyalties of indigenous translators were often suspect, they were recipients of distinct powers and privileges that buttressed their status as native informants.

In the next section, I rethink the basis on which scholars of global politics can afford (rather than deny) greater agency to the indigenous translator considering their liminality. It's a position that, despite their role in the production of colonial translation, has received little scholarly attention as central to colonial cultures of knowledge production.

En Otras Palabras: In-Between Worlds and the Archives of Translation

I turn here next to the story of the indigenous translator—and much maligned "mother" of the Mexican nation—the Nahua woman known as La Malinche. Given away into slavery as a child, she was "liberated" by Cortés in 1519 during his march toward Tenochtitlan, having been offered to him as a gift by Mayan vassals in the region of Tabasco in southeastern Mexico. Often dubbed by historians as Doña Maria to reflect her transformed social status within New Spain's embryonic caste system, ethnohistorians refer to her as Malinalli, or, Malintzin.

Malintzin represents the most well-known of relatively elite women whose lives would become paradigmatic examples of the intersection between gender, language, and territorial power across the so-called Age of Discovery. In Pamela Scully's view, while these are prominent and dominant narratives that remain even today, the danger is that they "[dampen] our appreciation of the experience of other women and of the widespread daily work women did for Europeans in the earliest years of conquest and centralization" (2005). The challenge here, then, becomes twofold. First, how do we honor Malintzin's example to highlight what her journey likely conveys about the fate of other translators—men and women alike? Second, what are the archives from which we can draw both narrative content and forms to speak about the legacy of her life and work today?

As Camilla Townsend writes, Malintzin's life with Cortés saw her "catapulted to the very center of the drama of two continents colliding" (2006, 2). That Malintzin is often regarded as a traitor to her people, rather than as a savvy navigator of Cortés's efforts to conquer the Aztec Empire, illustrates the power of "grand narratives" to occlude the interlingual nuance and complexity of the Spanish-Nahua encounter in the New World. Indeed, Malintzin's story is paralleled by hundreds if not thousands of other indigenous interpreters, scribes, and illustrators—particularly women—who literally rendered comprehensible the political vocabulary of the New World to European tongues, albeit at the price of being made invisible for centuries (Karttunen 1994, xi–xiv).

Like those countless others, Malintzin's story challenges several features of the Spanish American conquest narrative: for one, her actions go beyond the literary authority of the male "participant observer," instead illustrating what "other Indian women like her . . . were forced to confront . . . in their own lives" (Townsend 2006, 5) as the conquests raged. Her role in the conquest itself, however, showcases the centrality of interlingual encounters in politics, particularly by individuals at the intersection of world-historical transformations. How a young noble girl, given away to facilitate her stepbrother's familial ascension, later handed over to Spanish conquistadores as a conventional war prize, goes on to become the central negotiator and advisor to Cortés, his mistress and mother to their child and a mixed-race people, all before her death at the age of thirty is the story of epics. And although scholars have debated the evidentiary substance of Malintzin's journey, the power of her example resonates with us today as a living *interlingual memory*, albeit one that often serves revanchist political purposes.

Like the Franciscan missionaries who would later lead the spiritual conquest of Mexico, Malintzin quickly learned Castilian to leverage her knowledge of regional dialects and customs. In the eyes of Nahuas, Mayans, and Spaniards alike, she became a crucial go-between for exchange, communication, and conversion, facets of translation that reflect the embedded character of the interlingual encounters she witnessed. But more important than the literal languages she mastered was, according to Stephen Greenblatt, her "being in a state of circulation . . . at once a figure on the margins and at the center, both an outcast and a great lady . . . and it is not surprising that she has continued to function in our own time as a resonant, deeply ambivalent symbol, half-divinity, half-whore, the savior and the betrayer" (1991, 142–43). Greenblatt's emphasis on Malintzin's representational prowess echoes Todorov's own emphasis on the Spaniards' semiotic dexterity with words and symbols. Through that same lens, for him, Malintzin becomes "the supreme instance of the go-between in the New World but as an emblem of the vast process of cultural translation that the discovery initiated" (1991, 145). But as with Sahagún, what if instead of focusing on her symbolic and interpretive propensities, we emphasized what Malintzin *did*, *facilitated*, and what she *helps us remember* from the encounter with Spanish (language) and empire? What if Malintzin just happened to be the right person, living at the right moment, and knowing how to pursue the right path available to her given the circumstances?

As Bernal Díaz del Castillo recounts in the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (*The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*), his memoirs of the Mexican conquest, Malintzin's professed skill was not simply the product of confidence, but of the otherwise tragic fate many other women faced through conquest. By Castillo's own version of events, Malintzin simply knew how to read the room, and was recognized as such by Cortés to his great fortune:

> I want to talk about doña Marina, how from childhood she was a great lady and *cacica* [queen, princess] over towns and vassals. . . . Her father and mother were lords and *caciques* of a town, Painala, eight leagues from the town of Guazacualco, and other towns were subject to it. Her father died when she was a very small child, and her mother married another young *cacique* with whom she had a son and, it seemed, they loved him very much, and the father and mother agreed that he should become cacique after their deaths. To avoid any obstacles, one night they gave the child, doña Marina, to some Indians from Xicalango so she would not be seen. At that same time, the child of one of their Indian slaves died, and they announced that the one who had died was the heiress doña Marina. . . . As doña Marina was such an excellent woman and good interpreter in all the wars of New Spain, Tlaxcala, and Mexico, Cortés always had her with him. . . . Doña Marina had a great presence and commanded absolutely among all the Indians in New Spain. (Díaz del Castillo 2012, 54–55)

While she herself holds a vital place in the conquest of Mexico, there were many other indigenous interpreters like Malintzin—both potential and actual—if we consider that the broader history of New World conquest goes beyond the Aztec Empire. However, stories like Malintzin's are themselves subject to the same politics of translation that interpreters like her participated in. Malintzin is no stranger to political controversy: the very same reason she is remembered at all is the controversy. That her name is often used pejoratively to describe the ways that indigenous women survived during the trials of conquest (she is often disparaged as *la chingada*, or the fucked one) only adds to the difficulty of theorizing political languages beyond their role in war.

Malintzin's experience as a translator of (and for) empire makes her story more than just a *disclosing* of events surrounding the interlingual encounter between Spain and the New World. Rather, to paraphrase Rolena Adorno, her story is an *event in itself* (Adorno 2007, 4–11). To that end, the stories translators tell may require multiple avenues of interrogation including gender, race, and ethnohistory; but none of these are more powerful—as the chapters by Reshetnikov, Costa Lopez, and de Jong in this volume hauntingly show—than asking what translators themselves do and how they are remembered for it. The archive that holds their stories thus possesses the very same sense of indebtedness to relational memory (or lack thereof) that conquerors and conquered alike share.

In the final section of this chapter, I examine how these interlingual circumstances have been neglected in the historiography of International Relations, not least because of the field's imperial origins and Eurocentric conceptions of agency. By looking at how language and translation are relegated in the Anglophone study of global politics, my aim is to reveal and trouble the dominant paradigm of conquest that informs the field's readings of the past and arguably continues to color its aspirations for the future.

Paradigms of Conquest and the Politics of Historiography

While vital to the emergence of colonial Spanish America as a site of imperial knowledge production, the stories of missionary friars, captive indigenous women, and the eclectic avenues taken to translate indigenous languages has not received much attention in histories of global politics. Though a part of that exclusion is perhaps tied to scholarly suspicions concerning the evangelizing motives of missionary work, more flagrant is IR's lack of engagement with Spanish and indigenous language sources, translations, and authors writ large. The same can be said of Chinese and Mongolian concepts (see Cheney's chapter in this volume), the cultural hegemony of Persian (see Lahijani's chapter in this volume), and not least the Iraqi and Afghan interpreters who made the American encounter with Arabic and Pashto possible (see de Jong's and Menton's chapters). As much of this volume has highlighted, however, translation is an indispensable feature of the reflexivity needed to unpack logics of domination in global politics. Histories of translation in the context of conquest narratives are particularly key for the study of how *interlingual relations* shape *political relations*, both past and present. As I examined above, interlinguality also serves as a means of interrupting the infrastructure of colonial administration and, as I aim to show below, potentially upending extant paradigms of conquest that shape scholarly production.

The absence of Spanish sources—and by extension the indigenous vernaculars that Spaniards mastered (or attempted to) in their imperial endeavors—is reflective of IR's own conquest narrative as a field of colonial administration (Schmidt 1997; Vitalis 2015). Central to this narrative is the Liberal appropriation of that colonial legacy, whereby early efforts to manage race wars and calls for decolonization were sublimated into the clarion call for self-determination—first for some, perhaps later for others (Vitalis 2010; Barder 2021). As historians of colonial Spanish America have similarly shown, the early modern past has also been subject to the same hagiographic tendencies, whereby settler-colonial projects led by English and French Creoles have been made more palatable in juxtaposition to the Spanish colonial experience (Cañizares-Esguerra 2006; Street 2019). To be fair, early expositions of a Spanish "White Legend"—whereby the textual and legal interventions of priests, philosophers, and jurists formed part of a broader "Spanish struggle for justice" against military exploitation—have also risked downplaying the nuances of linguistic domination (Hanke 1971; Keen 1971).

Paying attention to the specific roles that translators and interpreters played in these formative moments would be an important step in interrupting the colonial infrastructure that still colors IR's grappling with the study of comparative colonialisms. Indeed, there are some important exceptions in the field, as many notable figures within IR's intellectual landscape have drawn attention to the difference that Spanish America made for the birth of global politics (Alker 1992; Campbell 1992, 111–18; Boucher 1998, 202–9). Few of these studies, however, have reflected on what role the actual translation of the New World played in its subjugation to the whims of the Old. The relation remains one where the metropole's status is legitimated in the eyes of its fellow empires, while its colonies remain peripheral possessions with little autonomy to show for their intellectual culture beyond mimicry (Bhabha 1984).

As Subotic's chapter in this volume notes, IR's Anglophonic bias is key to this conceptual reproduction. Without immersion in the linguistic intricacies of encounters, legal codes, and accompanying social challenges, studies of the global political past all too often lead to the reinvention of preexisting debates and exchanges, as well as to the further exclusion of works that tackle the ambiguous place of "native" expertise as sources of global insight (Zarakol 2010; Rabasa 2011; Barkawi 2017; Wigen 2018). The polemics of Spanish missionaries, jurists, and their native scribes are replaced by the writings of colonial bureaucrats who did not venture to learn the language of subjugated peoples, but rather exported the emerging idiom of "modern" political thought to the New World sans earlier spiritual disputations (Silverblatt 2008; Premo 2017).

Yet as contemporary IR scholars aim to rectify the Eurocentric basis on which international knowledge is produced, the field would be well served to consider the histories and lived experiences of subalterns beyond merely being producers of their own knowledge. Rather, as interlingual encounters of the past show, subaltern translators—both indigenous and European—are also arbiters of *what counts as knowledge at all*. As an interpretive strategy for studying the global politics of translation, conquest narratives are themselves products of global politics and constitutive of its theoretical possibilities. They curate the deeds and legacies of conquering heroes, as well as teach conquered peoples how to recount the story of their downfall. That these genres are further reproduced in texts and classrooms today only serves to further cement their linguistic exclusion. To begin any discussion of the logic of encounters with Columbus, Cortés, or even the putative "father of international law," jurist Francisco de Vitoria, while neglecting the Taino, Nahua, and Quechua interlocutors they drew from, effectively erases the way interlinguality makes the native informant a relevant agent at all. More than relevance, however, the concept of the native informant reifies a liminal status that can neither return to the relations of the past nor assume a stable identity in a colonial future. Yet, in practice, stability is precisely one of the things that serving as a translator could (and did) afford an indigenous conscript. While the goal of the conqueror—military and religious—is always one of subjugation, indoctrination, and domination, their political position did not preclude the accommodation of the artisan, laborer, concubine, or scribe. Indeed, for many indigenous translators, collaboration was a means of attaining more than just mere survival. But conquest is a doubly harmful logic: it promotes exclusion of the very immersive inquiries that make it effective.

Histories of global politics regularly detract attention from this crucial pedagogy of indoctrination, focusing instead on the retroactive act of turning the past into an anticipation of present concerns. Imperial domination becomes one-dimensional and deterministic: good empires beget civilization; bad empires engender barbarism. Nebrija's own reasoning again merits consideration here, as one of the aims of grammar books was indoctrination aimed at building a larger, better society. His reflections on the marriage between language and empire were not only hegemonic in character (for who would question the nobility of Latin), but also allegedly tutelary and intent on cultivating a spirit of learned upbringing:

> After Your Highness has subjected barbarous peoples and nations of varied tongues, with conquest will come the need for them to accept the laws that the conqueror imposes on the conquered, and among them our language; with this work of mine, they will be able to learn it, as we now learn Latin from the Latin Grammar. (Kamen 2002, 3; Nebrija 2014, 14)

Nebrija's paradigm is one such example of the determinism underlying conquest narratives. The rules of language, themselves born out of the experience of Iberian (re)conquest, serve to establish the boundaries and aims for new territories. Language thus becomes a central pillar of the infrastructure of colonial administration. As I show above, though, it is far from ready-made or incapable of reformulation.

Monumental ethnographies like Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* (1963) reveal the necessary linguistic sophistication and profoundly relational character of imperial politics in the New World. For example, the men who served as illustrators, surveyors, and interpreters of Sahagún's queries (known as *tlamatinimeh*, or simply, wise men) were part of a broader intellectual tradition of indigenous writers described by Kelly McDonough as "agents of their own discourses and agendas" (2014, 4). Though they wrote and labored under the shadow of empire, they were nevertheless "concerned with the more esoteric or abstract tasks of producing and interpreting knowledge, and . . . with the more technical, artisanal practice of recording these knowledges" (2014, 11). Hence the translation of conquered worlds and cosmologies served to strengthen, not dilute, the dissemination of imperial ideology. In effect, the means for modern imperial domination and appropriation are found in the very crucible of translation.

A generous reading of all these encounters would venture to say that the master's language evolved alongside the efforts of learned men to capture what the indigenous conscript brought with them for a future civilization in the Americas. Yet unpacking what it takes to learn a conquered people's language also merits reflecting on what learning a master's tongue entails (Ling 2002; Vasko 2019). In being forced to collaborate with a conqueror, the translator becomes a liminal figure with divided agency: a transformer of words and worlds, but also a betrayer (i.e., *traditore*) of words and nations

(Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Edwards 2010). Therefore, on the other side of liminality is the constant threat of disappearing from the record altogether. A conqueror's go-between can become a nationalist's pariah. What the vignettes, texts, and stories above illustrate, however, is that memories never truly recede, if you know how they continue to speak.

Conclusion: Global Politics as Imperial Translation

Why does this matter today and specifically to the study of global politics? Translation not only occurs on a two-way spectrum between conqueror and conquered, but ultimately shapes historical understanding of why a conflict ever took place at all. This is a political encounter that relates to domination not only as an obstacle, but as the *precondition* for any future freedom. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (2001) has documented, how to write the history of the New World was and remains a question full of robust responses that cut across politics, ideology, methodology, and transatlantic spaces. But translation is also a concern with how we belong to language before belonging to ourselves. Who gets to write the histories of domination, and how we convey these in our own rendering of the world, is an equally if not more urgent question in times of genocide, displacement, fake news, academic hoaxes, and generalized suspicion over the power of stories—shockingly, of both perpetrators and victims alike—and the languages they employ to convince us of the justness and urgency of their causes. Imagine what it would take for us to learn just one of those new languages; to learn not just what people under duress are saying, but also who's making them say it.

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