

Roberto A. Valdeón. (2015) *Translation and the Spanish Empire in the Americas*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. xii + 272 pp.

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In the introduction to the edited volume *Charting the Future of Translation History* (published a decade ago), Georges Bastin and Paul Bandia wrote

While much of the earl[y] work [in translation history] was descriptive, recounting events and historical facts, there has been a shift in recent years to research based on the interpretation of these [...]. Translation in history is now being linked to themes such as otherness, ideology, manipulation, and power.

(Bastin and Bandia 2006, 2)

The work of Roberto Valdeón (professor in the Department of English Studies at the University of Oviedo, Spain) clearly belongs in the newer strand of translation history, abounding in references to the above themes apropos of the presented data. Yet, Valdeón's contribution stems from a *critique* of that very strand in the case of colonial Spanish America – specifically, of its alleged lack of rigor in the interpretation of some historical facts.

Valdeón takes a handful of translation scholars and some cultural and post-colonial theorists to task for failing to “pay [...] much attention to the words of Spanish and Indian chroniclers or to extant official documents” (13) in their studies of Spanish colonialism in the Americas and for relying instead on received ideas (i.e., the so-called Black Legend) that originated in late sixteenth-century Europe with the help of the translators of Bartolomé de las Casas's *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. The pervasiveness of these ideas is reflected in the currency of certain assumptions about the Americas before and after 1492 (as well as before and after 1620) in the “anglophone world” (29 et passim), which are grouped into two types: (1) assumptions about the nature of the indigenous peoples (i.e., the noble savage) and the Spanish conquerors (i.e., the ruthless gold seeker), and (2) assumptions about the level of scientific, cultural, and economic development of the civilizations conquered by the Spanish (i.e., the sophisticated Aztecs and Incas) and the ones conquered by the English (i.e., the primitive Native Americans). These have in turn led to a third type of assumptions related to the ethics of translating in the New World that is most pointedly at work in metaphorizations of translation as violence (inflicted by the Spanish conquerors)

and treason (committed by those who conspired with the conquerors against their own peoples).

Given this state of affairs, Valdeón sets out to reconcile the older and the newer strands of translation history by looking at the conquest and colonization of Mesoamerica and the Andes through the lens of the themes championed today *but* in light of the primary sources available and the insights of a number of anthropologists, historians, and ethnographers “[whose] work is less known to translation scholars” (xi). Accordingly, he attempts to provide a more rigorous and altogether more “balanced” and “nuanced” interpretation of the role of translators and interpreters in colonial Spanish America than has heretofore been offered (6). Whether he succeeds in his attempt is, however, likely to be a moot point for translation historians and theorists of various persuasions.

Valdeón draws three main arguments about translation from his research. The first one is that “translation was, [...] [besides] an element of the conquest, [...] an element of communication and interaction between diverse cultures” (126). This would seem to be a fairly obvious and unimportant argument if one were thinking about translation as a form of mediated cross-cultural exchange. Valdeón, though, is referring to the ethical dimension of translation as a means of “reconnaître et recevoir l’Autre en tant qu’Autre” [recognizing and receiving the Other as an Other], as famously put by Antoine Berman (1985, 88), in order to question the appositeness of metaphors of translation as violence.

This argument is developed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 with somewhat mixed results. In Chapters 2 (“Conquerors and translators”) and 3 (“Translation and the administration of the colonies”), the author discusses the shifting status of interpreters during the conquest and colonization of Mesoamerica and the Andes, from unreliable ad hoc intermediaries to financially rewarded and socially valued actors. Drawing from the general premise that the ethical aim of translation is to communicate and interact with the Other, and pointing to the regulations concerning language mediation that were enforced in the colonial judicial system as evidence of ethical behavior, Valdeón comes to the conclusion that “the gradual professionalization of the job [interpreting]” in colonial Spanish America shows that “many [Spanish colonists] were prepared to listen to the indigenous peoples” (234). This is a reasoned interpretation of the facts that is supported by further evidence in Chapter 4 (“Evangelizing the natives”), where problems of communication and interaction and the efforts to overcome them are at their most conspicuous.

The interpretation provided in other parts of the book appears nevertheless to be driven by the author’s general thesis rather than by any evidence. This is the case also in Chapters 2 and 3, where some of the presented data do not quite cohere with the claim on the ethics of translating in the New World. For example: the search for a lexical equivalent to the Taino word *cacique* by Christopher

Columbus is portrayed as an attempt to “connect[...]” the Old World and the New World “*even if* he [Columbus] was not concerned with what it [cacique] signified for the Indians” (36; emphasis added); the allusions to mediator Ciquinchara in Juan de Betanzos’s account of the conquerors’ first encounter with the Inca ruler Atahualpa are presented as evidence of “the importance of communication” (59), even though just a few lines below reference is made to “the framework of the logical mistrust of the natives and the imminent clash of cultures” (ibid.); and the manipulation of *relaciones* (i.e., questionnaires commissioned by the Spanish Crown to gather information about its colonies) perpetrated by the interpreter Gaspar Antonio Chi to “provide his own insights into the situation” (91) is described as telling of “the importance of translation” (ibid.), despite the fact that no indication is given that Chi was acting as a translator or that the alterations he made were presented as translations (he is only credited with “not[ing] down the replies by the *settlers*” [ibid.; emphasis added]). The vagueness that at times characterizes the author’s rhetoric does not help in this regard – especially, his use of the phrase ‘some kind of’ or ‘some degree of’ in argumentative statements such as “[Columbus] was attempting to establish some kind of connection between [...] diverse worlds” (36), “the use of translators and interpreters in official contexts [...] denotes the interest of the administration in establishing some degree of communication with its subjects” (78), and “[the *relaciones*] reveal an interest in establishing some degree of interaction with the colonized” (90).

On the other hand, Valdeón’s sometimes questionable interpretation of the facts is partly rectified further in the book as he delves into the evolution of the colonial system. Towards the end of Chapter 5 (“The chroniclers and the interpreters translated”), he argues that, rather than being the result of an ethical commitment to Otherness, interlingual communication was a catalyst for meaningful intercultural understanding and facilitated critical assessment of received knowledge about the indigenous peoples on the part of the colonists. Here, the author’s interpretation is more articulate and persuasive than in some sections of Chapters 2 and 3.

In Chapter 3, Valdeón also questions metaphors of translation as treason to the indigenous peoples (in particular, as epitomized in the figure of La Malinche). He makes reference to the first laws issued by the Spanish Crown on the duties of interpreters as proof that “[belief in] the existence of a pan-Indian identity that native interpreters violated is, to say the least, naïve” (82) – specifically, Law XII acknowledged that indigenous interpreters sometimes altered the testimonies of their fellow compatriots to the latter’s detriment. Valdeón goes on to point out that, contrary to what is assumed when translation is presented as a form of treason, division was not triggered by the conquest: societies in the Mesoamerican and Andean regions were already divided along the lines of ethnicity, class, and gender.

This is an important argument that is extended further in the book to European identity. Yet, it is phrased in an unfortunate way, for it raises the following question: how could a “pan-Indian identity” be posited to have existed in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Andean region in the first place, considering that the figure of the Indian was a byproduct of Columbus’s discovery? While it may well be true that assumptions of cultural homogeneity and identity underlie metaphorizations of translation in colonial Spanish America as treason, Valdeón does little to counter these assumptions effectively, judging from his frequent use of the word ‘Indian’ to refer to the indigenous peoples of the Americas at large (examples can be found on pages 11, 43, 47, 50, 65, 68, 74, 76, 81, 93, etc.). This problem also pervades the author’s use of ‘European,’ as will be shown below. The result is a perceptive observation that nevertheless fails to become a coherent, convincing argument.

The second argument that Valdeón draws from his research is that translation enabled the survival (both physical and cultural) of the indigenous peoples by way of three strategies: assimilation, accommodation, and resistance. This appears to be a reformulation of the previous argument from the viewpoint of the conquered instead of the conquerors. However, the theme chosen in this case to interpret the data is not Otherness but hybridization. According to the author, “from the very early stages of the conquest, hybridization characterized the encounter,” and “its intensity [...] increased as the conquest progressed” (10). This interpretive shift is rather perplexing (hybridization and the recognition of an ontological difference or the affirmation of an ontological identity are in principle incompatible), but it is also revealing of the role of power in the interaction between the conquerors and the conquered: while the duty of the conquerors was to recognize the conquered as an Other, the conquered had to resort to hybridization to retain their identity and “subvert colonial rule from within” (240).

The contradictory dynamics of interaction in colonial Spanish America are most clearly shown in the chapter on evangelization, where the term ‘appropriation’ (a strategy of hybridization, according to Valdeón) is used to describe translation activity not only by the (polytheistic) converts but also by missionaries, who “tried to appropriate local rituals for the purposes of conversion” (151). In this regard, although the question of whether it is really possible to recognize the Other as an Other is naturally beyond the scope of this book, it is difficult to reconcile the argument on communication and interaction *despite* power asymmetries with the argument on hybridization as a survival strategy.

Furthermore, by identifying hybridization in colonial Spanish America with hybridity as theorized by Homi Bhabha (not exactly one of the “less known” scholars in translation studies that the author claims to draw from in his study), Valdeón overlooks what was actually specific to colonial Spanish America: the existence

of a Creole society that, even if administratively affiliated with the Republic of Spaniards, did not seek to become “almost the same [as the metropolitan authority]” (Bhabha 1994, 123) but strategically differentiated itself from the metropolitan authority through multiple loyalties in order to gain a privileged position in the colonial order. While Bhabha’s hybridity does convey the ambiguity of Creole discourse, it is structured around a set of categories (i.e., colonizer and colonized) that fails to accommodate the ambivalent engagement with sameness and difference that Spanish American Creoles showed.

Valdeón’s incorporation of hybridity is perhaps convenient, since the notion has been widely adopted in studies of translation in postcolonial contexts (see, e.g., Robinson 1997; Munday 2008, 131–135; Pym 2010, 144–148), but, more importantly, it is unsatisfactory to interpret colonial Spanish America. The author’s almost complete lack of reference to anything Creole, his use of *mestizo* as a different identity from “natives” and “Spaniards” (e.g., 80) that is nevertheless equated with “native” in Chapter 6 (“Native chroniclers and translation”), and the causal relation between miscegenation (racial), hybridity (cultural), and resistance (political) that underlies his discussion of native accounts of the conquest are the most salient problems that derive from it. Greater engagement with the work of some of the Latin American scholars listed in the bibliography (in particular, those in the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group) could have strengthened, and probably transformed, this argument.

Lastly, the third argument is that translations of the accounts of the conquest into the languages of other colonial powers well into the twentieth century serve to disprove “the existence of a unified European approach to empire” (4) and, consequently, reveal the limitations of the concept of Eurocentrism to account for European colonialism. Here, a pattern of “ideological manipulation of [...] foreign text[s] for purposes of [imperial] self-justification” (160) is observed and contrasted with the faithfulness of other translations (namely, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century academic editions). This argument is well served by the remarkable amount of data presented in Chapters 5 and 6, especially in the cases of Las Casas’s *Brevísima*, Pedro Cieza de León’s *Crónica del Perú*, and Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s *Comentarios reales de los incas* (all of which were rendered into English by the *enfant terrible* Clements R. Markham, among others). However, the persuasiveness of the argument is compromised by three interrelated problems: (1) Valdeón’s association of Eurocentrism with the existence of Europe as a unified (rather than unitary) bloc, (2) the author’s incorporation of secondary sources that challenge his argument, and (3) the lack of coherence between the author’s argument and his use of the word ‘European.’

The first problem can actually be elucidated by pointing to some instances of the second and the third. In the opening chapter (“Language, translation and

empire”), Valdeón discusses the instrumentality of translations for the English to not only discredit the Spanish but also “know about [their] difficulties and methods” (21). He quotes the work of Gesa Mackenthun and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, who point out the similarities between “English colonial schemes and Spanish colonial practice” (Mackenthun, quoted on p. 21), rooted in “a long history of shared cultural values, harkening back millenia [sic]” (Cañizares-Esguerra, quoted on p. 22). Valdeón’s conclusion is that, colonial rivalries aside, “they [the Spanish and the English] approached the New World from similar standpoints” (ibid.). Likewise, in the chapter on the colonial administration, he draws attention to Eric Cheyfitz’s “enlightening discussion [...] of private property as a defining component of European society” (100) and notes “striking similarities [between the Spanish and the English colonial contexts][,] as the natives were denied their traditional rights” (101). In this chapter, Valdeón also incorporates the term ‘Western’ by quoting Michael Horswell’s discussion of *relaciones* as “privileging the Western culture of the colonizer” (Horswell, quoted on p. 90) (the term appears again in Chapter 4, this time quoted from the work of Stephen Greenblatt: “the images of the devil in Western imagery” [Greenblatt, quoted on p. 106]). Finally, in the chapter on evangelization, Valdeón points out, apropos of the discussion of the words *conquista*, *conversión*, and *traducción* in Vicente Rafael’s study of translation in the Spanish colonial Philippines, that

the connection between these three words [...] is not unique to the Spanish language and to Spanish expansion. Other European languages influenced by or directly derived from Latin were used in similar colonial schemes in the Americas and in other parts of the world. (111)

(Not that Cheyfitz, Greenblatt, or Rafael qualify among the “less known” scholars either.)

These instances of apparent incongruity are interspersed with some instances of incoherence. The clearest example is found in the chapter on the history of translations of the Spanish chronicles, where Valdeón writes that “it [is] not possible to regard Europe as a unity, in the same sense as [sic] it is not possible to regard the indigenous peoples of the Americas as a unity” (155), and yet, a few lines below he makes reference to “the European mind” (ibid.). Other examples are just as problematic vis-à-vis the author’s contestation of Eurocentrism: “European cultural features” (19), “the European vision of the natives” (21), “European views of the land” (101), “the European way of life” (123), “a European perspective of the encounter” (203), and so forth.

What these examples convey is not a monolithic European identity and a distinctively European approach to empire but some shared characteristics (“features”), beliefs (“vision,” “views,” “perspective”), and values (“way of life”) about

oneself and others that could be reasonably mapped into a unitary cultural and likewise epistemological area (a “mind,” if you will), not necessarily a geographical, ideological, or political one (hence the use of ‘Western’ to refer not to European but to *Eurocentric* cultures). Whereas the factual part of Valdeón’s third argument (i.e., Spain’s colonial rivals translated and manipulated a number of chronicles in order to undermine the Spanish claim to the New World and justify their intervention) is conclusively substantiated, the interpretive part stems from a mistaken belief (i.e., Eurocentrism is contingent on the existence of a European identity) and results in an altogether misleading argument.

A few remarks are in order to conclude. In one of the chapters in *Charting the Future of Translation History*, Julio-César Santoyo (2006) included the history of interpreting and the role played by translation in History (with a capital H) among the remaining “blank spaces” in translation history. Valdeón makes a valuable contribution to these two areas of research in his book. Even if the contribution as such is not entirely his (he makes rather heavy use of secondary sources, referenced on almost every page), the breadth of his scholarship is certainly impressive and his research is solid. He provides rich fodder for those interested in the interpreting profession, the problems of communication and interaction that shaped the conquest, translation policies in Spanish American colonial society, and the role played by translators in the creation and dissemination of anti-Spanish propaganda. It will likely (at least, it should) become a staple reference in what Bastin and Bandia refer to as “descriptive” studies of translation in colonial Spanish America.

On the other hand, judging from the problems that Valdeón identifies (i.e., metaphors of translation, Eurocentrism) and the solutions (i.e., ethics of communication and interaction, hybridization and resistance, rethinking ‘European’/‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ identities), it seems doubtful that the book will have the same impact on the newer (not quite ‘new’ anymore) strand of translation history, specifically as it pertains to postcolonial approaches. While the author effectively balances (quantitatively) the problems with relevant data, some of the solutions he offers are not quite as nuanced (qualitatively) as they would need to be in order to solve the problems, however tentatively. Keeping in mind, though, that the inspiration for Valdeón’s study came from a conference that was held only some years ago (in late 2009), this contribution to a recent and ongoing debate on the issues therein addressed should be more than welcome.

One last remark: while typos and other errors are naturally to be expected in a publication of 100,000-plus words with plenty of elements in languages other than English (e.g., names, titles, quotes), the amount found in this book suggests that the copy editor simply did a poor job. A thorough revision should be undertaken for a future edition.

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