

Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence

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Abstract This essay opens the question of translation so as to reflect upon the movement at the borders of modernity. In particular it focuses on the question of translation as erasure, that is, as a mechanism through which modernity expands and demarcates its proper place, its territory. This operation of translation renders invisible everything that does not fit in the "parameters of legibility" of modernity's epistemic territory. Modernity's epistemic territory designates both the realm where the discourses of modernity thrive and their very horizon of intelligibility. Translation brings to view the epistemic borders where a politics of visibility is at play between erasure and visibility, disdain and recognition. To recognize the political content of modernity's epistemic territory is to recognize that the question of global social inequality cannot be addressed simply as the consequence of an incomplete modernity. It is to acknowledge that knowledge has been part and parcel of the modern / colonial systems of oppression and destitution. The epistemic territorial practices are such that all that lies outside their realm is made invisible, is excluded from the real and is actively disdained, even unnamed. At the borders their is the movement of rejection but also the movement of incorporation; where translation appears as a process of selection, classification and appropriation that erases all that does not fit into the proper place of the already established epistemic territory. The final part of the essay looks for that which escapes from the movement of translation as incorporation and addresses the question of untranslatability. This question help us reveal elements that are outside the field of appropriation of modernity. Finally we speak of translation as struggle. Thinking in terms of epistemic translation is already to begin thinking with a vocabulary of transition, of the borders; not transition in terms of chronological change, but rather referring to a transit at the borders of modernity's epistemic territory. The epistemic hegemony of modernity rests in a politics of border keeping, a politics of epistemic translation.

1 Translation as Erasure

Translation designates the permeability, the movement at the borders of a given language, a given system of meaning and more generally, of a given epistemic territory. This essay reveals two divergent processes. The first, translation as erasure, speaks of the coloniality of translation; that is, the way in which translation performs a border-keeping role and expands the epistemic territory of modernity. The second, translation as plurality, speaks of the configuration of dialogues and the thinking *of* the borders that challenges the modern/colonial system of oppression. The fight

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against destitution and disdain makes use of translation to define a territory of difference that is dialogical and plural. This article puts greater emphasis on the first process, translation as erasure, in an effort to show modernity's mechanism of epistemic exclusion and oppression. The second process, translation as plurality, is briefly explored in the final section, but it has been extensively discussed by authors such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos and is being practiced by various social movements (Santos 2006).

We follow the perspective achieved in translation studies that has unveiled the political content of translation. "Both translation studies and cultural studies are concerned primarily with questions of power relations and textual production. The idea that texts exist outside a network of power relations is becoming increasingly difficult to accept" (Bassnett 1998: 135). The notion of translation is extended beyond its practice in literature to speak of how it designates the border of a system of knowledge, of modernity's epistemic territory. Thus, here, translation is thought beyond the realm of literature as a constitutive practice of modernity, that is, as a necessary practice for the hegemony and expansion of modernity's epistemic territory.

When looking at translation as erasure, translation is seen initially as a mechanism through which the scriptural machine of modernity expands and demarcates its proper place, its territory. This operation of translation renders invisible everything that does not fit in the "parameters of legibility" of its epistemic territory. Modernity's epistemic territory designates both the realm where the discourses of modernity thrive and their very horizon of intelligibility. This territory is the proper place of modernity; it is the ground that bestows stability to its discourses. The borders of the epistemic territory signal the rift between modernity and coloniality. They are the borders that appear in the very slash in-between modernity/coloniality. They are the burgeoning hiatus, the swirling borders in the liminal tension between incorporation and exclusion, between visibility and erasure, between validity and disdain.

In exploring the question of untranslatability we will see how the epistemic territory of modernity determines the parameters of legibility, of recognition in accordance with modernity's metaphysical principles such as the notion of time and its rule of presence (Vázquez 2010a). The epistemic territory of modernity establishes its field of certainty, its reality, by a movement of incorporation that subdues the multiple, the discontinuous, difference into the realm of presence. Incorporation is the reduction of difference into sameness, of contingency into continuity. "In short, incorporation proceeds in terms of a logic of identity and similitude" (Ansell Pearson 2006: 235). Modernity's movement of incorporation that is grounded and

grounds its epistemic territoriality takes its historical form in a series of mechanisms of appropriation and representation. The epistemic territory of modernity is coeval to the movement of appropriation that we find at play in modernity's economic, political, cultural and scientific systems. On the other hand, it is the *proper place* of modernity's regime of representation (Vázquez 2010b).

The notion of modernity's epistemic territory enables us to avoid the over-geographical determinism present in various critiques of "eurocentrism". To be sure its configuration is closely related to the history of the hegemony of the geographical-west but its field of operation is not limited to a geographical location. Epistemic hegemony and violence is not simply distributed across geographical divides, there is a history of epistemic violence in every geographical location, including the geographical West (Fornet-Betancourt 2008; Santos 2009).

We will pursue this thought by drawing on examples from Latin America. We will demonstrate how the writing of the history and geography of the "discovered" territories meant the erasure of the local histories and geographies, furthermore, of the local notions of memory, land and language. Translation makes very explicit the coloniality of power (Mignolo 2005) and the epistemic violence (Santos 2006) that have enabled the expansion of modernity.

Finally, in order to address translation as plurality, we will look at how the movements that are fighting for visibility, for recognition around the world, are also challenging the borders of modernity's epistemic territory. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006) speaks of the need of translation as a political strategy to attain mutual intelligibility, to build common grounds for the recognition of diversity, of other knowledges that have been erased or excluded from the epistemic territory of modernity. Translation thus also designates a territory of difference, of plurality and inter-cultural dialogue. Translation as an activity of and at the borders, as the in-between multiple knowledges holds unique possibilities of emancipation.

2 Epistemic Violence

[T]he epistemological alternative proposed by the WSF is that there is no global justice without global cognitive justice (Santos 2006: 14).

In this section we will show how the question of translation contributes to better understand the political content of knowledge, so as to reveal knowledge as an arena of struggle between hegemony and emancipation. Translation brings to view the epistemic borders where a politics of visibility is at play between erasure and visibility,

disdain and recognition. To acknowledge the political content of modernity's epistemic territory is to acknowledge that the question of global social inequality cannot be addressed simply as the consequence of an incomplete modernity. It is to acknowledge that the very epistemic grounding of modernity is constitutive of global social inequality. Knowledge has been part and parcel of the modern / colonial systems of oppression and destitution. The epistemic territorial practices are such that all that lies outside their realm is made invisible, is excluded from the real and is actively disdained, even unnamed.

"The epistemological privilege granted to modern science . . . was . . . instrumental in suppressing other, non-scientific forms of knowledges and, at the same time, the subaltern social groups whose social practices were informed by such knowledges. In the case of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and of the African slaves, this suppression of knowledge, a form of epistemicide . . . , was the other side of genocide" (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007: xix).

The practices of translation have been instrumental for the epistemicide; translation is a particular mechanism of the other side of modernity: coloniality.

"Translation in the rhetoric of modernity . . . was always unidirectional and served the need of imperial designs. . . . [a] modern/colonial translation that captures and transforms people, cultures, and meanings into what is legible and controllable for those in power" (Mignolo 2005: 144).

This hegemonic form of translation shows to what extent the establishment of modernity's epistemic territory was violent. The establishment of modernity's beliefs was not simply performed through the "light of reason", but rather through colonial practices of expansion, disdain and erasure like those associated with what Michel de Certeau calls the scriptural machine.

"'Progress' is scriptural in type. . . . The 'oral' is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and tradition. A frontier, a front of Western culture is established by that separation. Thus one can read above the portals of modernity such inscriptions as 'Here to work is to write,' or 'Here only what is written is understood.' Such is the internal law of that which has constituted itself as 'Western' " (de Certeau 1988: 134).¹

The scriptural practices cannot be underestimated if we are to understand the establishment of modernity's epistemic territory. In speaking of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, de Certeau makes an observation that is directly applicable to the origins of modernity/coloniality in the conquest of America.

"Writing acquires the right to reclaim, subdue or educate history. . . . Writing becomes science and politics . . . It becomes violence, cutting its way through the irrationality of superstitious peoples or regions still under the spell of sorcery" (de Certeau 1988: 144).

The violence of the expansion of modernity's epistemic territory is the disdain of all that doesn't belong to its parameters of legibility and certainty. We can exemplify the movement of translation as a scriptural practice of incorporation with one of the earliest colonial works of translation and "ethnology", written at the very start of the Spanish colonization in America, the work of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (c.1488–1590), *"The History of the Things of the New World"* (Sahagún 1956). The work of Sahagún sits at the origin of "modernity", at the origin of the planetary expansion of modernity's epistemic territory. In the work of Sahagún we encounter the ambivalence and entwinement between the incorporation of the other into the scriptural archive of modernity and her erasure.

Nobody can deny the importance of the work of Sahagún for our understanding of what was lost, for understanding the ways of living that preceded the colonial encounter. Sahagún is credited as a major contributor to our knowledge and to the scriptural survival of pre-Hispanic Mexican culture, next to Fray Andrés de Olmos, Fray Alonso de Molina and Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía (Edmonson 1974: 3). The enormous size of the bibliography around his work bears testimony to his importance as "the first anthropologist of the Americas" (León-Portilla 1999).

"Even if only from the methodological point of view the work of Sahagún grants him the title of the father of anthropology in the new world, it is necessary to add that the materials that he gathered are so rich and important for the current research on the pre-Hispanic world, that they continue to be one of the most valuable sources for the researcher of Mexico's indigenous past" (León-Portilla 1966: 13).

In spite of Sahagún's undeniable importance for today's scholarship, his work is emblematic of the movement of translation at the borders of modernity, where the incorporation into the corpus of modern knowledge designates a movement of appropriation as erasure.

Bernardino de Sahagún together with other early "scribes", "translators" of the colonies witnessed the colonial destruction of other cultures and often showed admiration for the societies that were being colonized. In this sense their work is also an essential source for a study of the origins of the dark side of modernity.

"This work would be of great utility to make known the greatness of this Mexican people, which remains unknown . . . they have been destroyed, them and all their

things, so much so that they could not even keep the appearance of what they were. So that now they are seen as barbarians as worthless people . . ." (Sahagún 1956: 29)

Witnessing the erasure of a whole culture, Sahagún strove to preserve it by incorporating it into the written language of modernity. However, through this operation he reduced the other to be "an object determined by the categories of the European. . . . – and – he would declare the Indians world-view appearance and reality the sacred scriptures" (Villoro 1989: 23).²

Although the specialized literature in pre-Hispanic studies acknowledges Sahagún's work as a preservation of pre-Hispanic cultures, this moment of incorporation and translation of pre-Hispanic ideas into the body of European knowledge marks as well the historical moment of their erasure as practices, as living memory. Though Sahagún's text is a bilingual text in Nahuatl and Spanish, it is built on various levels of translation and scriptural practices: first it performs the appropriation of "oral knowledge" into a pictorial and scriptural language and then the passing from pictorial to written language. All these translations can be seen as an exercise of inscription, appropriation, incorporation, marking thus, the very moment of the demise of these living oral traditions under the hegemony of modernity's scriptural enterprise.

"Sahagún himself details all the manipulations to which he had to subject the original transcriptions of the elders' accounts. He cut synthesized, and arranged the materials to adapt them to the guidelines of his time concerning the writing of books. He had to organize the material by books, chapters, and paragraphs. . . . The combination of oral transcription and literary manipulation typical of Sahagún gives us in a nutshell a view of the confrontation between two worlds" (Marcos 2006: xxii).

The demise of oral traditions and the institution of a scriptural economy of knowledge comes hand in hand with the erasure of the past as a living experience, with a colonial politics of time (Vázquez 2009). The notions of memory (ancestors/memoria), land (tierra) and language (palabra) represent examples of the untranslatable, namely that which is erased by translation and replaced by the modern notions of chronology, space and writing. The untranslatable is discussed in the fourth section. The expansion of modernity's epistemic territory relies on this manner of incorporation as erasure where there is a survival of written history and a loss of living memory, of memory as experience. Coloniality has performed this uprooting of the "non-western", this un-naming, in order to inscribe them in a system of classification as the other, the backward, the savage, the primitive other. Translation is here revealed as erasure.

Both the expansion of modernity's epistemic territory and the way in which the frontier has been constituted and secured call forth the question of translation. Translation designates the movement at the borders and their very constitution. It brings into legibility a double movement: on the one hand, an economy of appropriation and expansion of modernity's epistemic territory, and on the other, the active rejection, the making invisible of modernity's elsewhere, of modernity's others. Appropriation cannot be thought without exclusion, universality without otherness, modernity without coloniality.

"Modernity is a condition of compulsive, and addictive designing. . . . When it comes to designing the forms of human togetherness, the waste is human beings. Some human beings who do not fit into the designed form nor can be fitted into it. . . . Flawed beings, from whose absence or obliteration the designed form could only gain, becoming more uniform, more harmonious, more secure and altogether more at peace with itself" (Bauman 2004: 30).

The stability of modern designs implies the segregation, marginalization and if possible the making invisible of all those that do not fit in the design. In this way, we begin to see how the movement of coloniality is always already implied in the movement of modernity. The mediation between modernity and coloniality points here to a movement that means at one and the same time incorporation and exclusion, continuity and rupture. As we have suggested, appropriation comes not only with destitution but also with erasure. The epistemic territory of modernity is such that it constitutes its field of visibility as the totality of the real (Vázquez 2010b). The equation of the real to visibility that underlies its forms of appropriation is also at play in its mechanisms of representation, in its visions of novelty, progress, modernization and the like, in the artifice of a utopian future. Modernity's mechanisms of appropriation and representation comes hand in hand with the uprooting of the past as a site of diverging experience, of discontinuity, of epistemic transformation and political action. In the following section, we will move beyond the question of translation as a scriptural enterprise to look at it as an epistemic mechanism of appropriation into modernity's territory.

3 Classification and the Appropriation of the World

Translation has to be understood not only as a "technology" of the scriptural enterprise of modernity, but also as a movement of appropriation of the world, of incorporation into modernity's territory, its reality and visibility. Translation appears thus as a process

of selection, classification and appropriation that erases all that does not fit into the proper place of the already established epistemic territory.

The literature around modernity / coloniality is key to see how these epistemic politics were concretely played out in the expansion of modernity. Anibal Quijano, for instance, shows how the social classification around the idea of race is a constitutive element of the expansion of modernity and capitalism since the unfolding of the modern / colonial system in America. The idea of “race” enabled the

“codification of the difference between the conquerors and conquered . . . a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others. The conquistadors assumed this idea as the constitutive, founding element of the relations of domination that the conquest imposed” (Quijano 2000: 533).

Quijano shows that the relations of power and domination in the colony cannot be sufficiently explained only by referring to the economic processes of extraction and exploitation. “[R]ace became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power” (Quijano 2000: 535). The colonial economy as well as colonial politics depended on the establishment of an epistemic apparatus of domination. At this very moment, modernity deployed its own “universal” categories so as to establish its epistemic territory, its monopoly over the real. What Martin Heidegger (1993) calls the mode of appropriation of modern science is explicitly seen in the practices and politics of knowledge that constituted the expansion of European hegemony. This modern/Euro-centric knowledge came to transform the practices of everyday life, the very notion of the real, including the exercise of identity.

“Social relation founded on the category of race produced new historical social identities in America—Indians, blacks, and mestizos—and redefined others. . . . [R]ace and racial identity were established as instruments of basic social classification” (Quijano 2000: 534).

The classification of the world is a key process in the expansion of modernity’s epistemic territory. It designates the particular mode of appropriation of the “disciplines”. It at once appropriates and represents the world within modernity’s parameters of legibility. It subjects the world to the power of modernity. Classification objectivises, constitutes series of objects. It institutes an ordering, a mapping of the world. It defines the real as presence. Classification brings into the order of continuity and sameness the diversity of the world.

Classification upholds, “naturalizes” hierarchies. It creates an image of the world as representation, one in which the real is vacated from experience. Experiences of the past, the land, the voice, the word remain in excess of modernity’s territory. Modernity’s epistemic territory seems to be contained in its own self-referential representation, within its totalizing myth of reason and universality, bound by its horizon of appropriation and representation. Concurrently, through classification those experiences outside and in excess of modernity’s territory are deprived from reality; they remain erased, unnamed or discredited as myth.

Let us take the example of the notion of race to see how the expansion of modernity’s epistemic territory involves appropriation as erasure. The condition of entrance of the “non-Western” into modernity’s epistemic territory was their classification and the erasure of their own experiences and knowledges.

“In the moment that the Iberians conquered, named, and colonized America, . . . they found a great number of different peoples, each with its own history, language, discoveries and cultural products, memory and identity. . . . Three hundred years later, all of them had become merged into a single identity: Indians” (Quijano 2000: 551).

The mechanism of classification configures a particular politics of naming and un-naming. The power of naming incorporates “alterity” to and subsumes it under modernity’s epistemic territory. Its power of inscribing “alterity” determines the parameters of visibility, of identity, of recognition of “alterity” within the epistemic territory of modernity. Language is brought under the sway of the scriptural economy; it is turned into an instrument of appropriation. The power of the disciplines rests in appropriation, in their ability to make into their own, into their proper place, their territory, the multiplicity of the “world”. Classification speaks of translation as a mechanism of expansion, incorporation and erasure.

The institution of the idea of race, just as the mapping of the world that sits at the origin of modernity, speaks of modernity’s mechanisms of classification and appropriation, of the modern “writing of the world”, of modernity’s scriptural machine. As we will see in the last section, this same manner of appropriation is today at play in the expansion of global hegemonic discourses, such as that of “global capitalism”. But let us first address in the next section the question that calls to be asked, the question of untranslatability. Now that we have seen translation as a movement of incorporation and erasure, we will approximate the question of that which is being lost, that which remains invisible, that which is erased in the movement of expansion of modernity’s epistemic territory.

4 Hegemony and Untranslatability

“Cada lengua es una visión del mundo, cada civilización es un mundo” (Paz 1973: 58).

Translation as a movement of incorporation calls for the question of untranslatability. What is that which remains untranslatable, outside the scope of translation? What is excluded from its movement of incorporation? What is in excess of modernity’s epistemic territory and escapes its economy of the real? This is a question that belongs to the urgent task of circumscribing modernity, of divesting it from its semblance of totality.

Various critiques of the hegemonic discourses of modernity have uncovered its Eurocentric parameters of observation (Bhambra 2007a; Chakrabarty 2000; Mignolo 2000; Said 1991). For example, Gurminder K. Bhambra shows how in the discussion on multiple modernities the European institutional framework remains as the unquestioned yardstick. “[W]hilst purporting to offer new ways of understanding the concept of modernity theories of multiple modernities continue to rest on assumptions of an original modernity of the West which others adapt, domesticate, or tropicalize” (Bhambra 2007b: 71). In a similar vein, she argues that in historical sociology there is a prevailing “western exceptionalism”, whose meta-narratives remain unquestioned. In other words historical sociology has kept “western modernity” as the main framework of reference, as its underlying “ideal type” (Bhambra 2010). Now our argument is that parameters such as “Western exceptionalism”, or that of the “European institutional framework”, or more generally methodological Eurocentrism find their condition of possibility in modernity’s epistemic territory and in its economy of the real. In other words, the question of translation and the untranslatable shows that modernity not only imposed “Western-centric” macro-narratives, but furthermore, that in establishing an epistemic territory, it came to define the very borders of the intelligible, of the “real”.

How can we elucidate the parameters of visibility and certainty that circumscribe the epistemic territory of modernity? What are the coordinates into which difference and multiplicity are being incorporated? There is, to be sure, a variety of ways in which we could approach this question. We suggest addressing it here through the question of time; thus intimating that all that is excluded from the epistemic territory of modernity is that which does not fit into its notion of time. The modern notion of chronological time connotes and enforces the notion of space as presence, thus making of presence and the present the sole site of the real (Vázquez 2010a).

In “historiography” we find an instance of the implementation of the modern notion of time that is directly related to the scriptural enterprise of modernity. Historiography deploys the linearity of time, it appropriates what has been, the “past” into the modern epistemic territory, into the field of “history”. Historiography reduces the past to a re-presentation, to presence, to the present. Under the representation and ordering of the past as a series of elements, the “notion” of the past as a site of experience is made meaningless. In the appropriation and representation of the past, the chronology of linear time emerges as the primary ordering principle. The incorporation of the past, its enclosure within the modern epistemic territory has been a central instrument of coloniality’s domination and the concurrent epistemicide.

“[T]he Europeans generated a new temporal perspective of history and relocated the colonized population, along with their respective histories and cultures, in the past of a historical trajectory. . . . that departed in the state of nature and culminated in Europe” (Quijano 2000: 541–2).

In Quijano’s reflections we can see how the incorporation into modern chronology is exercised as a form of “temporal discrimination” (Vázquez 2009). The linear representation of history in its often evolutionary form of classification has been a key instrument of discrimination.

“Thus, all non-Europeans could be considered as pre-European and at the same time displaced on a certain historical chain from the primitive to the civilized, from the rational to the irrational, from the traditional to the modern, from the magic-mythic to the scientific” (Quijano 2000: 556).

Modern epistemic translation comes to light as the incorporation of different realities into the parameters of legibility, where reality is ascertained as the field of presence and the present. What remains invisible, the untranslatable, are all those forms of understanding and relating to the world that constitute the exteriority of modernity. What is erased belongs to the temporalities and the spatialities of other social realities. In this way, notions such as land (*tierra*), word/language (*palabra*), past (*memoria*) are divested of their temporal depth to enter modernity’s epistemic territory, to enter its economy of the real.

“We are rebels because the land is rebel, there are those who sell and buy it as if the land was not [had no being] and as if the colour of the land that we are was non-existent” (Marcos 2001).³ When people of Chiapas say land / *tierra*, they do not mean a measurable, or quantifiable extension of land, an object of geography and even less a commodity. *Tierra* exceeds the modern limit of reality in

presence, it implies the past, heritage, memory. *Tierra* has to be defended not for the sake of property but for the sake of protecting the ancestors, of preserving an origin that is both “past” and always already “present”. This political responsibility towards the ancestors is not conservative but revolutionary vis a vis the modern notion of time, in which the present and presence are the sole locus of the real, and where political action is always oriented towards a future design, towards an as yet inexistent rational utopia (Vázquez 2010b).

A parallel reflection can be done around the notion of language / palabra. The decolonial, or better un-colonial meaning of “palabra” is not that of a language as an instrument of cognition, of knowledge. Furthermore, it is not the property of an individual, a “speaker”, a “writer”; rather here “palabra” refers to the realm of memory, of the ancestors, it belongs to an in-between, to a shared community in the present as in the past. Palabra is a site of experience that is only made possible in the coming together, in plurality, also in the coming together of the various pasts in the present. It is in this in-betweenness and not in its objectivity that “la palabra” gains its strength and credibility.⁴

Another example of the movement of erasure and incorporation is that of the colonality of gender. María Lugones helps us to illustrate this when she quotes *The Invention of Women* of Oyéronké Oyewùmi. “No gender system was in place. Indeed, she tells us that gender has ‘become important in Yoruba studies not as an artifact of Yoruba life but because Yoruba life, past and present, has been *translated* into English to fit the Western pattern of body-reasoning’” (Lugones 2007: 196).⁵ In the case of Mesoamerica, the gender system in place before the colony was radically different from modernity’s gender ordering. The modern male / female dichotomy did not exist rather we could speak of non-dichotomous approaches to gender. “[T]o be relevant to the Mesoamerican universe, gender must be freed from assumptions of fixed dichotomous characteristics grounded on anatomical distinctions . . . [A] gender theory true to Mesoamerican sources must be open, fluid, and nonstratified” (Marcos 2006: 14–15).

Modern epistemic translation has been the imposition of an economy of truth, of a notion of language as textuality, of time as chronology, of presence as the site of the real, of gender as dichotomy, and so forth. Modern epistemic translation is the operation of subsuming difference under an established framework of legibility, of certainty. The conditions of entry into modernity’s economy of truth are coeval with colonality’s mechanisms of disdain and erasure. The moment in which the epistemic territory of modernity establishes itself as the reference for social practices,

marks also the moment of the widespread destruction of other forms of life, of the diversity of human experience.

It is important to clarify that such a translation is not ruled by a single language but rather by a single economy of truth. In other words the economy of truth that constitutes the epistemic territory of modernity operates across different languages. In this very article, we have made an exercise of linguistic translation by using the words “tierra” y “palabra” in order to show that which remains untranslatable. We have been able to demonstrate how these words bear a different relation to time and an idea of togetherness that disappears when incorporated into the modern epistemic territory. The use of another language (Spanish) has facilitated the task of explanation, as a pedagogical device, a metaphor to make visible for the English speaking reader the difference with the established notions of land and language. But we must avoid the confusion and be aware that this doesn't mean that in hegemonic Spanish “tierra” and “palabra” do not bear the same meaning of “land” and “language” in English as they both belong to the same modern epistemic territory, the same economy of truth.

To ask the question of untranslatability reveals what is being lost in the movement of translation as incorporation. It is also to enquire into modernity's economy of truth. This exercise shows the importance of the “internal” critique of modernity in the tradition of romanticism, continental philosophy, critical thinking, and post-modernism that have uncovered various genealogies of modernity, they speak of what is known from a decolonial perspective as the local history of the west. These critical traditions have divested modernity's economy of truth from its claim to universality by making it socially and historically constituted. Heidegger's history of metaphysics, Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Derrida's *Grammatology* are prominent examples in this still ongoing effort to reveal and humble modernity's machinery from the inside. Yes, it is true that their perspective is Eurocentric as they also very much belong to the local-history that they are challenging, their critique is somehow circumscribed by the “totality of modernity”, by its epistemic territory. However, it is of paramount importance that decolonial thinking recognizes their relevance for the humbling of modernity, for the disarticulation of modernity's claims to truth and universality. They have proven wrong a modernity whose hegemony and power of expansion remains bound to its economy of truth, to its regime of representation, to the imposition of its epistemic territory as a universal reality. One task that remains open is that of bridging the gap between the “intra-modern” critiques of modernity and the critique that knows the borders, the

“external” critiques of modernity. Let us now go to the final section where we will offer in the manner of a conclusion some thoughts on the possibility of understanding translation not as incorporation, but rather as struggle.

5 Translation, Struggle and the Vocabulary of the Borders

“Le consentement universel est déjà un préjugé bien miraculeux et incompréhensible”.

Alfred Jarry 1897 (Jarry 1980: 32)

This final section departs from the question of translation as erasure in order to open some final thoughts on translation as struggle. Thinking in terms of epistemic translation is already to begin thinking with a vocabulary of transition, of the borders; not transition in terms of chronological change, but rather referring to a transit at the borders of modernity’s epistemic territory. The epistemic hegemony of modernity as we have seen rests in a politics of border keeping, a politics of epistemic translation.

Understanding epistemic translation is to understand how the borders of the intelligible are kept and defined; how the modern epistemic territory constitutes itself by incorporating and by doing so also by objectifying and rejecting. To recognize the erasure of difference in the politics of translation is at one and the same time the recognition that behind the semblance of unity, there is always already difference. “[O]n the one hand, translation suppresses the differences between one language and the other; on the other, it unveils them with more clarity; thanks to translation we become aware that our neighbours speak and think in a different way from our own⁶” (Paz 1973: 59).

To speak of translation and the borders of the epistemic territory of modernity is already to recognize that there is an elsewhere to modernity, to its economy of truth, to its universal validity claims. Translation thematizes at one and the same time modernity’s contours of visibility and the very same borders as the site of its coloniality, of the mechanism of disdain and erasure, of the production of invisibility.

The limits of modernity’s epistemic territory are also sites of rebellion of creative fracture and celebration of plurality. The emancipatory notion of border thinking, as elaborated by Mignolo (2000), is consistent with the realization that “[a]lternatives to modern epistemology can hardly come only from modern (Western) epistemology itself” (Mignolo 2000: 9). Today it is clear that modernity’s economy of truth, its politics of visibility, is being challenged by a thinking and a politics that are precisely bringing to question the borders of its epistemic hegemony.

Many non-Western (indigenous, rural, etc.) populations of the world conceive of the community and the relationship with nature, knowledge, historical experience, memory, time, and space as configuring ways of life that cannot be reduced to Eurocentric conceptions and cultures. . . . Differences between worldviews become explicit and turn into sites of struggle . . . (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007: XX)

In the context of our discussion on the epistemic territory of modernity, social struggles appear as struggles that are challenging and redefining the oppressive grammars of power. In this way, many terms are being displaced and re-signified, they are endowed with a meaning that articulates emerging political practices, alternative forms of justice, other ways of living.

“Just when the global discourse on democracy has become one-dimensional, purveying the neoliberal model of market democracy as the only universally desirable model . . . significant countervailing processes have emerged in the form of political and social movements at the grassroots. . . . In this process of opposition to globalization, the micro-movements have begun to raise a new discourse on democracy and to invent political practice . . .” (Sheth 2007: 3).

It is worth noting the specific meaning that the notion of translation has taken within social movements, particularly in the context of the World Social Forum. “A politics of cultural diversity and mutual intelligibility calls for a complex procedure of reciprocal and horizontal translation” (Santos, Nunes and Meneses, 2007: xxi). Here translation appears as a practice of plurality, it is a form of translation that is not performing a border keeping role and expanding modernity’s epistemic territory, but rather articulating a common ground of struggle for challenging modernity hegemony. For Boaventura de Sousa Santos this form of translation in-between movements is the condition of mutual intelligibility and articulation of struggle. “This theory of translation allows common ground to be identified in an indigenous struggle, a feminist struggle, an ecological struggle, etc., without erasing the autonomy and difference of each of them” (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007: xxvi). In other words, translation enables the coming together of a plurality of movements and by turning difference into a site for struggle it comes to fracture, to challenge the forces of erasure of modernity’s epistemic territory.

To speak of translation as struggle enables us to change the terms of the conversation from an economy of truth into a politics of difference, an ecology of differences. It brings the recognition that there is difference outside the paradigm of unity of modernity, that modernity’s epistemic territory has been kept and expanded precisely by the incorporation and disdain of difference. By exposing the hegemonic politics of border keeping, of epistemic translation as erasure, we can behold the existence of other knowledges and

the possibilities of configuration of “intercultural dialogues”, of a politics of plurality.

The thinking of translation is an effort and a call to continue searching for a vocabulary of the borders, for a view of modernity as a powerful and hegemonic, but also limited, epistemic territory. One of the essential tasks of critique is that of revealing the contours of modernity so as to divest it from its semblance of totality, so as to disprove the claims that say that there is no outside to modernity, to capitalism, to globalization etc . . . By showing the contours of modernity’s epistemic territory, the thought of translation as erasure contributes to the humbling of modernity. It enables us to take seriously “modernity’s elsewhere”, the lands of difference, of plurality. Translation as struggle, translation not as border keeping but as border breaking, not as erasure but as the preservation of difference, speaks of a movement of recognition, remembrance and emergence.

Notes

¹ My translation.

² My translation: “El otro sólo puede ser comprendido en cuanto se le niega su papel de sujeto y se reduce a un objeto determinado por las categorías del europeo. Puede entonces ser dominado. . . . declarará apariencia la del indio y realidad la que la Escritura revelada.”

³ My translation: “Rebelde somos porque es rebelde la tierra, y hay quien la vende y compra como si la tierra no fuera y como si no existiera el color que somos de la tierra”.

⁴ It is interesting to note that one can find in European poets similar relations to language, this shows how what we know as modernity’s hegemonic “notion of the real” has also erased or marginalised other experiences within “European modernity” in order to establish its economy of truth.

⁵ My italics.

⁶ My translation: “[P]or una parte, la traducción suprime las diferencias entre una lengua y otra; por la otra, las revela más plenamente; gracias a la traducción nos enteramos que nuestros vecinos hablan y piensan de un modo distinto al nuestro”.

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