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# Translation Matters

## Special Issue: History as Translation

Guest Editor: Margarita Savchenkova

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# TRANSLATION MATTERS

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However, in the interests of transparency, and out of respect for the attention and professionalism that peer reviewers bring to their task, from Spring 2025 we will be making their (anonymous) reports available on the TM website, whenever possible.

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**GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION**

# HISTORY AS TRANSLATION: SEARCHING FOR TRANSLATION IN THE TRACES OF HISTORY

Over the past few decades, translation studies has shown an increasing interest in historical themes. This emerging focus has led to a wide range of collaborative initiatives[1] and publications that seek to offer a thorough understanding of how history and translation intersect.

Central to this interdisciplinary dialogue is the idea of an intrinsic connection between translation and history. Translation has undeniably shaped historical processes across different periods and cultures, while historical contexts, in turn, play a crucial role in understanding translational practices. As aptly observed in the manifesto of the History and Translation network, "there is no history without translation and no translation without history"[2], since both are concerned with uncovering the past and interrogating the ways in which language—deeply entangled with power relations and social asymmetries—operates within historical discourse. In a similar vein, André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett (1998, p. 6) stress that "[t]ranslation is in history, always. It is, in many cases, a vital factor within history, and the more we learn about its history, the more obvious this fact becomes".

Among the most influential academic contributions to this field are George Bastin and Paul Bandia's (2006) *Charting the Future of Translation History*, Theo Hermans' (2022) *Translation and History: A Textbook*, Christopher Rundle's (2022) *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History*, and Lieven D'hulst's (2025) *A Cultural History of Translation*. Alongside these broader theoretical reflections, numerous studies have focused on the history of translation and the historical role of translators themselves. A landmark example is *Translators through History*, edited by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth ([1995]/2012), which traces the contribution of translators across different eras. Equally significant are the collective volumes *Translation under Fascism*, edited by Christopher Rundle and Kate Sturge (2010), and *Translation under Communism*, edited by Christopher Rundle, Anne Lange, and Daniele Monticelli (2022), both of which attempt to map translational activity within authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

Nevertheless, without in any way diminishing the important contribution these studies have made to both translation studies and history, it should be noted that much of this research tends to conceptualize translation primarily as an interlingual activity, identifying temporal gaps, along with cultural, ideological, and linguistic aspects, as some of the main challenges faced by translators. In this context, this special issue of *Translation Matters* aims to move beyond existing approaches by reconsidering translation outside the

[1] Most notably the international research network History and Translation (https://historyandtranslation.net/), established in 2021 by scholars such as Christopher Rundle, Hephzibah Israel, Outi Paloposki, Daniele Monticelli, and Vicente Rafael, among others. Another example is the digital portal devoted to the history of translation in Spain (https://phte.upf.edu/), created by Francisco Lafarga and Luis Pegenaute, which documents the evolution of translation activity in Spain from the medieval period to the present day.

[2] See https://historyandtranslation.net/manifesto/ (Accessed: 12 June 2026).

limits of a strictly interlingual framework. More specifically, it invites readers to explore the possibility of understanding history itself as a form of translation in the broadest sense, as a ubiquitous practice (Blumczynski, 2016), while engaging with the implications of such a perspective.

The conception of history as a form of translation is by no means a recent development; it has its roots in critical historiography. For instance, Hayden White ([1987] /1990, p. 1) describes narrative—and therefore history—as "the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific". As he points out, historians may feel uneasy with the idea that their works involve translating 'facts' into 'fiction'; nevertheless, this process is an inherent aspect of historical writing (White, 1978, p. 92). In this sense, White ([1987]/1990, pp. 188–189) underscores that

> [h]istorians have always used some version of a theory of language to assist them in their work of 'translating' meaning across the historical continuum in order to 'make sense' of their documents. It would appear, therefore, that the question confronting contemporary historians is not whether they will utilize a linguistic model to aid them in their work of translation but what kind of linguistic model they will use. And this is especially crucial for intellectual historians, who are concerned above all with the problem of meaning and that of translating between different meaning systems, whether as between past and present or between the documents and those readers of history books who wish to know what these documents 'really mean'.

Alun Munslow (1997, p. 6; 2012, p. 150) also argues that history is fundamentally "the process of translating evidence into facts" and is essentially "a translation exercise". Historical writing can be seen as translating between different mediums (LaCapra, [1983]/1994, p. 26), where the past is converted into written form and interpreted through contemporary concepts (Jenkins, [1991]/2003, pp. 15–16).

In this context, historians act as translators bridging the past and the present. As Peter Burke (2005, p. 3) aptly states, "[i]f the past is a foreign country […], then historians may be regarded as translators between past and present". A similar idea is expressed by Paul Hernadi (1976, p. 247), who argues that "[t]o the extent that the historian succeeds in communicating 'thoughts, things, and images' as 'words, names, and signs', he translates — from the idiom of events, forever past, into the idiom of continually present discourse".

Several philosophers have likewise reflected on history in terms of transmission and translation. In his unpublished seminar *History and Truth*, for example, Jacques Derrida conceives of history as a transfer, a transmission, as something perpetually in motion (see Baring, 2014, p. 176), like translation itself. And in *After Babel*, George Steiner ([1975]/1976, p. 29) also frames the past through the paradigms of translation and reading:

> The process of diachronic translation inside one's own native tongue is so constant, we perform it so unawares, that we rarely pause either to note its formal intricacy or the decisive

> part it plays in the very existence of civilization. By far the greatest mass of the past as we experience it is a verbal construct. History is a speech-act, a selective use of the past tense. Even substantive remains such as buildings and historical sites must be 'read', i.e. located in a context of verbal recognition and placement. […] But each reading, each translation differs, each is undertaken from a distinctive angle of vision.

The conception of 'history as translation', introduced by critical historiography, has recently been systematically explored in one of the most comprehensive and innovative works on the intersection of historiography and translation studies, *La traducción y la(s) historia(s). Nuevas vías de investigación*, by África Vidal Claramonte (2018). In this monograph, the author challenges the traditional view of history as an objective account of 'reality', positing instead that history is not a single text, but rather texts that rewrite and translate 'reality' intralingually (Vidal Claramonte, 2018, p. 2). She thus encourages readers to reconsider history as an intralingual form of translation that should always be conceived in the plural, so as to avoid the danger of a single History (Adichie, 2009), namely, the history of the victors.

Similarly, Luigi Alonzi's (2023) *History as a Translation of the Past: Case Studies from the West*, reviewed in this special issue by **Celestine Mannuthy Babu**, approaches historical interpretation as a translation process. In his introduction, Alonzi (2023, p. 1) argues that interpreting the past can be seen as an "act of translation, both epistemologically and cognitively".

Another contribution is Margarita Savchenkova's (2024) work, *La traducción emocional de la historia. La memoria traumática en la obra de Svetlana Alexiévich*, also reviewed in this issue by **Inés Carril Vega**. Savchenkova explores how history, translation, traumatic memory, and emotions intersect in the context of (re)writing Soviet history. She takes the work of Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, as a central case study.

More recently, África Vidal Claramonte's (2025) *Translating His-stories*, likewise reviewed in this issue by **Javier de la Morena-Corrales**, further develops the line of inquiry initiated in her 2018 work. In this publication, she reflects on how women engage in the process of (re)translating histories that have traditionally been narrated from male perspectives.

Going further, it is important to note that the understanding of history through the lens of translation increasingly transcends the textual realm. For example, Peter Burke (1997) employs the concept of *translatio* to analyze the emergence of the carnival tradition in the Americas. In the same vein, Sergei Oushakine (2013) invokes the idea of translation when discussing the military parades that the Russian government organizes annually to mark the end of the war between Nazi Germany and the USSR. For Oushakine (2013, p. 272), these patriotic celebrations function not simply as acts of remembrance, but as performative practices based on symbolic reenactment, through which the past is translated into present-day physical space.

Scholars working within the field of conceptual history frequently draw on the notion of translation to illustrate the intricate process of both establishing and operationalizing concepts (see Pernau and Sachsenmaier, 2016). Following Reinhart Koselleck's (2016) line of thought, Kari Palonen (2016, p. 174) maintains that "every translation, as an act in time, involves a conceptual history of the movement between the translatable and translated". He further suggests that translation itself may be understood as a 'method' of conceptual history.

Additionally, some researchers within the history of emotions have turned to translation-oriented approaches. A prime example is William M. Reddy's monograph ([2001]/2004), *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. Drawing on anthropological and psychological research, Reddy ([2001]/2004, p. 86) points out that "every expressive act can be viewed as the outcome of convergent translation tasks. Sensory, linguistic, relational, and status codes are all in play in the articulation of the expression". In order to trace the evolution of emotions in modern France, Reddy introduces the concept of 'emotive', a term deeply intertwined with the notion of translation. According to Reddy, the 'emotive' links the expression of emotions with emotional experience itself, representing the interpretative effort through which we translate our feelings.

* * *

As the previous discussion has shown, a growing number of studies have begun to approach history as translation. The contributions included in this special issue aim to further develop and enrich the existing research. Moving beyond the strictly interlingual realm, the articles examine different historical periods and geographical contexts through the conceptual lens of history as translation. Collectively, they explore the intersections between history and translation, focusing on the ways in which historical processes, narratives, and memories may be interpreted as forms of translation.

The opening contribution to this special issue of *Translation Matters*, authored by **Luigi Alonzi**, lays the theoretical foundations for the volume. After providing a broad bibliographical overview of the intersections between history and translation—necessarily engaging with seminal works by Theo Hermans (2022) and Christopher Rundle (2012)—Alonzi proposes the use of translation as an analytical framework for interpreting historical phenomena. Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, the author examines the historian's role as a mediator whose work always entails acts of translation. In this regard, historians mediate between past and present by translating cultures, ideologies, and social practices of distant periods into forms intelligible to contemporary readers (see also Burke, 2005; Hernadi, 1976). He conceptualizes history as a mode of 'translated presence', in which multiple temporal layers interact within the present and every historical object is regarded as something translated that must continually be retranslated for future contexts.

The article by **Adrián Izquierdo** explores the relationship between translation and political biography in early modern historiography through the works of the French historiographer Pierre Matthieu. The author shows that historical writing during this period functioned as a translational practice operating on two levels. On the one hand, it involved a temporal dimension, whereby figures from antiquity and the medieval past—such as Sejanus or Philippa of Catania—were reinterpreted as political models through which Matthieu could indirectly criticise contemporary royal favourites. On the other hand, it entailed a linguistic and cultural dimension, as these texts were translated into different languages and adapted to new political contexts. By analysing the Spanish and English versions of Matthieu's narratives, Izquierdo demonstrates how translation enabled political biographies to resonate with local realities and anxieties. Ultimately, the study highlights that the historian is an active cultural mediator who constructs meaning through processes of adaptation, selection, reformulation, and omission, thereby revealing translation as a prime element of historiographical practice itself. In doing so, this work echoes the arguments advanced in Alonzi's contribution to this special issue.

**Estibaliz Valle**, for her part, examines the theatre of Olympe de Gouges during the French Revolution. This paper underscores that De Gouges' plays not only documented revolutionary events, but also mediated political experience by transforming it into theatrical discourse. Through a detailed analysis of four plays, the author identifies different modes of translation, including spatial-social translation to represent revolutionary sociability, allegorical-memorial translation to reinterpret the political memory of figures such as Mirabeau, crisis translation to provide moral coherence to violence, and affective-mythopoetic translation to reconfigure military victories into political myths. The paper positions De Gouges' dramaturgy as a performative mediation that reveals how theatre can function as a tool for giving meaning to history as it unfolds.

**David Gibbons**'s article, which follows, revisits *Storia della colonna infame* by Alessandro Manzoni through the prism of history as translation, proposing that Manzoni's historiographical practice constitutes a process of translation between past and present. According to Gibbons, Manzoni strategically employed a text written two centuries earlier as a means of indirect political commentary on his own historical context of nineteenth-century Italy under Austrian censorship. This strategy enabled him to 'synchronize' distinct temporalities and address political issues from a relatively protected position.

In his contribution, **Charles Cheung** invites readers to approach the rich history of China through the viewpoint of a twentieth-century Portuguese journalist, José de Freitas. Cheung's case study is *A China antiga e moderna* (1941), which he explores through the notion of so-called ´double foreignness´. This concept refers to the way in which the temporal distance of the past is intensified by the cultural and linguistic distance involved in narrating the history of a foreign civilization. The author demonstrates how Freitas, working within the context of 1940s Portugal, employed both interlingual and cultural translation to rewrite predominantly Francophone sources. Through strategies of adaptation, selection, omission, and simplification, China's long and heterogeneous past

was totally reshaped into a coherent form accessible to Portuguese audiences. The paper thus shows how the use of European references and stereotyped images transformed the complexity of Chinese millennial history into a linear and simplified historical account.

The next contribution shifts the focus to a different geographical and historical context through the study of **Tamara Barakat**, whose research brings together translation, oral history, memory, and trauma. In this paper, Barakat proposes that translation can serve as a methodological tool capable of producing embodied, affective, and experiential forms of knowledge about the past. Drawing on the concept of the 'anarchive', she seeks to capture the sensory and emotional dimensions of history, often overlooked by traditional archival systems. Barakat centers her analysis on the artwork *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* by Samia Halaby, in order to show how experiential translation (Campbell and Vidal, 2025) transforms oral testimonies from survivors of the 1956 massacre in Palestine into a multimodal visual narrative. In this way, the artwork recovers and preserves the memory of marginalized communities, while also illustrating translation's capacity to mediate traumatic experience beyond merely linguistic realms.

**Parina Ghomi Oskoui'**s paper argues that the dubbing of historical films constitutes a process through which the past is reconstructed and adapted to new contexts. Through an analysis of Hollywood films dubbed into Persian, the author demonstrates that dubbing functions as a form of mediation that frequently softens or removes references to sexuality, religion, and politics in order to align them with prevailing norms in Iran. The study positions dubbing as a historiographical practice and as the final stage in a chain of translations: from historical events to written accounts, from written accounts to cinematic narratives, and from cinematic narratives to dubbed narratives.

The next two articles turn to the history of Germany, though they approach it from two different perspectives: one through the personal testimonies of translators, and the other through the medium of museum exhibition practices. In the first case, **Hanna Blum** investigates the historiography and memory politics surrounding the German Democratic Republic by mobilizing the concept of 'narrative translation'. She explains that, following German reunification, dominant narratives recontextualized the socialist past in ways that legitimized the new political order. Blum thus contrasts institutional narratives—focused on repressions and the failure of the so-called 'illegitimate state' (*Unrechtsstaat*)—with oral testimonies from translators who worked in East Germany. Their accounts constitute a 'counter-translation', revealing experiences marked by professional precarity, loss of status, and disorientation during the *Die Wende*. The study contends that historiography itself operates as a political translation that frequently marginalizes and silences alternative viewpoints. Blum, therefore, calls for a more plural historiography, capable of moving beyond the opposition between condemnation of dictatorship and nostalgia for the socialist past.

For her part, **Joy McClean** examines the exhibition 'Roads not Taken' at the German Historical Museum (Berlin) through a translational lens, arguing that this exhibition acts as a form of 'subjunctive translation'. By presenting fourteen decisive moments in German

history alongside what 'might have happened', 'Roads not Taken' challenges the notion of a single and linear historical narrative, positioning visitors as active co-translators of the past. McClean emphasizes that the artistic design and spatial organization of the exhibition—particularly the physical separation between areas associated with 'reality' and 'possibility'—foster an experimental and participatory mode of historical discovery. Finally, the study underscores that the exhibition's significance lies in revealing history as an open and continually mediated process of construction.

The final article in this special issue likewise investigates the intersection between translation and museum spaces, though within markedly different temporal and geographical settings. In her contribution, **Min-Hsiu Liao** explores the Red Fort in Taiwan as a 'space of translation', where history is reassembled through the interplay between the material place and the textual memory preserved in the writings of foreign travelers. Central to Liao's analysis is Jackson Chen's Mandarin translation of the nineteenth-century diary written by John Dodd. She argues that Chen assumes the role of 'translator-author', using prefaces and extensive footnotes to revisit and challenge the colonial perspective embedded in the source text. The paper demonstrates how this heavily mediated translation is incorporated into the museum's multimodal practices, including interactive games and theatrical performances. Through these practices, textual memory is transformed into a 'third space' of cultural production. Liao contends that the past is a contested field in which translators and curators determine which aspects of history are reactivated and made visible for contemporary audiences.

* * *

As a translation studies researcher and historian, I could not agree more with Paul Hernadi (1976, p. 247), who described History with a capital 'H' as an irretrievably lost original. The articles gathered in this special issue not only offer a variety of perspectives on the study of history as translation, but also recover and bring together overlooked stories, thereby shedding further light on the past. Although the past can never emerge as a single, clear, and complete reflection—since it "comes to us refracted through translational processes" (Johnston, 2016, p. 240)—, these multiple histories-in-translation may nevertheless contribute to richer, more plural, and more heterogeneous images of distant realities.

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**EPIGRAPH**

*Ernest*. Gilbert, you treat the world as if it were a crystal ball. You hold it in your hand, and reverse it to please a willful fancy. You do nothing but re-write history.

*Gilbert*. The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it. That is not the least of the tasks in store for the critical spirit. When we have fully discovered the scientific laws that govern life, we shall realize that the one person who has more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action. He, indeed, knows neither the origin of his deeds nor their results. From the field in which he thought that he had sown thorns, we have gathered our vintage, and the fig-tree that he planted for our pleasure is as barren as the thistle, and more bitter. It is because Humanity has never known where it was going that it has been able to find its way.

From Oscar Wilde ([1890]/1997) *The Critic as Artist.* Copenhagen: Green Integer, p. 50.

*Ernest:* Gilbert, tratas al mundo como si fuera una bola de cristal. Lo sostienes en la mano y le das la vuelta para satisfacer los caprichos de tu imaginación. No haces más que reescribir la historia

*Gilbert:* Nuestro único deber con la historia consiste en reescribirla. Y no es de las menores obligaciones que incumben al espíritu crítico. Cuando lleguemos a comprender todas las leyes científicas que sustentan la vida, entenderemos que nadie alberga más ilusiones que el hombre de acción. Ignora tanto el origen como las consecuencias de sus actos. Donde creyó haber sembrado espinas, cosechamos racimos, y la higuera que plantó para complacernos es tan estéril como el cardo y más amarga. La humanidad ha encontrado su rumbo porque jamás ha sabido adónde se dirigía.

Translated into Spanish by Margarita Savchenkova

# HISTORY AS TRANSLATION: A COMMON THEORETICAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT: I am a historian by training. Most of my reading over the past thirty years has been in history and history-related topics. One could therefore say that I am expressing the historians' point of view on this topic. However, things are not so simple as they seem. The concept of 'History as Translation' calls into question what it means, today, to be a historian and a translation scholar and implies the creation of a common space in which History and Translation coexist on the same level; this common space is a polyphonic space, for a polyphonic history and polyphonic translations, where the historian is a translator, moving between different times and places, and the translator works as a historian, abandoning traditional ways of conducting research and opening up to new perspectives in the study of history and translation studies.
KEYWORDS: History, Translation, Epistemology, Cognition, Temporality

## 1. Translation history: between two disciplines

The publication of *Charting the Future of Translation History* in 2006 represented an important step towards attempting at defining a developing disciplinary field. The editors of the volume, Georges L. Bastin and Paul F. Bandia, argued that it was "an attempt to point at blanks, at shortcomings which have prevented translation history from reaching its full disciplinary status among scientific fields and discovering the proper way to guarantee its own future" (2006, p. 1); they outlined that "from microhistory, archaeology, and periodization to subjectivity and postmodernism, methodological 'blank spaces' are being filled," giving insights for answering to questions such as "should history of translation draw much more on history and historiography?" and 'should the field develop its own methodology and research techniques?' (2006, p. 2). The book was divided in two main blocks on methodology and history, which aimed at shedding new light on the different ways of practicing translation in different times and places; thanks to recent innovations in historiography (the editors claimed), it would be possible for translation historians to better understand the role of translators and the different functions performed by translations.

What is important to emphasize here is that the object of analysis was still the history of translation, i.e. how translations have been practiced over the centuries and what was the role and the social-ideological background of translators. In this endeavour, the editors of the volume believed that it was necessary to pay attention to recent contributions coming from new historiographical currents, to the extent that Paul Bandia went so far as to observe that "translation historians should overcome the false perception of their status as mere archivists or translation scholars or practitioners 'masquerading' as historians" (2006, p. 3). Clearly, a ghost in the machine runs through this entire discussion. Why should translation scholars, even though they are engaged in translation history, behave like historians? Does not this mean betraying their own tradition of scholarship and stepping

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outside their own disciplinary field? Would not it be more appropriate to leave this task to professional historians?

A few years later, Chris Rundle (2011) addressed the issue head-on, contending that scholars in translation history should exactly behave as historians. Rundle's statement was fraught with serious consequences, which the discipline has not yet fully digested. Indeed, in subsequent years he had to return to the topic repeatedly to clarify his position and his proposal for theoretical change. This implied, and still implies, that translation historians should focus not so much on the history of translations and translators, but rather on how translations and translators can help us understand specific historical periods and phenomena. It was a radical change in perspective, a true paradigm shift. To the question "In short, is translation the object of our research, or it is the lens through which we research our historical object?" (2011, p.1), Rundle explicitly responded: "you either choose to contribute to a *history of translation* or to *translation in history*" (2011, p. 3). Thus, not only did the perspective change, but also the object of analysis. Translation was no longer to be the end of research, but the means to achieve another goal: the understanding of historical phenomena through the study of translations. In a subsequent article, an expansion of the one just cited, Rundle (2012) focused on the difference between a perspective like that of Hayden White and Paul Veyne, concerned with historically grasping the specificity of historical phenomena, and the perspective of Descriptive Translation Studies, concerned instead with gaining an understanding of the universal dimension of translations. The article also allowed Rundle to clarify the difference between his perspective and that previously outlined by Paul Bandia, which can be summarized in the distinction between 'history of translation' and 'translation in history'.

Again, in his contribution to the special issue of *The Translator* (2014), Chris Rundle emphasised that "some forms of interdisciplinary engagement with historical studies [was] desirable for those of us who work on translation history" (p. 2); and once again he took the opportunity to clarify his position with respect to Bandia's: this "is desirable not in order to appease a sense of epistemological inferiority or to acquire greater institutional status (motives which Bandia attributes to me […]) but because engaging with like-minded researchers who have different approaches to a shared subject is a potentially enriching experience" (p. 2). Therefore, it was not so much a question "of importing the theoretical insights of historical studies into translation studies" (Rundle, 2014, p. 3), as advocated (among others) by Bastin and Bandia, or of "coaxing other historians to view translation history as a legitimate academic discipline" (p. 4), but rather it was essentially an issue of expertise, of sharing with historians a common knowledge about an established historical subject. Ultimately, Rundle disagreed with "Bandia's idea that a translation historian's primary purpose must be that of 'facilitating translation practice and enhance knowledge in translation studies'" (2014, p. 4).

Recently, Chris Rundle has returned to the issue in an interesting dialogue with Theo Hermans published in *Chronotopos: A Journal of Translation History* (Hermans & Rundle, 2021). Not by chance, two topics were highlighted: the definition of the disciplinary

boundaries between History and TS, and the distinction between research aimed at finding universal categories and research focused on historical specificity. In one of the most intense moments of the exchange between the two scholars, Theo Hermans contended: "I don't think of myself as an historian, I think of myself as somebody working on translation but with an active interest in the environment of translation and the way that translation interacts with this environment" (2021, p. 21). At which point Rundle retorted: "Wouldn't you say that when you do this work [the history of translation in the Low Countries] you are acting as a historian? Even if your primary concern during your career has been translation, when you take up that task, then you are taking on the task of an historian. Is that not a fair comment?" (2021, p. 21)

Evidently, it was a fair comment but, as said by Hermans, "up to a point" (2021, p. 21); in the sense that many translation scholars, Hermans included, did not feel entirely comfortable in the historian's shoes and felt all the problems of this change of perspective. It should be noted that Chris Rundle is among the founders of the History & Translation Network (HTN), which has as first objective "to enhance the visibility of translation and interpreting history both in translation studies and in other disciplinary areas, especially history"[1]; the HTN organized two international conferences, the first in Tallinn in 2022 and the second in Graz in 2024, as well as promoting numerous cultural events. This is a very important initiative that has successfully engaged many scholars. However, it cannot go unnoticed that the vast majority of HTN members are translation scholars.

## 2. Historians and translation: insights and pitfalls

What is historians' perspective on translation?

We might begin by pointing out that there have been some very important and penetrating insights from historians about the practice of translation in history and the interpretation of history as a process of translation, but none of them has developed these insights thoroughly. As an example, Hayden White (1975) reached the conclusion that the historian's work is essentially a work of translation, since the source documents do not speak for themselves, but can say something significant only through the interpretation that the historian gives to them. White actually "dreamt of 'a means of translating from one mode of discourse to another, in the same way that we translate from one language to another'" (Paul, 2011, pp. 104-5), which implies that the work performed by historians can be considered as a process of translation and thus, determined by the 'form of the content', to recover the title of one of his best-known books. This approach to history has been comprehensively described by Alun Munslow (1997, p. 142), who highlighted that:

> White's historical method works from the general assumption that written history is unarguably a literary enterprise and we cannot gain access to what the past was about other than through it. It follows that we understand the past through the narrative form we devise to organise it […] The deconstructive historian's function remains that of interpretation, but

[1] HTN quote available at: https://historyandtranslation.net/

> an interpretation viewed as the translation or rendition of one text (the past) into a new narrative version which is another text.[2]

It is interesting to note that Reinhart Koselleck faced similar problems and reached similar conclusions in his endeavours to match concepts and languages. To understand Koselleck's approach to the relationship between history and translation, we must start from the hermeneutic problem raised by Otto Brunner, one of his intellectual fathers. Brunner's works represent, despite their limitations, one of the first and most profound empirical demonstrations of the theoretical consequences of the concept of history as a translation of the past. Brunner, indeed, forcefully emphasised that the language of nineteenth-century historians was an anachronistic distortion of medieval concepts (a bad translation of them, one could say). In fact, as he himself emphasised, it would have been possible to understand those concepts only by acquiring an awareness of the differences between the medieval political and social context and the contemporary one. These distances/differences could/should be bridged through a linguistic and conceptual translation, which went from the present to the past. Koselleck contended, however, that this translation was not sufficient, and that a second translation (*Rück-übersetzung*: retranslation) from the past to the present was necessary. In particular, Koselleck believed that to fulfil this task on a methodological and comparative level it would have been necessary to define a metalanguage as a term of comparison, falling into theoretical difficulties that have been well highlighted by Kari Palonen (2012).

In 1999, Willi Paul Adams published an article in *The Journal of American History*, which directly addressed the issue of the historian's role as translator. This short article, published as the outcome of a roundtable discussion on the topic of interpreting the Declaration of Independence through translation, can only partially serve as a summary of the situation at the end of the last century. The questions Adams raised were simply that of a historian confronted with the problem of translating texts and documents; to do so, he advanced some common-sense considerations and drew on some classic texts on linguistics and translation. However, the methodological and epistemological perspectives outlined by White and Koselleck on the subject were substantially neglected in this article, and nothing in his reconstruction pointed towards the issues that would be addressed at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a consequence of the 'translation turn' in historiography. On the other hand, the observation that Adams (1999, p. 1284) made at the beginning of his article is symptomatic: "no student of American historiography […] has so far enriched the unusually sophisticated pages of the journal *History & Theory* with an analysis of the pitfalls and conundrums translating historians and readers of translated historiography face".

Four years later, *History & Theory* published a *'Forum on translation and historiography'.* Of particular interest is the article 'The predicament of ideas in culture:

[2] A few pages earlier, Munslow (1997, p. 115) had described the translation process put in place by the historian, "akin to mixing colours and producing shapes on a canvas".

translation and historiography' by Douglas Howland, the author of *Translating the West. Language and political reason in nineteenth-century Japan* (2002). In this article he reviewed some books published in previous years, dividing them into two groups. The first group, composed of Eric Chefitz's *The Poetic of Imperialism* (1991), Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation* (1992) and Vicente Rafael's *Constructing Colonialism* (1988), was characterized as being based on post-colonial essentialism (through the concept of identity) and on the extended use of the concept of translation (especially as 'representation'); the second group, towards which he was more inclined, included Lydia H. Liu (*Translingual Practice* 1995), Naoki Sakai (*Translation and Subjectivity* 1997) and Frederic C. Schaffer (*Democracy in Translation* 1998), who "all undertake rigorous explanations of the meaning of concepts as they were used in history" (Howland, 2003, p. 53). Essentially, the division used by Howland laid on the greater or lesser proximity to intellectual history, as practiced in those years by Quintin Skinner. Even if we admit that such a distinction can be accepted, it is easy to argue that the trend of studies in the following years has gone precisely in the direction criticised by Howland, that is, towards a progressive extension of the concept of translation favoured by the 'translation turn' in cultural studies.

Beyond other considerations that could be made, Howland's article is further proof of the fact that the infrequent dialogues between historians and translation scholars were often not productive dialogues, but rather discussions on common topics carried forward on parallel tracks. It is along these lines that the aforementioned volume edited by George Bastin and Paul Bandia on *Charting the Future of Translation History* might be placed, in that it was an attempt to grasp the advantages that translation scholars could draw from the theories that historians had developed in recent years, encouraging a dialogue between disciplinary fields that remained very distinct. However, as mentioned, even in this case there was no delineation of a research path based on a common ground but rather an attempt to develop a dialogue between the two disciplines, historiography and translation studies.

It was precisely in those years that one of the most important contributions that historians have offered to the study of translations in history was made, namely the book *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe* (2007) edited by Peter Burke and Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia. In this case too, the book was composed solely of historians; however, working on the general issues of cultural translation and cultural hybridity, Peter Burke also made a fundamental contribution to the specific understanding of the role of the historian as a translator of the past.

If the past is a foreign country, it follows that even the most monoglot historian is a translator. Historians mediate between the past and the present, and face the same dilemmas as other translators, serving two masters and attempting to reconcile fidelity to the original with intelligibility to their readers (Burke, 2007a, p. 7; see also Burke, 2007b).

To my knowledge, one of the few volumes that have brought together historians and translation scholars is the one edited by Martin J. Burke and Melvin Richter, *Why Concepts*

*Matter. translating social and political thought*, which included articles by Melvin Richter, Jeremy Munday, Anthony Pym, Kari Palonen, Jörn Leonhard, Mario Turchetti, Eric Nelson, Peter Burke, Joachim Kurz, Douglas Howland, Steven Lukes, Keith Tribe. This volume aimed at breaking "new ground in its focus on the theory and practice of translating political and social thought" (Burke and Richter, 2012, p. 1).

Especially novel is the application to these issues of not just translation studies, but also the history of concepts, or conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), which emphasizes the central place of language and translation in political and social discourse, especially in concept formation, transmission, and reception (Burke and Richter, 2012, pp. 1-2). This collaboration between disciplines was not above suspicion, however, to the extent that Melvin Richter felt the need to point out that "in such a meeting of fields hitherto separate, it is most profitable to assume that no one professional expertise trumps all others [and that practitioners of these disciplines] regard such dispute as normal, rather than pathological" (Burke and Richter, 2012, p 2). He also openly admitted that 'few historians of concepts in the human sciences know anything about the existence of translation studies, much less, about its distinctive methods, theoretical foci, and highly developed fields, such as the history of translation" (2012, p. 4), an observation that is also largely true in reverse (consider, for example, that this volume edited by Martin J. Burke and Melvin Richter is rarely cited in the context of translation history). Ultimately, despite the efforts made in recent years to achieve a fruitful collaboration, the two disciplinary fields have remained substantially separate.

However, as we will see in the following pages, major results in overcoming these disciplinary cleavages are beginning to be achieved by scholars that are focusing instead on common theoretical objectives, who have not worried about rigidly observing the limits imposed by their respective disciplines and who have ventured into unexplored fields, often founding their investigations on a broad metaphorical conception of translation.[3]

**3. History as translation: a new approach to history and translation**

Over the last fifty years, interdisciplinarity has become something of a buzzword in academic inquiries, though it has primarily been understood as a dialogue between disciplines and not so much as the creation of a common field of research. This has also happened in translation history, especially in the perspective outlined in the volume edited by George Bastin and Paul Bandia, described above. More difficult to overcome is the challenge of abandoning traditional ways of conducting research and opening up to new

[3] I have limited myself to outlining some aspects of the relationship between historiography and translation studies, for the purposes of this article. As regards the problems relating to the relationship between history and linguistics, a good overview is provided by Langer, N., Davis, S. and Vandenbussche, W. (eds) (2012), while the article by Patrick Honeybone in the same volume (2012) is especially emblematic of the difficult relationships between the two disciplines. Interestingly, Honeybone argues that a common space between the two disciplines can be found at the cognitive level, although his reconstruction turns out to be rather thorny on a theoretical level and, as far as we are concerned, at odds with the theoretical proposal contemporaneously advanced by Malvin Richter.

perspectives, entailing the creation of new common ground and ways of seeing that unsettle our habits. Ultimately, Chris Rundle's theoretical proposal ran into these difficulties. How can one be a historian within a linguistics department, and how can one legitimize one's position as a historian within Translation Studies?

The concept of 'history as translation' is even more radical than the perspective advanced by Chris Rundle; indeed, in the latter case, despite a reversal of perspective, the concept of translation remained within the boundaries of traditional understandings, as I have described above. Instead, the concept of 'history as translation' truly implies the creation of a common space in which History and Translation coexist on the same level. This common space is polyphonic, and in it, the historian is a translator moving between different times and places (Burke, 2010, 2023). In other words, while Rundle considers the translation of books as the means to understand historical phenomena, the 'history as translation' approach is not interested in translated books but in a shared concept of translation and all that this implies at the cognitive and theoretical level. As a consequence, 'history as translation' does not refer to traditional concepts of history and translation, but requires a theoretical bent that has the linguistic dimension as one of its main components while, at the same time, relying on a broad and metaphorical understanding of both concepts.

As outlined by Antoine Berman (1995, 2012), the metaphorical consideration of the concept of translation was developed in German Romanticism and expanded from the linguistic and literary structure across other disciplinary fields. In particular, Berman insisted on the importance of the concept of versatility introduced by Novalis, who compared translation to the voluptuous movement of liquids (1995, p. 125). This led to a desire for 'total translation', which some scholars are returning to by connecting it to the concept of Anthropocene (Littau, 2023) and arriving at the identification of new fields of study such as eco-translation, biosemiotic translation, geo-linguistics, geo-media and geo-translation (Cronin, 2017). Berman's work was precisely intended to identify the possible overflow between the linguistic (restricted) and metaphorical (generalized) understandings of translation. Rainer Guldin has conducted a close analysis of the 'inner tensions' existing between the linguistic concept of translation and the metaphorical transpositions of it elaborated by Berman, underlining that he "does not take into consideration the fact that the different disciplines generally use the metaphors they borrow from other disciplines to suit their own ends, even if the choice of a specific metaphor clearly also introduces a new point of view" (Guldin, 2022, p. 26). More recently, Piotr Blumczynski (2023) even pointed out that etymologically the concept of translation derives from the material transfer of objects, so linguistic and textual translation should be considered, in fact, a metaphorical extension of material translation.

From this perspective, we are witnessing a refreshed conception of the field of translation, inclined towards the cognitive and material level (Apter, 2006; Arduini, 2014; Gentzler, 2017; Bassnett and Johnston, 2019; Simon, 2019, 2023; Israel and Franz, 2020; Bennett and Puga, 2024; Campbell and Vidal, 2024, 2025; Savchenkova, 2024; D'hulst,

2025), which tends to overturn restricted conceptions of translation studies, seen now not from within but from outside. A particularly interesting contribution to the definition of a common ground between history and translation is that offered by Hillary Footitt, who appropriately remarks that the discussion on the subject "implicitly assumes that both disciplines are conceptually reified, that they are not subject to the constant challenge and redefinition which is the norm within all academic fields" (Footitt, 2022, p. 66). She thus invites scholars "to engage with the materiality and spatiality of translation over time", arguing that "a translation history which explores the material relationality of translation can help to move us beyond questions of finality and disciplinary identity" (2022, pp. 66-67). Especially important from my point of view is the notion of "presenting the past" implied by her proposal for an ethnographic approach to translation history, which "serves to reframe translation history as simultaneously diachronic and synchronic"; this kind of history is aimed at providing "a snapshot of translation from below at a particular moment in time, as lived on the ground of its materiality, silences and asymmetrical dominations" (Footitt, 2022, p. 76).

A pronounced attention to spatiality and materiality in the field of translation studies has been shown in recent years by M.ª África Vidal Claramonte, who is the author of *Translation and Objects: Rewriting Migrancy and Displacement through the Materiality of Art* (2024). Also very recent is her book *Translating His-stories* (2025), part of the *Elements in Translation and Interpreting* series. The concept of 'history as translation', as developed by M.ª África Vidal Claramonte, foregrounds the notion that History is always a reconstruction, until now a linear and homogeneous narrative constructed by the winners, which urges the need to re-write histories in the plural, to re-narrate and re-translate the old male/winners his-stories from the point of view of the silenced/female/feminist voices (her-stories). The premise of this bold work was first stated in the important book that Vidal Claramonte published in Spanish in 2018: *La traducción y la(s) historia(s): Nuevas vías para la investigación*. The creation of a common space between history and translation was delineated so substantially here that it is not possible to say whether Vidal's argument refers primarily to history or to translation. This result was achieved by highlighting above all the intralinguistic aspect of the translational process, i.e. the fact that every time we write or speak, we actually translate.[4]

The foundations of this discourse, which drew inspiration from the fervent intellectual season of post-modernism and post-structuralism as well as from German conceptual history and the linguistic turn, had already been admirably brought into focus by George Steiner and Paul Ricoeur; however, I will not revisit the well-known arguments of these two authors in detail, having dealt with them elsewhere (Alonzi, 2023). Furthermore, many of these elements can be found in Theo Hermans' (2022) very recent textbook: *Translation and History*. The volume contains a detailed account of the discourses on translation developed by Hayden White, Reinhart Koselleck, Quentin Skinner

[4] On this fundamental aspect, see Pillière and Berk Albachten (2024)

and other historians, and can be considered much more than a textbook for translation scholars; it clearly indicates a research perspective that deserves to be fully developed and which we can include within the concept of 'history as translation'. This is the opening statement of the volume (Hermans, 2022, p. 1):

> The past lives inside us. It is there in the form of private memories and in the historical knowledge we have acquired, individually and collectively. Its remnants are all around us in the form of pictures, recordings, books, statues, objects in museums and other sites of private and collective memory. It is growing with every moment that passes but also selectively remembered and forgotten. We cannot think of ourselves without simultaneously dredging up a version of our past history.

In the pages that follow, Hermans outlines a conception of 'history as translation' in which the cognitive aspects and the relationship with materiality are appropriately highlighted.[5] The new perspective of translation history is perceptively delineated as something exceeding the traditional field of translation, while acknowledging the difficulties that such an overcoming engenders for the practice of both disciplines. In his own words:

> disciplinary boundaries can be crossed, even though this is generally harder than it seems because different research communities have different discourses, communication circuits, points of reference. For my own part, I take the view that the two disciplinary angles do not have to be mutually exclusive […]; even if the focus of one's research is translation rather than the slice of history into which it fits, the motives for translating and the effects of translation always exceed translation.[6]

Taking inspiration from Hermans' textbook, Alexandra Lianeri (2024) adds further insights for the creation of a common space including history and translation. In her view, this common space could be structured around three theoretical kernels:

1. the habitation of spaces of translation;
2. the temporality of translating;
3. the configuration of historical being and change in terms of translation's transformative movement.

Necessarily simplifying here a highly complex discourse, Lianeri overlaps the Greek notion of *metaphrasis* and the Latin concept of 'translation', reading historical change as a form of multitemporal and multilayered transformation, where the flowing of time is represented as a translational movement triggered by withdrawal and following after, disappearance and appearance, swallowing and regurgitation (*metabolē as kairos* or, perhaps better, *kairos as metabolē*).

[5] There are clear affinities between Hermans' approach and that developed by a historian like Kleinberg (2017).
[6] See also the recent collection of essays by Hermans (2023).

> When the past appears as highly translatable, we consider it as something with no interruptive power of agency. Set between these excesses, a translation perspective may highlight the pasts *Nachleben* and "translated presence," wherein historical sense is marked by the temporally and politically polymorphous intensity of receptivity and traumatic confrontations between past, present and future (Lianeri, 2024, p. 286).

Finally, translation is the means through which cultures encounter and synchronize with each other. The result of this encounter, of this translation, is a third term born 'in relation to' and in the 'flow of times and cultures'. Indeed, we have not only translations through spaces but also translations through time. Each of the translated cultures has its temporality which is synchronized at the moment of translation; and of course, this translation/synchronization is itself inserted into the flow of times and spaces and is, in itself, the main means through which this flowing occurs. I do not think to translation and synchronization as a final and definitive step, but rather as a process occurring in the fleeting time of Augustinian memory. This discourse can be metaphorically extended to the work of both historians and translators. In this way, the theoretical discourse on translation is inextricably connected to the recent theoretical discourse on temporality in history and historiography (Kleinberg, 2012; Helgesson, 2014; Tamm and Olivier, 2019; Jordheim, 2022; Rebello Cardoso Jr. et al., 2023; Kleinberg, 2025), each shedding light on the other, and contributing to the overcoming of traditional cleavages, encouraging us to leave behind pre-established paths and move towards an open common space.

The most important aspect of the conception of 'history as translation', as intended here, is the correct understanding of the concept of presence/presentism. What kind of presence/presentism is it? It is a synchronistic presence and a translated presence. In this sense, the difficult relationship between a diachronic approach and a synchronic approach, emphasized by some translation scholars (as an example by Rundle, 2018), is resolved within a conception of presence wherein the diachronic dimension is contained within the synchronic dimension. This development of the Koselleckian conception of the 'synchronicity of the nonsynchronous'[7] is, in turn, a consequence of the conception of translated presence, that is a presence containing different temporalities. History is all in the present – a notion that refers less to the important concept of history as contemporary history, as outlined by Benedetto Croce (also because in this case we move along a linear temporality), but rather to a conception of presence in which plural temporalities intersect at each moment in the flow of time. What we call history is something that theoretically belongs to the past but is concretely present in the world around us. From this point of view, the work of the historian as translator consists exactly in connecting theory (the past) and practice (the present), projecting them to the future.

We interact with (linguistic, material) objects that surround us synchronically, each of which has its own temporality, each of which was born at a specific moment in time, underwent a specific development, and has reached us with the full weight of its history,

[7] On this topic, see the important article by Jordheim (2011).

its myriad transformations, like an object already 'translated', as Alexandra Lianeri (2023 and 2024) would say. This is what urges us to approach 'history as translation'. All the objects around us are historical (that is, translated), including language; thus, these already-translated objects are in turn retranslated by us, and are thus delivered to the future. It is an approach to history that insists on processuality, on transformation, on relationality while at the same time being an approach to translation that is laid out in an expanded conception, fostering the creation of a common space between the two disciplines.

This represents a reversal of the accentuated processes of specialization that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, and which had led to a situation of difficult dialogue within the human sciences and between the human sciences and other sciences. The hope is that the concept of 'history as translation' can help revive that dialogue, leading to the creation of a common theoretical space, and enabling people to have a more balanced and conscious relationship with the human and natural world around them.

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# HISTORY IN MOTION: TRANSLATION AND THE POLITICAL AFTERLIVES OF THE PAST IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the relationship between translation and life-writing in early modern European historiography through two political biographies by the French historiographer Pierre Matthieu (1563–1621). It argues that translation in Matthieu's historical writing operates on two levels: as a temporal reinterpretation of the past and as a linguistic transfer across languages. In works such as his biographies of Sejanus and Philippa the Catanian, Matthieu uses historical exempla to criticize the political influence of royal favorites in contemporary France, including Concino Concini and Leonora Galigaï. Drawing on classical and medieval sources, these narratives were translated into Italian, Spanish, and English, where they were adapted to comment on influential figures such as the Duke of Lerma, the Count-Duke of Olivares, and the Duke of Buckingham. The article contends that Renaissance historiography was inherently translational, with historians acting as mediators who transferred meaning both vertically from past to present and horizontally across languages and political contexts, ensuring the continued relevance of historical narratives.
KEYWORDS: Pierre Matthieu, Biography, History, Translation, Early Modern

## 1. History writing and translation in early modernity

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the recovery of ancient historians was central to the revival of classical learning and the reform of contemporary culture.[1] Humanist scholars intensely engaged with the works of Greek historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plutarch) and their Roman counterparts (Caesar, Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius). Editions and translations of their works into Latin (when written in Greek) and vernacular languages (mostly from Latin) flooded the presses and many were fundamental in the development of great historical vernacular prose, such as Jacques Amyot's *Vies parallèles* and Thomas North's *Lives*, both translations of Plutarch's collections of ancient Greek and Roman lives. As vernacular languages matured into robust literary vehicles, translation played a key role in the development of classical genres, with biography[2] emerging as one of the most prominent and enduring forms.

Humanists such as Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, and later Desiderius Erasmus, Beatus Rhenanus and Justus Lipsius translated Greek and Latin histories into elegant, accessible prose, but also edited them according to emerging philological standards. History writing was a branch of rhetoric, and historians shaped narratives to persuade and instruct, blending fact with eloquence in line with humanist ideals of moral and civic

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[1] The reception of these ancient historians in early modernity, as studied by Peter Burke (1966), shifted according to the needs and tastes in history.

[2] The vernacular terms 'biografía', 'biographie' and 'biography' appeared in the second half of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth (Mayer and Woolf, 1995, pp. 1-37). For the development of biography as a genre, see Momigliano (1971).

education. Their work involved comparing manuscripts, correcting textual corruptions, and producing critical editions of authors such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Seneca and Tacitus. Within the historiographical genre, interest in life writing grew steadily, and while biographies of prominent historical figures remained the most prevalent, there was a growing and sustained focus on charting the lives and character of painters, philosophers, physicians, or poets, both ancient and modern (Mayer and Woolf, 1995; Weiss, 2010).

Since Plutarch, life writing relied on the selection and interpretation of events to reconstruct the narrative of a past life. In early modern Europe, this often involved transposing a life lived into words and ideas, and engaging in interlingual translation — often from Greek and Latin into the vernaculars, or between vernaculars themselves.[3] Several decades ago, George Steiner conceptualized the reading and interpretation of historical texts as translational acts, characterized by repetition, transformation, and renewal. From an epistemological perspective, Steiner argued that what separates ancient texts from their modern representations is both temporal distance (the gap between their original context and their later interpretation) and linguistic distance (whether between distinct languages or within the evolution of a single language). Writing of the past may thus be understood as a translational enterprise, simultaneously linguistic and cultural, that mediates between past and present (Steiner, 1975, pp. 29-31, p. 352).[4] This view resonates with the power-oriented approaches that emerged in Translation Studies from the late twentieth century onward. The so-called 'power turn' recontextualizes translation as a historically situated practice conditioned by ideology and power (Gentzler & Tymoczko, 2002). From this perspective, historiography itself may be seen as a form of translation operating under comparable constraints.

As Peter Burke notes, in early modernity "even the most monoglot of historians is a translator," since they "mediate between the present and the past and face the same dilemmas...attempting to reconcile fidelity to the original with intelligibility to their readers" (Burke, 2007a, p. 7). Moreover, Burke emphasizes that "the interlingual translation of historians was at the same time a form of cultural translation, in other words, an adaptation to the needs, interests, prejudices and ways of reading the target culture, or at least of some groups within it" (Burke, 2007b, p. 133). Historians then served as cultural mediators, interpreting the past through the lens of the present and engaging in translation across both linguistic and historical boundaries (Burke, 2013). Hayden White's narrativist theory further intensifies this translational understanding of historiography by foregrounding its poetic and rhetorical dimensions. For White, historians, like poets, weave stories. The underlying poetic structures that condition these configurations beyond the level of narrative content constitute what White (1978a, 1987) calls 'metahistory.' In order

[3] It is worth reminding here that Jakobson (2004, p. 139) distinguishes three types of translation: interlingual (between different languages), intralingual (reformulation within the same language), and semiotic (the transmutation of signs).

[4] For history writing understood as a translation of the past, see the excellent collection edited by Alonzi (2023), which offers further bibliography and illuminating case studies. See also Vidal Claramonte (2018).

to compose their narratives, historians must resort to rhetorical elements, and this interconnection between history and literature is exemplified by White in these words: "Historians may not like to think of their works as translations of facts into fictions; but this is one of the effects of their work" (1978b, p. 92).[5]

In light of the above, this article examines the translational dynamics of early modern historiography through the works of French poet and historian Pierre Matthieu (1563–1621). It argues that Matthieu's French texts, shaped by classical and medieval precedents, offer a mode of political interpretation that is taken up and reworked in their Spanish and English translations. These translations transmit content but also adapt Matthieu's exemplary mode of reading and writing history across different cultural contexts, establishing a chain of interconnected texts grounded in a shared humanist historiographical framework but responsive to different political circumstances. Matthieu's biographical narratives exemplify the dual translation process mentioned above: cultural (transmitting historical meaning from the past to the present) and interlingual (translating material from diverse multilingual sources into French and then into other vernacular languages). They work as a form of political commentary on current events, and their Spanish and English translations, in turn, replicate the mirroring process at work in the original, activating contemporary anxieties about over-influent favorites in their respective contexts.

Widely read and imitated, French historian Matthieu achieved great renown in the world of royal historiography and politics throughout the seventeenth century.[6] Both his monumental *Histoires of France*[7] and his biographical sketches were immensely popular within the European communities of readers, and his books became a fixture on the most important libraries of the time. Matthieu was appointed royal historiographer when French King Henry IV initiated a program to restore the monarchy's authority after decades of civil wars that had devastated the nation and posed a challenge to the very nature of kingship. As an official historian, he ultimately produced an official history designed to legitimize the consolidation of power for both Henry and his successor, Louis XIII.

Matthieu's narratives, much like those of his contemporaries, were rooted in the Ciceronian dictum of *historia magistra vitae*—the idea that history serves as the 'mistress of life'—and the Polybian principle of *similitudo temporum*,[8] which holds that the past

[5] Given our emphasis on biography as a historical genre, it is worth recalling Bourdieu's insights into the process of selecting the meaningful elements of a life, which then biographers articulate in the form of a sequenced narrative, thereby generating the illusion of a coherent development through the construction of an artificial sense of life (1986, p.70).

[6] For an overview of Matthieu's works, see Izquierdo (2019).

[7] For example: the *Histoire des derniers troubles de France, sous les règnes des Roys Très Chrestiens Henry III, Roy de France de et de Pologne, et Henry IIII, Roy de France et de Navarre* (1594-1606) (Republished with new chapters several times); the *Histoire de France & des choses mémorables aduenues aux Prouinces estrangeres durant sept années de paix dv règne de Henry IIII, Roy de France & de Nauarre* (1605) ; and the *Histoire De Louys XI, Roy de France et des choses mémorables advenues en l'Europe durant vingt & deux années de son règne* (1610).

[8] For an overview of Renaissance historiography, see Grafton (2007).

illuminates both present and future. In Matthieu's times, history writing did not aim primarily to reconstruct the past, but to reinterpret it as a means of instructing the present—drawing on Neostoicism, Machiavellian prudence, and Tacitist insights. Deeply influenced by Justus Lipsius, Matthieu's historiography reflects the humanist tradition of extracting political and moral sententiae from the past.[9] An eloquent and persuasive historian, Matthieu structured his narratives around the *exemplum*, both as a rhetorical device and a tool of moral imitation. In his elegant prose, hyperbole, parallelism, digression, *sententiae*, and *apophthegmata* abound. His concise style—much admired by contemporaries[10]—offered a penetrating reflection on human motives and political action in times of uncertainty, as he dissected the passions to reveal the inner lives of princes, royal favorites, and Machiavellian schemers, shedding light on the motivations of famous or infamous historical figures. These biographies were purportedly conceived to move their readers to a better course of action, that is, to have them act virtuously, or at least not to act badly.[11] In general, they recount the lives—and reversals of fortune—of celebrated and notorious figures alike: Sejanus, Tiberius' favorite; Philippa the Catanian, minister of Queen Joan of Naples; the French statesman Marquis of Villeroy; and French monarchs such as Louis XI and Henry IV. Matthieu's biographies of Sejanus and Philippa,[12] together with the panegyric *Histoire de la mort déplorable de Henry IV, roi de France et de Navarre* (1611) and the political sketch of the *Remarques d'Estat et d'histoire sur la vie et les services de Monsieur de Villeroi* (1618),[13] became his most translated books.

In what follows, we will focus on two of Matthieu's most widely read works, published in Paris in 1617: *Aelius Sejanus. Histoire romaine recueillie de divers autheurs* and *Histoire des prosperitez malheureuses d'une femme Cathenoise, grande seneschalle de Naples*. These biographies recount the rise and fall of Sejanus, Tiberius' infamous favorite in the first century A.D, and Philippa, a fourteenth-century washerwoman who became the trusted minister of Queen Joan of Naples. Both historical figures stood as enduring symbols of the fallen royal favorite, achieving extraordinary popularity across Europe and securing a lasting place in the continent's collective imagination in the seventeenth century.

[9] Lipsius, a central figure in the Neostoic revival, sought to reconcile ancient Stoicism with Christian doctrine. His critical editions of Tacitus and Seneca, together with treatises such as *De Constantia* and *Politicorum*, became influential across Europe and emphasized emotional self-control and constancy in the face of political turmoil, essentially for monarchs and ministers. For Lipsius, see Morford (1991).

[10] For Matthieu's European fame in the seventeenth century, see Lafond (1981) and Izquierdo (2019), particularly Chapters I and II.

[11] Matthieu articulates the didactic purpose of historical writing as follows: "La première & plus importante fin de l'Histoire est de rendre les mauvais bons, les bons meilleurs," *Histoire de France et des choses mémorables*, Advertissement.

[12] *Aelius Sejanus, Histoire romaine recueillie de divers autheurs* (1617); *Histoire des prosperitez malhevreuses d'une femme cathenoise, grande seneschalle de Naples* (1617).

[13] *Histoire de la mort déplorable de Henry IIII, Roy de France et de Navarre: ensemble un poème, un panégyrique et un discours funèbre: dressé à sa mémoire immortelle* (1611); *Remarques d'estat et d'Histoire sur la vie et les services de Monsieur de Villeroy* (1618).

**2. Life of Sejanus**

In 1617, after the young king Louis XIII asserted his royal authority by ordering the assassination of the Queen's favorite, Concino Concini, Matthieu wrote a biography of Sejanus, Tiberius's powerful minister, using it as a framework to narrate Concini's rise and fall. That same year, taking as a model one of Boccaccio's cases from *De casibus virorum illustrium*, he produced a biography of Philippa the Catanian as a blueprint to reflect on the excesses of Concini's wife, Leonora Dori Galigaï. [14] In both cases, using a translative historiographical method, Matthieu treated past lives and events as templates (*exempla*) for present-day commentary and historical meaning. Translating from Latin sources into French, and then from French into other vernacular languages, became the material channel through which these new historical reconfigurations were mobilized in new settings, traveling not only across languages, but across time, place, and political contexts.

Concino Concini, an Italian who arrived at the French court with Marie de Medici, quickly rose to power. Through his wife, Leonora Dori—better known as Galigaï —who was the queen's intimate confidante, the couple gained enormous influence over royal affairs. Their rapid ascent, wealth, and foreign origins caused widespread resentment among the French nobility. After Henry IV's death in 1610, Concini effectively controlled the regency. He was soon created Marquis d'Ancre, and, in 1613, appointed Marshal of France. But his unprecedented authority during Marie de Medici's regency, his arrogance and unpopularity led to his downfall: he was assassinated in 1617 on the orders of the young Louis XIII, and Galigaï was executed shortly after on charges of witchcraft. In Matthieu's interpretative framework, the dramatic rise and fall of Sejanus and Philippa mirrored the abuses of Concini and Galigaï, with Concini cast in the role of Sejanus and Galigaï as a modern-day Philippa —both wielding unchecked power under a monarch's favor, both destined to fall.

As for how Matthieu put together his biographical narrative, his history of Sejanus, as the title indicates, was a 'Histoire romaine recueillie de divers autheurs' (Roman story compiled from different authors). His principal sources were Books III and IV of Tacitus' *Annals*, supplemented by accounts from Suetonius, Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Velleius Paterculus' *Historiae Romanae*, as well as ethical exempla and commentary selectively drawn from Seneca and Juvenal—particularly Satire X, among other sources. Needless to say, compiling and translating classical texts (Tacitus, Suetonius, etc.) into French also meant reshaping the source material to reflect contemporary circumstances. Early modern historians like Matthieu found in Tacitus's account of Tiberius's reign, where the Roman attributes the emperor's disastrous shift in behavior to the corrupting influence of Sejanus, the guiding lines to craft the lives of the French royal favorites, prompted by the situation unraveling under his eyes in the Parisian Louvre after Henri VI's assassination:

> The Capitol began and the Louvre hath revived this History, which I present to Your Majesty amidst the public applause for the happiness of your Monarchy It is a mirror that flatters not,

[14] For Concini and his wife, Leonora Dori, known as Galigaï, see Duccini (1991).

> but rather a pure and crystalline water which, at the same instant it shows the stain, taketh it away. You (Sir) shall therein behold that a prince ought to be very careful to conserve his authority entire. Great ones here may learn it is not good to play with the generous lion, though he suffer it, and that favours are precipices for such as abuse them (Matthieu, 1632, 'To the King')[15].

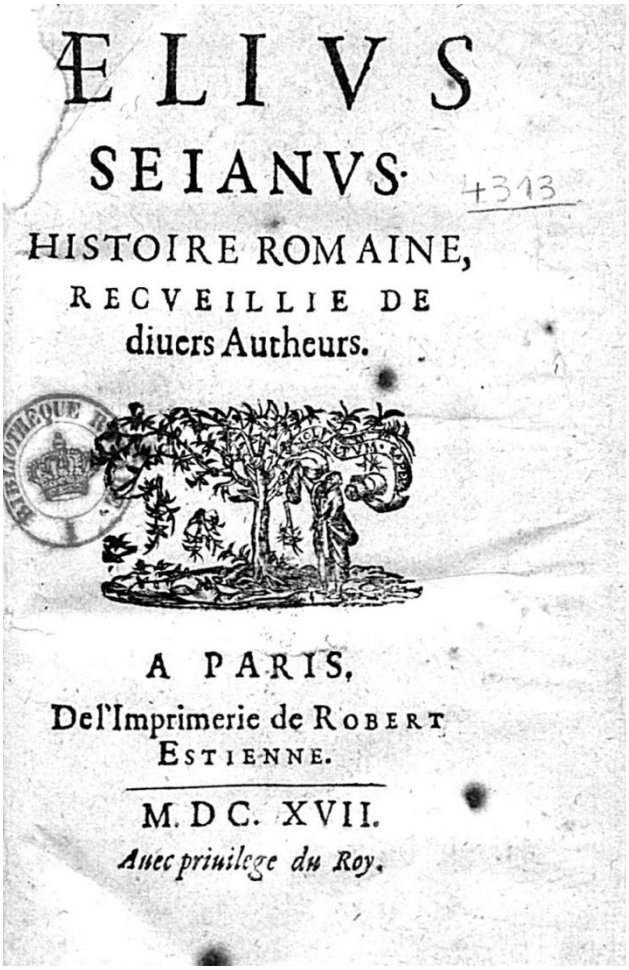

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HISTOIRE ROMAINE,
RECVEILLIE DE
diuers Autheurs.
A PARIS,
De l'Imprimerie de ROBERT
ESTIENNE.
M. D C. XVII.
*Auec priuilege du Roy.*

**Figure 1.** First page of Matthieu's biography of *Sejanus* published in Paris in 1617. Courtesy of the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, Antwerp.

Matthieu's original dedication to the French king was largely retained in most translations into Spanish, English and Italian. Its persistence suggests that translators understood its role in shaping how the text should be read, encouraging readers to connect the historical narrative with contemporary political concerns. His deliberate juxtaposition of the Roman Capitol and the Parisian Louvre functions symbolically, constructing a rhetorical bridge between ancient Rome and contemporary France. Although the passage above (in the original and the English translation) is brief, it exemplifies Matthieu's elegant

[15] « Le Capitole à veu naistre, & le Louvre a renouvellé ceste Histoire, que je presente à vostre Majesté dans les publiques acclamations du jour de sa Monarchie. C'est un miroir qui ne flatte point, mais plustot une eau pure & claire, qui au mesme temps qu'il le monstre la tâche, donne de quoy l'effacer. Vous y verrez, SIRE, que le Prince doit estre grandement jaloux de conserver entiere son AUTHORITE: les Grands y apprendront qu'il ne se faut joüer au Lyon genereux, quoy qu'il le souffre, & que les faveurs sont des precipices à ceux qui en abusent ('Au Roy') ». All quotations are drawn from Hawkins's 1632 English translation; punctuation and spelling have been modernized.

and concise style, intended to make history accessible and politically effective. Matthieu universalized a timeless lesson: the recurring cycle of favoritism, ambition, and political downfall transcends eras and empires in which Rome served as the historical precedent and Paris as its modern echo. By linking the two, he warns the French king that even though centuries have passed, the moral dangers of entrusting power to corrupt favorites remain unchanged.

From the very first line of the biography, Matthieu emphasizes Tiberius's central mistake: an "excess of favor" (1632, p. 1) on Sejanus, and opens with a universal reflection on the nature of a monarch's love for his subjects that frames the entire narrative:

> Although princes do sovereignly dispose of their own hearts, impressing love and hatred on whom, or how they lift, yet ought we to wish their affections towards particular men may be very just and regular; for if any disorder happen therein, it introduceth public ruins, rendreth them odious, and their favorites miserable (Matthieu, 1632, p. 1).[16]
>
> […]
>
> The Heavens, incensed against the Roman Empire, permitted this exorbitance in the soul of Tiberius through the excess of favour he conferred on Aelius Sejanus, uniting in his person those charges which ought to have been distributed amongst many, and making him so great that he had much ado to unmake him. In the end, the ruin of the State, which was the foundation of his greatness, was also the cause of his fall (Matthieu, 1632, p. 2).[17]

*The life of Sejanus* repeatedly underscores the fraught relationship between the monarch and his favorite, portraying the king as increasingly dependent and the minister as driven by unchecked ambition: "In all his designs he found so much facility and affection in Tiberius that he had little else to do but to ask and give thanks. He denied him nothing, oft times preventing his suits and protesting he deserved much more …" (1632, pp. 6-7).[18]

Matthieu's interpretation of the historical Sejanus resonated across Europe, as historians and translators adapted it to new contexts as a warning against the dangers of favoritism in absolute monarchies. The political machinations of Matthieu's Sejanus in the Roman Capitol spread beyond the Louvre to the courts of Madrid and London.

The first Spanish translation of Matthieu's *Sejanus* was produced by a Genoese banker living in Madrid, Vicenzo Squarzafigo, who translated it indirectly from the Italian in 1621:[19] *Vida de Elio Seyano*. As a banker to the Crown, Squarzafigo was well connected to

[16] « Encores que les Princes disposent souverainement de leurs cœurs, qu'ils y forment l'amour & la haine pour qui & comme ils veulent, si est-ce qu'il faut desirer que leurs affections envers des particuliers soient justes & bien reglées, car s'il y a du desordre, il ameine les ruines publiques, rend les Princes odieux, & les favoris misérables » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 1).

[17] « Le Ciel irrité sur l'Empire Romain, permit ce d'euoyement en l'ame de Tibere, par l'excez de la faveur qu'il porta à Ælius Sejanus, unissant en sa personne les charges qui devoient estre departies à plusieurs, & le faisant si grand qu'il eust peine de le desfaire. A la fin la ruine de l'Estat qui fut le fondement de sa grandeur, fut aussi la cause de sa cheute » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 2).

[18] « En tous ses desseins, il trouva en Tibere tant de facilite & d'affection, qu'il n'avoit peine qu'a demander & remercier : il ne luy refusoit rien, prevenant souvent ses demandes, & advouant qu'il meritoit encores d'avantage… » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 9).

[19] Although Squarzafigo's motivations for the translation remain unclear, the Italian vogue for Matthieu's works and the banker's close ties to elite circles suggest an early Italian route for their reception. Another of Matthieu's texts to enter Spain via an Italian version was *Remarques d'estat et d'Histoire sur la vie et les*

Madrid's circles of power, and his version offers an early testimony to the growing interest in Matthieu's historical writing in Spain. The year 1621, marked by the death of Philip III and the rise to the throne of his successor, was a moment of intense political turmoil. A few years earlier, in 1618, the fall of the Duke of Lerma, Philip III's powerful favorite, marked one of the most striking political downfalls of early seventeenth-century Europe. For two decades, Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, Duke of Lerma, effectively governed the monarchy, controlling royal appointments, finances, and foreign policy, and eclipsing the authority of the monarch. Contemporary sources, for instance, recount how Concino Concini was at times referred to as "the Duke de Lerma of the Queen" (Aricò, 2007, p. 186), stressing his association with the Spanish favorite and the nature of Marie de Medici's dependence on him. Lerma's vast accumulation of wealth and privileges, coupled with widespread corruption at court, fueled resentment among nobles and reform-minded clergy.[20]

This climate of discontent formed the background to the rise of his successor, the Count of Olivares. To any observer in 1625, it was obvious that Olivares' methods for securing royal favor differed little from those of his predecessor. During the early years of his ascendancy (1620–1625), Olivares became synonymous with the growing excesses and corruption at the court of Philip IV. The new administration was marked by lavish spending, favoritism, and the consolidation of power within a tight circle of relatives and friends of the all-powerful minister, individuals who benefited from lucrative appointments and royal patronage. All these practices became increasingly visible, and the accusations of graft, influence-peddling, and manipulation of royal justice proliferated.[21] In this context, a second Spanish translation appeared in Madrid in 1625: *La vida del dichoso desdichado* (Life of the fortunate unfortunate man), translated by political writer Juan Pablo Mártir Rizo. If Squarzafigo's version was read as a reflection of the relationship between Philip III and the Duke of Lerma, by 1625 Sejanus' life was likely interpreted not only in relation to Lerma's excesses and fall but also to Olivares' grip on the political affairs of the Crown.

Mártir Rizo retitled his translation *Vida del dichoso desdichado* (Life of the fortunate unfortunate man), a characteristically Baroque formulation that underscores the tension between fortune and ruin in the career of the royal counselor. The translation follows the original closely, though it is largely mediated through its paratexts. Alongside the required approvals, one of which describes the work as '…a history worthy of being known,

*services de Monsieur de Villeroy*, translated into Spanish by the political writer Fernando Alvia de Castro and also published in 1621 (*Observaciones de Estado y de Historia sobre la vida y servicios del Señor de Villeroy*, Lisbon: Pedro Craesbeeck). Squarzafigo's Sejanus shows no significant textual or paratextual traces of the Italian mediation.

[20] As is known, although the Duke of Lerma fell from political grace, he managed to secure a cardinal's hat, which offered him the protection of the Church at a critical moment. See, for example, Feros, 2006, pp. 241-260.

[21] For Olivares' rise to power, see Elliot (1986).

especially by those who are close to kings or occupy high positions'[22]—Mártir Rizo's Advertisement to the reader opens by presenting "the example of a most dissimulating prince and of a cunning and daring man, whose actions shook the very foundations of the Roman Empire."[23]

If for Matthieu translation operated on two distinct levels —as a cultural translation or temporal reinterpretation of the world Sejanus and Tiberius in light of the political situation in the Louvre, and a linguistic operation involving the interlingual translation of various sources, particularly Latin ones, into French— in Squarzafigo and Mártir Rizo's case the scope of the translational endeavors is further expanded. Their versions transfer meaning not only from the Roman past to their own present, but also across languages and political contexts, where both Roman and French realities illuminated the political situation in Madrid.

But this dynamic was not unique to Spain. Across the English Channel as well, translation became a form of political mediation: the English rendering of Matthieu's *Sejanus* exemplifies how a text could be reshaped into a veiled commentary on the fraught relationship between King James I and the Duke of Buckingham. The early decades of the seventeenth century saw a marked interest in Sejanus-themed texts in England, reflected in historical narratives, theatrical productions, and translations where the figure of the Roman favorite was a coded symbol of the corrupt minister or royal favorite. In 1603, Ben Jonson staged a tragedy titled *Sejanus, His Fall*, in which he imitated passages from Juvenal's Satire X on the corruption of power and greed. Tiberius's favorite is also the central character in the anonymous tragedy *The Tragedy of Claudius Tiberius Nero*, published in 1607.

Interestingly, Matthieu's *Sejanus* was only translated into English in 1628, shortly after the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham in August of that year. The stated imprint ('Printed at Paris') is most likely false, since the book was probably printed in London. No name is given for a translator, and the volume contains no prefatory material. The timing of this first English translation, together with the spurious printing place, and the nameless translator, reinforces the contemporary association between Sejanus and corrupt fallen favorites like Buckingham. The 1632 version was written by Sir Thomas Hawkins, who also rendered into English Giovanni Battista Manzini's *Della peripetia di fortuna, overo sopra la caduta di Seiano* (Political observations upon the fall of Sejanus). Hawkins's translation did not appear independently, but was issued with another of Matthieu's popular works under the title *Unhappy Prosperitie Expressed in the Histories of Aelius Sejanus and Phlippa the Catanian*. The shift from the anonymous version to Hawkins' translation reflects not only differing publication strategies but also political positioning. Hawkins dedicated the volume

[22] "…Historia digna de ser sabida, y más de aquellos que están cerca de los reyes u ocupan lugares altos," Matthieu, *Vida del dichoso desdichado*, translated by M. Rizo, 'Aprobación' de Gil González Dávila. My translation.

[23] "Comunico un ejemplo del príncipe más disimulado y de un hombre industrioso, atrevido, por quien titubeó la máquina del Imperio Romano…," Matthieu, *Vida del dichoso desdichado*, translated by M. Rizo, 'Advertencia'. My translation.

to William Cecil (1591–1668), 2nd Earl of Salisbury, a prominent courtier who served as a member of the Privy Council under James I and Charles I and as Lord Treasurer since 1626. Hawkins notes that the earl showed "particular affection" (Matthieu, 1632, p. A1r) to the original, which implies prior familiarity with Matthieu's work in French, and presents his translation as a response to both to Salisbury's interest and to the "noble favours" (p. A1r) he had received. Hawkins also stresses the work's utility for a political reader as the earl, describing its content as "important, the observations prudent, maxims of state useful, and sentences weighty" (1632, p. A1r). Salisbury emerges a fitting dedicatee for Matthieu's two texts on the fall of a corrupt favorite. As a loyal courtier frequently "affected by Buckingham's machinations," (Bird, 2013, p. 7) he faced significant obstacles in securing court office due to Buckingham's dominance. In this context, the dedication of the *Unhappy Prosperitie Expressed in the Histories of Aelius Sejanus and Phlippa the Catanian* to a figure politically marginalized by Buckingham suggests that the translation carried a pointed resonance within the English political milieu.[24]

In sum, both English versions of Matthieu's *Sejanus,* published in 1628 and 1632*,* sit within the same lineage as Ben Jonson's *Sejanus, His Fall*, Manzini's *Peripetia di Fortuna*, and other works that reframe Roman history to comment on the political crises of early modern monarchies, from Paris to Madrid to London.

### *2.1 Life of Philippa the Catanian*

> Favor raised this Catanian from dust to glory, and pride threw her headlong from glory into dust again. I present this History to your Majesty, as of a monster of fortune, which you may peruse for curiosity, others for instruction: For (verily) it is a model, which figures the shipwreck of those who strike not sail to decline the Tempest (Matthieu, 1632, 'To the King', p. 217).[25]

With this dedication to the king, Matthieu introduces the story of Philippa the Catanian as a cautionary tale about the perils of fortune and pride. Described as a "monster of fortune," (1632, p. 217) she is elevated from obscurity to power by royal favor, only to be brought down by ambition. This short passage also highlights Matthieu's characteristic style, which exploits the rhetoric of opposition and parallel structures to illustrate how historical truth can expose the downfall of states. If as a historian Matthieu drew inspiration from Tacitus' *Annals* to write his Sejanus, here he turned to Boccaccio's *De casibus illustrium virorum,* which included the history of Philippa, to reflect on contemporary

[24] See Patterson (1984) and Keenan (2011) for an overview of how Roman history is deployed through substituted figures, pointed historical parallels, and other strategies designed to evade censorship, enabling playwrights to stage and comment on contemporary Stuart politics, particularly issues of favoritism, ambition, and court corruption associated with the Duke of Buckingham.

[25] « La Faveur esleva ceste Cathenoise, de la cendre a la gloire, & l'Orgueil la precipita de la gloire à la cendre. J'en presente l'Histoire à V. M. comme d'un monstre de fortune, qu'elle verra par curiosité, les autres par instruction: car c'est un tableau qui marque le naufrage de ceux qui n'abaissent les voiles, pour donner moins de prise à la tempeste ('Au Roy')». All quotations are drawn from Hawkins's English translation; spelling has been modernized.

politics. Matthieu's *Philippa* recounts the rise and fall of Queen Joan of Naples's favorite, Philippa—a washerwoman who gained considerable influence in 14th-century Naples, persuaded the queen to murder her husband, Prince Andrew, and was sentenced to death and executed in a brutal and public fashion.

In the *Histoire des prosperitez malheureuses d'une femme Cathenoise, grande seneschalle de Naples* Matthieu explores in depth the workings of human passions within the sphere of politics. Much of the biography portrays Philippa's manipulations of all her mistresses, particularly the young Queen: she "had no desire, but to humour her, rather added increase than moderation to her appetites, thinking on nothing but to reign in the Kingdom…" (Matthieu, 1632, pp. 269-270).[26] The Catanian embodies the post-Machiavellian figure of the evil minister who leads a prince away from virtue, and the antithesis of neo-Stoic ideals that sought to regulate the passions through moderation, reason, prudence, constancy, and patience. By exposing the passions that drive corrupt ministers and inexperienced rulers, Matthieu offers negative exempla through which readers may distinguish between legitimate and questionable forms of prudence and learn to guard themselves against deception. The biography of Philippa thus functions as a political dramatization of the dangers of unrestrained desire, warning both kings and ministers against the abuse of power.

The Spanish version includes, as part of its prefatory material, a 'Judgement of the works of Matthieu' (*Juicio a las obras de Pedro Matheo*) by the influential writer Francisco de Quevedo. While Quevedo acknowledges Matthieu's reputation in Spain for his judicious historical writing, he also stresses that, as a French subject writing about an enemy nation, he is biased. The 'Judgement' identifies one major fault: Matthieu's alleged calumny regarding the humble origins of the kings of Aragon in contrast to the supposed greatness of the French monarchy; The passage is corrected in the Spanish translation through a marginal note that counters these claims. This intervention is significant given that the events narrated take place in Naples, then under Aragonese rule, making the defense of its dynastic prestige all the more pointed.

While Matthieu's accounts of the lives of Sejanus and Philippa were published in Paris in the same year as separate works, the English reception brought them into closer alignment. In the English context, Sir Thomas Hawkins's 1632 translation of the history of the infamous female favorite was published together with *Sejanus,* as mentioned earlier, creating a paired reflection on the fall of powerful ministers.[27] The frontispiece of the 1632 edition of the *Unhappy Prosperitie Expressed in the Histories of Aelius Sejanus and Phlippa the Catanian* is a rich visual allegory that encapsulates the moral and political themes of the text. Sejanus appears on the left, facing Philippa on the right, a mirrored placement that signals that the two figures are to be read as parallel moral exempla. Beneath the

[26] « Sa gouvernante qui n'avoit autre passion que pour luy plaire apportoit plustot de l'accroissement, que de la moderation à ses desirs ne pensant qu'a regner dans le Royaume… » (Matthieu, 1617, pp. 387)
[27] The Rouen edition by Ian Berthelin in 1642 also combined Matthieu's Sejanus and Philippa, along with the political biography of the Marquis of Villerroy.

ornate central cartouche containing the book's title, a Latin anagram—*Seianus: Es Ianus*—plays on Sejanus's name by identifying him with Janus, the two-faced god who sees both past and future, underscoring the didactic value of recalling the past to illuminate present dangers. In the lower section of the frontispiece, the two scenes on the pedestals deepen this meditation on the rise and fall of fortune. On the left, Neptune rising from the sea is accompanied by the caption *Ianus: qui faelix aspicis ortum* (Janus, being fortunate, beholds the beginning), evoking his ascent to prosperity. Opposite this image is a shipwreck, paired with the caption *Despisis: occasum miser* (you ignore the downfall), a reminder of the neglected warnings and inevitable ruin. Between these two scenes, a vignette representing people approaching a blazing fire visualizes divine and moral retribution.[28] A line from Juvenal's Satire X —*Ardet adoratum populo caput, et crepat ingens Seianus* (The head once adored by the people burns, and mighty Sejanus bursts apart)— anchors the book as a timeless cautionary tale on the instability of fortune.

If the false imprint and nameless translator for the 1628 English version of Sejanus shields the act of translation itself in a context critical of favorites, the visual allegory of the English frontispiece of the *Unhappy Prosperity* (1632), an edition that pairs Sejanus and Philippa under the advocation of Janus, can be read as a semiotic operation aimed at guiding the readers' moral and political interpretation, reinforcing the trope of the cyclical rise and fall of power.

In Matthieu's view, greed, deceit and dissimulation drove Philippa's actions, and much of her biography is therefore devoted to describing her manipulation of her mistress. When Philippa sees her position at court threatened by Joan's pregnancy (which would increase her husband's power at court), she "caused her [Joan] to swallow the poison of a horrid counsel […] saying Heaven would do her a great favour if he made her a widow before she were a mother" (Matthieu, 1632, p. 280).[29] Andrew's assassination is a historical fact, and Matthieu exonerates Queen Joan of direct responsibility, attributing the crime instead to her susceptibility to the favorite's influence. As a woman, Joan is portrayed as governed by emotion; as a queen, however, she ultimately breaks free from Philippa's hold and reclaims the prudence expected of a ruler, rectifying her earlier misjudgments and punishing the guilty:

> …In all this we must conclude that ill success waits on unjust prosperity, that there is not any wickedness which bears not its pain and repentance; that he who perpetrates one, expects the opportunity of another, that whilst the worlds theater lasts, Fortune thereon will play her tragedies and will make it appear she flatters those she means to stifle (Matthieu, 1632, pp. 298-299).[30]

[28] The frontispiece of the 1639 edition is even more elaborate, with both figures standing beside a globe from which a large tree grows, accompanied by a caption *Ubicunque damnor, datur ultra*... (Wherever I am cast down, another is raised in my place).

[29] « … luy fait avaller le poison d'un detestable Conseil dans la douceur de sa liberté, disant que le Ciel luy faroit une grande grâce, s'il la rendoit vefve premier que d'estre mere » (Matthieu 1617, p. 402).

[30] « En tout cela il faut conclurre qu'il a du malheur aux Prosperitez injustes, qu'il n'y a point de meschanceté qui ne porte sa peine & son repentir, que qui en fait une, en attend une autre, que tant que le theatre du




**Figure 2.** Frontispiece of the 1632 English edition of Matthieu's joint biographies of Sejanus and Philippa.[31]

Philippa and her children were brought to justice and subjected to grievous torments. After being tortured, naked, they were "dragged through the town upon a hurdle, then tied to three ship masts, burning pincers twitched them, razors flayed them, and flames choaked them" (Matthieu, 1632, p. 296). According to Matthieu, Philippa "died in the midst of her torments, her heart and entrails were torn out, her head set upon one of the gates of Naples, and the rest of her body turned into ashes" (Matthieu, 1632, pp. 296-297). His

monde durera, la fortune y jouera des tragedies, & fera voir que elle embrasse ceux qu'elle veu estouffer » (Matthieu, 1617, p. 428).

[31] Courtesy of the British Library, Early English Books online (EEBO).

account parallels the horrific fate of Concini and Galigaï. Contemporary chronicles and engravings record how Concini's corpse was pillaged, torn to pieces by the crowd, dragged through the streets, and even disinterred and desecrated the day after burial (Duccini, 1991). Galigaï, for her part, was executed on the Place de Greve, her body burned, and her ashes scattered to the winds (Mongrédien, 1968).

**3. Conclusions**

In the seventeenth-century European imaginary, political biography emerged as a thriving genre that secured historians such as Pierre Matthieu lasting fame within the Republic of Letters. His *vitae*, which used the past to instruct monarchs and ministers in the responsible exercise of power, and warned them of the perils, served a moral and political purpose. In the two biographies briefly examined here, infamous historical characters such as Sejanus (mapped onto Concini) and Philippa the Catanian (aligned with Leonora Galigaï) became enduring cultural symbols of the treacherous counselor, resonating from the Louvre to the courts of Madrid and London.

Historical writing as practiced by Matthieu and other seventeenth-century historians can be understood a translational practice since the historian mediated the transfer of meaning from past to present, and then it was, in turn, translated into other languages and political contexts. In both *Aelius Sejanus* and the *Histoire des prosperitez malheureuses d'une femme Cathenoise,* he established a rhetorical bridge between ancient Rome, medieval Naples, and contemporary France, aligning the Roman Capitol and the Neapolitan court with the Parisian Louvre to universalize a warning about the recurrent dynamics of favoritism and political downfall across time and empires. From an interlingual translation perspective, these narratives, drawing on Tacitus and Boccaccio, were first reworked into French before circulating into other vernaculars, including English and Spanish.

The versions of Matthieu's biographies in Spain and England exemplify the mechanisms of cultural translation, where both Sejanus and Philippa's identity are reframed and redefined through translation to make their cases resonate within the receiving culture. The political mirroring pattern, linking Sejanus with figures such as Concini, Lerma, Olivares, and Buckingham, demonstrates the success of this process of cultural transposition. The mobility of Matthieu's critique is thus a direct result of his translational strategies and those of his translators across Europe. Moreover, some printers, such as those responsible for the 1632 *Unhappy Prosperity* edition, relied on what can be called intersemiotic translation to highlight the central message of the biographies. In short, the interlingual translation of historians served as a form of cultural translation in the seventeenth century, reshaping content to align with the expectations and ideological frameworks of the receiving culture. As this brief analysis of Matthieu's work has shown, the historian-translator in early modern Europe did not merely transmit history across languages, but actively produced it; translation was not ancillary to historiography, but integral to it.

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# TRANSLATING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: REWRITING POLITICAL EXPERIENCE IN OLYMPE DE GOUGES'S THEATRE

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Olympe de Gouges's revolutionary theatre (1790–1793) as a site of historical translation, demonstrating how theatrical performance mediates and transforms political experience. Drawing on recent work in historiography (White, Munslow), translation studies (Vidal Claramonte, Zethsen), and performance theory (Fischer-Lichte), the article argues that de Gouges actively translated revolutionary events into dramatic forms that reshaped their meaning for contemporary and future audiences. The analysis of four plays, *Les démocrates et les aristocrates* (1790), *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791), *La France sauvée* (1792), and *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (1793), reveals distinct modes of translation: spatial-social, allegorical-memorial, ideological, and affective-mythopoeic. Each work demonstrates how theatre performs intralingual translation, converting political discourse into accessible dramatic form whilst mediating collective emotions and the construction of revolutionary memory. The article contributes to understanding 'history as translation' beyond strictly interlingual frameworks, positioning de Gouges's dramaturgy as both historiographical intervention and emotional translation of revolutionary experience.
KEYWORDS: Olympe de Gouges; French Revolution; History as Translation; Revolutionary Theatre; Affective Translation.

## 1. Introduction

When Olympe de Gouges composed her revolutionary plays, she was not merely documenting contemporary developments. She was actively translating the unfolding Revolution into dramatic form, transforming political chaos into legible theatrical narrative. Her theatre illustrates what recent historiographical theory has identified as the fundamentally translational nature of historical representation. White (1990) and Munslow (1997, 2012) have demonstrated that history is not a transparent record but an interpretative transformation, requiring the conversion of experience into narrative, evidence into meaning, and temporal distance into intelligibility. Vidal Claramonte (2018) extends this insight, arguing that historical writing constitutes intralingual translation, a continuous reframing of reality across shifting ideological and temporal coordinates.

Theatre, as an embodied and performative medium, offers particularly rich terrain for examining these translational processes. It converts events into action, abstraction into emotion, and political rupture into collective experience. Studies of eighteenth-century dramaturgy have long emphasised the centrality of visual composition and affective intensity in theatrical meaning, foregrounding theatre's capacity to channel collective experience through sensorial and emotional forms (Frantz, 1998). Friedland's analysis of revolutionary theatricality further underscores that political events did not simply unfold but were actively staged, rendered intelligible through representational forms. This insight

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resonates with recent approaches in Translation Studies which conceptualise history itself as a process of translation rather than transmission (Friedland, 2002).

Drawing on recent debates in translation studies that move beyond a strictly interlingual understanding of translation to examine history itself as a translational process (Vidal Claramonte, 2018; Savchenkova, 2024), this article approaches history as translation, examining how theatrical performance mediates and transforms revolutionary experience. In this context, the French playwright and political activist Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) offers an illuminating case study. Born Marie Gouze in Montauban, she moved to Paris where she adopted the name Olympe de Gouges and began her literary career as a playwright. Between 1784 and her execution by guillotine on 3 November 1793, she composed over twenty plays, many engaging directly with the revolutionary present, sometimes responding within weeks of the events they dramatised (Lucet, 2021). Though today she is widely celebrated for her 1791 *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, this political manifesto belongs to a different register than her primary vocation: theatre. As Blanc (2022) shows, both her theatrical and political interventions were deeply shaped by her marginal social position as a woman writer and by the pressures of the revolutionary public sphere.

This marginal position distinguishes her dramaturgy from that of other practitioners of patriotic theatre (Bourdin, 2017): unlike male playwrights who operated within established theatrical institutions, de Gouges wrote from the periphery of both the literary and political fields, producing translations of revolutionary experience that foregrounded affective and gendered dimensions systematically absent from dominant theatrical production.

De Gouges's theatrical vocation emerged from multiple factors. Whether it served to reaffirm her purported connection to the dramatist Lefranc de Pompignan or resulted from the theatre mania of her Parisian social circles, theatre became the space where she deployed her ideas and struggles, inventing a political voice through dramatic form (Lucet, 2021). Her dramaturgy interprets the Revolution rather than merely depicting it. She reinterprets political conflict as theatrical action, recasts ideological tensions in embodied dialogue, and renders the moment's instability legible through character, speech and scene. This theatrical translation operates on multiple levels: linguistic (converting political discourse into dramatic dialogue), temporal (transforming recent events into narratable plots), spatial (transposing public spaces onto the stage), and affective (translating collective experience through theatre's capacity for emotional catharsis).

Despite this prolific output, she never achieved recognition as a major literary or political figure during her lifetime. Following her execution, she was almost entirely forgotten for nearly two centuries (Ritz, 2021). The contrast between this long eclipse and her current celebrity is striking. Her theatrical works, many unpublished during her lifetime or never performed, exemplify what has been termed an 'archival erasure' (Lucet, 2021). This silencing was shaped not only by her execution but also by persistent misogyny that characterised nineteenth-century historiography. Contemporary critics dismissed her as a

mediocre writer, reducing her contributions to theatrical failures and personal eccentricity rather than acknowledging her literary and political significance (Lucet, 2021).

This article examines four plays (1790-1793), each illuminating a distinct dimension of history as translation. *Les démocrates et les aristocrates* (Gouges, 1790) illustrates spatial and social translation, showing how the Champ de Mars is transformed into a theatrical microcosm that translates revolutionary sociability and class tensions into a dramatic encounter. *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (Gouges, 1791) exemplifies allegorical and memorial translation, demonstrating how contested political memory is negotiated through mythological frameworks, translating the unstable reputation of a revolutionary hero into philosophical inquiry. *La France sauvée* (Gouges, 1792) reveals crisis translation and ideological emplotment, showing how chaotic insurrectionary violence is restructured into coherent moral narrative, translating political rupture into republican pedagogy. Finally, *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles* (Gouges, 1793) exemplifies affective and mythopoeic translation, demonstrating how military triumph is converted into civic ritual and founding myth, translating contingent victory into timeless republican virtue. These works were selected for their direct engagement with revolutionary circumstances, their chronological distribution across the Revolution's intense phase (1790-1793), and their exemplification of complementary theatrical strategies that, taken together, demonstrate the multifaceted nature of theatre as historical translation.

Existing scholarship on de Gouges's revolutionary theatre has examined her works primarily through the lens of political thought and nationalism (Arguelles-Ling, 2007; Le Hir, 2014; Nielsen, 2002) or has compared her ideas with those of Rousseau on the social function of theatre (Bergès, 2018). While these approaches have yielded valuable insights, none has examined her plays through the framework of translation studies. This article addresses that gap, arguing that a translational perspective reveals dimensions of her dramaturgy that other approaches have not fully explored.

By situating de Gouges within the framework of 'history as translation', this article demonstrates that her dramaturgy epitomizes the interpretative, affective and transformative dimensions through which theatre, like history, engages the past, giving shape to its meanings and future possibilities.

## 2. Theoretical framework: history as translation

To fully understand this translational practice, it is necessary to examine the theoretical foundations. The idea that history is a form of translation has become central to contemporary historiographical theory, challenging assumptions about historical narrative as transparent record. White describes historical writing as "translating knowing into telling" (1990, p. 1), whilst Munslow emphasises that historiography entails "translating evidence into facts" (1997, p. 6). This transformation is conditioned by sources, conceptual tools, ideological commitments and narrative expectations. For both theorists, the past must be organised, emplotted and rhetorically shaped before becoming legible as 'history'. This inherently selective process means that historical accounts are always situated

narratives rather than neutral representations (Munslow, 2012, p. 150). This conception aligns with what Simon (1996) identifies as the 'politics of transmission', whereby translators and, by extension, historical mediators necessarily engage in acts of cultural interpretation that perpetuate or contest dominant values.

Vidal Claramonte (2018) expands these claims, proposing that historical writing constitutes intralingual translation. She argues that this involves rewriting 'reality' within the same language but across shifting ideological, temporal and affective coordinates. She posits that history comprises multiple texts continuously rewriting past developments within evolving cultural frameworks, destabilising historical objectivity and highlighting narrative multiplicity (2018, p. 2). Her emphasis on rewriting is particularly relevant for artistic forms, where the past is performed, adapted and recoded through semiotic systems.

Building on this conceptual foundation, Korning Zethsen (2009, pp. 296-297) has systematized the study of intralingual translation, identifying multiple types. These include diachronic translation (across time), expert-to-layperson translation, and translation between style levels or registers. Zethsen argues that intralingual translation "serves communicative functions in society by bridging gaps between groups of language users of the same language" (2009, pp. 296–299). Applied to de Gouges's revolutionary theatre, this framework reveals how her plays perform multiple forms of intralingual translation simultaneously. They convert specialized political discourse into accessible theatrical form, transform recent events into narratable theatrical plots, and mediate between elite political culture and popular theatrical audiences.

De Gouges's theatre exemplifies the complexity of intralingual translation in revolutionary contexts, where language itself was undergoing radical transformation. As Darnton (2023) illustrates, revolutionary France witnessed an explosion of new political vocabularies, with terms like *citoyen*, *patrie*, and *république* acquiring unprecedented semantic density and affective charge. These theatrical translations navigate multiple registers simultaneously. They move from the specialised discourse of political assemblies (with its legalistic terminology, constitutional debates, and parliamentary rhetoric) to the accessible, emotionally charged language of popular theatre. This is not merely simplification but fundamental reframing, what Jakobson (1959) terms 'rewording' or 'intralingual translation'. Here, meaning is reconstituted through different linguistic resources within the same language system.

Consider the translation of political pamphlets and assembly speeches into theatrical dialogue. Revolutionary pamphlets employed dense argumentation, classical allusions, and sophisticated rhetorical structures addressed to literate, politically engaged readers. De Gouges transforms this register into dramatic exchanges characterised by heightened emotional immediacy: exclamations, rhetorical questions and moral pronouncements replace abstract argumentation; concrete imagery and interpersonal conflict give embodied form to ideological opposition; rhythmic, declamatory speech replaces the dense prose of political pamphlets. When a character in *La France sauvée* denounces monarchical conspiracy, she translates complex constitutional arguments about sovereignty and

representation into visceral accusations of betrayal, rendering political theory as embodied moral drama. This intralingual translation makes revolutionary ideas accessible to diverse audiences, including the illiterate who could attend performances but not read pamphlets. Simultaneously, it reshapes their meaning through affective intensification.

Zethsen's taxonomy helps us recognise that de Gouges enacts multiple types of intralingual translation simultaneously. First, there is register translation: converting the formal prose of political discourse into the more colloquial, emotionally direct language of theatrical dialogue. Second, there is diachronic translation: bridging the temporal gap between recent developments and their dramatic representation. This process requires not only narrative restructuring but linguistic updating as political vocabularies evolved rapidly during these years. Third, there is expert-to-layperson translation: mediating between elite political culture (deputies, journalists, political theorists) and popular audiences who may lack specialised knowledge of constitutional debates or military strategy but access political meaning through affective experience (Zethsen, 2009).

Crucially, de Gouges's intralingual translations are never neutral. As Hermans (2014) argues, all translation involves 'positioning': the translator's stance towards source material, target audience, and the cultural field itself. De Gouges translates revolutionary discourse through the lens of her Girondin politics, feminist commitments, and theatrical expertise. She produces versions that amplify certain voices (moderate republicans, virtuous citizens) whilst marginalising others (radical Montagnards, sans-culotte militants). Her translations thus participate actively in the Revolution's ideological contestation, demonstrating that intralingual translation, like interlingual translation, is fundamentally a political practice. It is a site where cultural power is exercised, contested, and reconfigured (Álvarez and Vidal Claramonte, 1996; Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002).

Beyond textual translation, scholarship on emotions and memory highlights the affective dimensions of historical meaning-making. Savchenkova's (2024) concept of 'emotional translation of history' and Reddy's (2004) account of emotions as cultural practices both demonstrate that affect functions as a translational force: it shapes what is remembered, which voices gain visibility, and how contemporaries make sense of unprecedented change.

The cultural turn in translation studies (Bassnett, 2002, pp. 1-6) has emphasised translation as intercultural mediation shaped by power relations and ideological commitments. As Simon (1996, p. ix) argues, "translators are necessarily involved in a politics of transmission, in perpetuating or contesting the values which sustain our literary culture". Lefevere's foundational account of translation as rewriting establishes that such mediating operations actively manipulate and reorganise cultural memory according to dominant ideological frameworks (1992).

These developments converge in performance studies, which extends the translational framework beyond the verbal dimension. If Translation Studies reveals how texts are transformed across registers, ideologies and temporal distances, performance studies shows how these transformations operate through embodied, spatial and affective

semiotic systems that exceed purely linguistic analysis. Lüsebrink (1989, p. 341) shows how revolutionary circumstances like the taking of the Bastille were rapidly dramatised, establishing theatre as a primary medium for translating political rupture into collective memory through performance and emotions. As Burke (2005, p. 3) observes, if "the past is a foreign country", those mediating it, such as historians, translators, and playwrights, function as cultural intermediaries bridging temporal distance. Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008) illuminates how theatrical events generate cognitive and affective frameworks through the 'autopoietic feedback loop'. This is the continuous circulation of impulses between actors and spectators (2008, pp. 7-9) that reshapes perception and produces new forms of communal experience. Theatre thus becomes a site where historical events undergo multiple translation layers: narrative, visual, spatial, affective and ideological (Gentzler, 2017).

Within this framework, 'history as translation' provides a productive lens for examining Olympe de Gouges's revolutionary dramaturgy. Written when the Revolution's outcome remained uncertain, her plays translate unfolding events into dramatic forms that render political crises legible, recast ideological divisions as interpersonal conflicts, and articulate future-oriented visions of republican virtue. In doing so, her theatre demonstrates how the stage functions as a powerful medium for mediating and transforming the present-as-history.

The methodology adopted in this article draws on close reading of the dramatic texts as primary sources, analysing how each play's structural, linguistic, spatial and affective dimensions enact the translational operations identified in the theoretical framework. Each play has been selected because it exemplifies a specific mode of historical translation whilst collectively covering the Revolution's most turbulent years (1790–1793). The analytical procedure consists in identifying, within each dramatic text, the mechanisms through which political events are transformed into theatrical form: how discourse is reregistered, how temporality is restructured, how space is reorganised, and how collective emotion is shaped and directed (Susam-Sarajeva, 2009).

## 3. Olympe de Gouges as a translator of the Revolution

Building on the theoretical framework established above, this section examines de Gouges's position as a cultural mediator and translator of the Revolution, identifying the specific modes of historical translation that her dramaturgy enacts and that will be analysed in the four case studies of the next section. Olympe de Gouges occupies a singular position within the French Revolution's cultural landscape. Operating in what Darnton (2023) characterises as Paris' 'early information society', she participated in the formation of collective political consciousness through theatrical performance. Throughout the revolutionary period, the dramatist operated as a theatrical chronicler of unfolding political upheaval. Her sustained engagement with contemporary events, producing dramatic responses with extraordinary rapidity, positioned her dramaturgy as urgent political intervention rather than retrospective commentary (Blanc, 2022). This proximity

determines her dramaturgy's nature: a mode of real-time mediation reframing the Revolution for the stage as its outcome remains uncertain. De Gouges acts as translator of her time, mediating and transforming events so they become intelligible as drama, ideology and collective experience. This apparent paradox, that translation can operate in real time, is resolved when we recognise that mediation does not require temporal distance. De Gouges's theatre demonstrates that translational operations of selection, reframing and emplotment can be performed simultaneously with the events they translate, shaping their meaning as they unfold rather than retrospectively.

Blanc (2022) underscores that this mediating position was inseparable from her political activism, which brought her into direct conflict with revolutionary authorities. Similarly, Sherman (2013) characterises this positioning as one of 'engaged marginality', allowing de Gouges to critique revolutionary orthodoxies whilst remaining committed to revolutionary principles. Kadish and Massardier-Kenney (1994, pp. 1-5) identify de Gouges as "an especially salient illustration of women's role as linguistic, cultural, and political mediator during the French Revolution". Translation, as Bassnett (2002, p. 18) notes, involves "a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures" mediated by the translator's position. Although not a translator in the conventional sense, de Gouges embodied the mediating position between cultural and linguistic groups that characterises translation practice (Kadish & Massardier-Kenney, 1994): as a native speaker of Occitan writing in French, she negotiated between regional and national linguistic registers at a moment when language itself was a site of political contestation.

Theatre, for de Gouges, is an active instrument of political intervention and historiographical interpretation. Verdier (2001) reveals how de Gouges challenged theatrical conventions and social norms (Verdier, 1994), recasting the Revolution's shifting dynamics into embodied conflict. This translation operates through selective dramatisation. It isolates emblematic situations, condenses political tensions into character relations, and amplifies moral stakes through heightened emotional registers. She produces dramatic language conveying the moment's complexity whilst guiding spectator interpretation. The stage reorganises the Revolution into meaningful forms, actively constructing historical meaning.

De Gouges enacts crisis translation, turning developments such as the Bastille's fall or Mirabeau's death into compact theatrical structures with clear dramatic arcs. These structures impose coherence, causality and rhythm upon historical material experienced as unstable and unpredictable. Where contemporaries confronted bewildering crisis succession, de Gouges's dramaturgy offers interpretative frameworks that retrospectively organise experience into legible plots.

Through allegorical-memorial translation, she elevates contested political figures and events into philosophical allegory, translating unstable revolutionary memory into enduring moral exempla transmitted to future generations. By displacing action to mythological or afterlife spaces, as in her treatment of Mirabeau, she creates critical distance from partisan

controversy whilst simultaneously consecrating revolutionary heroes through dialogue with canonical thinkers.

She performs ideological translation, filtering developments through political commitments: Girondin republicanism, critique of absolutist authority, abolitionist stance against slavery, and early feminist insistence. Her plays articulate citizenship visions grounded in rational deliberation and ethical responsibility, rejecting both monarchical tyranny and revolutionary excess. This positioning becomes precarious. By 1793, de Gouges's moderate vision opposes Montagnard dominance (Hunt, 2004). Martin (2009) illustrates how this positioning placed her within a moderate republican framework, challenging both monarchical authority and revolutionary orthodoxies.

De Gouges undertakes affective-mythopoeic translation, recognising emotion as political cognition. Her dramaturgy positions emotional responses as constitutive elements of political understanding, foregrounding enthusiasm, indignation, compassion, grief, and patriotic fervour. By staging collective feeling, she creates an affective public experiencing the Revolution as shared emotional and ethical horizon. This aligns with Savchenkova and Reddy's perspectives on emotions as mediating structures through which historical meaning is produced and naturalised. As Perazzolo (2023) establishes, the author's theatrical practice translated political terror into affective spectacles designed to shape civic consciousness through emotional engagement. This mediating function extended beyond textual production to de Gouges's position within the cultural field itself. As Kadish and Massardier-Kenney (1994, p. 39) observe, de Gouges sought to bridge these disparate cultural domains, straddling:

> the high culture of theater as practiced at the Comédie-Française on the one hand, a cultural domain from which women writers were typically excluded, and the popular culture of pamphlets, speeches, and melodrama on the other hand.

Her dramaturgy executes spatial-social translation, transposing events from dispersed revolutionary sites onto the stage's concentrated space. This spatial reorganisation constitutes an interpretative act bringing together what was historically scattered and creating visual and symbolic proximities that reshape understanding. The theatrical space becomes a microcosm compressing the Revolution's geographical and social diversity into a unified representational field. This enables spectators to grasp the totality of revolutionary experience through concentrated dramatic action.

These operations confirm that de Gouges's dramaturgy exemplifies historical translation's multifaceted nature. Her plays do not simply convert events into theatre: they project interpretations back onto the historical field, shaping how contemporaries understood their present and establishing the stage as a powerful apparatus for constituting historical meaning.

## 4. Dramatic case studies: translating events into theatre (1790–1793)

Between 1790 and 1793, de Gouges produced plays responding to political events with remarkable immediacy, often composing within weeks of the developments they dramatised. Far from offering detached reflections or retrospective interpretations, these works translate contemporary developments into theatrical structures that actively mediate their meaning for spectators, shaping how audiences understand and emotionally process the revolutionary present. Each play enacts a distinct mode of historical translation: spatial-social, allegorical-memorial, crisis, affective-mythopoeic, illustrating the multiplicity of ways in which theatre can intervene in, interpret and reframe the present as it unfolds. Connors (2025, p. 56) emphasises how such revolutionary event-based theatre sought to create collective knowledge and emotional bonds through dramatic reenactments of recent military and political events, transforming spectators into active participants. De Gouges's theatrical works exemplify what Simon (1996, p. 8) describes as "translation as a mode of engagement with literature, as a kind of literary activism" through which cultural mediators "contribute to cultural debates and create new lines of cultural communication".

Drawing on insights from dramaturgical approaches to political theatre, notably articulated by Ubersfeld (1989), four plays form a representative constellation: *Les démocrates et les aristocrates, ou le curieux du Champ de Mars* (1790) engages the Fête de la Fédération; *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (1791) addresses his death and public mourning; *La France sauvée, ou le tyran détrôné* (1792) responds to the incarceration of the monarchy; and *L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles, ou les vivandiers* (1793) celebrates French military victories. This chronological progression reveals how de Gouges adapts her dramatic tools to the Revolution's shifting tempo and increasingly violent trajectory, responding to changing political climate with varying modes of narrative, emotional and ideological reframing. As Bourdin (2017) shows, these works participate in the broader phenomenon of 'patriotic theatre', which sought to forge revolutionary consciousness through theatrical representation.

Reading these plays as 'history as translation' foregrounds mechanisms through which the playwright transforms events into drama: temporal condensation, character translation, moralisation, affective modulation, and construction of civic exemplarity. Read through the lens of multimodal and intermedial retranslation (Spoturno, 2020), these works demonstrate how theatrical performance operates not only on the verbal level but through the interaction of spatial, visual, and affective semiotic codes, revealing theatre as a space where translation is not a secondary operation applied to a fixed past, but a constitutive practice through which the present is rendered intelligible as history.

### *4.1. Les démocrates et les aristocrates (1790)*

*Les démocrates et les aristocrates*, premiered in late 1790 (Gouges, 1790), constitutes Gouges's experiment translating revolutionary dynamics into drama. Composed after the Fête de la Fédération (14 July 1790) (Ozouf, 2013; Thiele-Knobloch, 1991), the play responds to a moment of optimism when the Revolution still appeared reconcilable with

constitutional monarchy. The work unfolds at the Champ de Mars during preparations for this festivity celebrating national unity and the reconciliation between the king and the people. Rather than focusing on spectacular events, the play stages everyday sociability, capturing the affective texture of early revolutionary culture through a succession of fortuitous encounters among characters from diverse classes, professions and ideological positions.

The play's structure is deliberately anti-narrative. Organised as successive scenes articulated around M. de Bélisle, an impartial National Guard officer, it presents not a closed story but a radiographic snapshot of French society. Characters representing the *ancien régime* (aristocrats, genealogists), encounter proponents of the new democratic order (doctors, sentinels, democratic servants) in a light, humorous tone that masks profound social critique. The cast includes the Marquise de la Branche du Blason (aristocrat), the doctor M. Séné (democrat), the genealogist M. de l'Écusson, the blind Père Ambroise and his dog Jacob (both aristocrats), alongside servants like La Fleur (democrat) and La Jeunesse (aristocrat). Unlike conventional patriotic theatre, which resolved ideological conflict through heroic narrative and civic triumph, de Gouges deliberately withholds resolution: the characters' disputes remain unsettled at the curtain, a formal choice enabled by her distance from the celebratory imperatives of mainstream revolutionary dramaturgy. This structure exemplifies what might be termed spatial-social translation: the transformation of public revolutionary space into theatrical representation and of diffuse social conflict into concentrated dramatic encounter. This spatial-social translation operates primarily as register translation in Zethsen's terms, converting the specialised discourse of revolutionary politics into the accessible emotional language of popular comedy. Set at the Champ de Mars, the play translates the festivity's performative politics into drama that both reproduces and interrogates its staged unity, condensing geographic, temporal and social multiplicity into a legible theatrical form. In doing so, it demonstrates how theatre renders collective experience intelligible through processes of selection, condensation and reframing.

*Les démocrates et les aristocrates* also enacts affective translation shaping how the Revolution is emotionally experienced. Rather than presenting revolution as terror or instability, de Gouges foregrounds moral renewal and future possibilities. She highlights patriotic enthusiasm, optimism and communal affection, constructing an affective atmosphere that legitimises the revolutionary process. She translates political disagreement into a comedy of reconciliation, suggesting the new order can be built through dialogue and civic virtue rather than coercion or violence. This affective framework reflects 1790's optimism before the radicalisation of 1792-1793.

Finally, the play performs a distinctly moral and pedagogical translation of revolutionary change. By presenting the Revolution as a test of individual character, de Gouges aligns political transformation with ethical self-reform. The aristocrats' moral trajectory, from self-interested privilege to patriotic sacrifice, serves as an exemplary model of the broader social reconfiguration demanded by revolutionary ideology. This trajectory

is encapsulated in the figure of the genealogist M. de l'Écusson, who boasts of having fabricated over two hundred marquises and six hundred counts (Gouges, 1790, Act I, scene ultima), inadvertently exposing the artificial nature of aristocratic hierarchy. When he laments that his genealogical tree has become worthless, the democratic National Guard officer M. de Bélisle responds: "You can take your tree elsewhere; it won't take root here. I suggest you turn it into firewood and use it to keep warm"[1] (Gouges, 1790, Act I, scene XI), brutally summarising the historical rupture the Revolution represents. This pedagogical dimension extends beyond individual characters to the audience itself, inviting spectators to witness and internalise the moral lessons it dramatises, translating abstract revolutionary principles into affective experiences that shape political subjectivity.

### *4.2. Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées (1791)*

With *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (Gouges, 1791), de Gouges employs allegorical displacement to mediate Mirabeau's legacy in the immediate aftermath of his death in April 1791. The orator's sudden demise produced unprecedented communal emotion, manifested through elaborate ceremonies, commemorative pamphlets, poems and prints. As the character Fortuné recounts: "Never has public gratitude exploded in such a solemn or touching manner […] our actual legislators, […] fought with the citizen soldiers for the honour of carrying you"[2] (Gouges, 1791, Act I, scene VII). This theatrical testimony captures the collective grief that transformed Mirabeau into the Revolution's first secular saint. He was pantheonised immediately upon death, becoming the inaugural occupant of the newly secularised monument to revolutionary virtue.

*Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* illustrates allegorical translation and the construction of revolutionary memory at its moment of formation. The play presents Mirabeau newly deceased, encountering historical figures in the afterlife including Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and Henri IV, among others. Together they discuss France's future, liberty, and the dangers threatening the Revolution. Where *Les démocrates* translated contemporary space, this play translates recent history into philosophical allegory, elevating Mirabeau from political figure to philosophical interlocutor.

The composition of this afterlife assembly is itself analytically significant. The inclusion of Henri IV alongside Enlightenment philosophers suggests a vision of French patriotism that transcends revolutionary rupture, implying continuity between monarchical and republican traditions. As Le Hir (2014, pp. 54-56) notes, this reflects the originality of de Gouges's ideas on patriotism, which resist simple alignment with either revolutionary orthodoxy or royalist nostalgia. Equally notable is the presence of female figures among the inhabitants of Elysium, whose inclusion contests the masculine exclusivity of the revolutionary pantheon (Verdier, 1994, p. 206). This strategy enables de Gouges to

[1] « Vous pouvez porter votre arbre ailleurs, il ne prendra pas racine ici. Je vous conseille d'en faire du bois pour vous chauffer ». All translations from French into English are the author's own.
[2] « Jamais la reconnaissance publique n'éclata d'une manière plus solennelle, et plus touchante […] nos législateurs mêmes […] disputaient aux soldats citoyens l'honneur de te porter ».

participate in the Revolution's active construction of its own pantheon, using theatre to shape how revolutionary heroism would be remembered and transmitted. Where other patriotic plays of the period presented revolutionary heroes through uncritical hagiography, de Gouges's allegorical displacement creates space for philosophical interrogation, a nuance enabled by her position outside the dominant theatrical institutions that celebrated revolutionary orthodoxy.

The central operation is allegorical elevation. This allegorical-memorial translation exemplifies diachronic translation, bridging the temporal gap between Mirabeau's recent death and its transformation into enduring philosophical legacy. By displacing action to the Champs-Élysées (the classical underworld reimagined as enlightened judgement space), she transfers Mirabeau from the mortal realm of political compromise into the eternal sphere of philosophical principle. This spatial translation performs a double function. It creates critical distance enabling engagement with questions about the Revolution's direction without explicit partisan positioning. Simultaneously, it consecrates Mirabeau by placing him in conversation with Enlightenment luminaries Montesquieu and Rousseau. The play thereby translates Mirabeau's political career into philosophical legacy, suggesting his ideas merit the same enduring consideration as those of canonical thinkers.

Such allegorical framing enables particularly sophisticated translation of revolutionary mourning into political pedagogy. Rather than staging grief as emotional spectacle, the author reframes it into rational dialogue about the Revolution's future. Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and the other historic figures function not merely as judges but as philosophical frameworks through which to interpret Mirabeau's significance. Their presence structures the play's central question: not whether Mirabeau was virtuous, but what his example teaches about revolutionary possibility and peril. The play thus participates in what Nora (1996-1998) identifies as the active construction of sites of memory, spaces where collective values are articulated and transmitted.

The play also performs profound translation of political discourse across registers. Mirabeau's oratory, delivered in the contentious space of the National Assembly, is reframed as philosophical dialogue conducted in the timeless realm of ideas. This translation elevates revolutionary rhetoric from circumstantial argument to universal principle, suggesting that the Revolution's debates concern fundamental human questions rather than merely contingent political conflicts. Olympe de Gouges thereby transposes the Revolution's immediate struggles into philosophical territory, claiming for it the dignity and permanence of Enlightenment thought.

Ozouf (2013) reveals how revolutionary funerals transformed death into civic pedagogy, staging republican virtue through theatrical commemoration. Hunt (2004) likewise demonstrates how such commemorations created new secular rituals channeling grief into political solidarity. De Gouges's play exemplifies both processes, translating mourning into philosophical instruction and collective emotion into republican virtue. The affective register oscillates between reverence and inquiry, celebration and interrogation, creating emotional complexity that prevents simple hagiography. This sophisticated

affective translation reflects the Revolution's own unstable relationship to its emerging heroes, simultaneously needing and fearing the charismatic authority they embodied.

Most significantly, *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* foregrounds the performative construction of revolutionary memory at its origin. By staging posthumous judgement whilst collective memory remains fluid, de Gouges exposes how the Revolution actively shaped its own historiography. Memory emerges not as passive record but as active translation, a process of selecting, elevating and consecrating certain figures whilst the revolutionary present remains uncertain. The play thereby establishes that historical memory is always translational, never merely transmissive. It requires converting lived experience into legible narrative, political complexity into moral exemplum, and temporal chaos into meaningful sequence.

### *4.3. La France sauvée, ou le tyran détrôné (1792)*

*La France sauvée*, completed in August 1792 (Gouges, 1792), marks de Gouges's most ambitious and precarious attempt to translate an ongoing political crisis into dramatic form whilst that crisis remained unresolved. This unfinished work is set in the Tuileries Palace on the night of 9-10 August 1792, hours before the royal family's imprisonment in the Temple tower (Thiele-Knobloch, 1993). The temporal specificity is crucial: de Gouges writes not retrospectively but in real time, attempting to impose narrative coherence on events whose meaning remains radically uncertain. By August 1792, the monarchy had lost legitimacy through Louis XVI's flight to Varennes (June 1791), suspected foreign correspondence and resistance to revolutionary legislation. Tackett (2015) has shown how the period following the king's suspension witnessed intensifying factional violence. Revolutionary theatre at this moment functioned as contested public space where competing narratives were performed and policed (Walton, 2009).

*La France sauvée* exemplifies crisis translation and ideological emplotment, the transformation of chaotic, fragmented political rupture into coherent moral narrative. Written during the August 10$^{th}$ insurrection that would definitively end the monarchy, the play performs urgent translational work: converting bewildering violence into legible story, translating conspiracy rumours into dramatic evidence, and transforming political crisis into republican pedagogy. The play reveals how theatrical translation can function as direct political intervention, projecting interpretative frameworks designed to shape collective understanding in real time. Where *Mirabeau* translated memory and heritage through allegorical distance and *Les démocrates* translated festive sociability, *La France sauvée* translates the immediate present, demonstrating theatre's capacity for real-time historical mediation.

The central mechanism is crisis translation. This crisis translation operates as expert-to-layperson translation, converting the complex constitutional and factional disputes of August 1792 into morally legible dramatic narrative accessible to popular audiences. De Gouges transforms complex, fragmented events (rumours of treason, contested testimonies, conflicting accounts, chaotic insurrectionary violence) into structured dramatic

narrative attributing coherence, causality and moral clarity to crisis. This exemplifies White's emplotment: converting chronicle into story through event selection and arrangement according to recognisable patterns. Yet whilst patriotic productions typically presented the monarchy's fall as necessary justice, de Gouges's play offers more complex translation. The deposed king and queen appear not as villains but as tragic figures whose fate tests the Revolution's moral character. This reframing works to translate constitutional crisis from partisan triumph into ethical dilemma, attempting to preserve space for clemency even as violence becomes inevitable. This ethical complexity distinguishes de Gouges's translation from that of her contemporaries: where patriotic dramatists typically emplotted the monarchy's fall as necessary justice, her marginal position allowed her to stage moral ambiguity without institutional censure, foregrounding the human cost of revolutionary violence rather than its political necessity.

*La France sauvée* performs profound ethical and ideological translation. De Gouges positions her drama as republican critique, exposing monarchy's systemic failures (corruption, despotism, betrayal) and articulating political virtue grounded in transparency, justice and popular sovereignty. Marie-Antoinette becomes a dramatic conduit for anxieties about betrayal, conspiracy and national vulnerability. Rather than crude caricature, de Gouges translates her into complex symbol of institutional decay, positioning her downfall as historically necessary step toward France's moral regeneration. Yet the Queen's speeches also claim agency typically denied to women in revolutionary discourse, translating gendered victimhood into political argument (Scott, 1999; Poggi, 2021). When Olympe de Gouges, the character, confronts the Princess of Lamballe in the Tuileries, she declares:

> I abhor tyrants but I do not want assassins' weapons used to destroy them. I do not want my nation to be sullied by the blood, even of the guilty[3] (Gouges, 1792, Act I, scene VII).

This ethical framing exposes how revolutionary discourse instrumentalised femininity as political scapegoat whilst simultaneously contesting the gendered structures underlying ostensibly universal political language. The play thus transforms political judgement into theatrical pedagogy, offering moral lessons about power, accountability and civic virtue that participate in revolutionary citizenship's ethical education.

*La France sauvée* ultimately reveals the performative dimensions of historical translation under conditions of extreme urgency. By insisting on ethical nuance in depicting figures typically reduced to caricature, and by foregrounding women's voices within masculine political discourse, de Gouges demonstrates that theatrical mediation can interrogate revolutionary narratives even as it participates in their construction. The work positions theatre not as mirror of political transformation but as active site where competing interpretations of crisis are negotiated, tested, and projected onto the revolutionary public sphere.

[3] « J'abhorre les tyrans mais pour les détruire je ne veux pas qu'on emploie le fer des assassins. Je ne veux point que ma nation se souille du sang même des coupables ».

### *4.4. L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles, ou les vivandiers (1793)*

*L'Entrée de Dumouriez à Bruxelles*, written in late 1792 or early 1793 (Gouges, 1793), represents de Gouges's most direct engagement with Revolutionary Wars and the emotional politics of national triumph. When the embattled Revolution desperately needed military success to consolidate legitimacy, the play dramatises General Dumouriez's celebrated entry into Brussels (14 November 1792) following the decisive victory at Jemappes (6 November 1792) (Thiele-Knobloch, 1991). This turning point, after months of setbacks and invasion fears, carried French armies beyond national borders into the Austrian Netherlands, transforming defensive war into revolutionary liberation. The play features a diverse cast including General Dumouriez himself, the Belgian magistrate Balza, the French sans-culotte Charlot and his wife and daughter Charlotte, the Ferning sisters (two young women who fought at Jemappes), an Austrian archduke, a resourceful spy called Tape-à-l'oeil, and various Belgian and French citizens. As the character Balza proclaims in the play's climactic moment:

> See what sovereign is right now at our gates: a free people who fight against all tyrants to defend the cause of the people, and who give back to nations their rights[4] (Gouges, 1793, Act I, scene V).

*L'Entrée de Dumouriez* illustrates affective and mythopoeic translation, the conversion of military victory into civic ritual and foundational myth. Where previous plays translated social tensions, contested memory, and political crisis, this work translates collective joy and triumph, demonstrating that historical translation encompasses the full affective spectrum of revolutionary experience. This affective-mythopoeic translation combines register and diachronic translation, converting military reportage into civic ritual whilst simultaneously projecting contingent victory into timeless republican myth. The play transforms specific military events (the battle of Jemappes, Dumouriez's entry into Brussels) into timeless celebration of republican virtue, translating tactical success into moral demonstration and contingent victory into founding moment. This mythopoeic operation, creating foundational narratives that transcend historical particularity, reveals theatre's capacity to generate the affective communities necessary for revolutionary consolidation.

De Gouges translates this pivotal event into theatrical spectacle of civic unity, patriotic exaltation and cross-national fraternity, revealing how theatre mediates not only crisis or mourning but also collective enthusiasm and triumphant celebration, affective dimensions often marginalised in scholarship privileging conflict and violence. This affective translation participates in broader revolutionary practices of mobilising public sentiment through performance. Bourdin (2017) examines how patriotic theatre mobilised support for revolutionary wars, transforming victories into celebrations of national heroism. Similarly,

[4] « Voyez actuellement quel est le souverain qui se présente à nos portes : un peuple libre, qui combat seul contre tous les tyrans, pour défendre la cause des peuples, et qui rend aux nations leurs droits ».

Mason (2014) shows how popular songs, theatre, and festivities served to mobilise public support, rendering military conflict as communal celebration of civic virtue and national identity. Such performances, including de Gouges's dramatisation of Dumouriez's triumph, worked to construct the emotional frameworks through which revolutionary publics understood and endorsed military action. Yet de Gouges's translation of military victory differs from that of her contemporaries: where patriotic theatre typically celebrated French triumph in nationalist terms, her cosmopolitan vision frames military expansion as universal liberation, a perspective shaped by her feminist and abolitionist commitments that cut across the nationalist imperatives of dominant theatrical production.

De Gouges reframes the military campaign not as tactical narrative but as foundational moment constructing transnational republican community united by shared values rather than dynastic allegiance. The play's structure builds toward a grand finale featuring the planting of the liberty tree, a military parade accompanied by the song *"Où peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille?"*, a civic marriage ceremony performed by Dumouriez himself, and the triumphal coronation of the general by the allegorical figure of Fame descending with a genie. Through such ceremonial spectacle, de Gouges elevates military victory into civic ritual, converting contingent action into enduring myth that embodies timeless revolutionary principles (Frantz, 1992). As Duvignaud (1965) demonstrates, theatrical performance functions as collective ritual that constructs and reinforces social solidarity through shared symbolic action, revealing the structural affinities between revolutionary ceremony and dramaturgical form.

This mythopoeic translation extends beyond narrow nationalism to articulate cosmopolitan vision of fraternity between liberated peoples. Portraying Brussels inhabitants welcoming French troops as liberators, the play translates military expansion into universalist rhetoric of emancipation and voluntary association. When Dumouriez declares that provincial identities must "disappear forever" so Belgians may "form but one people of brothers under a single appellation" (Gouges, 1793, Act V, scene XIX), the moment reframes conquest as voluntary republican federation, positioning revolution as universalist project transcending borders.

Yet the play's timing reveals translation's contingency. Written when Dumouriez embodied revolutionary triumph, the work could not anticipate his defection to Austria just months later (April 1793). This biographical irony demonstrates that revolutionary memory remained unstable, subject to constant retranslation as political circumstances shifted, exposing how theatrical mythmaking of contemporary events remains perpetually vulnerable to historical reversal.

## 5. Conclusion

These four plays, spanning 1790 to 1793, reveal the breadth and complexity of theatrical translation across the Revolution's most turbulent years. From the festive optimism of *Les démocrates* to the fragile triumph of *L'Entrée de Dumouriez*, de Gouges's dramaturgy demonstrates that historical translation is never singular but operates simultaneously

across spatial, memorial, ideological, and affective registers. Each work responds to distinct political exigencies whilst collectively illustrating theatre's capacity to mediate revolutionary experience in real time, transforming chaotic events into legible narratives even as their meanings remained radically uncertain. This article has demonstrated that Olympe de Gouges's revolutionary theatre operates as historical translation that is fundamentally performative rather than merely representational. The four plays examined reveal that theatrical mediation does not simply record revolutionary experience but actively constitutes it, transforming political chaos into intelligible narrative, collective emotion into structured affective experience, and contingent events into foundational myths. The spatial-social translation of *Les démocrates*, the allegorical-memorial translation of *Mirabeau*, the crisis translation of *La France sauvée*, and the affective-mythopoeic translation of *L'Entrée de Dumouriez* demonstrate that historical translation encompasses multiple simultaneous operations, each responding to specific political exigencies whilst shaping how revolutionary publics understood their present.

In doing so, this article contributes to translation studies by demonstrating that intralingual translation operates not only between registers or time periods, but also across semiotic, spatial and affective dimensions (Zethsen, 2009; Spoturno, 2020). It also contributes to scholarship on de Gouges by offering the first systematic analysis of her revolutionary plays through a translational framework, complementing existing approaches focused on nationalism and political thought (Arguelles-Ling, 2007; Le Hir, 2014).

The significance of de Gouges's work extends beyond individual achievement to illuminate how marginalised voices mediate historical experience. Her two-century erasure was not incidental but structural, reflecting gendered mechanisms through which certain modes of historical translation are systematically excluded from canonical archives. Yet precisely this marginality enabled distinctive strategies foregrounding affective experience, embodied performance and collective emotion as constitutive elements of historical understanding. Her plays reveal what official chronicles systematically obscure: that revolutionary transformation was lived through grief, joy, fear and hope as much as through ideological conviction, and that theatre provided essential infrastructure for processing these collective emotions. Marginalised voices do not simply add content to existing narratives; they expose fundamentally different modes of historical translation operating beyond dominant archival practices.

This recognition carries profound implications for studying political crisis. If theatre functions as real-time historical translation, then revolutionary culture requires attending not only to what events occurred but to how they were performed, emotionally processed and collectively interpreted as they unfolded. Olympe de Gouges's dramatic production captures this instability, translating political uncertainty into theatrical forms that preserve rather than resolve ambiguity. *La France sauvée's* ethical nuance becomes testament to theatre's capacity to interrogate revolutionary orthodoxies even when translating crisis into pedagogy, whilst *L'Entrée de Dumouriez* demonstrates theatre's capacity to translate military triumph into civic ritual and republican myth. These works reveal translation's

constitutive fragility when historical meaning remains radically unsettled, challenging retrospective methodologies that impose narrative coherence on fundamentally unstable processes.

Olympe de Gouges's execution silenced her voice in 1793, and historiographical misogyny erased her contributions for two centuries. Yet her recovered plays demonstrate that marginalised perspectives can resurface to challenge dominant narratives, exposing what canonical histories obscure. History, her theatre insists, is never settled but remains perpetually open to retranslation by those willing to recover voices that power sought to silence. In this sense, studying de Gouges's revolutionary theatre becomes itself a form of historical translation, one that contests erasure and reaffirms that the past remains available for reinterpretation by those committed to hearing what dominant archives worked to suppress.

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# "THERE IS NO DOUBT IT MUST HAVE A FIGURATIVE MEANING": HOW MANZONI READ, INTERPRETED AND TRANSLATED HISTORY IN THE *STORIA DELLA COLONNA INFAME*

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to demonstrate that Alessandro Manzoni's reading and writing of history, as shown in the *Storia della colonna infame*, are consistent with the acts of interpretation and translation as defined in most conventional senses, and may therefore be helpfully analysed from a translation studies perspective. These interpretative and translational acts are also often expressed in language reminiscent of allegorical exegesis: for Manzoni, history is a text to be read and interpreted according to its figurative as well as its literal meaning, and translated accordingly. Such an indirect approach to historical discourse, and indeed the use of history itself, was in part due to contingent reasons, for example the need to avoid excessive scrutiny from the authorities. The discussion focuses on three aspects in particular: interlingual translation; intersemiotic and extratextual translation; and textual history, understood as translation.
KEYWORDS: Manzoni, Translation, History, Allegory, Metaphor, Censorship

## 1. Introduction: theoretical framework

In his introduction to a recent collection of essays, Luigi Alonzi (2023) uses the term 'synchronization' to describe the relationship between different periods of time in historical discourse. Synchronization, he argues, "connects, past, present, and future", by "disrupting and resetting time, as well as creating complex temporalities differing from linear chronology"; in so doing, it addresses what he refers to as "the central problem of historical inquiry", namely "anachronism" (Alonzi, 2023, p. 1). In the sense in which he uses the term, 'anachronism' signifies largely historical difference – the 'foreignness' of the past as a 'foreign country' – which it is the task of the historian to translate to the more familiar setting of the present, by 'synchronizing' it. In the same way that interlingual translation posits equivalence between the meanings conveyed by both original and translated versions, while at the same time leaving scope for the translator to exercise their creative faculties, so too the historian assumes, identifies or establishes parallels between different times in history, interpreting the earlier one on the basis of their own understanding, and representing it in terms appropriate to the later one.

The language in which these historical and translational processes is expressed, however, is reminiscent also of a third phenomenon, which may predate or underlie the

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I should like to thank the staff of the Biblioteca Braidense Nazionale in Milan, Italy, for enabling me to consult the autograph manuscripts discussed in this article, and Barbara Colli for helping me to reconstruct their genesis. English translations from the *Storia della colonna infame* and its earlier versions are my own, mainly for two reasons. First, the *Storia* itself has only ever been translated into English on two occasions: the first time as part of the definitive, 1840-1842 edition of *I promessi sposi*, published by Longman in 1845, a version which presents various difficulties; and the second by Kenelm Foster, published separately in 1964, in many ways an excellent translation but too free to be used for detailed discussion of the original (see Gibbons, 2025b, pp. 57-58, p. 72). Second, the analysis of Manzoni's text in this article draws also on previous, unpublished versions of the *Storia*, which, as such, have never been translated before into English.

others. The act of identifying a similarity between two discrete entities, and focusing on it to the exclusion of what may be many other differences, with the aim – more or less consciously – of arriving at a new way of perceiving reality, is fundamentally the same process as that involved in making metaphor.[1] From a hermeneutical standpoint, like the historian or translator, the interpreter of metaphorical or figurative discourse must retrace the steps taken by the author, recognize the fundamental similarity, focus on it to the exclusion of all else, and then apply it to their own situation. The equivalences between history, translation and metaphorical or figurative language inevitably call to mind the work of Hayden White, who described tropes as a useful tool "for understanding the operations by which contents of experience which resist description in unambiguous prose representations can be prefiguratively grasped and prepared for conscious apprehension" (White, 1975, p. 34). As a result of his insights, and those of later scholars such as Alonzi, it is now less controversial than it once was to assert that the writing of history can be translational or metaphorical; or that the reading of history can be interpretative and/or exegetical (in the sense of being comparable to glossing figurative discourse).

A corollary must be added for cases in which the focus is on historians who themselves are from previous centuries. Here a third temporality comes into play: what constituted the present for the historian, is history for the contemporary observer. Thus, in the same way that a three-way equivalence can be postulated between history, translation and metaphor, so too a triangulation may be established between the historian's past (the period with which they were concerned), the historian's present (the time in which they wrote), and the present of the contemporary observer (the present day). These three temporalities, in the discourse of historians viewed from a current perspective, may be said to be synchronized (to use Alonzi's term), translated (sequentially, as the first temporality is translated to the second, and the second is translated to the third), and interpreted figuratively (in that the similarities between them can be highlighted, and their implications which transcend temporal difference analysed).

What follows is an attempt to probe these triangulations by focusing on the approach adopted by one historian in particular. That the author concerned is better known as a novelist is of little consequence; the fact that his historical discourse was expressed in and around a work of fiction does not make him any less a historian for this reason. My aim is to illustrate how this author interpreted and/or exegeted the events of the period about which he chose to write, how he identified points of contact between it and his own, and how he put his readers in a position where they could recognize the parallels and draw their own conclusions regarding them. My purpose is also, to a lesser degree, to highlight some reasons why this may still be of interest.

[1] Metaphor and translation are so structurally interlinked that they share the same etymology (Guldin, 2016, 2022).

## 2. Alessandro Manzoni: fiction, history, translation, allegoresis

The doubts that ultimately undermined Alessandro Manzoni's idea of writing a historical novel in the style of Walter Scott—doubts which ensured that his *I promessi sposi*, the most famous novel in the history of Italian literature, would be his first and only work of fiction—are sufficiently well known not to require explanation on this occasion. Suffice it to say that those doubts, which were aesthetic as well as ethical, were expressed most memorably by the author himself years later, when he asserted that "only the truth is beautiful" (Manzoni, 2000, p. 12).

What is less commonly acknowledged is the fact that the historical sections of Manzoni's novel—including the epilogue entitled *Storia della colonna infame* (hereafter, also the '*Storia*') an account of the miscarriage of justice committed against those falsely accused of spreading the plague in Milan in 1630, which was omitted from the first version of the novel published in 1825-1827, extensively rewritten, and then reintegrated into the second, definitive edition released in 1840-1842—are themselves almost as indirect a way of telling the truth as the fiction he later decried. To write about the past was, for Manzoni, among other things,[2] a way to comment on the present while remaining at a safe(r) distance from the consequences of doing so. To discuss current affairs critically and in public under the restored Austrian administration in the 1820s might have exposed him to a series of threats, ranging from censorship (Albergoni, 2007, 2008; Frajese, 2014) to arrest, exile or imprisonment, as befell some of his friends and acquaintances (Becherucci, 2020).[3] Conversely, to comment on such affairs at one stage removed from the present—by writing about historical events that showed parallels with them—not only solved some of the ethical issues raised by the writing of fiction, but also enabled him to avoid some of the more serious repercussions of doing so. The decision to write history may therefore be seen as in one sense an act of self-censorship (Centenari, 2024), through which Manzoni threw a veil of discretion over his views on some of the most sensitive topics, before the authorities had an opportunity to object to them.[4] It is a technique which, moreover, he

[2] A new reading has been proposed recently by Adriano Prosperi, whereby the *Storia* represents Manzoni's response to the memory of the French revolution and the 'hidden danger' to the public posed by conspiracy theories (Prosperi, 2023; cf. also Centenari, 2024, p. 27). This new reading is, however, not incompatible with the more established view of Manzoni's account, nor does it negate the text's translational dimension in the sense of establishing a parallel between the historical and recent past (see, for example, Prosperi, 2023, p. X, quoting a letter from Manzoni to Adophe de Circourt written in 1843: "[…] il m'avait semblé que sous tout cela il y avait pourtant encore un point, qui touchait aux dangers toujours vivants de l'humanité […]").

[3] In 1821, when Manzoni started work on the first draft of his novel (known as *Fermo e Lucia*, albeit never published with this title), of which the material that came to form *Storia della colonna infame* was an integral part (Raboni, 2020, p. 123), only two years had passed since *Il Conciliatore*, the journal edited by the leading exponents of Milanese liberal circles, had been closed down, forcing some of Manzoni's friends and acquaintances into exile, while others were soon sentenced to death for their role in the 1821 disturbances.

[4] Manzoni's use of history in this sense is analogous to Carlo Cattaneo's decision to embrace the technical subjects that came to represent the focus of his writings, as a result, among other things, of the struggles he encountered with the censor's office in trying to have his *Interdizioni israelitiche* published in 1835. As Cattaneo himself said, writing much later (in 1860, when censorship was no longer an issue), he had been

recognized in some of the historical sources on which his account of the plague and the ensuing trials was based: events that occurred almost two centuries before he sat down to write about them.

It is with Manzoni's use of historical discourse as a form of indirect expression that I am concerned in this article, in the *Storia* in particular. The central argument is based on the following theses: first, that this mode of writing and reading history is, by any conventional definition, comparable to and consistent with the acts of interpretation and translation; second, that these interpretative or translational acts are often presented by Manzoni in language reminiscent of allegorical exegesis; and third, that the reader has a role to play in the hermeneutical process, frequently being invited to complete the translation themselves. The analysis will focus on three main aspects: interlingual translation; intersemiotic and extratextual translation; and textual history as translation.

**3. Interlingual translation**

Interlingual translation is an integral part of the historical discourse written by Manzoni, in the sense that— at the risk of stating the obvious—most of his sources wrote in Latin, while he himself was writing in Italian.[5] Several examples are found even in the chapters of *I promessi sposi* that deal with the plague, in particular quotations from his main historical source, Giuseppe Ripamonti's *De peste*, in which the original Latin phrase is included after the Italian, often following a semicolon, as an indication of the reference's translated status.[6]

The same technique is evident throughout the *Storia*, in which interlingual translation is also a regular feature. Here the examples come not only from historians such as Ripamonti but also legal sources, including the text of the trial conducted against the alleged plague-spreaders,[7] or the works of the jurists, whose opinions are often cited and discussed critically. The latter, indeed, are described as 'interpreters', private individuals who interpreted the official texts on the subject of torture, most of which derived from Roman law, and translated them for their respective generations. Manzoni acknowledges the inappropriateness of private citizens effectively becoming legislators, especially with regard to so critical an issue as torture (Manzoni, 2002, p. 25). At the same time, though,

unable to intervene publicly in the main political debates of the time because of what he called the "lack of free speech in my country", which forced him to devote himself to more "practical" subjects instead (Cattaneo, 1860, p. v).

[5] Reference to 'Italian' here is contentious given the non-heterogeneous state of the languages spoken in the peninsula in Manzoni's time, not to mention his own role in forging a language that would be fit for purpose with a view to the creation of a single nation-state. It is also, however, inevitable on this occasion, simply for reasons of space.

[6] See, for example, the phrases "*sed belli graviores curas*" (Manzoni, 2022, p. 579; Manzoni, 2023, p. 792), and "*pro patriae hostibus*" (Manzoni, 2022, p. 584; Manzoni, 2023, p. 798).

[7] The translated status of Manzoni's references to the trials is stated explicitly in the first version of the text, known as the *Appendice storica su la Colonna infame*, when he quotes from the final verdict regarding the plague-spreaders' torture and death: it is "repulsive", he says, to "translate and write down" the verdict, and imagines it will be equally difficult and repulsive for the reader to read it in his version (Manzoni, 2002, p. 252).

he highlights the translational nature of their work, and often translates the salient points made by them.

As well as historical and legal sources, the *Storia* also features translations from classical authors. These include Virgil, who is cited in Annibal Caro's Italian translation, and Horace (Petrocchi, 1985), whose *ridiculus mus* reference from the *Ars poetica* is quoted near the start of the essay.[8] Manzoni had in fact translated both authors during his youth. His versions of *Aeneid*, V, ll. 286-361 (the funeral games for Anchises organized by Aeneas) and *Satire*, I, 3, ll. 1-56 (Horace's satire of indulgence) date from 1800, when he was around fifteen, and represent some of his earliest works.

His later return to these classical models, however brief, in the definitive version of the *Storia* composed some four decades later, is interesting in its own right, but the presence of classical historians quoted and translated is even more significant. Such historians include Plutarch (whose *Lives* are cited in Girolamo Pompei's translation), Tacitus (*Annals*), and, most importantly, Livy (*History of Rome*). In Chapter V, for example, Manzoni tells of how one of the men accused in the trial, the barber Giangiacomo Mora, under torture to reveal his non-existent accomplices in an alleged act of plague-spreading, blurts out the name of "the first person to come to mind, prompted by his pain" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 122): a formulation that translates a phrase from Livy's account of the conspiracy against Hieronymus in the Second Punic War. Livy's importance for Manzoni as a historian is attested by a reference in one of the earlier drafts of the novel, as well as an 1824 letter to his friend, the librarian Gaetano Cattaneo, again quoting the *History of Rome*,[9] not to mention the reference in Chapter XXXII of the definitive version of *I promessi sposi* (Manzoni, 2022, p. 610; Manzoni, 2023, p. 838). The historian of Rome is also alluded to in an earlier draft of the *Storia*, as will be discussed presently.

## 4. Intersemiotic and extratextual translation

The translational dimension of Manzoni's version of history goes deeper than interlingual translation, however, also embracing, for example, intersemiotic and extratextual translation. In looking at the processes by which this dimension emerges, three aspects in particular will be discussed: signs, actions, and figurative interpretation.

### *4.1 Signs*

With regard to the first of these aspects, even a superficial reading of the *Storia* shows that the interpretation of non-linguistic signs is an important issue in it. For example, the column itself is a non-linguistic, material signifier, that serves to convey a given message from previous generations to later ones. In the first version of the text, the *Appendice*

[8] Virgil is cited at the end of Chapter VI, when Manzoni compares Caterina Rosa, one of the two women responsible for unfair charges being brought against the accused, to Allecto, who was summoned by Juno to initiate war between the Latins and Trojans (Manzoni, 2002, p. 143: cf. Virgil, 1812, p. 241, l. 789). For Horace, see Manzoni, 2002, p. 3 (*Ars poetica*, l. 139).

[9] Cf. Manzoni, 2006, I, p. 498; and Arieti (ed.), 1986, I, p. 356, quoting Book III, § 35 of the *History of Rome* ("*impedimentum pro occasione arripuit*").

*storica su la Colonna infame* (hereafter, also the *Appendi*ce), Manzoni evokes the monument's purpose through the use of the verb 'eternare', meaning to render the memory of the judges' actions 'eternal': a noteworthy ambition, undermined ironically by the author who observes that the monument was pulled down less than a century and a half later (Manzoni, 2002, pp. 272-273). The column's demolition by the Austrian authorities in 1778 resulted in a second column being constructed: a textual rather than a material column, namely Manzoni's *Storia*, which addressed the problem of what had become an absent signifier by replacing it.

There are a number of similarities and differences between the two columns. Both, for example, function as signs that require interpretation. In both cases, moreover, the correct interpretation is non-literal as well as literal. For the former, the monument's signification functions ironically (antiphrastically), its correct meaning being the opposite of what those who decreed its construction meant it to be.[10] They intended it to remind later generations of the role they had played in safeguarding the city from mortal danger, ensuring that justice was done and the guilty parties were punished. In fact, as Manzoni begins by saying, while the monument did testify to their role in these events, it was memorable for all the wrong reasons. For the latter 'column', meanwhile, though it does contain outright criticism of those responsible for this miscarriage of justice, its target was not only them but also the Austrian authorities in Manzoni's day, who had unfairly tried, exiled and imprisoned his friend Federico Confalonieri and others like him (Dionisotti, 1988, pp. 251-253; Centenari, 2024, pp. 17-19). Here too, the message, or one of the messages, is expressed indirectly (allegorically on this occasion, rather than ironically).

The column of infamy is a sign, and as such — whether through its presence, absence, or replacement by a different form of sign — demands interpretation. The process by which meaning is attributed to it can be described in terms of translation, as the response to more recent controversial monuments has been (Bellentani, 2021). Manzoni here shows remarkable prescience, his reading of the past raising implications not only for his own generation but future ones as well. Within half a century of the *Storia* being published, the city centres of the Italian peninsula were filled with what one historian has called a "forest of statues" (Banti, 2007, p. 659), displaying the heroes of the Risorgimento for posterity.[11] While the message conveyed by these statues was meant to be unambiguous, their legacy for later generations (their 'translation" in this sense) has proved more complex, as historians such as Banti (2007) have shown. Furthermore, the recent phenomenon of statues being demolished as a way of drawing attention to the historical injustices of colonialization suggests that the semiotic process set in motion by the institution of public signs such as monuments is still relevant today. The way in which

[10] Note the comment in the *Appendice* (Manzoni, 2002), where the author states that "a monument is not history: indeed at times, not only is it far less than history, it is actually the opposite" (p. 231). On definitions of irony based on antiphrasis in relation to Manzoni, see Gibbons, 2025a, p. 527.

[11] This "forest of statues" in Milan would include one of Manzoni himself, by Francesco Barzaghi, erected in Piazza San Fedele in Milan in 1883, ten years after the author's death.

such signs produced and produce meaning, and the meanings attributed to them, can be analysed effectively from a translation studies perspective.

### *4.2 Actions*

Regarding the second aspect, actions, there is a passage consisting of three consecutive paragraphs in the 'Introduction' to the *Storia* which, through a series of verbs, illustrates how the translation process as a whole functions. The process starts with the act of perception, followed by interpretation of the perceived data, and culminates in an emotional, ethical and ultimately even theological response.

With regard to the first action, perception, the first verb used by Manzoni is to 'recognize' ('*riconoscere'*): the truth of evil conduct can be known or "recognized" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 6) by the observer–be seen for what it really is–not so much through words, which are frequently deceptive, but through human "acts" (p. 6), which are harder to dissimulate. Once these 'acts' have been 'recognized' as such and the truth has emerged, the sign can have only one referent, the semiotic process functions correctly, and the proper meaning is successfully assigned to it. In this case, the point serves to introduce Manzoni's main argument: that the evil in this historical injustice was caused not, as Pietro Verri (2002)[12] had suggested, by the fact that seventeenth-century medical knowledge was ignorant regarding how infectious diseases are transmitted, or the barbarian nature of jurisprudence at the time (which, in following the precedent of Roman law, continued to make provision for torture as a valid method of interrogation); rather, it was caused by what Manzoni (2002, p. 6) describes as "passions that pervert the will". He implies that such passions were common in his day too ("such causes sadly were not exclusive to one period of history in particular"; 2002, p. 6), leaving the reader to infer that similar miscarriages of justice could have occurred in the recent past as well, with the trials and sentences of Silvio Pellico, Confalonieri and the others still fresh in the memory. This hermeneutical nudge enables the reader to draw parallels between the historical and contemporary situations, almost without Manzoni being implicated in their judgements.

Next, the narrator takes a step back and asserts that if readers merely "see" (a weaker act of perception than actually 'recognizing') the atrocious events recounted as being the "effects" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 7) (similar to, but also different from, the "acts" referred to above (2002, p.6), as the surface manifestations of deeper phenomena) of an earlier and less enlightened period of history, they will experience a confused set of emotional responses, triggered by what is fundamentally a wrong interpretation. They will certainly feel horror at the injustice committed and compassion for those who suffered as a result; however, they will also experience "discouragement" and "despair", because they "appear to see" (2002, p. 7) (again, the perception is a mistaken one) these atrocities as historically determined and therefore unavoidable. Such a misperception implies that

[12] Verri, one of the best-known thinkers of the Milanese enlightenment, had used the same trial materials to make a strong and impassioned case against torture in his *Osservazioni sulla tortura* (Verri, 2002), a work which Manzoni admired even though he took issue with some of its detail.

human beings are driven by forces larger than themselves to commit acts of the most horrendous injustice, compelled by passions they are unable even to "notice" (2002, p. 7) (a term equivalent to 'recognizing').

The tangled emotional response goes further than wrongly experiencing discouragement and despair, however. The "indignation" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 7) that arises spontaneously in the reader when they realize the gravity of the injustice committed by the Milanese judges—a response that Manzoni describes as being "noble and holy" (p. 7) — starts to seem "unreasonable" (p. 7) if the historically determinist reading is correct, because there was nothing the judges could have done to prevent themselves from acting so abominably, hence it would be unreasonable to hold them to account for doing so. Consideration of the 'holiness' or otherwise of the reader's response suggests that the frame of reference has moved from the emotional to the ethical and theological. Indeed, Manzoni suggests that the reader may be brought to the point of questioning (or even "denying") the existence of divine providence if the latter allowed, or caused, such events to occur, or "accusing" (p. 7) it if it does exist, on the grounds that it should have prevented them. Manzoni characterizes both responses as "blasphemous", and the mere entertaining of such conclusions as "madness" (p. 7). Paradoxically, his interpretation of the past offers a more hopeful message: by ascribing responsibility to individuals who made wrong choices, after allowing themselves to be blinded by "passions" such as fear and anger, he preserves the possibility of a reading whereby history does not have to repeat itself. From this perspective, human beings can and should open their eyes to the evidence before them, and act justly as a consequence.

The same distinction is maintained later on in the same paragraph, where he writes of "looking more carefully" at the "facts" (Manzoni, 2002, p. 7) (a term which, together with the previous 'acts' and 'effects', constitutes a third way of referring to what might be described as 'signs'). 'Care' is required by the reader in observing the facts because, if the message were to be stated too clearly, it might also be understood by the wrong recipients (the censors, or others prepared to denounce those sympathetic to the democratic cause). If the reader does "look carefully" (p. 7), however, what they 'discover' is that the column of infamy episode, rather than an unavoidable consequence, was an act of injustice, one that could have been 'seen' (properly, that is, in the sense of being 'recognized') at the time, and so prevented, even by those who committed it.

This act of looking at a sign properly, giving it due consideration, entertaining the possibility that it might mean more than it appears to do based on a superficial reading, and then interpreting it accordingly, is in every way analogous to the act of allegorical exegesis. For Manzoni, the process of reading or translating the signs of history appears to be similar to that of interpreting sacred texts. The revelation that this process yields for the column of infamy episode—namely that human beings must take responsibility for their actions, regardless of the historical period they live in and the limitations such times may have—produces a sense in the reader not of "discouragement" or "despair" but "relief" (2002, p. 7) and also (although Manzoni stops short of saying so) allows providence

(Parisi, 1999, 2023) to retain its privileged position as the most effective explanation for the workings of history. While history can and does often repeat itself, it is not ineluctably predestined to do so: the circle can be broken if observers are prepared to read and interpret history properly, to learn from its lessons, and allow themselves to be changed by them, even when this means confronting their own blindnesses caused by passions such as fear of authority and popular sentiment, or anger in the face of phenomena they do not understand (including pandemics such as the plague of 1630).

### *4.3 Figurative interpretation*

The third and last aspect of the intersemiotic and/or extratextual dimension of Manzoni's translational approach to history is what I have described as figurative interpretation. Perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon is found in the so-called "digression on posterity" (2002, pp. 295-298), in which Manzoni critically analyses the truism whereby the misjudgements of all centuries are said to be corrected by posterity's impartial and infallible judgement on them.

The digression was probably composed in 1823, while the effects of the trial of Confalonieri and the others were ongoing. In the *Appendice* it came immediately after reference to the physical column's demolition, but the manuscripts show that Manzoni omitted it even from this first, unpublished version, hence it was inevitably excluded from the definitive edition published in 1840-1842 as well.[13] The reasons for this omission remain the subject of speculation, but one might be the fact that it specifies the links between past and present too overtly. Such explicitness, while potentially dangerous for Manzoni, makes the digression particularly important for the purposes of this article, because it reveals the author's translational approach to history with especial clarity.

The discussion is based on a metaphor, that of posterity as a courtroom, in which the participants are judges, and the judgements issued are verdicts on historical events. The metaphor is developed further on a couple of occasions, when Manzoni qualifies his description, characterizing individuals as "disputants" in the trial rather than "judges" (p. 297); or when he describes human beings as "indulgent judges of our own cases" (p. 298). However, the basic concept is the same, and it requires no great leap of the imagination to understand how the metaphorical development of a hypothetical trial might affect a reading of Manzoni's literal account of a historical one: if one figurative application is possible through the development of the metaphor, another such application—from past to present, with reference to the recent trials in which his friends and acquaintances had suffered their own miscarriages of justice—is also possible.

[13] The sheets on which the digression was written were removed by Manzoni from the *Appendice* (Manz.B.X.3: see p. 38d in particular, which contains the first words of the digression, duly crossed out) and kept separately (they are catalogued as Manz.B.XXXIV.2). All the autograph manuscripts cited in this article may be consulted through the Alessandro Manzoni portal which contains, among other things, an extensive archive of digitized manuscripts. Available at: www.alessandromanzoni.org (Accessed: 7 April 2026).

There is, though, a second underlying metaphor, stated less openly than the trial one but present nonetheless, in which the events of history are seen as a text and so can be read textually; in the same way, that is, that Manzoni reads and attempts to make sense of the initial proposition. Not only is the terminology described previously evident here also,[14] but the approach taken in interpreting the central proposition is again that of non-literal exegesis. The first step, he argues, is to construe the proposition literally; if, as is sometimes the case, this first move produces a nonsensical interpretation, the breakdown in the semantic process triggers the next stage, which is figurative ('metaphorical'). The proposition that historical misjudgements are eventually and permanently corrected by posterity cannot literally be true, Manzoni asserts, for the term "posterity" (2002, p. 297) refers to a judgement that begins when the generation concerned passes away, and lasts "to the end of time" (p. 297). This is manifestly not the case on this occasion, for the proposition implies that at some point a change in the verdict occurs. If it were true, moreover, general rules would have to be established by which to 'discover', or identify, the point at which this metaphorical 'posterity' starts and the fallible version of it ceases. But when we try to establish such rules, we find it impossible to identify a given point in time at which the judgement of posterity becomes uniform, accurate and unchanging. Furthermore, human passions cloud impartiality of judgement with regard not only to the present but also the past, meaning that one generation inevitably thinks they are the ones who are enlightened, while the previous generations with whom they disagreed are simply "poor souls" (p. 296).

Like the courtroom metaphor, the history-as-text metaphor falls just short of making clear exactly how historical events are being translated to their contemporary applications. Manzoni does come very close to doing so at one point, however, when discussing the reasons why people are moved to study history in the first place, or why they study certain historical periods or events as opposed to others. The reason, he suggests, is the interest that derives from current affairs: we study a given historical episode in the hope that it will yield wisdom, whether as a model to imitate or an example to avoid. Without such an interest, that is, in cases where there is no direct relation with "our own present matters", from which we can derive "a judgement that is valid also for ourselves" (2002, p. 295), historical analysis becomes cold and arid. At this point the digression comes to an abrupt end, with Manzoni saying that the legal and popular verdict it was decided to recall through the column of infamy "presents all the characteristics referred to above" (p. 277). The fact that the discussion ends here, and that Manzoni never returned to it in this form, suggests that this too might be an act of self-censorship, the author stopping before more contentious allusions become too obvious.

[14] For instance, Manzoni asks whether all judgements expressed by a plurality of individuals should be "recognized" as the infallible verdict of posterity; and invites the reader to "look carefully" into the matter (2002, p. 296).

## 5. Textual history

### *5.1 The textual history of the 'Storia'*

The digression on posterity, a fragment omitted from the published version of the work, also forms a suitable starting point for discussion of the third aspect of the translational dimension of Manzoni's historical discourse being discussed in this article: its own textual history. The manuscript variants that survive are themselves material signs that require interpretation and translation: relics and remnants of previous versions, that tell the story of the work's genesis. They too function as historical monuments, much like the column of infamy itself. On this occasion it is not the authorities' metaphorical attempts to rewrite history that require translation, but Manzoni's literal attempts to rewrite the history of his text. For example, how are we to interpret the fact that, though the drafts that made his views on the links between past and present clearest are the ones which he shelved, they survived nonetheless, unlike some other of the digressions he subsequently abandoned, such as the treatise on language which, according to Manzoni's stepson, Stefano Stampa, the author "burned to the very last page" (Stampa, 1885, p. 88)?

To summarize the work's textual history briefly, the *Storia* began life as Chapter V of Book IV of *Fermo e Lucia*, the first redaction of *I promessi sposi*, completed on 17 September 1823 (the date at the end of the manuscript leaves no room for discussion). It soon became clear, however, that Manzoni's account of the trial had outgrown the space allocated to it, running to around 120 pages, far too long for a single chapter. The manuscript held by the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense (Manz.B.X.3) reveals the different strata of its genesis in both the title and page numbering (Stella, 2023, pp. 13-14). The original title, 'Capitolo V', is deleted, replaced first by 'Appendice storica', then by 'Appendice' (these too deleted), before finally, at the top of the page, the title *Storia della Colonna infame* stands unaltered. The change in the page numbering, meanwhile, with the original sequential numbers of the novel's manuscript (page and chapter) deleted in favour of a new sequence starting from scratch, confirms the hypothesis that a separate work was emerging. Some sheets, such as the digression on posterity, were removed and kept separately. The final manuscript, which contains evidence of a thorough revision process, served as the basis for the copy submitted to the censor's office (Manz.B.X.4) which in turn shows further corrections by the author. The dating of all this material is contested, but recent scholarship (Raboni, 2017, p. 113; Raboni, 2020, p. 128) suggests it was all completed in the final months of 1823. Meanwhile, an advertisement transcribed in the censor's copy of the second redaction of the novel,[15] stating that the *Storia* was 'in the press', suggests it was only discarded at the last moment. Fifteen years later, in 1839, again according to the most recent scholarship (Raboni, 2017, p.113.; Raboni, 2020, pp. 131-132), Manzoni returned to his appendix, revising it heavily (in the manuscript now catalogued as Manz.B.X.5), and eventually published it as the novel's epilogue in the definitive, 1840-1842 edition.

[15] Manz.B.V., which contains the *admittitur* of the censor Ferdinando Bellisomi and the *imprimatur* of his colleague Bartolomeo Zanatta, the latter dated 3 July 1824.

### *5.2 The textual history of Manzoni's historiography: the case of Giuseppe Ripamonti*

Against this backdrop, analysis of the more explicitly historiographical sections of the treatise and their development is of particular interest in shedding light on its translational dimension. The comments on Manzoni's main source Ripamonti in Chapter VII of the *Storia*, and the changes from the earlier to the later versions of them, are especially enlightening.

On this occasion it is helpful to start from the final version (Manzoni, 2002, pp. 144-146). Two of Ripamonti's qualities as historian are cited in praise of him: one stylistic, the other ideological. Firstly, he is described as being the only writer of his time who was "not obscure" (p. 144); and second, he is said not to have spoken "exclusively according to the common credence" (p. 144). Both these qualities are expressed as double negatives, and the latter is immediately qualified when Manzoni writes that Ripamonti is a "curious example of that tyranny which a dominant opinion can often exert on the words of those whose minds it has been unable to subdue entirely" (p. 144). Immediately he provides examples of what he means: on the one hand, he says, Ripamonti never expressly denies the guilt of the accused, Guglielmo Piazza and Giangiacomo Mora, and at one point "appears" (p. 145) (the same terminology already witnessed on several occasions) expressly to affirm it; on the other, he also "seeks to imply the opposite" (p. 145) of what his words actually say. In practice Ripamonti does so through a series of techniques that are listed by Manzoni: "raising the occasional doubt, timidly and fleetingly, regarding the most important of circumstances"; "directing the reader's attention to the correct point, through the odd word"; "putting words in the mouth of the accused that are better able to assert their innocence than they themselves could have"; and, finally, "demonstrating compassion of the kind that is felt only for those who are innocent" (p. 145). Further examples are given before Manzoni states that Ripamonti expresses his sentiments most clearly when "he protests he does not want to express them at all" (p. 145), namely when the narrative forces him to take up a position regarding whether or not he believed the plague-spreaders actually existed. If he denied their existence, Manzoni quotes Ripamonti as saying, he would face consequences given how "deeply rooted" (p. 146) the prevailing conviction was at the time. To combat such an opinion would be "hard and pointless" (p. 146), so he chooses the only available option: not to affirm or deny, but simply to repeat the opinions of others (cf. Ripamonti, 2009, p. 148). Manzoni brings his discussion to a close by replying to a hypothetical objection—that Ripamonti, if he did not believe what he was writing, might have been well advised not to write at all—by reminding the reader that he was also the official city historian, and so one of the few men who could be ordered to write history or not to do so.

It is a remarkable passage, and a highly instructive one too. In reading, interpreting and translating Ripamonti's historiography for his own readers, Manzoni is effectively saying that it cannot and should not be taken only at face value. The careful reader must be attentive to the presence of textual clues—the odd word here or there, by which the historian gives notice that his true meaning is other than what the words themselves

signify—to arrive at a full understanding and translation of his history. The irony is that Ripamonti's historiography in fact imitates the approach taken under torture by those he is describing. The testimony given by Piazza, for example, consisted of what Ripamonti describes as "ambages" (2009, p. 116), another term traditionally associated with allegorical exegesis, and contained "many contradictory and conflicting responses, through which he revealed his crime even while he sought to deny it" (p. 116). Mora, meanwhile, having repeatedly denied any involvement in the non-existent crimes, only produced what was considered to be a credible version of the truth, or something approximating to it, when the torture he was enduring became too much for him to bear (2009, p. 122). As the real truth in both cases was clear to anyone who, such as Ripamonti, was minded to look carefully at the evidence, so too it was clear to those of his own readers who had ears to hear the intended meaning.

A further level of irony is added by the fact that, as Ripamonti, like Piazza and Mora, was giving his testimony under pressure from the threat of punitive consequences, albeit less immediate (hence the expressive strategy adopted was likely to be more conscious), so too Manzoni's account of Ripamonti's follows the same approach. He too, feeling that he was unable to articulate his version of the truth directly, regarding the way in which justice was or was not being done in his time, raises the odd doubt, directs the reader's attention, puts words in the mouths of his characters which make clear where his sympathies lie, and so forth. The hope or expectation is that in this way the attentive reader will pick up these clues, interpret their meaning correctly, and translate them in order to arrive at the intended conclusion.

The passage thus brings together many of the strands discussed in this article. However, the survival of a previous version of it (Manz.B.X.3, pp. 45a-49a) adds a further historical dimension which in turn requires interpretation. The first point to note is that the earlier version is much longer, and forms part of a strongly-worded defence of Ripamonti against the charges of previous critics, in particular Girolamo Tiraboschi, who accused him of using a style that was "inflated and pompous" (B.X.3, pp. 45a-b). In response Manzoni embarks on a lengthy and structured analysis of Ripamonti's style, in which it becomes clear that the two qualities expressed by means of double negatives in the final version were condensed from a much longer list of qualities, all expressed positively. Far from being inflated or pompous, Manzoni argues, Ripamonti's style was unusual among Latin writers of his time for its "propriety", for the way in which it is "deliberately proportionate to its subject", and for its "calm and orderly energy" (B.X.3, p. 45c).

It is also remarkable, he says, for the detail of the pictures he paints, to the point where in certain passages, the reader might be forgiven for thinking they had a copy of Livy in their hands (Manz.B.X.3, p. 45d). The reference to the Roman historian is no coincidence, as the references mentioned earlier on in this article indicate. Such a comparison would have been high praise for Ripamonti, and the manuscript shows that Manzoni had second and third thoughts regarding to it. He began by writing that "in some

places the reader of that book might think they had Livy", then deleted the final three words, replacing them with "for a moment", then completing the phrase with the words "they held Livy in their hands" (B.X.3, p. 45d), before making several attempts at qualifying the comparison, saying that the nature of the events Ripamonti recounted would soon have reminded them they were reading a modern not an ancient author.

A further stylistic quality is then cited in response to Tiraboschi's criticisms—the wealth of observations on the customs and ideas of people of different classes of the time contained in Ripamonti's history—before Manzoni comes to his main point: that Ripamonti stood out from his contemporaries primarily for his independence of judgement, especially on the subject of this "tangled mess of potions and plague-spreaders" (B.X.3 p. 46b). On this occasion, however, he justifies Ripamonti's failure to "express his opinion positively" by reference to what he describes as "the unhappiness of the times" B.X.3 p. 46b). This phrase too underwent several different formulations: first Manzoni wrote that "the unhappiness of the times did not allow Ripamonti to express his judgement clearly, a judgement which was opposed to the common sentiment"; after deleting much of this, he wrote that the same reason "could not prevent him from alluding to it secretly on every occasion, sometimes through stylistic devices, sometimes in the narration of circumstances, and sometimes by putting words or reasonings in the mouths of others, through which he expressed compassion: words that can only be found by those who actually feel them" (B.X.3 p. 46b). Finally Manzoni settled on a version in which, while the unhappiness of the times meant that Ripamonti was unable "to express his judgement positively, and even exacted from him the odd phrase that appears to articulate the common opinion, still it could not prevent him from alluding to his own thoughts sincerely on several occasions: covertly perhaps, but in such a way as to leave the careful reader in no doubt" (2002, p. 280). The consistency of the terminology used again confirms that allegorical exegesis is the preferred hermeneutical method; and the translational dimension is underlined in the subsequent passage where he says that Ripamonti, in refusing to express his opinion, does so more eloquently than anywhere else, which Manzoni translates interlingually: "we will translate this passage too, as best we can", he writes, for "it depicts very keenly the difficulty faced by a writer who feels strongly both disgust at the popular falsehood and a desire to express the truth that he sees, while at the same time anticipating the cries of opposition that the truth he is proclaiming will attract to him" (B.X.3, p. 47b-c).

How, then, is the 'careful reader' to interpret these previous versions of Manzoni's text, and their survival? The first point to note is surely the removal, from the first version to the second, of this reference to the 'unhappiness of the times' as the historical justification for Ripamonti's acts of self-censorship. In the final version, while the times in which wrote may have been infelicitous (this is not in doubt), and his official role as historian to the city put him in an unenviable position, these pressures are no longer used as an excuse for his not telling the truth openly and unambiguously. The only mitigation offered is that, if Ripamonti failed explicitly to deny the guilt of Piazza and Mora, so too did

all other historians who wrote on the subject until Pietro Verri more than a century later. Meanwhile, the reduction in the number of qualities for which Ripamonti is praised to just two, plus the fact that even these are expressed as double negatives rather than positively as in the previous version, suggests that Manzoni had reined in his previous high opinion of Ripamonti somewhat. The historian remained a model for Manzoni's own historiography, but this did not mean his decision to speak the truth indirectly could be justified, even on historical grounds. As is so often the case with Manzoni, truth-telling is a matter of moral courage; and if Ripamonti was only prepared to tell the truth "timidly and fleetingly" (2002, p. 145), this was bound to affect the ethical judgement that Manzoni and posterity would have of him and his work.

At the same time, however, Manzoni was conflicted between, on the one hand, his own need to tell the truth regarding the injustice of current affairs, and, on the other, the likely implications of doing so. The fact that he qualified his opinion on Ripamonti in the sixteen years between the first and second versions of his text is as eloquent a comment on himself as it is on Ripamonti. Circumstances had changed in the intervening period, and with hindsight Manzoni may have felt he should have spoken out more clearly: the 'unhappiness of the times', in which a repressive foreign regime was using all of its powers to put down liberal opposition, including free speech, in no way excused him from his own moral and theological obligation to tell the truth. Contingent historical circumstances may provide some explanation, but never justification.

**6. Conclusion**

Manzoni, we may therefore infer, intended his historical discourse to be read in the same way that he read Ripamonti's. His *Storia* is to be read literally, as history, but at the same time the reader is invited to go beyond the literal. The additional level of interpretation required is comparable to allegorical exegesis, and it is this, fundamentally hermeneutical act that allows Manzoni's narrative to be usefully analysed from the perspective of developments in translation studies.

The parallel between past and present which enables the reader to interpret allegorically here is the responsibility that individuals must bear for allowing their judgements to be clouded by what Manzoni describes human 'passions', resulting, in such cases, in the most atrocious miscarriages of justice. This interpretation or translation process results in 'synchronization', in which the similarities noted between two periods of history result in them being joined across the centuries and in linear chronology being disrupted. The relevance of the trials of Piazza and Mora to those of Pellico, Confalonieri and the others is established by inference rather than directly, in the same way that Ripamonti hinted at parallels between events in the time of the alleged plague-spreaders and his own.

If, finally, the synchronization process, as suggested at the outset, extends beyond the establishment of parallels between the historian's period of interest and their own period, to embrace the perspective of the present-day observer as well, it comes as little

surprise that Manzoni's *Storia* should have had such a relevance in recent decades. While the significance of monuments and their demolition referred to above remains unexplored for the moment, and though the relevance of the *Storia* and the plague materials in the novel to the recent pandemic has begun to receive scholarly attention (Prosperi, 2023, p. VIII), its denunciation of miscarriages of justice has had a decisive influence on much of the fiction and non-fiction written by contemporary authors in Southern Italy and in particular Sicily, for obvious reasons (Agovino, 2025). The importance of human beings taking individual responsibility for acts of injustice is an issue that continues to command attention, and demand translation, through the centuries.

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# TRANSLATING AND POPULARIZING CHINA'S PAST IN PORTUGAL: DOUBLE FOREIGNNESS IN JOSÉ DE FREITAS'S *A CHINA ANTIGA E MODERNA* (1941)

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes 'double foreignness' as a methodological prompt for analyzing the writing of a foreign country's history, where spatiotemporal distance is compounded by cultural-linguistic distance. It examines José de Freitas's *A China antiga e moderna* (1941), a Portuguese popular history volume that connects China's past to the Second Sino-Japanese War for early-1940s readers. Through Lefevere's ([1992]/2017) concept of rewriting, the study shows how Freitas selectively rewrites francophone sources into Portuguese within a popularizing editorial framework. Drawing on Maitland's (2017) model of cultural translation, the analysis traces Freitas's interpretive gestures through which China's past is made more intelligible to Portuguese readers and framed sympathetically, notably through familiar reference frames and recurrent images of the Chinese as 'pacifist' and 'traditionalist.' The case suggests that double foreignness can be productively analyzed through the interplay of intertemporal, interlingual, and cultural translation.
KEYWORDS: History as Translation, Double Foreignness, Cultural Translation, Rewriting, Popular History, Chinese History in Portugal

## 1. Introduction

Recent scholarship at the intersection of Translation Studies and Historiography has conceptualized historical writing as an 'intralingual translation of reality' (Vidal Claramonte, 2018; Savchenkova, 2024) and as a 'translation of the past' (Alonzi, 2023b). Comparatively less attention has been paid to the historical writing of a foreign country, although this seems to be where translation scholars are well positioned to offer insights. To address this gap, I build on the familiar metaphor of 'past as a foreign country' from novelist Hartley (1953) to propose a descriptive label, 'double foreignness': the spatiotemporal foreignness of the past is compounded by cross-cultural and cross-linguistic foreignness when a history is narrated from outside its cultural-linguistic continuum. As a methodological prompt, 'double foreignness' foregrounds not just intertemporal translation but two additional types – interlingual and cultural translations – as analytically central.

In this paper, I address 'double foreignness' by studying a Portuguese popular history publication on China, *A China antiga e moderna* (1941), written by Portuguese journalist José de Freitas (1910–1976?, according to Aresta, 2021). I choose this volume for two reasons. First, it explicitly aims to present China's history to the Portuguese general reader to help them understand the then-ongoing Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) as the Chinese struggle for their freedom (Freitas, 1941, p. 7), and thus provides a case for observing how popular historical writing negotiates double foreignness. Second, despite over four centuries of Portuguese presence in China (especially in Macao), mid-twentieth-century Portuguese discourses and representations of China remain under-discussed in existing scholarship. Against this background, studying *A China antiga e moderna* brings

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into view José de Freitas, a rarely studied figure whose writings appear to have shaped some Portuguese readers' perceptions of China from the 1940s to the 1970s (see Seabra, 1972, pp. 24-25; Cardina, 2010, p. 202).

To explore how double foreignness is negotiated in this case of popular history, I ask: through what body of sources does Freitas translate China's past in *A China antiga e moderna*, and how is that past rendered through interlingual rewriting and cultural translation? A guiding hypothesis of this article is that, in popular historical writing, double foreignness is managed less through explicit explanation of its specificities than through forms of mediation oriented toward intelligibility. The analysis is based on a close reading of the volume and comparison with the works it cites, approached through Lefevere's ([1992]/2017) concept of rewriting and Maitland's (2017) model of cultural translation.

Section 2 develops the conceptual framework by clarifying the interlingual and cultural translations in the analysis, before concluding with a brief discussion of popular history. Section 3 situates *A China antiga e moderna* in the editorial, political, and discursive context of early-1940s Portugal. Section 4 examines Freitas's network of sources and analyzes how *A China antiga e moderna* rewrites and culturally translates them for Portuguese readers.

## 2. Conceptual framework: translating a foreign country's past

White ([1987]/1990, p. 89) suggests that, depending on how the past is connected to the present ('distinct' or 'continuous'), it can appear either 'alien' or 'knowable.' Historical writing, as Burke (2019, p. 21) positions it, lies between "faithfulness to the past" and "intelligibility in the present" (Alonzi, 2023a, pp. 673-674) further argues that historical writing is an inevitably anachronistic act of translation, in which present language renders past words and concepts by synchronizing meanings sedimented across different times. This line of critical historiography has also been explicitly taken up within recent Translation Studies scholarship, where historical texts are approached as translations of past events (e.g., Vidal Claramonte, 2025).

Building on this framework of 'history as translation,' I use 'double foreignness' to foreground an underexplored situation: the historical writing of a foreign country. 'Double foreignness' refers to an encounter with two distinct, though inseparable, forms of alterity: the pastness of the historical object and the linguistic-cultural world in which that past is embedded, both of which may remain foreign to the target reader. 'Double foreignness' foregrounds the intersection of spatiotemporal and cultural-linguistic alterity as a constitutive condition of writing about a foreign country's past, one that poses methodological challenges both for historical writing and for its analysis. In historiographical research, 'double foreignness' thus calls attention not only to intertemporal translation but also to interlingual and cultural translations as forms of mediation required to render that past legible.

Interlingual translation refers to the translation from one perceived language to another. In Lefevere's (2017) terms, interlingual translation is a form of rewriting that

involves selection, condensation, reorganization, and reframing for a new readership. Rewriting is shaped primarily by ideology and, secondarily, by the dominant poetics of the receiving system, while patronage names the powers and institutions that enable or constrain rewriting by regulating its ideological acceptability (pp. 11-12). From this perspective, what matters is not only how words are translated, but also how translational choices relate to the ideological, formal, and institutional conditions of their production.

Although *A China antiga e moderna* is not a translated volume, interlingual translation plays a central role in its construction. Freitas draws mainly on francophone sources (see Section 4.1), but these may themselves already mediate Chinese materials, concepts, and historical knowledge. The process is therefore better understood as a layered Chinese-French-Portuguese mediation. In this article, however, I focus on how Freitas rewrites the sources he cites within the institutional framework of publication in which the volume appeared, that is, within one expression of patronage that enabled and constrained this rewriting. This interlingual translation is also likely shaped both by Freitas's own ideological positioning and by broader assumptions in his milieu about how China and the Chinese could or should be represented to Portuguese readers. This interlingual layer forms one important basis for Freitas's broader cultural translation of China in his handling of double foreignness.

Before 2000, 'cultural translation' was primarily used in two broad fields: in anthropology, it refers to the mediation of another community's symbolic world to readers at home and to a reflexive critique of how such representation is shaped by institutional power; in postcolonial studies, it was used to think through the negotiation of cultural difference under conditions of migration and (post)colonial contact (Conway, 2022, p. 47). Since 2000, the term has become widely debated in Translation Studies not only because it remains diffuse and often under-theorized, but also because its theoretical expansion has raised broader concerns, as Maitland (2017, pp. 18-25) summarizes: its position vis-à-vis interlingual translation is often unclear; it risks marginalizing interlingual translators and linguistic difference; it may become so metaphorically broad as to lose analytical precision; and it has been criticized for potentially 'ossifying' cultural difference.

In response, Maitland (2017, p. 27) argues that cultural translation should be grounded in the practice of the interlingual translator, in the sense that interlingual translation theory provides conceptual tools for understanding and explaining human action and other public cultural phenomena (see also Maitland, 2024, p. 33). Maitland (2017, p. 28) defines cultural translation as the "traceable presence of hermeneutic gestures of reading and writing in the construction and reception of a range of cultural phenomena present in the public sphere." In this model, the cultural translator is both reader and writer, engaged in interpreting what resists immediate understanding and rearticulating that interpretation for an audience (Maitland, 2017, p. 10). Maitland (2024, p. 40) states that "[n]ot everything is cultural translation": for cultural translation to occur, one must be able to discern at least the structures of author, text, translator, translation, and audience, together with contestable meaning and a critical recontextualization of the

action in question. Her model treats cultural translation as a historically and socially situated process that involves interpreting an object, reading it across spatiotemporal distance, resituating it within the translator's own sociocultural horizon ("incorporation"), and reshaping its meaning for a specific purpose ("transformation") (Maitland, 2017, pp. 10-11).

Using Maitland's model of cultural translation, I examine the traceable interpretive gestures through which Freitas renders China's history intelligible in ways that may also encourage sympathy towards the Chinese among Portuguese readers. In this case, Freitas functions as the cultural translator, while the 'author' and 'text' are best understood as the source authors and texts he cites and rewrites.

To recap, this article uses 'translation' at three related but distinct levels. First, at the intertemporal level, I use 'history as translation' in a broad sense to describe the mediation of the past for present readers. Second, at the interlingual level, I draw on Lefevere's notion of rewriting. Translation then refers to how Freitas rewrites specific French-language passages into Portuguese, as shaped by patronage (e.g., the editorial agenda of the collection) and ideology (e.g., assumptions about China and the Chinese). Third, at the level of cultural translation, I follow Maitland's model, understanding the term to refer to the interpretive gestures through which Freitas renders China's past, as mediated in his sources, intelligible to Portuguese readers.

A final consideration within this theoretical framework is the role of popular history, particularly given that the case concerns a work of historical popularization. Extant scholarship on popular history suggests that what counts as 'popular' is historically and socioculturally contingent, which makes it necessary to situate each case in its specific context (De Groot, 2012).[1] Nevertheless, in the Portuguese context, it still remains underexplored how popular historical writings functioned in the early 1940s. Analyzing *A China antiga e moderna* may therefore help clarify how popular history operated in that setting.

## 3. Context: publishing and narrating China in early-1940s Portugal

As Maitland (2017, p. 62) notes, every text is read in a different time and place from that in which it was written and, hence, carries a "double historical reference" between the world of the writer and the world of the reader. In *A China antiga e moderna*, this means that China's past reaches Portuguese readers only through a situated act of mediation shaped by the world in which Freitas and his audience were located. From Lefevere's (2017) perspective, moreover, such mediation is not autonomous but conditioned by patronage

[1] The movement from historical, sinological, and politically inflected sources to popular history could also be approached through the lens of 'inter-epistemic translation,' particularly insofar as it entails the repackaging of relatively specialized knowledge for a non-specialist readership (Bennett, 2024). Here, however, 'double foreignness' is operationalized as the combined spatiotemporal and cultural-linguistic distance involved in writing a foreign country's past. Popularization is, therefore, considered primarily in relation to how China's past is made intelligible to Portuguese readers, rather than as a transfer across epistemic systems.

and ideology. This section, therefore, reconstructs two contextual dimensions: first, the institutional framework of publication which, as a form of patronage, might have enabled or constrained the ways in which Freitas rewrote his sources; second, the political and discursive environment, including Estado Novo book censorship and wartime Portuguese representations of China, which help situate the ideological horizon within which Freitas rewrote his sources for Portuguese readers.

*A China antiga e moderna* is the first volume published in the 'Povos e Civilizações' section of Biblioteca Cosmos, a collection published by Edições Cosmos between 1941 and 1948. The stated goal of the collection, as shown at the end of the volume, is "to present […] a synthesis of all the advances made by modern science in recent years, in a simple and clear manner, accessible to everyone […]" (Cosmos, 1941, p. 116).[2]

The Biblioteca Cosmos collection was edited by Bento de Jesus Caraça (1901-48), a prominent mathematician known for his anti-fascist commitments. This political stance could be sensitive in early-1940s Portugal, given Estado Novo's official neutrality in World War II and its book censorship. Nevertheless, a censor's report on *A China antiga e moderna* authorized the volume without substantial explanation (R. 1619/42).[3] More broadly, between 1938 and 1944, the Estado Novo's censorship examined 15 books related to the Second Sino-Japanese War; all were approved.[4]

Although research on Portuguese representations of China during World War II remains limited, the available evidence suggests that a strand of Portuguese public discourse was sympathetic to China, as Freitas also appears to be. To name just a few examples, an article published in 1936 in the biweekly magazine *Ilustração* praises the Chinese government for adopting a "pacific solution" to avoid war with Japan (Ilustração, 1936, p. 16). By 1938, *Ilustração* predicts that a Chinese victory would offer 'less danger' than a Japanese one, because China's self-sustainable territory and its philosophical tradition of "resignation" (Benarús, 1938, p. 17) made colonial ambitions unnecessary. Similarly, some prefaces to Chinese volumes translated into Portuguese in the early 1940s encourage a sympathetic view of China and the Chinese (Cheung, 2024, pp. 111-122).

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Portuguese to English in this article are my own. The original text of the above quote reads: "[P]ropõe-se a Biblioteca Cosmos apresentar […] a síntese de tudo quanto as ciências modernas teem adiantado nos últimos anos, de maneira simples e clara, acessível a todos" (Cosmos, 1941, p. 116).

[3] An index of censors' reports is compiled by Teresa Seruya and Maria Lin Moniz; Available at https://fch.lisboa.ucp.pt/system/files/assets/files/indice-rel-censura.pdf. The reports themselves can be accessed at Portuguese National Archives, Torre do Tombo. Digital versions are available on its Digitarq platform: https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/documentDetails/eab995eedc0948438028df7b86a47260 (14 August 2025). For the in-text reference, the 'R.' stands for 'report,' the first set of digits is the number assigned by the censorship, and the digits after the slash indicate the year of issuance.

[4] The reports include R. 687/38, R. 1311/41, R. 1619/42, R. 1705/42, R. 1708/42, R. 1759/42, R. 1792/42, R. 1832/42, R. 1844/42, R. 1853/42, R. 1859/42, R. 1884/42, R. 1885/42, R. 2672/44, and R. 2704/44. Since the censorship seemingly did not have a direct impact on *A China antiga e moderna*, this paper does not elaborate on how the censorial mechanism functions. For a panorama of the Estado Novo's book censorship, see Seruya (2025), which discusses, *inter alia*, how censors react to books related to other countries involved in World War II.

In summary, the editorial framework within which Freitas (re)writes likely encouraged simplification as a mode of intelligibility. At the same time, the available censorship records and print evidence suggest that a sympathetic framing of China was not only publishable in early-1940s Portugal, but also legible within existing Portuguese reference frames.

## 4. Analysis: a Portuguese translation and popularization of Chinese history

José de Freitas worked as a reporter for mainstream newspapers (including *Diário de Notícias*, *República*, and *Diário Popular*) and rose to prominence in Portuguese journalism in the 1950s. During World War II, he wrote five books on the then-Chinese leader's life, the war in the Far East, and Japanese imperialism and expansionism, but information related to him offers little to explain this sustained interest.[5] There is no evidence that, during the 1940s, Freitas had any direct contact with the Far East or knew Chinese. Therefore, his historical account of China was likely shaped by his reading and imagination.

In *A China antiga e moderna*, Freitas frames contemporary China against a historical narrative stretching back nearly five thousand years, since his chronological outline begins in 2852 B.C. He presents modern China as "a people fighting for their existence, struggling for their complete liberation from all foreign yoke" (Freitas, 1941, p. 7).[6] Structurally, the book is divided into two parts: 'China, velha China' (46 pages portraying the period from 2852 BCE to 1911) and 'A caminho da libertação' (45 pages portraying the period from 1840 to 1940). The temporal distribution is disproportionate, with an overlap between them (1840-1911). This overlap, alongside the headings of the two parts, suggests a narrative of transition since the West's intervention in the 1840s: an ancient, oppressed China gives way to a modern Chinese people engaged in emancipation from colonial domination. In other words, Freitas seemingly reduces five thousand years to a disproportionate old/modern binary, flattening the double foreignness of China's past into a more homogeneous pole.

Based on this understanding of Freitas and his book, the following analysis further examines how he works with the double foreignness by citing francophone sources, rewriting them into Portuguese, and culturally translating China's past for the Portuguese readership.

### *4.1. Sources: a China translated through French*

As a journalist by profession, with no formal training in history or sinology, José de Freitas might have encountered credibility issues when writing about Chinese history. In the preface to *A China antiga e moderna*, he adopts a self-deprecating stance, appealing to the authority of "eminent internationalists and historians" and claiming that his goal is "simply

[5] Fragments of José de Freitas' biographical information can be found in Caeiro (2016, p. 51) and Aresta (2021). His published books are available for consultation at the Portuguese National Library.

[6] The original sentence describes the Chinese as "um povo luta pela sua existência, bate-se pela libertação completa de todo o jugo estrangeiro" (Freitas, 1941, p. 7).

to compile, in a tolerably elaborated summary," the Chinese past and present (Freitas, 1941, p. 7).[7] Despite this claim, he does not provide a bibliography. Some names appear in the main text and footnotes with minimal reference (author and/or title only).

In Table 1, I present all authors cited in the volume, both in the text and in the peritext (including the preface and footnotes). I also collect additional data on them for this discussion, including language, publication date, authors' birth and death dates, and the pages on which they appear. The asterisk after the title indicates that I could access an edition of that book during this research.

**Table 1.** Sources indicated in *A China antiga e moderna* (table prepared by the author)

| Author | Title and year | Language | Page(s) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Frey Gaspar da Cruz (1520-1570)** | *Tratado das cousas da China* (1569)* | Portuguese | 10 |
| **Jaime do Inso (1880-1967)** | *Visões da China* (1933)* | Portuguese | 10, 23 |
| **Félicien Challaye (1875-1967)** | *La Chine, le Japon et les Puissances* (1938) | French | 12, 75, 90 |
| **Henri Maspero (1883-1945)** | *La langue chinoise* [Conference] (1934) | French | 21, 23 |
| **Ferreira de Castro (1898-1974)** | -- [cited without title] | Portuguese | 22 |
| **Lin Yutang (1895-1976)** | *La Chine et les chinois* (1937), trans. of *My Country and My People*) | French (trans. S. & P. Bourgeois) | 21, 22, 24 |
| **Jean Escarra (1885-1955)** | *La Chine - Passé et présent* (1936)* | French | 22, 29, 93 |
| **Marcel Granet (1884-1940)** | *La pensée chinoise* (1934)* | French | 24 |
| **Giuseppe Ferrari (1811-1876)** | *La Chine et l'Europe* (1867)* | French | 36 |
| **C. P. Fitzgerald (1902-1992)** | *Li-Che-Min – Unificateur de la Chine* (1935), trans. of *Son of Heaven*) | French (trans. G. Lepage) | 47 |
| **Alexandre Bonacosi (?-?)** | *La Chine et les Chinois* (1847)* | French | 60 |
| **G. Shmith (?-?) (unidentified)** | *Croquis Chinois* (unidentified) | French | 70 |
| **Georges Maspero (1872-1942)** | *La Chine* (1925) | French | 75, 78 |
| **Anton Zischka (1904-1997)** | *El Japón sobre el mundo* (1938), trans. of *Japan in der Welt*) | Spanish (trans. E. Suda) | 78, 102 |

[7] The original text reads: "O problema do Extremo Oriente está já estudado por eminentes internacionalistas e historiadores. É nosso objectivo, apenas, num simples trabalho de compilação, reünir, em resumo sofrivelmente elaborado, os principais aspectos da vida chinesa, a sua civilização, a sua transformação social realizada por Sun-Yat Sen" (Freitas, 1941, p. 7). Sun-Yat Sen is considered a leader of the 1911 Revolution, which ended the Chinese monarchy.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Carlo Sforza (1872-1952)** | *L'énigme chinoise* (1928)* | French | 88 |
| **Wang Jingwei (1883-1944)** | *Problèmes Chinois et leurs solutions* (1935), trans. of *China's Problems and Their Solution* | French (trans. J.-Em. Lemière) | 90 |
| **Roger Lévy (?-?)** | *Extrême Oriente et Pacifique* (1935) | French | 100 |

A total of 17 authors are identified, with 27 references (i.e., instances in which an author or work is cited). 22 (81.5%) of them are paraphrases (without quotation marks), and only 5 (18.5%) are direct quotes (with quotation marks). Among these authors, 3 (17.65%) are cited in Portuguese, 13 (76.47%) are in French (three translations from English), and 1 (5.9%) is in Spanish.

Qualitatively, the only Spanish work appears to be more connected to Japan, as the title, *El Japón sobre el mundo*, indicates. The Portuguese references function more as anecdotes than as sources of Chinese history. Dominican friar Frey Gaspar da Cruz is invoked to claim that the Portuguese were the first to bring the name "China" to European attention (Freitas, 1941, p. 10). Naval officer Jaime do Inso is paraphrased to report a remark attributed to Mussolini about his ignorance of the "Chinese question" (p. 10), and later to recount a mythic origin for the Chinese classic, *I Ching* (p. 23). Writer Ferreira de Castro is quoted for characterizing the Chinese: "The Chinese suffer with a smile" (p. 22).[8]

By contrast, Freitas anchors his historical narrative primarily in established French sinology. Prominent figures include Henri Maspero (specialist in Daoism), Marcel Granet (sociologist of ancient China), Jean Escarra (jurist of Chinese law), and Georges Maspero (historian of China and Indochina). He also relies on French translations of non-French authors – notably C. P. Fitzgerald (British sinologist) and Lin Yutang (Chinese Anglophone writer) – and cites Italian political figures, Carlo Sforza and Giuseppe Ferrari, in their French works.

Freitas's dependence on francophone sources appears understandable given the absence of Portuguese sinology and, as Seruya (2024, p. 258) observes, the Francophile tendencies in Portuguese translation and culture of that period. Nonetheless, the double foreignness of China's past, despite being mediated in these francophone sources, still required further mediation by Freitas for his Portuguese readership, especially within the volume's popularizing editorial framework.

### *4.2. Interlingual translation*

In this section, 'translation' is used in the interlingual sense, referring to Freitas's rewriting of francophone materials into Portuguese, ranging from close quotation to freer paraphrase and unmarked textual reuse. Freitas rarely indicates the interlingual works involved, aside from a single note on the absence of a particular "Portuguese or French" translation (Freitas, 1941, p. 81). Nonetheless, he must have performed interlingual

[8] The original reads: "[Os chineses] sofrem a sorrir" (Castro, cited in Freitas, 1941, p. 22).

translations. Since not all of those francophone sources were accessible for this study, and Freitas's citation practice does not specify editions or page numbers, it is difficult to recover all the passages he uses for his rewriting. Accordingly, the analysis below is illustrative rather than exhaustive, based on cases where the source text could be located with reasonable confidence.

*4.2.1 Without explicit reference*

To trace how Freitas might cite or translate certain words without referencing any work, I compared their tables of contents and chapter headings. The results mostly show generic or loose structural similarities, except for Jean Escarra's *La Chine – Passé et présent*. Its first part is largely paralleled by the first half of *A China antiga e moderna* in structural terms, but Freitas often presents finer subdivisions. Table 2 presents Freitas's division in order, along with the corresponding chapter or subchapter in Escarra's book.

**Table 2.** Structural correspondences between Freitas and Escarra (table prepared by the author)

| ***A China antiga e moderna* – index of Part 1** | ***La Chine – Passé et présent* (corresponding parts)** |
|---|---|
| **Os limites territoriais** | Données géographiques |
| **A população** | Le peuple / La société |
| **Orografia e hidrografia** | Données géographiques |
| **O clima** | Données géographiques |
| **O povo chinês** | Le peuple / La société |
| **A língua** | La langue |
| **A literatura** | Littérature. – Arts. – Sciences |
| **As artes** | Littérature. – Arts. – Sciences |
| **As ciências** | Littérature. – Arts. – Sciences |
| **A religião** | La vie religieuse et la pensée philosophique |
| **Os filósofos** | La vie religieuse et la pensée philosophique |
| **Resumo histórico** | Résumé historique |
| **Quadro das dinastias chinesas** | Résumé historique |

The comparison between their contents also shows similarities. For example, in *La Chine – Passé et présent*, Chapter II 'Données géographiques' ('geographical data') opens with a list of Chinese self-designations (e.g., 'Empire du Milieu') and notes that "'China' is a foreign name whose origin is unknown" (Escarra, 1936, p. 20). [9] Freitas also opens his Part 1 by listing those same Chinese self-designations but in Portuguese. But then, Freitas provides an answer to Escarra's 'unknown origin' of the word 'China': "According to the most reliable sources, the word *China* was heard by the Portuguese in India, where the kingdom had been known for many years by the name of Tchina" (Freitas, 1941, p. 10).[10]

[9] The original text reads: « Le mot *Chine* est une appellation étrangère dont l'origine n'est pas connue » (Escarra, 1936, p. 20).

[10] The original text reads: "Segundo as indicações mais seguras, a palavra *China* foi ouvida pelos portugueses na India, onde havia já muitos anos se conhecia o reino pelo nome de Tchina" (Freitas, 1941, p. 10).

In short, the examples above illustrate that, without explicit reference, Freitas rewrites Escarra's text by reorganizing and rendering it into Portuguese, while also reframing it through Portuguese reference points.

*4.2.2 Paraphrases with reference*

Here, I focus on Freitas's two paraphrases in reference to Escarra's book. In the first instance, Freitas reworks a descriptive passage about the Chinese character (see Table 3). Compared with Escarra's relatively succinct phrasing, Freitas makes the imagery scenically specific, introducing the 'golden cage' and the 'public square.' He also recasts key details: whereas Escarra emphasizes mistreatment of dogs and donkeys, Freitas foregrounds their more affectionate and quasi-familial place in Chinese domestic life. These shifts intensify a starker moral antithesis in the representation of the Chinese (familial tenderness vs. public brutality).

**Table 3.** Comparison between Escarra's and Freitas's texts (table prepared by the author)

| **Escarra (1936, p. 66)** | **Freitas (1941, p. 22)** |
|---|---|
| L'homme d'une grande bonté envers les siens ne manifestera aucune émotion en face des souffrances des autres. Celui-là qui prend mille précautions pour le confort de son oiseau favori torturera son chien ou son âne et assistera impassible au supplice d'un criminel en riant des souffrances physiques et morales qui lui sont infligées. | O pássaro que canta na sua gaiola dourada é sempre bem tratado pelo dono que com êle perde horas, acariciando-o delicadamente; o cão é respeitado e ninguém lhe bate; o burro e o boi, velhos amigos e companheiro do camponês na sua dura faina pela existência, representam no lar o mesmo que um filho. Mas este mesmo chinês que ama a família e respeita os animais, pode rir-se com prazer infantil e selvagem de horríveis sofrimentos físicos e morais aplicados, numa praça pública, a qualquer criminoso caído sob a alçada da antiga justiça chinesa ([1]).<br>([1]) Jean Escarra – *La Chine – Passé et présent*. |
| [A man who is very kind to his own kin will show no emotion in the face of others' suffering. The man who takes a thousand precautions for the comfort of his favorite bird will torture his dog or donkey and watch impassively the torture of a criminal, laughing at the physical and moral suffering inflicted on him.] | [The bird that sings in its golden cage is always well treated by its owner, who spends hours with it, caressing it delicately; the dog is respected and no one beats it; the donkey and the ox, old friends and companions of the peasant in his hard struggle for existence, represent in the home the same as a son. But this same Chinese, who loves his family and respects animals, may laugh with childish and savage pleasure at the horrible physical and moral suffering inflicted in a public square on any criminal who has fallen under the jurisdiction of ancient Chinese justice ([1]).<br>([1]) Jean Escarra – *La Chine – Passé et présent*.] |

In the second instance, Freitas (1941, pp. 28-29) loosely rewrites Escarra's (1936, pp. 133-137) overview of Chinese literature. Given the length of the two passages (approximately 366 and 1,077 words), I do not reproduce them in full and instead summarize their main points of convergence and divergence. Freitas broadly preserves

Escarra's typology of literary genres (e.g., poetry, Buddhist literature, and the novel) but omits his discussion of Chinese lexicography and textual criticism. Freitas also drastically reduces the number of authors and works mentioned, retaining only two of the most canonized poets, Li Bai and Du Fu. Whereas Escarra (1936, p. 134) notes that these poets are known in Europe "thanks to translations," Freitas (1941, p. 29) repeats this point but adds that such translations "only provide an imperfect idea of their extraordinary poetic delicacy."[11] Freitas also replaces much of Escarra's detail (e.g., descriptions and lists of specific authors and works) with sweeping characterizations: "All Chinese are pantheists, and almost all the verses of Chinese poets describe fields, trees, and flowers" (Freitas, 1941, p. 29).[12] Escarra, by contrast, explicitly stresses the thematic plurality of, for instance, Tang poetry: "Tang poetry draws on many sources of inspiration. It is by turns heroic, elegiac, descriptive, religious, amorous, and bacchic" (Escarra, 1936, p. 133).[13]

To sum up, the two examples above illustrate how Freitas rewrites Escarra's passages through selection, condensation, and generalization, even when the French author is explicitly acknowledged as the source.

### *4.2.3 Direct quotations with reference*

In this part, I analyze two direct quotations. The first passage is originally from Marcel Granet's *La pensée chinoise* (1934) (see Table 4). Freitas's version simplifies Granet's phrasing, eliding the idea of language as an 'organ' and recasting it in plainer terms. The Portuguese translation also amplifies praise by rendering the Chinese language as "the greatest instrument of culture of the entire East" (1941, p. 24), rather than only "the entire Far East" (1950, p. 63) in the original.

**Table 4.** Comparison between Granet's and Freitas's texts (table prepared by the author)

| **Granet ([1934]/1950, p. 63)** | **Freitas (1941, p. 24)** |
|---|---|
| Le chinois est une grande langue de civilisation qui a réussi à devenir et à rester l'instrument de culture de tout l'Extrême-Orient. Elle a, de plus, servi d'organe à l'une des littératures les plus variées et les plus riches. | O chinês é uma grande língua de civilização e o maior instrumento de cultura de todo o Oriente. Serviu a uma literatura das mais variadas, das mais ricas. |
| [Chinese is a great language of civilization that has succeeded in becoming and remaining the instrument of culture of the entire Far East. It has also served as the organ for one of the most varied and richest literatures.] | [Chinese is a great language of civilization and the greatest instrument of culture of the entire East. It has served one of the most varied and richest literatures.] |

[11] Escarra's French text reads: « Mais ceux de Li T'ai-po, ou Li Po et de Tou Fou, sont connus du grand public grâce aux traductions » (1936, p. 134). Freitas' Portuguese text reads: "[…] Ta-Fu e Li Pó, conhecidos na Europa devido a traduções que só dão uma ideia imperfeita da sua extraordinária delicadeza poética" (1941, p. 29).

[12] The original text reads: "Todos os chineses são panteístas e quási todos os versos dos poetas chineses descrevem os campos, as árvores e as flores" (Freitas, 1941, p. 29).

[13] The original text reads: « La poésie des T'ang relève de nombreuses sources d'inspiration. Elle est tour à tour héroïque, élégiaque, descriptive, religieuse, amoureuse, bacchique » (Escarra, 1936, p. 133).

Another direct quotation is a long passage on the origins of Chinese philosophy that Freitas takes from Giuseppe Ferrari's *La Chine et l'Europe* (1867).[14] Freitas's (1941, pp. 35-36) Portuguese translation (124 words) is almost half the length of Ferrari's (1867, pp. 283-84) French original (246 words) because of its many unmarked omissions, including Ferrari's philosophical elaborations, descriptive clauses, and rhetorical intensifications. For example, Freitas suppresses Ferrari's personification of philosophy as a restless liberal spirit: "And all assertions seem so unbearable to philosophy that it never ceases to overturn its own convictions to reclaim its freedom at every moment" (Ferrari, 1867, p. 284).[15]

The two direct quotations discussed here show that Freitas rewrites his sources through selective quotation, unmarked omission, and simplification. More broadly, the examples examined here in Section 4.2 suggest a recurrent pattern of rewriting: francophone materials are selected, reorganized, condensed, and reframed for a Portuguese readership. These patterns are also consistent with the volume's editorial framework, which privileged intelligibility for Portuguese readers. Moreover, where Freitas departs more clearly from his sources in order to praise China, his rewriting may also be read in Lefevere's (2017, p. 30) terms, as one way in which ideological considerations appear to prevail over more strictly linguistic transfer. This sympathetic tendency becomes clearer in the following analysis of cultural translation.

### *4.3. Cultural translation*

Building on the interlingual translation examined above, this section shifts the focus to cultural translation as a broader interpretive mediation. Drawing on Maitland's (2017) model of cultural translation, I read *A China antiga e moderna* as a historically and socially situated mediation of China's past for Portuguese readers. The following close reading traces the interpretive gestures involved in this rearticulation through passages that tend to render China and the Chinese more familiar and to frame them sympathetically. This analysis is based on my reading of the volume and supplemented by targeted keyword searches in a digitized copy of the volume. The recurrent, relevant keywords include 'Europa', 'Portugal,' 'pacifismo,' 'tradicionalismo,' and related terms. On this basis, I identify two macro patterns of interpretive traces in *A China antiga e moderna*, which are presented below. Because there are many examples, the following exposition includes the Portuguese text in a footnote only when my translation may be considered significantly different.

#### *4.3.1 European and Portuguese reference points*

One recurrent trace of Freitas's cultural translation lies in his tendency to explain China through European and Portuguese points of reference.

[14] The catalogue entry from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France shows that the book is by Joseph Ferrari, and he is actually Giuseppe Ferrari.

[15] The original reads: « Et toutes les affirmations lui [philosophie] semblent tellement insupportables, qu'elle ne cesse de bouleverser ses propres convictions pour reconquérir à chaque instant sa liberté » (Ferrari, 1867, p. 284).

Freitas repeatedly explains Chinese realities through comparison with European ones even in Part I of the volume about 'old China,' when direct contact with Europe was limited. He explains that the Chinese census is not done in the "rigorous European way" (Freitas, 1941, p. 17) and casts the "old Chinese mentality" (p. 20) as scarcely intelligible to Europeans. He further suggests that China is not a "nation" in the European sense (p. 20), while praising the Chinese language as a unifying instrument that Europe desires (p. 21). Chinese theatre is judged "monotonous" for "European taste" (p. 29), and major Chinese poets known in Europe, as mentioned, are said to be accessible only through "imperfect translations" (p. 29). Confucian reverence is compared to the "European cult of the Unknown Soldier" (p. 34).

For Portuguese reference points, China is said to be 126.5 times the size of continental Portugal (Freitas, 1941, p. 13), with roughly 3,000 Portuguese residents at the time (p. 14). Regarding Chinese languages, Freitas states that a Chinese northerner learns a Southern "dialect" (p. 21) more easily than a Portuguese learns French. He also notes that the Portuguese settled in Macao during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) (p. 53), claiming that the Portuguese first introduced opium to Canton; soon after, English contraband grew, leading to the Opium War (1839-42) (pp. 66-67). In this war, he writes ironically, a long self-isolated China fired the very weapons that the well-known Portuguese traveler and writer Fernão Mendes Pinto (1509-1583) sold in the 16th century (p. 62). He mentions that Western pressures sparked Chinese uprisings, including the assassination of Macao's Portuguese governor João Ferreira do Amaral (1801-1849) (p. 69).

Taken together, Europe serves as a broader horizon for civilizational comparison, while Portugal provides more immediate points of reference that both ground the narrative for Portuguese readers and highlight Portugal's own historical entanglement with China. Some of these comparisons can be read, in Maitland's terms, as a form of "incorporation": a process that "both preserves and overcomes distance" (2017, pp. 99-100), with a contradictory desire to approximate and reduce the other. In this sense, Freitas renders China's past more familiar by relocating it within cultural frameworks already available to Portuguese readers, though often at the expense of historical specificity.

### *4.3.2 Timeless images of the Chinese*

Freitas (1941, p. 61) claims that the enduring traits of Chinese civilization help explain both the country's slower adaptation to Western customs than Japan and the succession of military and diplomatic defeats it had suffered since the Opium War. Taking this claim as a point of departure, I identify two recurrent discursive images of the Chinese in his account: 'pacifist' and 'traditionalist'.[16] Both are relevant to his attempt to portray China as the victim of the then-ongoing Japanese imperialist invasion. They also reveal interpretive

[16] Freitas's image-building of China is indeed an interesting topic for an imagological approach, typically involving textual, contextual, and intertextual analyses (see Flynn et al., 2015, p. 3), but that lies beyond the scope of this research, whose primary framework is 'history as translation.' I use 'image' instead of 'stereotype' or 'ethnotype' because there is insufficient evidence to establish how far such characterizations functioned stereotypically in Portugal in the early 1940s.

gestures of simplification and continuity that connect China's past to its present, making it more intelligible to Portuguese readers.

The first trait Freitas emphasizes is 'pacifist.' He invokes a Chinese proverb and Confucian teachings to claim that the Chinese are "anti-militarist" and "peaceful," and that they "despise brute force" (1941, p. 22). He buttresses this with a citation from Lin Yutang, who lists "pacifism" among the core traits of the Chinese (p. 22). As cultural evidence, Freitas notes popular Chinese songs exalting "hatred of the war" (p. 29). Historically, he states that foreign conquerors in China always ended up "dominated" by a Chinese preference for a "peaceful life" (pp. 42-43). Doctrinally, he claims that "pacifism and hatred of war" are traits of Chinese civilization (p. 59) and that all Chinese philosophy condemns war and devalues the military arts. Freitas justifies this claim with Chinese social temperament – attachment to land and peace (p. 60) – and a geopolitical-economic rationale: Chinese abundance and frugality made their expansion unnecessary, resulting in a defensive rather than a conquering posture (p. 61). Finally, he attributes British success in the Opium War to a Chinese "ancestral hatred of resorting to violence" (p. 62).

The second 'trait of the Chinese' in Freitas's perception is 'traditionalist.' By this, he probably means a shared attachment to inherited customs and opposition to innovations. Freitas portrays ancient China as "jealously guarding its spiritual treasures" (Freitas, 1941, p. 9), invoking Lin Yutang to attribute a "conservative spirit" to the Chinese (p. 22). Chinese popular theatre and songs are said to exalt respect for forebears (p. 29), and the ancestral cult is described as extraordinarily widespread (p. 34). Politically, the Qing dynasty is characterized by efforts to preserve the country's stability and isolation from the world (p. 66). In an anecdote, the Chinese destroyed a recently constructed train because it disrupted their "centuries-old routine" (pp. 70-71). Freitas emphasizes that the then-Chinese government has adopted a policy to restore those older customs (p. 72). On one occasion, he explicitly identifies "traditionalism" (p. 91) as one significant obstacle to China's modernization. He also notes that, during the 1930s, even the patriarchal regime remained intact among Chinese peasants, and that the new Civil Code could not yet be applied to Chinese clan structures (p. 96).

While portraying the Chinese as 'pacifist' and 'traditionalist,' Freitas does not ignore many historical shifts, such as those between Chinese dynasties. However, he describes these changes as "cycles" (1941, p. 41): a pattern of successive dynasties marked by revolutions, civil wars, uprisings, and the eventual decline of each dynasty. In fact, this is a concept known as the "dynastic cycle" (Dillon, 1997, p. 87) in traditional Chinese historiography. Yet, Freitas does not find this phenomenon interesting, and he explicitly characterizes the "cycle" as "monotonous" and "uniform" (1941, p. 40).

In short, Freitas repeatedly casts the Chinese as 'pacifist' and 'traditionalist' and reduces political change in Chinese history to a recurrent 'cycle.' These passages substantially simplify both Chinese history and the image of the Chinese, a gesture that is consistent with the volume's popularizing drive towards intelligibility. In Maitland's terms, Freitas's interpretive gestures also suggest a movement from incorporation towards

"transformation" (2017, p. 10), that is, a purposeful rearticulation of meaning. In this sense, China's past is brought within intelligible interpretive frames and, above all, reshaped into a continuous narrative that encourages sympathy for the Chinese among Portuguese readers during the then-ongoing war. This narrative also resonates with the sympathetic strand in wartime Portuguese discourse on China.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has examined José de Freitas's *A China antiga e moderna* as a translation of the Chinese past for the Portuguese readership in the early 1940s. I have described such a situation using the concept of 'double foreignness,' which encompasses not only spatiotemporal (past-present) but also cultural-linguistic (Chinese-Portuguese) distance. Hence, interlingual and cultural translations become important to examine alongside the intertemporal layer.

The study shows that Freitas relies chiefly on francophone sources. His paraphrases from French are free, and even direct quotations contain unmarked omissions and translational shifts. Read through Lefevere's (2017) notion of rewriting, the French texts are selectively reshaped into *A China antiga e moderna* in ways that are consistent with the popularizing agenda of the volume's editorial framework, Freitas's sympathy towards the Chinese, and a modest yet discernible pro-China tendency in wartime Portuguese print discourse.

Drawing on Maitland's model of cultural translation, the study also identifies two main patterns of interpretive gestures: Freitas frequently uses European or Portuguese points of reference to approximate Chinese history; his image-building of the Chinese as 'pacifist' and 'traditionalist' consolidates a simplified, intelligible continuity between China's past and present. Therefore, Freitas incorporates China's past within interpretive frames available to Portuguese readers, often at the expense of its historical specificity. He also transforms it into a narrative that encourages sympathy towards the Chinese. The result is a popular historical account that provides an immediate yet homogenizing interpretation of the Chinese as a historically coherent group. The principal distinction Freitas draws between China's past and present is the old/modern binary, already announced in the volume's title, *A China antiga e moderna*.

In theoretical terms, although this case study of a single volume has limited generalizability, it suggests that double foreignness in popular historical writing may be managed through intertwined intertemporal, interlingual, and cultural forms of translation oriented toward intelligibility. Intertemporally, the foreign past may be reorganized into more legible contrasts, such as an old/modern binary; interlingually, foreign sources may be selectively rewritten into the target language through operations such as selection, omission, condensation, and reframing; culturally, the past of the foreign country may be recontextualized within cultural frameworks available to target readers, for instance, through familiarizing comparisons or essentializing image-building.

Thus, the historical writing of a foreign country entails not only translating the past, but also translating the languages and cultural frames through which that past becomes readable in the present. The concept of double foreignness foregrounds the intertemporal, intercultural, and interlingual work, enabling a critical reading of the historical accounts thus constructed: not to dismiss them, but to see more precisely the foreign worlds as they are translated into a present that is itself socially and historically situated.

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# TRANSLATION, ORAL HISTORY AND THE ANARCHIVE IN SAMIA HALABY'S *DRAWING THE KAFR QASEM MASSACRE*

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that translation can serve as a methodology for creating new embodied, affective, and experiential knowledge about the past. Using the concept of the 'anarchive', the article explores the creative-research translation practices artists engage in as they create historical documents that foreground the sensorial, material, and embodied dimensions of the past. To illustrate these arguments, the article analyses Samia Halaby's (2016) *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*. Based on her own oral history interviews with the survivors, the artist visualizes the 1956 massacre during which Israeli border police killed 49 Palestinians and wounded 13 others. In this multimodal publication, Halaby presents the reader with her visual documentation of the massacre, the English transcripts of the testimonies she collected, and a reflection on the anarchival translation process she engaged in throughout the project. The article contributes to emerging debates on translation of lived experience, oral history, archives, and decolonial knowledge.
KEYWORDS: Experiential Translation, Oral History, (An)Archive, Art, Translation and Decolonization

## 1. Introduction

Oral history refers to both the "process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past" (Abrams, 2016, p. 2) as well as the narrative account resulting from these interviews. As a methodology, it enables researchers to document the experiences of those who are often marginalized and suppressed in dominant historiography and archives, such as the working class, refugees, women, and the illiterate, offering in-depth insights onto not only how these individuals and their communities experienced specific events, but also how they remember and interpret these events from the perspective of the present (Frisch, 1990; Thompson, 2016). Oral history embraces the subjectivity of lived experience, and, to quote historian Alessandro Portelli, 2016, p. 52) "tell[s] us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did".

Beyond its subjectivity, Portelli (2016) argues that what sets oral history apart from other historical sources is its co-constructed and dialogic nature. The interview is a conversation that is shaped by the interaction between the interviewer and narrator. It is also a multimodal performance constructed by verbal and non-verbal signs. The narrator's gestures, facial expressions, silences, hesitations, cadence, rhythm, the tone and volume of their voice, and their use of non-standard language varieties are as instrumental to the construction of meaning in their account as their spoken words, revealing their emotions, attitudes, and how past events continue to affect them.

It is these unique characteristics that have made oral history a prevalent practice in documenting the experiences of survivors in the aftermath of mass atrocities, violence, and crises, both within and outside academic research (Cave and Sloan, 2014; Abrams, 2016).

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In the visual and performing arts, Desai and Hamlin (2010, p. 57) observe that oral history is increasingly employed "as a method to document the stories of people who are socially, culturally, economically, racially, or ethnically marginalised". Incorporating oral history as part of their creative-research praxis enables artists to create multimodal historical records that foreground the gustatory, olfactory, tactile, aural, and visual dimensions of lived experience and advance alternative and multisensorial interpretations of the past. As such, their artworks and performances turn into "counter-archives" that capture "what is traditionally understood as non-archivable—affects, bodies, performances, and embodied events" (Springgay, Truman, and MacLean, 2019, p. 897) and "anarchives" (Massumi, 2016; Manning, 2020) that document the creative-research practices they engage in as they transform oral history across media.

Drawing on Campbell and Vidal's (2024a; 2025) understanding of translation as an experiential process, this article argues that such counter-archival and anarchival creative-research practices are underpinned by experiential translation. In line with Vidal Claramonte's (2025a) recent theorization of historical documents as translations of the past and the historian as a translator who offers one of many possible interpretations of sources and facts, this article will explore how experiential translation enables artists to create (an)archives that document the lived experiences of survivors of mass atrocities. The article asks: How can these (an)archives contribute to the construction of anti-colonial experiential knowledge about the past? How can they be reflexive of the processes behind their creation? How can they promote ethical and politically engaged encounters with the embodied oral histories they document? In addressing these questions, the article establishes new links between Translation Studies and Oral History, contributing to emerging debates on the role of experiential translation in generating new knowledge and countering systematic processes of epistemicide in (post)colonial contexts (e.g., Chambers and Demir, 2024; Vidal Claramonte, 2025b), as well as to recent scholarship on translation, multimodality, and the arts (e.g., Boria et al., 2020; De Francisci and Marinetti, 2025).

To this end, I will analyse Palestinian American artist Samia Halaby's (2016) *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* – a multimodal publication that documents the 1956 massacre in which Israeli border police killed 49 Palestinians in the eponymous village. Based on her own oral history interviews with survivors, Halaby created a series of drawings, sketches, and murals that visualize the stages through which the massacre was perpetrated. In this publication, the artist presents the reader with drafts of her sketches and drawings, the final visualizations she created, and an in-depth reflection on the creative-research process through which she – as she describes it – "translated the words of witnesses into pictures" (Halaby, 2016, p. 91). Finally, she includes her English translation of the Arabic oral histories she collected and other primary sources she relied on during her research.

As such, I argue that Halaby's publication develops into both an oral history counter-archive and a translator's anarchive that allows the reader to engage with the creative-research process underpinning her reconstruction of the massacre and transformation of the survivor testimonies into art. The first part of the article offers a brief historical

overview of the Kafr Qasem massacre and its aftermath. The second section outlines the themes and topics explored in existing research on translation and oral history. After that, I define 'experiential translation' and the 'anarchive', identifying how they can intersect and enrich our understanding of history as translation. To illustrate my arguments, the following section analyses Halaby's experiential and anarchival translation process, drawing on examples from her visualization of the last stage of the massacre. The conclusion offers reflections on the theoretical and practical implications of approaching experiential translation as anarchival practice.

**2. The Kafr Qasem massacre**

On the eve of 29 October 1956, Israeli border police massacred 49 Palestinians and wounded 13 others in the village of Kafr Qasem. At that time, along with other Palestinian villages within the borders of the newly established Israeli state, the residents of Kafr Qasem lived under military rule, governed by a military administration that subjected them to severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, including curfews (Sa'di, 2016).

The massacre was perpetrated against the backdrop of the tripartite Israeli, British, and French attack on Egypt, with the aim of toppling Gamal Abdel Nasser and taking control of the Suez Canal, which Nasser had nationalized. The Israeli army command brought forward the curfew imposed on Kafr Qasem and other neighbouring villages from 9.00 p.m. to 5.00 pm. Colonel Issachar Shadmi – the commander of the area in which the village is located – ordered the soldiers in his sector to shoot and kill whoever violates this new curfew. The village's *mukhtar* was informed of the change in curfew around thirty minutes before it came into effect. As most of the villagers worked in the fields surrounding Kafr Qasem, it was not possible to warn them ahead of their return to the village at the end of the working day (Manna', 2011; Pappé, 2011, pp. 55-59).

Most of the killing took place at the western entrance of the village, where the soldiers had placed a checkpoint, stopping and shooting the villagers upon their arrival, in what Palestinian author Emile Habibi (1976) describes in one of the earliest publications on the massacre as 'the nine waves of killing', including attacks on groups of men, women and children returning on foot, donkeys, bicycles, carts and trucks. Other killings were documented within the village and at its northern field. In addition to that, the soldiers forced men from the neighbouring village of Jaljullia to dig a hole that would later serve as a mass grave for the bodies of those killed in Kafr Qasem (Robinson, 2003, p. 395).

A media blackout followed and the village was placed under siege. Nevertheless, on 9 November 1956, news of the massacre was published in the *Itihad* newspaper by Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset and Communist Party Tawfik Toubi. The latter had been informed about the massacre by a journalist who had managed to bypass the roadblocks around the village but did not want to break the military gag order. On 20 November 1956, Toubi managed to find his way into the village and collected witness statements. Three days later, he published a press release in Arabic, English, and Hebrew exposing what had happened in the village. An inquiry into the massacre was launched

between 1957-1958, with eleven soldiers put on trial. By 1960, all of them had been acquitted. Shadmi was given a reprimand and fined one piastre for what the Israeli court perceived as a technical error (for an in-depth discussion of the massacre and its aftermath, see Habibi, 1976; Orbach, 2013; Sorek, 2015; Halaby, 2016, pp. 39-57). The State went as far as to enforce a 'reconciliation' between the villagers and perpetrators in an attempt to put an end to the trials (Robinson, 2003). It also tried to control how the massacre was commemorated, framing it as an isolated and exceptional event, rather than as part of the ongoing Nakba[1] and the structural violence of the Israeli settler colonial project (Barakat, 2022).

Over the years, the massacre has been the subject of some literary, artistic, and filmic treatments.[2] Yet, it was only when artist Samia Halaby began her project of visualizing the massacre that a creative project engaged with and foregrounded the lived experiences of the survivors. In the 1990s, Halaby was contacted by Aishy Amer – a young woman from Kafr Qasem – urging her to document the massacre through art (Halaby, 2016, p. 17). As the subsequent discussion will demonstrate, the project slowly grew beyond these initial aims, developing into an exploration into how experiential translation – with its material, embodied, and collaborative dimensions – can facilitate the co-construction of decolonial knowledge. Over the course of fourteen years, Halaby proceeded to create a series of sketches, drawings, and murals that visualize the stages through which the massacre unfolded. In doing so, the artist relied on three main sources of information: her own oral history interviews with the survivors; written transcripts of survivor testimonies published in the village's *Al-Shorok* magazine; and existing publications on the massacre, including Tawfik Toubi's press release, Emile Habibi's (1976) *Kafr Qasem: The Massacre – The Policy,* and the Israeli Communist Party's *Kafr Qasem: The Massacre and the Lesson* (1996). She also consulted maps of the village and passport pictures of the victims and survivors.

In the project's earlier stages, the artist's translations of the massacre could be accessed either in museum and gallery exhibitions or online through a memorial website she had created. The project turned into a translator's anarchive in 2012. After reviewing the material she had gathered and created over the years, the artist decided to publish a book featuring not only her visual documentation of the massacre, but also the oral histories and other sources she collected, as well as a reflection on her translation praxis through written essays and drafts of her drawings. In doing so, the artist wanted the project

[1] Between 1947-48, around 500 Palestinian villages were depopulated, 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly expelled from Palestine, becoming refugees, while thousands were massacred by Zionist militia in preparation for the establishment of Israel (Pappé, 2006; Masalha, 2012). This was accompanied by the looting of Palestinian documents, diaries, and family albums, many of which have been appropriated into Israeli archives (Sela, 2018). This period became known as the Nakba and is understood not as a past event, but an ongoing process that continues in the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the denial of the right of return for refugees (Manna', 2013).

[2] For instance, the massacre features in the poetry of Tawfiq Zayyad, Samih al-Qasem, Mahmoud Darwish, and Hanna Abu Hanna; the artworks of Abed al-Abedi and Abed al-Tamam; and Borhane Alaouié's (1975) film *The Massacre of Kafr Kassem*.

to "reach many hands and eyes" (2016, p. 18) serving as a primary historical source that is deeply reflective of the processes behind its creation.

**3. Translation and oral history**

While translation underpins different stages of oral history documentation, interpretation, and dissemination, its methodological and epistemological implications are often left unaddressed (Temple, 1997). In guidelines by leading oral history bodies (e.g., Oral History Association and Oral History Society) and key textbooks (e.g., Abrams, 2016), there is a notable absence of discussion concerning translation practice. Yet, translation informs "what is known, how it is known, and who is seen to tell" (Young and Temple, 2014, p. 130).

Although explicit dialogue between Translation Studies and Oral History remains rare (McDonough Dolmaya, 2015), some oral historians offer valuable reflections on the implications of using translation and interpreting as part of their research methodologies. For instance, studies discuss the impact of using interpreters on the dynamics of the oral history interview (e.g., Andrews, 1995; Wheeler, 2008; Jones-Gailani, 2013); the challenges of transcribing, translating and editing the recorded interview for publication in ethnographic and social research (e.g., Tedlock, 2011; Melian-Zamora and Behar, 2020; McCartney, Kritsch and Snowshoe, 2021); and the extent to which the translator's positionality and socialization impinge on their translation decisions (e.g., Temple, 2006, 2013; Temple and Koterba, 2009; Huynh Chau Nguyen, 2020).

In recognition of the materiality of oral history and its communication of embodied knowledge, some studies consider strategies for translating the verbal and non-verbal dimensions of the interview in written transcripts. Reeves-Ellington (1999) suggests the use of poetic transcription, creative punctuation, and the preservation of colloquial emphatics to reflect the idiosyncrasies of the interview, while Gawlewicz (2014) proposes providing explanations within square brackets for paralinguistic elements of the interview, implicit attitudes and values held by the narrators, the emotional connotations of their utterances, and any culture-bound terminology and grammatical structures they employ.

Such concerns are compounded in the translation of oral histories with survivors of mass atrocities which feature verbal and non-verbal markers of trauma. Drawing on her own experience of translating written oral histories by survivors of the Hiroshima bombing, Nicoll (2023) reflects on the significance of conveying such manifestations of trauma, including the survivor's use of metaphorical language, sensory imagery, and narrative pace. By adopting such an approach, Painca (2025) argues that the translator demonstrates an awareness of what historian Michael Frisch terms 'shared authority' – that is her positionality and the impact of her decisions on the co-creation of meaning in the translated testimony. At the same time, Müller's (2014) analysis of David Boder's English translations of his 1946 wire-recorded interviews with Holocaust survivors draws our attention to the potential risk of 'over interpreting' what we perceive as linguistic reflections of trauma. Müller notes that Boder attempted to convey such markers by rendering them into 'awkward' English language structures – a decision that was not always

effective. Müller also observes that the written transcripts do not convey the non-verbal dimensions of the interview – silences and hesitations – that are significant to meaning-making, pointing to a limitation resulting from a shift in the materiality of the interview during the translation process.

Another issue that is raised in relation to the translation of survivor oral histories lies in the safety and wellbeing of the translators, interpreters and transcribers involved in such projects (Abrams, 2016, p. 191). This topic remains largely unexplored, but studies like Bosseaux (2025) identify an absence of support and training on how to handle 'vicarious trauma'.

While these studies mainly focus on the practicalities and challenges of translating oral history in and into written accounts, they clearly demonstrate that a Translation Studies lens is instrumental for helping us understand the impact of translation on reconstructing what Portelli (2016) and other historians identify as the unique features of the oral history encounter: its subjectivity, orality, narrativity, performativity, and shared authority. Building on these insights, this article will shift our attention to the equally important yet less-studied processes of experiential translation that underpin the transformation of lived experience into oral history accounts and their subsequent remediations into multimodal counter-archives and anarchives.

**4. Experiential translation and the anarchive**

The concept of the anarchive was introduced by philosophers Erin Manning and Brian Massumi in their exploration of how to capture the 'traces' resulting from collaborative research-creation practices. Their aim behind creating a "repertory of traces" (Manning, 2020, p. 92) is not to identify techniques for documenting past co-creative activities but to find ways for "harnessing the process" (p. 76) behind them in a manner that allows it to be reactivated in the future, continually generating new creative processes (pp. 92-93). As Massumi (2016, p. 6) puts it, the anarchive is "a feed-forward mechanism for lines of creative process, under continuing variation".

Unlike archives which are conventionally perceived as static repositories of past events, objects, or knowledge (Millei, Piattoeva and Silova, 2024, p. 8), the anarchive is a research-creation practice that "catches experience in the making" and that "catches us in our own becoming" (Manning, 2020, p. 84). It captures that which is usually considered 'unarchivable', such as ephemeral processes, affect, experiential knowledge and lived histories (Springgay, Truman, and MacLean, 2019), allowing us to "bin[d] together seemingly disparate fragments of 'missing' data" and thereby "opening new possibilities of seeing the world" (Millei, Piattoeva and Silova, 2024, p. 8).

When engaging with archives as part of creative-research practice, archival objects can be seen as the "springboard" for anarchiving, and the archive itself as the "waystation" through which the anarchival journey moves (Massumi, 2016, p. 6). Furthermore, Massumi argues that the anarchive itself is not a physical object; it is "a cross-platform phenomenon" (2016, p. 6) that requires materialization into different multimodal forms like artwork,

performances, museums exhibitions, and films, for it to be continually shared and engaged with. Every encounter with such forms is meant to prompt further new collaborative interactions that then produce further anarchival encounters and forms, allowing the traces of the creative process to proliferate in new and varied iterations.

From a Translation Studies perspective, it can be argued that anarchiving, with its continuous transformation of experiential knowledge across medial and (non)verbal forms, is underpinned by a process of experiential translation. Moving beyond lingua-centric conceptualizations of translation, Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal's two recent edited volumes *The Experience of Translation: Materiality and Play in Experiential Translation* (2024b) and *The Translation of Experience: Cultural Artefacts in Experiential Translation* (2025) prompt us to approach translation "as a meaning-making process which is in-the-moment, temporally contingent, relational, material, ludic and embodied" (Campbell and Vidal, 2025, p. 8). In this process, the source and target texts are revised to encompass sensory, (im)material, and (non)verbal signs. Rather than focusing on the relationship between source and target texts, experiential translation allows us to explain the 'how' of meaning-making, or what Piotr Blumczynski (2023, p. 82) refers to as "translationality" – that is the "experience of connecting, through material, sensory mediation, with another reality across space and time". It foregrounds the translator's subjective engagement with and interpretation of signs and is concerned with how "to make experiences translatable across the linguistic and sensory boundaries and media that together serve to generate, maintain or challenge cultural hegemonies" (Campbell and Vidal, 2024a, p. 2).

In other words, as anarchival practice, experiential translation is concerned with process. It allows us to capture the 'how' behind co-creative engagements with historical documents and lived experience. It opens the space for considering the sensorial, (im)material, corporeal and collaborative aspects of creating knowledge. The concern here is not on evaluating the correspondence between survivor oral histories and their intersemiotic translation into art, but on documenting traces of the process that enabled the generation of new, previously supressed knowledge on the past. As the subsequent discussion will show, Halaby's drawings are but one of many possible manifestations of the experiential translation process, and the translator's anarchive invites us to consider how we ourselves can continue to engage with the questions, methods, ethical concerns, and experiential knowledge her project generates.

## 5. Analysis

### *5.1 Making sense of the fragments*

As a painter and art scholar specialized in abstract art,[3] the Kafr Qasem project was Samia Halaby's first experience of creating 'documentary drawings' that present her visual

[3] Samia Halaby is an art scholar and leading visual artist specialising in abstract painting. She was born in Jerusalem in 1936. Her family was forced to leave Palestine during the Nakba, fleeing to Lebanon, before immigrating to the US in 1951. The New York-based artist studied design and fine art and has held academic posts at several universities in the US. She has published books and articles on art history and her own

interpretation of this painful episode of Palestinian contemporary history. To achieve this goal, Halaby held that the aim of her project is to create "realistic" drawings that "accurately" represent the events of the massacre, perceiving herself as a "camera" that would capture the massacre in its entirety (2016, pp. 16, 158). Mirroring traditional instrumentalist conceptualizations of translation, the artist believed her task is to create an accurate rendition of a fixed and identifiable source text. Halaby states (2016, p. 57):

> Research on this project absorbed me for a lot longer than expected. Reading the material first provided by Aishy Amer led to the first sketches. My thinking was that a few sketches and a final work on the subject would be enough. However, further opportunities to visit Kafr Qasem presented themselves… Gradually, I became rivetted by the compelling facts, and the project slowly grew beyond my expectation.

The first assumption to be revised was the translator's understanding of her role as that of the camera and the translation process as a linear transformation of one text into another. One of the challenges Halaby faced from the outset was the possibility of building a cohesive visual narrative of events amid a lack of photographic documentation of the massacre and an absence of detailed testimonies by its survivors. In a discussion of her book during the Palestine Writes Festival, Halaby explains that

> It was very hard for me to put in my head the entire massacre and how it happened. I received bits of it from here and there… I could not completely comprehend the depth of what was being said to me. (Palestine Writes, 2020, 22:35-23:20)

Available written sources, such as Emile Habibi's (1976) description of how the massacre unfolded and publications by the Israeli Communist Party were informative but did not centre the survivors' embodied and emotional experiences, nor did they provide access to detailed witness statements. Similarly, Halaby found the court documents[4] unreliable as they favoured the narrative of the perpetrator and any survivor statements featured within them were too brief (2016, p. 59).

A key development in the project was Halaby's decision to use oral history as the main methodology in her creative-research practice. Through the help of Aishy Amer and her friends and family, the artist was able to interview several survivors of and witnesses to the massacre during her visits to the village in 1999 and 2000, and later in 2012 and 2014. As explained earlier, oral history interviews "reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events", shedding light on "unexplored areas of the daily life of the nonhegemonic classes" (Portelli, 2016, p. 52), while illustrating how narrators interpret and

theory of abstraction, and has exhibited her work in museums and galleries around the world (Winter, 2025).

[4] This is in reference to details about the trials included in Israeli Communist Party publications. At the time of authoring *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*, official trial documents, such as photographs, evidence, police reports, and court transcripts, were classified. In 2019, some of these documents were published online in Hebrew by the Akevot Institute, while others remain classified and inaccessible to the public (see: https://kafr-qasim-massacre.akevot.org.il/).

understand these events from their position in the present. Seeking to better understand what the survivors saw, heard, felt, and thought as the massacre unfolded, and how it continues to affect the residents of the village (now town) decades later, Halaby resorted to oral history.

Oral history facilitates the artist's cognitive and emotional engagement with the lived experiences she seeks to translate. The oral history encounter is a live, situated performance (Abrams, 2016). It immerses the translator in how the survivor's body remembers and reconstructs events – using what Jeff Freidman (2014) describes as 'embodied channels of communication', like body language, movement, silences, and voice, allowing the artist to know and understand the events in a manner that is profoundly different from reading about them in written documents (i.e. Toubi's press release and Habibi's account).

Additionally, the oral history interview is not an unmediated monologue by the narrator; it is actively shaped by the questions the interviewer poses (Portelli, 2016, p. 56). Adopting oral history as part of her creative-research practice allows Halaby to elicit information about "the physical appearance of things" (2016, p. 58), key to a translation that foregrounds the materiality of lived experience, as will be discussed later.

After that, the artist found it difficult to transform the oral histories she conducted into drawings, owing to their traumatic content, and the limited visual descriptions they sometimes provided. This challenge necessitated further reappraisal of what it means to transform oral history and lived experience into art. Rather than perceiving the function of translation as that of "conveying meaning", Campbell and Vidal (2024a, p. 10) argue that translation is a process of (un)knowing, "a form of investigation or research and of embracing the unknown, with the potential to open up the space between words and indeed to access that which escapes language" (p. 11). As the following analysis will show, Halaby embarks on an almost two-decade research investigation aimed not only at reconstructing the massacre but at contemplating questions related to artistic practice and the visualization of trauma. As such, her translation develops into anarchival practice, a methodology through which she thinks and experiments, co-creating new knowledge on a historical event and on translation practice itself.

### *5.2 The ninth wave of killing: embrace in death*

As explained earlier, one of the sources Halaby relied on during her research process was Emile Habibi's (1976) account of the massacre, in which he describes it as unfolding in 'nine waves'. Habibi employs this metaphor to indicate that the workers returned to the village in 'waves' rather than in one group, with each wave being killed upon their approach to the western entrance of the village. It also signifies that each stage of killing was more atrocious than the one preceding it, like waves gradually shattering a boat during a storm (Habibi, 1976, pp. 24, 36). Inspired by Habibi's metaphor, Halaby translates the oral histories she collected into visualizations of these nine waves.

To illustrate Halaby's experiential and anarchival translation process, this section will draw on examples from her visualization of the 'ninth wave of killing', often described as one of the most harrowing stages of the massacre. A truck carrying fourteen women and girls returning from picking olives in the fields approached the western entrance of the village. Also onboard were the driver, two boys and a young man. Seeing the bodies of those killed earlier in the day scattered on the side of the road, the driver sped up, trying to escape. One of the women, Safa Sarsour, saw her son Jumaa's body among the dead and started to scream in horror. The rest of the women started to scream as well. The soldiers chased the truck, shot its tyres and gas tank, and forced everyone out. The men and boys were lined up and shot. Meanwhile, two girls who had run and hidden behind the truck rejoined the remainder of women in fear. As the soldiers start firing bullets at the women, they formed a circle, huddling together. Only one child survived despite being injured in her head, chest, stomach and leg: Hana Amer.

The artist's process of translating the killing of the women unfolded almost over a decade and underwent significant transformations over the duration of the project. When Halaby began researching the massacre, survivor Hana Amer was reluctant to give a personal testimony. In the absence of an oral history source, Halaby's initial sketches in 1999 were based on Emile Habibi's (1976, p. 39, my translation) description of the event:

> Witnesses (survivors from previous waves) report that the 14 women and girls stuck to each other while bullets rained on them. They started rotating in a circle while stuck to each other. The circle turned into a dance of death challenging any great artist to express it… Hana Suleiman Amer (who was then 16 years old and survived)[5] narrates that she found herself at the centre of this circle of death. The circle spun around her, and she turned with it. She heard a shot followed by a moan, then the sound of a body hitting the ground, then the sound of another shot, moan, and body hitting the ground, until she was left alone. She fell to the ground, unconscious.

Habibi also writes (1976, p. 35, my translation):

> …Safa Mohammad Asas Sarsour saw her son's [Jumaa] still body on the side of the road and threw herself at him. They then killed her. Her other son Abdallah… was with her and fell dead in his mother's lap, next to his murdered brother.

Halaby's first sketch of the scene (Figure 1) portrays the women once they had descended from the truck, following Habibi's description. Some stand cowering in fear, while others look around in terror. To the right, the two girls who had found shelter behind the truck rejoin the other women, the men's bodies are crumpled on the ground, with Safa Sarsour holding the corpses of her two children. The name of each subject is inscribed at the bottom of the drawing, ensuring they can be identified. When the artist showed this

[5] Earlier written accounts of the massacre reported that Hana Amer was sixteen years old in 1956. In her interview with Samia Halaby in 2012, she corrects this information: "They said that I was 16 but I was less than 15 years old. I was only recently out of school" (2016, p. 230).

drawing to friends in Kafr Qasem, it was met by criticism regarding the historical inaccuracy of the dresses worn by its subjects. Halaby recalls that (2016, p. 145):

> Because I lacked information, I dressed them in the mountain village dress I am familiar with… The women looked stiff and lacked the body language that I came to know as that of Kafr Qasem women who possess a certain pride of posture and feminine coquettishness that is charmingly self-aware.

The artist's lack of knowledge led to a generic and emotionally detached portrayal that was perceived as falling short in conveying the bodily presence of the women and the cultural context in which they were embedded. The only way to deal with this failure was to engage in further experimentation and research through experiential translation. As anarchival practice, Halaby's translation process starts to shift away from questions of transforming a source text into a target text, developing into "an act of discovery, as a pathway to the acquisition, dissemination and, importantly, the production of knowledge" (Campbell and Vidal, 2024a, p. 10).



**Figure 1. D2038** *Fourteen Women of the Ninth Wave, Kafr Qasem Massacre* series (1999) conte crayon on paper, 12.75 x 19 5/8 in, (32 1/2 x 50 cm). Courtesy of Samia Halaby.

Halaby visualized this scene again into a sketch in 1999 and enlarged it into an exhibition mural in 2006 (see Figure 2). Inspired by Emile Habibi's choice to title this wave of the massacre "The dance of death" (1976, p. 39), Halaby portrays the women holding each other in a final embrace before they are killed. Her focus in this rendition turns to Khameesa Amer, the woman at the front of the circle with her back turned to the viewer

as she falls to the ground. After having interviewed Khameesa's son Muhammed Amer in 1999, the artist learned that he found his mother's shoes and grey *abaye* (coat) at the site of the massacre (2016, p. 199), details that the viewer can note in Khameesa's bare feet, discarded shoes, and clothing.



**Figure 2. D2045** *The Women Embrace in Death, Ninth Wave of Killing, Kafr Qasem Massacre* series (2006) charcoal and acrylic on linen, 84 x 126 in, (188 x 250 cm). Courtesy of Samia Halaby.

Another detail with which the artist was occupied at the outset of the project was Safa Sarsour's reaction to losing both her children before getting killed herself. Following Habibi's description (see above), the artist portrays Safa throwing herself at her son's dead body (see Figure 3). We can also observe a woman behind Safa, either pulling her back or consoling her, and to the right, the bodies of the slain men and the two girls hiding behind the truck. However, it was only through the translation process that Halaby discovered that this detail in Habibi's account was inaccurate, and Safa "did not have a chance to descend from the truck and hold him" (Halaby, 2016, p. 147).

In 2012, Halaby gained access to a written statement by Hana Amer given in 1960 to a historian in the village. Amer also agreed to be interviewed by the artist. Her two testimonies revealed harrowing details that were missing from Habibi's account, and thus Halaby's initial portrayals of the women. Hana Amer's testimony appears in Halaby's (2016, p. 228) English translation as follows:

> We descended and stood glued to each other in a kind of circle… Each of us tried to hide behind the other and we spun in a circle trying to avoid the bullets. My co-workers began to

> fall one after the other, but I was in the middle and was turning as they were all turning until my last friend fell to the ground, then I also fell.



***Figure 3. D2037*** *Safa Reaches to Her Son, Kafr Qasem Massacre* series (1999)
conte crayon on paper, 9 5/8 x 12 3/4 in (25 x 35 cm). Courtesy of Samia Halaby.

Beyond relating how the women were shot, Amer's testimony allows us a glimpse into the emotions she and the women experienced as the truck approached the village: "I was very fearful"; upon seeing the piles of dead bodies: "…we all screamed in our loudest voices. We lost all ability to think or judge. We could not feel where we were…"; and as she was shot and left alone among the dead bodies: "my soul left me" (Halaby, 2016, pp. 228, 229).

Also of significance to Halaby's translation of the massacre were visual descriptions that Amer provided about the physical site of the massacre: "… the area where they stopped us was full of olive trees and a small bit of cactus fence. They shot us on the gravel of the unpaved roadbed" and "it was extremely dark"; the build of the truck: "[it] had no seats like today and it had no top; it was not covered"; and the clothes adorned by the women: "We used to wear pants. It was the older women who wore *saraweal* [ankle-length bloomers] … Most women wore a *ksiyye* [long shawl] or a *mandeel* [headscarf]…" (Halaby, 2016, pp. 229, 230).

Dissatisfied with her 1999 and 2006 portrayals, Halaby experienced a pressing urge to draw a group portrait of the women and girls to "contemplate them and understand their relationships" (2016, p.145) before she reworked the visualization of their killing (see Figure 4), a process in which the artist immersed herself into the very bodies of the women,

appropriating their feelings, memories, and even body postures. In that, she relied on the oral histories she collected, the women's passport pictures, and the new information she had gained on their mode of dress, the physical and emotional reactions they experienced, and the spatial and temporal setting in which their experiences were situated, as described in Amer's statement above. This deep sensorial entanglement with her sources is what allows the artist to embrace the unknown and generate new knowledge. It enables her to experience 'translationality' and connect cognitively and bodily with these women from whom she is temporally, spatially and experientially distant (Blumczynski, 2023). This is evident in Halaby's reflection (2016, p. 146, my emphasis):

> As I drew the women and studied the existing passport pictures, I began to feel that I had become acquainted with them. I wanted to ask them how they felt, what they thought, how they stood next to each other, their body language, at the moments before the shooting began. I could almost communicate with them as a feeling overcame me… A channel seems to open between my eyes and theirs and all else recedes. But what remains during such creative moments in unclear, a visual impulse, *a sensation of knowledge* outside the realm of words.

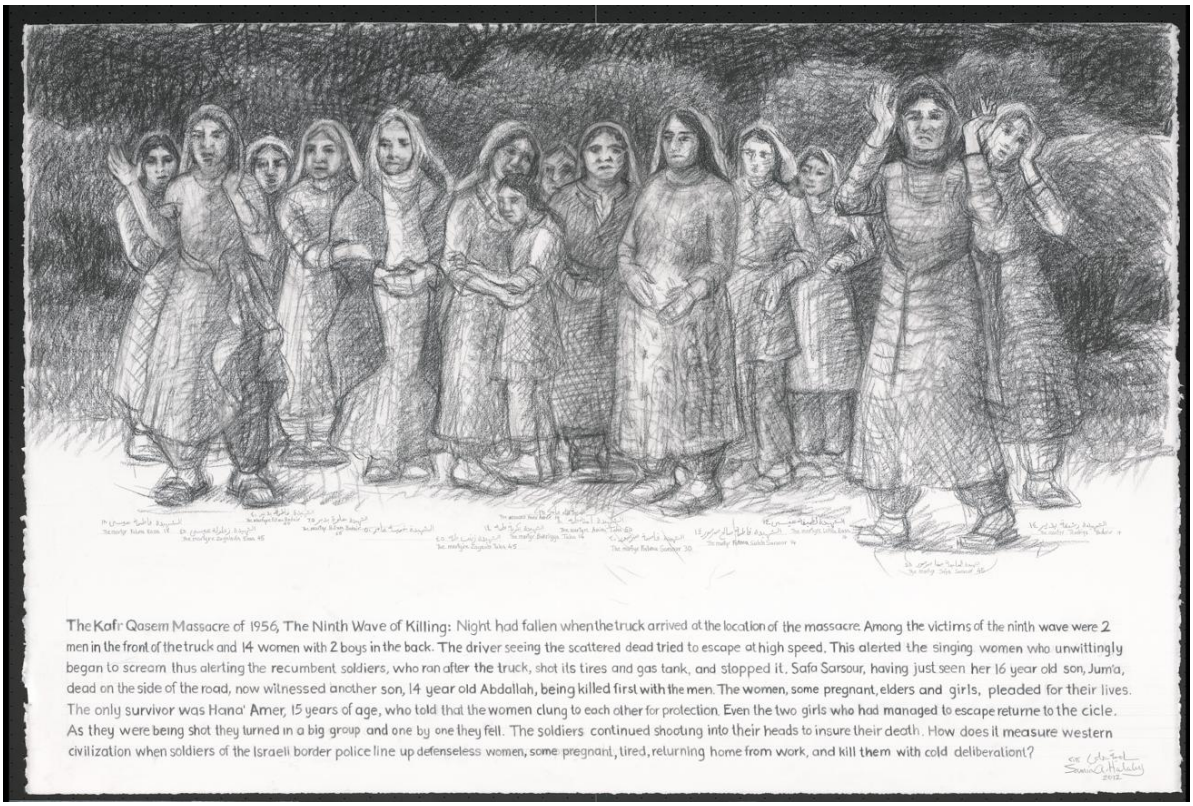



**Figure 4. D2154** *The Ninth Wave of Killing, All of the Women, Kafr Qasem Massacre* series (2012) charcoal on paper, 30 x 44 ½ in, (96.5 x 113 cm). Courtesy of Samia Halaby.

The artist's experiential translation process and its resulting 'sensation of knowledge' bring an added layer of discovery: she realizes that in their moment of killing, the women did not embrace or dance. Rather, they imploded, collapsing onto each other as they were shot, resulting in Hana Amer falling under the bodies encircling her, as she related in her testimony. As Figure 5 shows, Halaby illustrates the women "huddled facing their assailants" (2016, p. 144) – their direct gaze, unlike earlier renditions of their killing, defies their killer and shifts the viewer from a detached onlooker to a morally implicated witness.



**Figure 5. D2155** *The Ninth Wave of Killing, Implosion*, *Kafr Qasem Massacre* series (2012) charcoal on paper, 30 x 44 ½ in, (76 x 113 cm). Courtesy of Samia Halaby.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Why does Halaby insist on taking us along her journey of translating the massacre? Why does she record the 'traces' of her research-creative process, turning her project from that of historical documentation via translation into anarchival practice? At the outset of the project, Halaby imagined that she would be able to create 'photographic' drawings that visualize the massacre objectively and accurately. In the conclusion to her book, she reflects on the impossibility of this task, revising her role to creating documentary visualizations that (re)story the fragmented past into a narrative that engenders new ways of seeing and knowing it in and for the present. One may argue that this aim could have been achieved by publishing the oral histories and their visualizations on their own. However, what this article demonstrates is that by exposing the audience to her creative-research practice, the artist shows that the process of translation is indivisible from its resulting visualizations.

As this article argues, experiential translation is a powerful methodology for the (co)generation of new embodied, experiential, and affective knowledge about the past.

Translation enables artists and cultural practitioners to create multimodal historical documents that foreground the felt, smelt, heard, seen and tactile aspects of memory and lived experience. By adopting a process rather than a product-oriented understanding of translation, anarchival practice allows us to appreciate the significance of what would normally be perceived as failed, aborted or discarded translations (Blumczynski, 2022), and their significance to the production of decolonial knowledge, the rectification of facts, or the development of a translator's skills and practice, as seen in Halaby's project.

As Halaby reminds us, her drawings and other historical documents resulting from experiential translation processes "are an accumulation of knowledge poured into visual form and thus the life experience of the one who makes [them] affects the result" (2016, p. 147). Thus, any interpretation the audience themselves make of such historical documents cannot be abstracted from the translator, her creative-research journey, and the memories and experiences of survivors and victims.

The anarchive, as Andrew Murphie (2016, p. 41, emphasis in original) writes, "is not just about how we store the past" but "also about how we organize *possible actions* for the future". Translation as anarchival practice in this oral history documentation project distils both the artist's and massacre survivors' experiential knowledge into multimodal artworks, as well as providing us with a 'waystation' that invites further investigations, creative encounters, and remediations of the massacre as a lived and living historical event.

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# RE-SCREENING THE PAST: MULTI-TIERED REFRAMING IN DUBBING HISTORY FILMS

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the ways in which translation dynamically reshapes the past, offering new insights into the reframing practices that emerge through the dubbing of history films. It conceptualizes renarration of historical reality as a multi-tiered hermeneutic movement from the intralingual rewriting of the past, to the intersemiotic cinematic screening of the historical narrative, and ultimately to re-screening historical reality in cross-cultural contexts via interlingual dubbing. Drawing on critical historiography and narrative constructivism, the study analyzes four Persian-dubbed Hollywood history films and demonstrates that dubbing, as the third reframing tier, recurrently attenuates or omits explicit sexuality, romantic betrayal, religious specificity, and politically sensitive motives, while adjusting character relations and moral evaluations to align with dominant cultural norms in the target context. The article thus suggests that dubbing functions not only as a linguistic transfer but as a culturally embedded mediation of historical narrative, where the past is reimagined, and re-historicized.
KEYWORDS: Dubbing, History Film, Renarration, Reframing, Critical Historiography, Narrative Constructivism

## 1. Introduction

"History is written by the victors." (Unknown)

Having become so popular, this storied quote implies that history is less neutral than a story. Even more, the very history of the quote itself is indicative. It is frequently attributed to figures such as Walter Benjamin or Winston Churchill, yet its authorship remains imprecise. So, history is indeed not an absolute repository of facts but a narrative believed, repeated, and reshaped over time.

Seen in this light, if history is not a transparent window onto the past, then it could be understood as a translation of it (White, 1990; Munslow, 2006, 2012; Jenkins, 2003; Burke, 2005; Vidal Claramonte, 2018, 2025), a translation that implies every act of historical representation is shaped by the cultural, ideological and epistemological forces. Much like any act of translation that selects, reframes and narrativizes fragments of events to construct coherent stories (Baker, 2018, 2007, 2014), history reframes the past to make it fit the concerns, values and imaginaries of the present. To clarify the conceptual distinction between the past and history, Munslow (2012, p. 7) argues that "the ontological category of the past can be defined as what once was but is no more, whereas history exists in the category of a narrative that we construct […] about the past". From this postmodern constructivist perspective, history is never the past itself but a mediated emplotment informed by the historian's narrative choices and interpretive sensibilities (White, 1987). Vidal Claramonte (2025, p. 1), following Hayden White's critical historiography of the 1960s, similarly argues that the historical text is "one narrative of facts among many other

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possible narratives". Therefore, historical writing does not precede interpretation but is constituted by it. Meaning is not extracted from the past but assembled through narrative strategies that render selected traces intelligible, coherent, and culturally resonant in the present.

The constructive and interpretive nature of history, then, becomes especially pronounced when it is mediated through cinema. Rosenstone (2013, p. 86) observes that cinema "inject[s] image, sound, and color to our histories, connecting a sense of the past with the present, and providing us with a richer, more textured sense of human experience". History films are considered as distinct forms of historical emplotment, having "unique powers of representation" (Rosenstone, 1988, p. 1185). Their multimodal composition provides a greater latitude for representing and reinterpreting the past on screen. "History on the screen" is not merely a visual depiction of the past but, just as "history on the page", dynamic constructions that blend fact with narrative, and visual and auditory elements with historical events (Rosenstone, 2023, pp. 1–2). This conception foregrounds the filmmaker as a historian whose choices in emplotment and representation endow the past with meaning (White, 1990; Toplin, 1988).

This construction of the past becomes even more complex when history films travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries through translation, particularly dubbing. Dubbing introduces an additional layer of transformation that "depends not only on linguistic symmetries between languages but also on fundamental decisions based on power, dominance and ideology" of the cultural context in which the past unfolds (Díaz Cintas, 2012, p. 279). As Cronin (2009, p. 13) observes "for the film to make social sense it must be taken out of its original language context and translated into or recontextualized in the language of the film spectators". Furthermore, the multimodal nature of dubbing amplifies its influence on the sensory and emotional transmission of historical content. Visual elements such as costumes and settings are combined with audio cues like voice modulation and background scores to create a cohesive historical experience (Krebs, 2014). However, these interventions may also introduce biases or distortions, thereby constructing the audience's perception of the past.

Despite substantial scholarship on the narrative construction of history (White, 1987; Munslow, 2012, 2019) and extensive work on cinematic representations of the past (Rosenstone, 1995; Toplin, 2002; Hughes-Warrington, 2007), the intersection of history, cinema, and translation remains significantly underexplored. Similarly, audiovisual translation (AVT) research has examined ideological manipulation and cultural adaptation (Díaz Cintas, 2012; Zanotti, 2016), yet focused analyses of how dubbing reframes historical narratives for new audiences remain scarce.

Addressing this gap, the present study first reviews the layered construction of historical meaning across historiographical narration, cinematic representation, and cross-cultural dubbing, proposing that the translation of history films constitutes a multi-tiered process of narrative manipulation. It then conducts a multimodal and narratological analysis of four Persian-dubbed Hollywood history films to investigate how processes of

selection, emplotment, and narrative accrual culminate in the cross-cultural construction of the past for contemporary audiences. This study therefore investigates how Persian dubbing through the deployment of reframing strategies such as temporal and spatial framing, repositioning of participants, selective appropriation, and labelling, may contribute to the reconfiguration of narrative representation in dubbed history films. The aim of the study is to examine how these interventions operate within Baker's (2018, 2014) framework of narrative constructivism and to explore the extent to which dubbing contributes to the reframing of historical narratives for Iranian audiences. To this end, the study employs critical historiography and constructive narrative approach for examining how narratives shape understandings of historical events. This approach enables a systematic account of how historical meaning is negotiated and transformed in interlingual translation. In doing so, the study advances a deeper understanding of translation's mediatory role across cultures and positions dubbing as an active historiographical practice within the broader hermeneutic movement from the past to the present, where historical knowledge is ideologically rearticulated for new audiences.

## 2. Rewriting the past

The relationship between history and translation has gained remarkable scholarly prominence in the last two decades, resulting in a series of field-defining special issues—*Meta* (2004, 2005), *Translation Studies* (2012), *Methis* (2012), *MonTI* (2013), *The Translator* (2014), *Przekładaniec* (2019), and *Translation & Interpreting* (2019), which collectively signal the emergence of a distinct field of 'translation history'. As Rundle (2022, xviii) observes, "historical perspectives have always played an important part in translation studies, but it was only around the beginning of the twenty-first century that translation history began to emerge as a specific field." This evolution mirrors critical historiography's epistemological shift toward understanding history as a form of translation (White, 1990; Munslow, 2006, 2012; Burke, 2005; Jenkins, 2003; Vidal Claramonte, 2025). Rather than a monolithic record, history operates as a multiplicity of texts that "intralingually" rewrite reality (Vidal Claramonte, 2018, p. 2). Consequently, historical meaning emerges through the continuous negotiation, selection, and reinterpretation of prior accounts (Jenkins, 2003). Through this lens, 'historying', defined by Munslow (2010) as the transformation of the remains of the past into narrative, becomes an act of translation. Hermans (2022, p. 125) argues that translation itself is "a form of reported speech", an act of retelling what others once said; similarly, history retells what happened through layers of interpretive mediation. Therefore, as Baker (2014, p. 159) argues translation does not merely report past events, it is understood as "a form of (re)narration that *constructs* rather than *represents* the events and characters it re-narrates" according to the cultural, ideological, and epistemological frameworks of the present.

This recognition dismantles positivist and empiricist assumptions of neutrality. For Bandia (2006), postmodern developments foreground a deconstructionist approach that emphasizes interpretation, textuality, and the impossibility of unmediated access to the

past. Consequently, history becomes an act of intervention, not only reflecting dominant discourses but contributing to them. Hermans insists that translations "feed into" discourses and "are designed to act on the world around them" (2022, p. 125), a claim equally applicable to historical writing.

The implications for history writing are profound. As Burke (2005, p. 3) observes, "if the past is a foreign country […], then historians may be regarded as translators between past and present". This implies that if translation renarrates meaning across languages and cultures, historical writing renarrates meaning across temporal divides. Both practices are selective and inherently ideological. As Saramago (2010, p. 180) notes, history is "always selective, and discriminatory too, selecting from life only what society deems to be historical and scorning the rest". Rosenstone (2013, p. 71) similarly argues that historians select certain aspects of the past as meaningful for that mode of thought we call 'history'.

Munslow concludes that historical narratives are not discovered but invented, each a re-inscription shaped by "troping and/or emplotment" (2010, p. 8). This does not imply relativism; rather, as Munslow (2012) clarifies, acknowledging that history is narrative construction does not negate justified belief about the past. Instead, it situates history within "a literary, cultural practice" (Munslow, 2006, p. 18) that continuously reshapes the past.

Thus, to understand history as translation is to recognize the historian as translator, an agent whose textual interventions, narrative decisions, and ideological positions mediate the past into culturally resonant meaning. This view not only connects historiography and translation studies but also grounds the interpretive frameworks necessary for analyzing mediated histories in contemporary media.

## 3. Screening the past

The study of history through film has emerged as a major field of inquiry, particularly through the recognition that moving images constitute a distinct mode of historical narration. In one of the most influential claims in the field, Rosenstone asserts that "the visual media are a legitimate way of doing history—of representing, interpreting, thinking about, and making meaning from the traces of the past", and that the history film screens the past "with its own rules of representation" (1995, p. 3). These rules differ from those governing written historiography because film expands the concept of 'text' into a fully multimodal assemblage.

Pinto (2024) articulates this shift as a move from monosemiotic to multisemiotic text. While written history relies on linguistic structure, history films integrate a wide array of meaning-making resources. These include gesture, sound, image, color, and layout, all of which, as Adami (2017) argues, are historically and socially developed semiotic resources that communicate ideology and power. The multimodal nature of history films thus significantly broadens the representational affordances of the past. Costumes, sets, props, and landscapes acquire a uniquely cinematic 'thingness', echoing Ankersmit's (1994) claim

that material details contribute to historical meaning beyond what textual history typically foregrounds.

History films screen the past through multimodal emplotment. Filmmakers select historical events and transform them through camera work, *mise-en-scène*, performance, and sound into compelling narratives that shape collective memory. Rosenstone (2013, p. 72) observes that history films reconfigure the past in terms of current beliefs, conflicts, and questions, reinforcing Saramago's (2010) insistence on the selectivity inherent in all historical representation. Thus, this multimodal translation of the past is not neutral. The renarration of historical events into film involves transposing meaning from archival traces into visual dramatization, thus reframing historical knowledge (Toplin, 2002). This creative dimension allows film not only to depict but also to construct historical meaning, offering audiences interpretive frameworks that may compete with or reinforce written histories.

Through this mediation, history films profoundly shape popular understandings of the past. Their sensory immediacy renders abstract historical processes tangible, embedding historical narratives into cultural memory. As Rosenstone (2023, p. 17) suggests, history films do not merely illustrate history; they "rethink history on the screen", negotiate it, and make it emotionally accessible. They thus establish themselves as potent historical agents, functioning not as transparent windows to the past but as multimodal constructions of it.

By understanding history film as a multimodal historical text, scholars can situate audiovisual (AV) representation within the broader landscape of historical translation, bridging the conceptual terrain between historiography, semiotics, and AV media. This sets the stage for examining how translation practices, particularly dubbing, further reshape cinematic histories across languages and cultures.

## 4. Re-screening the past

The intersection of history, film, and translation reveals a complex triadic relationship wherein AVT functions as both mediator and constructor of historical meaning. Translation within cinema, especially dubbing, does not merely transfer linguistic content; it actively constructs the multimodal narrative for the new cultural and ideological context (Díaz Cintas, 2012). Baker conceptualizes this phenomenon as "reframing" and defines it as "an active strategy that implies agency and by means of which we consciously participate in the construction of reality" (2018, p. 106). Although Baker mainly deals with linguistic resources, the same state of affairs is true in the case of nonlinguistic resources in AVT, particularly dubbing (Ghomi and Farahzad, 2020).

Díaz Cintas (2012) underscores the capacity of AVT to operate as a powerful platform for manipulation, where the audio and visual semiotic resources converge to reinforce certain interpretive trajectories and shape viewers' perceptions. Within this multimodal environment, dubbing emerges as especially susceptible to reframing practices. As Zanotti (2016, p. 355) notes, dubbing often becomes "the most invisible and subtle form of censorship", precisely because its interventions remain concealed beneath the seamless

illusion of naturalized speech. Danan (1991, p. 161) similarly identifies dubbing as "an ideological tool" strategically employed by nation-states to regulate external cultural influences. In this sense, the dubbing of foreign films serves not only to enhance cultural acceptability but also to fulfil broader ideological objectives.

When applied to history films, such ideological manipulations carry amplified consequences. While historical narratives already involve selective interpretation of the past (Rosenstone, 2013); dubbing introduces an additional layer of reinterpretation. Changes introduced through dubbing reverberate across the multimodal composition of the film. Such modifications affect not only linguistic content but also plot coherence, historical agency, and ideological direction. Dubbing may soften national conflicts, reconfigure power dynamics, or omit politically sensitive references, rewriting history in accordance with cultural norms.

Given the multimodal, politically charged nature of history films, dubbing amplifies the translator's agency. In this sense, dubbing history films reveals translation as a historical act with its own narrative consequences. Through synchronization constraints, and ideological pressure, dubbing reshapes the cinematic archive of history, participating in the ongoing process of historical rewriting. This dynamic foregrounds the need for a constructivist narrative framework capable of accounting for the layered processes through which the past is translated across media, languages, and cultures.

## 5. Methodology

### *5.1. Theoretical framework: constructive historiography*

Bringing the above underlying theories together, this study develops a constructive historiographical approach towards dubbing that synthesizes the multiple layers through which the past is transformed into history, mediated into film, and translated across languages. This approach, drawing heavily on critical historiography and narrative constructivism, reconceptualizes history as a set of interlinked practices of intralingual, intersemiotic, and interlingual translation. It provides a comprehensive theoretical lens for analyzing how historical narratives evolve through processes of selection, narrative accrual, and emplotment.

At its core, constructive historiography asserts that history is not the past but a narrative constructed about the past. This narrative shaping is the first translational process: intralingual translation of the past into history. As Vidal Claramonte (2018) notes, history rewrites and translates reality within the same language, through profoundly interpretive means. The historian operates like a translator who renders the silent remains of the past into culturally intelligible discourse, guided by ideology, positionality, and contemporary concerns. Munslow's (2010) concept of 'historying' captures this transformation.

The second translational process involves intersemiotic translation, where historical accounts are adapted into multimodal form. History films exemplify this transformation and the shift from 'historiography' to 'historiophoty', as White (1988) calls it, which entails

translating historical meaning into visual, auditory, and affective modes. Through costumes, *mise-en-scène*, soundtracks, and camera movement, films refigure the past, generating meaning inaccessible to written histories but also producing new layers of narrative distortion (Rosenstone, 2013). Film, situated in contemporary sociopolitical contexts, reanimates past events through presenting aesthetic strategies.

The third translational process is interlingual translation, which occurs when history films cross linguistic and cultural borders. Dubbing, in particular, introduces a new narrative layer that renarrates the cinematized past. As Hermans (2022, p. 125) characterizes translation as "intervention", dubbing actively reshapes historical meaning in culturally significant ways.

Thus, the constructive historiography in dubbing reveals historical meaning as the product of three major cumulative translations. Each stage encompasses several minor inter-related reframings that amplify the multi-tiered nature of reframing in history films. To ensure analytical manageability, the study focuses exclusively on the third tier of multi-layered reframing and its associated subcategories.

### *5.2. Research design and procedure*

The corpus of the study comprises four major Hollywood history films including *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), and *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), together with their Persian-dubbed counterparts produced by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). These four films form a coherent corpus in several respects. All are big-budget Hollywood epics that dramatize well-known historical or pseudo-historical events, and all have been repeatedly broadcast in Persian-dubbed versions by IRIB, making them highly visible sites for the mediated construction of the past in Iran. The films also share thematic and narrative features (martial conflict, imperial power, heroic masculinity, romantic or sexual transgression, and contested religious or political authority) that are likely to intersect with sensitive moral and ideological norms in the target context. This combination of shared genre, visibility, and thematic comparability makes them an appropriate, focused sample for exploring how dubbing reframes historical narratives.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, all sequences containing (a) explicit or implied sexuality and romantic relationships, (b) religious or ritual practices, and (c) politically sensitive motivations or representations of power were identified and time-coded in the source versions. Second, the corresponding dubbed sequences were transcribed in Persian and aligned with the English source dialogue. This corpus of aligned scenes provided the basis for detailed comparison at the level of verbal and nonverbal manipulations, such as omissions/additions, and changes in character interaction.

Third, the aligned data were coded inductively and then interpreted through Baker's (2018) constructive narrative framework, which outlines four principal types of reframing, including temporal and spatial framing, selective appropriation, labelling, and repositioning of participants. Since Baker notes that these categories are not exhaustive

and calls for further empirical research to refine and expand the typology, each instance of change was first categorized descriptively (e.g., 'deletion of kissing scene', 'neutralization of religious reference') and then analytically mapped onto one or more reframing strategies. Temporal and spatial framing refers to "selecting a particular text and embedding it in a temporal and spatial context that accentuates the narrative it depicts" (Baker, 2018, p. 112), thereby situating the translated narrative within new temporal–spatial coordinates that foreground specific meanings. Selective appropriation encompasses "patterns of omission and addition designed to suppress, accentuate or elaborate particular aspects of a narrative encoded in the source text" (Baker, 2018, p. 114). Framing by labelling involves "using a lexical item, term or phrase to identify a person, place, group, event or any other key element in a narrative" (Baker, 2018, p. 122), including through euphemistic or evaluative terminology. Finally, repositioning of participants concerns "the way in which participants in any interaction are positioned, or position themselves, in relation to each other and to those outside the immediate event" (Baker, 2018, p. 132), with shifts at this level altering both the local and broader narrative structures in which characters or groups are embedded.

## 6. Data analysis

This section examines the interlingual reframing of four Persian-dubbed history films through the lens of Baker's (2018) four main interrelated reframing strategies, including temporal and spatial framing, selective appropriation, labelling, and repositioning of participants. Following the multilayered conception of reframing as a constructive narrative activity, the analysis suggests how dubbing participates in a broader hermeneutic movement that successively reframes historical narratives across languages, modes, and cultures. By structuring the analysis around reframing types rather than film-by-film description, the study reveals the patterned, cross-film regularities through which Persian dubbing reshapes the past for contemporary Iranian audiences.

### *6.1. Temporal and spatial framing*

Temporal and spatial framing involves embedding a narrative within a recontextualizing configuration of time, space, and cultural proximity (Baker, 2018). Across all four films, the Persian dubbing frequently relocates the stories into a sanitized moral temporality and a culturally de-Christianized spatial frame, while simultaneously drawing them closer to a cultural horizon acceptable within Iranian sociopolitical norms.

A consistent strategy across *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995) and *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018) is the neutralization of medieval Christian ritual space. Scenes depicting Christian wedding rites, clerical blessings, or sacramental acts, such as Bruce's bedroom ritual in *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018) and Wallace's clandestine Catholic marriage in *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), are removed or drastically shortened. These deletions reposition the narrative into a less denominational, more culturally neutral spiritual space, shifting historical Scotland's Catholic religiosity out of focus.

In *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), religious and mythological terms are either substituted with neutral terms as illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 or omitted as illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 1.** Example of spatial framing in *Troy*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| Of all the warlords loved by the gods, I hate him the most. | در میان جنگ سالاران محبوب از او بیش از همه نفرت دارم. | Among the favored warriors, I hate him the most. |

As Table 1 illustrates, references to Greek gods are changed to secular lines and the term 'warlord' is substituted with 'warrior'.

**Table 2.** Example of spatial framing in *Troy*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| May the gods be with you. | خداوند پشت و پناهت باشه. | May God protect you. |

In this example, Greek 'gods' are replaced with Islamic monotheistic 'God'.

**Table 3.** Example of spatial framing in *Troy*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| Apollo watches over us. | این قلعه بسیار مستحکمه. | This castle is very strong. |

In this example, the mythological term 'Apollo' is omitted entirely in the dubbed version.

As Table 4 illustrates, in *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), Maximus' prayer to his ancestors is reframed into an Islamic-leaning monotheistic familiar cultural register. 'Ancestors', 'blessed mother' and 'gods' are re-labelled as monotheistic prayers.

**Table 4.** Example of spatial framing in *Gladiator*

| **English Original** | **Persian Dubbed** | **Backtranslation** |
|---|---|---|
| Ancestors, I ask for your guidance. Blessed mother, come to me with the gods' desire for my future. Blessed father, watch over my wife and son with a ready sword. | پروردگارا هدایتم کن تقدیر من به دست توئه راهنمای آینده ی من باش. از تو می خواهم محافظ همسر و فرزندم باشی. | Lord, guide me. My destiny is in Your hands. Be the guide of my future. I ask You to protect my wife and my child. |

In *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), as Table 5 illustrates, the Christian ritual of baptism is omitted in the dubbed version.

**Table 5.** Example of spatial framing in *Outlaw King*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| I know this young man. I baptized him. | من این جوان رو می‌شناسم. خانوادش رو هم می‌شناسم. | I know this young man. I know his family as well. |

These strategies of omission and substitution not only avoid cultural dissonance but also ideologically realign the films' historical worlds with Iranian ethical, religious, and political spaces.

Temporal reframing occurs through the heavy use of archaic, formal Persian diction in all four history films, which elevates the translated dialogue into a stylized classical register, thereby signaling historical distance and epic gravitas. This stylization moves the films further away from the immediacy of colloquial, character-specific registers and instead places them in a generalized, idealized historical past aligned with Persian literary heritage rather than Greco-Roman or Scottish antiquity.

### *6.2. Selective appropriation*

Selective appropriation, including omissions, additions, reductions, and expansions (Baker, 2018) is the most pervasive reframing strategy across all four dubbed history films. The Persian versions demonstrate systematic patterns of attenuating sexuality, minimizing graphic violence, suppressing alcohol consumption, and removing morally or politically sensitive elements.

In *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), Achilles' opening scene in bed with two women is excised; all scenes of lovemaking, nudity, kissing, or sensuality involving Paris and Helen are removed, along with scenes that portray Helen's adultery explicitly. Similarly, *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000) removes intimate exchanges between Commodus and his sister, erasing one of the film's central psychological tensions. In *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), the rape of Murron, the biting of the perpetrator's face, and the marital intimacy between Wallace and Murron are removed or heavily cropped. *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018) similarly deletes the sexual intimacy between Bruce and Elizabeth.

In *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), as Table 6 illustrates, the rumor about Longshanks ambiguous relationship with the princess and conceiving the marriage is deleted entirely in the dubbed version.

**Table 6.** Example of selective appropriation in *Braveheart*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| It was widely whispered for the princess to conceive; Longshanks would have to do the honor himself. | شایعه بود که پادراز پرنسس را به عقد پسر خود درآورده تا بتواند با کمک پادشاه فرانسه به ستم گریهایش بیافزاید. | It was rumored that Longshanks had married the princess to his own son so that he could intensify his tyranny with the help of the French monarch. |

All four films undergo systematic minimization of gore. In *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), torture scenes, throat-slitting, and dismemberment are reduced or omitted entirely. In *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), Wallace's quartered body is not shown; battle scenes are cropped to avoid bloodshed. In *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), graphic battlefield sequences and

crucifixion imagery are reduced. In *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), violent close-ups during combat are attenuated, and certain kills are removed.

Scenes depicting wine rituals, drinking, dancing, and communal feasting, key components of historical sociability, are removed across all four films. For example, the Spartan banquet in *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), the reunion drinking scene in *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), and the Scottish victory gatherings in *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995) are omitted entirely or backgrounded by changing the shot type from long or medium shot into close-up which places the wine glass in the background.

In *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), as Table 7 illustrates, the term 'beer' is replaced with 'celebration' in the dubbed version.

**Table 7.** Example of selective appropriation in *Outlaw King*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| Music, beer, peace! | موسیقی، صلح، جشن! | Music, peace, celebration! |

Morally or gender-specific sensitive elements are removed. As Table 8 illustrates, in *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), lines such as *May the gods keep the women in our beds* are deleted entirely, avoiding morally discomforting patriarchal labelling present in the source.

**Table 8.** Example of selective appropriation in *Troy*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| May the gods keep the wolves in the hills and the women in our beds. | امیدوارم کشورمان از شر دشمنان محفوظ بماند. | I hope our country remains safe from its enemies. |

Similarly, in examples illustrated in Tables 9 and 10, gender-specific sensitive elements such as *wives are for breeding*, *peace is for the women and the weak* are either completely omitted or attenuated in the dubbed version.

**Table 9.** Example of selective appropriation in *Troy*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| Wives are for breeding. You understand, for making little princes. | --- | --- |

**Table 10.** Example of selective appropriation in *Troy*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| Peace is for the women and the weak. | تو ضعف نشان دادی اشتباه کردی. | You showed weakness; you made a mistake. |

In a similar example in *Braveheart*, as illustrated in Table 11, the sexuality is attenuated that is consistent with the previous reframing.

**Table 10.** Example of selective appropriation in *Braveheart*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| For any common girl inhabiting their land is married, our nobles should have sexual rights on the night of her wedding. If we can't get them out, we'll breed. | هر مالکی که صاحب جسم و مال رعیت خود است، حق دارد آنها را بکشد، شکنجه کند، ببخشد یا به بردگی بکشاند. هر نجیب زاده ای که به اینجا بیاید مالک رعایا خواهد بود. آری ما چنین نجبایی را برای اسکاتلند می خواهیم. | Any landowner who possesses the body and property of their serf has the right to kill them, torture them, pardon them, or enslave them. Any nobleman who comes here will become the master of the serfs. Yes, these are the kinds of nobles we want for Scotland |

Selective appropriation therefore reshapes the narrative's moral universe, removing narratively integral elements in favor of cultural acceptability and ideological alignment.

### *6.3. Framing by labelling*

Labelling refers to the choice of lexical markers that classify people, actions, and institutions in ways that advance particular narrative positions (Baker, 2018). The Persian dubs frequently employ labelling to soften, redirect, or moralize the historical representations.

Terms related to sexuality are frequently euphemized. As Table 12 illustrates, the infamous '*primae noctis'* in *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), that is, the right of sexual access on a woman's wedding night, is reframed into 'full ownership'.

**Table 11.** Example of labelling in *Braveheart*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| Grant them primae noctis, first night. | تملک کامل رعایا را به آنها اعطا کنید. | Grant them full ownership of the peasants. |

This shifts a gendered sexual violence narrative into a narrative about feudal oppression, thereby recasting English tyranny as political rather than sexual domination.

In another example in *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), as illustrated in Table 13, 'Holy Jesus' is replaced with 'God' in the dubbed version.

**Table 12.** Example of labelling in *Braveheart*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| Holy Jesus! | اوه خدای بزرگ! | Oh my God! |

In the dubbed version of *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), as Table 14 illustrates, Wallace is labelled not as a 'martyr' (as in the source) but as a 'hero', shifting his meaning from religious martyrdom to secular nationalist valor.

**Table 13.** Example of labelling in *Outlaw King*

| **English original** | **Persian dubbed** | **Back translation** |
|---|---|---|
| Some consider him a martyr. | بعضی ها اونو یک قهرمان می دونن. | Some consider him a hero. |

The dubbed version of *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), as it is illustrated in Table 15, erases Christian-Islamic geopolitical references and recasts the space as generic.

**Table 14.** Example of labelling in *Outlaw King*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| Great warrior who saved my life in the Holy Land. | جنگجوی بزرگی که جان منو در سرزمین با اهمیت نجات داد. | A great warrior who saved my life in a land of great importance. |

Such labelling choices rewrite the historical world into a lexicon that aligns with Iranian sociocultural norms, thereby moralizing and culturally reframing the narrative.

### *6.4. Repositioning of participants*

Repositioning concerns shifts in relational roles, agency, or narrative alignment (Baker, 2018). Across the corpus, this form of reframing is the most structurally consequential, producing major alterations in plot logic and character motivation.

Gender and sexual relationships are repositioned when inappropriate in the target ideology and culture. As illustrated in Tables 16 and 17, in *Troy* (Petersen, 2004), Helen is explicitly reframed as Menelaus's daughter instead of his wife. This relational shift removes the adultery storyline and transforms Helen's departure with Paris into an act of filial defiance rather than romantic betrayal. As a result, the causal chain leading to the Trojan War is softened and partially reframed. This is one of the most extreme examples of reframing identified in the corpus.

**Table 15.** Example of repositioning of participants in *Troy*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| Princes of Troy, on our last night together, Queen Helen and I salute you. | شاهزادگان تروا، در آخرین شبی که با هم هستیم، به همراه دخترم هلن به شما خوش آمد می گویم. | Princes of Troy, on this last night that we are together, I welcome you along with my daughter, Helen. |

**Table 17.** Example of repositioning of participants in *Troy*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| I always thought my brother's wife was a foolish woman. | همیشه فکر می کردم دختر برادرم دختر ابلهی است. | I always thought my niece was a foolish girl. |

In *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), the attraction between Wallace and Princess Isabella is erased, preventing any implication of extramarital intimacy. Correspondingly, as Table 18 illustrates, the final revelation that Isabella is pregnant with Wallace's child is replaced by the line eliminating the child's paternity and preserving the princess's moral integrity.

**Table 16.** Example of repositioning of participants in *Braveheart*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| Your blood dies with. A child who is not of your line grows in my belly. | نسلت با تو منقرض میشه چون من هرگز بچه دار نخواهم شد که نسلت بمونه. | Your lineage will die out with you, because I will never have children for your bloodline to continue. |

In *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), as Tables 19 and 20 illustrate, the incestuous undertone between Commodus and his sister, Lucilla, is fully removed, changing the psychological profile of Commodus and significantly reducing the film's depiction of imperial depravity.

**Table 17.** Example of repositioning of participants in *Gladiator*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| Kiss? | خواهر؟ | Sister? |

**Table 18.** Example of repositioning of participants in *Gladiator*

| English original | Persian dubbed | Back translation |
|---|---|---|
| - Stay with me tonight?<br>- You know I won't.<br>- Then, kiss me.<br>- Sleep, brother. | - کنارم می مونی؟<br>- نگرانیت بیمورده.<br>- تا فردا. | - Will you stay by my side?<br>- Your worry is unnecessary.<br>- Until tomorrow. |

In all four films, accents and dialects, which are powerful markers of class, ethnicity, and political identity, are neutralized. This shifts characters (e.g., Scottish peasants, Roman slaves, Trojan princes) from socially diverse participants into linguistically homogenized actors, flattening the sociopolitical landscape.

In *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), William Wallace's brief exchanges in multiple languages, such as French and Italian, serve an important characterization function, portraying him as unexpectedly educated, linguistically skilled, and socially versatile. In the Persian dubbed version, however, these multilingual moments are rendered into standard Persian, eliminating the linguistic shifts that mark Wallace as an intellectually agile figure. This neutralization not only alters his individual characterization but also repositions him within the narrative, recasting him as a more conventional, monolingual national hero. By removing the multilingual cues that distinguish Wallace from those around him, the dubbing process reshapes his relational position vis-à-vis other characters and reduces the socio-cultural complexity originally encoded in his portrayal.

Scottish and Northern English accents in *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995) and *Outlaw King* (Mackenzie, 2018), and the multilingual code-switching in *Troy* (Petersen, 2004) and *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), are rendered into uniform Standard Persian. This erases social stratification and ethnic identity markers encoded in the original linguistic texture. In *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), there are several scenes in which Princess Isabella code-switches between French and English that are neutralized in dubbed Persian.

In *Troy* (Petersen, 2004) and *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), protagonists are reframed as morally purified figures. Achilles' promiscuity is erased; Maximus's prayer is monotheized; and Paris, Helen, and Bruce's morally ambiguous behaviors are softened or removed. This results in ideologically sanitized protagonists more compatible with dominant cultural norms in the target context.

Across all films, the Persian dubs enact a systematic, multi-tiered reframing that transforms the AV narratives into culturally aligned histories. The reframings work

cumulatively. Temporal-spatial framing situates the films within culturally acceptable moral-temporal horizons, selective appropriation removes ideologically sensitive or culturally discordant material, labelling recontextualizes identity and agency through moralized lexical choices, and repositioning of participants reshapes character relations and narrative causality. Together, these strategies illustrate how dubbing participates in the ongoing reconstruction of the past and how history films become sites of mediated historiography.

**7. Discussion**

The analysis of four Hollywood history films and their Persian dubbed versions by IRIB shows that the reframing strategies described by Baker (2018) are not isolated interventions but operate cumulatively across different layers. Taken together, they produce a multi-tiered transformation of the past, where each layer compounds the interpretive shifts introduced by the previous one. These findings suggest that reframing operates not simply as a linguistic transfer, but rather as a broader set of narrative reconfigurations that may influence how aspects of historical causality, moral evaluation, and character agency can be constructed and represented within culturally situated frameworks.

Across all cases, four interrelated reframing strategies work in concert. Selective appropriation produces new moral universes that reposition the films' historical conflicts in line with Iranian cultural and broadcasting norms. Labelling functions as a powerful and subtle vehicle for ideological reframing. The Persian dubbed versions frequently replace sexually explicit, religiously sensitive, or politically problematic terms with neutral, abstract, or euphemistic alternatives. Repositioning of participants is the most narratively consequential form of reframing, profoundly altering character identities and interpersonal dynamics.

What these interventions collectively reveal is that the dubbed versions participate in the same narrative logic that governs historical writing itself. History, as discussed at the beginning, is not the past but a constructed narrative about the past. Just as historians 'translate' remnants of past events into intelligible accounts shaped by present ideologies, dubbing translates and reshapes the cinematic past into forms compatible with contemporary cultural norms. The dubbed versions demonstrate this dynamic vividly: they do not simply transfer pre-existing historical meaning but actively rebuild it through choices of omission, substitution, and moral reframing. The multimodal nature of film amplifies this reconstructive process. Rosenstone (1995, 2013, 2023) highlights that history films work through image, sound, gesture, material details, and emotional immersion; therefore, modifying even one semiotic layer can reshape how viewers perceive the past. The Persian corpus intervenes precisely at these multimodal levels: muting violent sound cues, erasing erotic gestures, such as kissing and lovemaking, cutting ritual scenes, and revoicing prayers into monotheistic invocations. On their own, such cuts may not necessarily entail a renarration of historical meaning. However, in several cases they co-occur with changes in

dialogue or character repositioning that alter how relationships, agency, or moral transgression are framed, thereby contributing to a more substantive reframing of the historical narrative. These interventions confirm the idea that film reconfigures the past rather than simply captures it (Rosenstone, 1988), and that changing the AV fabric of a film fundamentally alters its historical meanings.

The ideological dimension of dubbing intensifies this effect. Scholars such as Díaz Cintas (2012) and Zanotti (2016) point out that AVT often operates as a platform for manipulation, subtly enforcing ideological or moral boundaries through ostensibly technical choices. Hermans (2022, p. 125) similarly emphasizes that translation is never neutral but an act of intervention designed to "act on the world around [it]". These claims are clearly reflected in the Persian versions: sexuality is frequently erased; Christian rituals are neutralized; politically sensitive motivations are softened; and female autonomy is repeatedly diminished. Such patterns demonstrate that dubbing performs a regulatory function, embedding foreign narratives into domestic moral and ideological frameworks.

The cumulative reframings also reflect the broader understanding of translation as a multi-layered, constructive process. Baker's (2018, 2014) notion of reframing shows that translations shape reality through selective appropriation, labelling, temporal-spatial framing, and repositioning of participants. All four strategies are pervasive in the corpus. But beyond this, the dubbed films exemplify a deeper hermeneutic movement: history is first reframed by the historian (intralingual translation), then by the filmmaker (intersemiotic translation), and finally by the translator (interlingual translation). Each stage reconstructs the past anew, confirming Ankersmit's (1994) and Saramago's (2010) insistence that all historical representation is selective, partial, and deeply cultural.

## 8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that historical meaning does not simply travel intact across media and languages; rather, it undergoes a multi-tiered hermeneutic transformation shaped by the narrative practices of historiography, cinema, and dubbing. Each stage of mediation adds a new narrative layer that aligns the past with the ideological, moral, and aesthetic expectations of its receiving environment. Following constructive historiography, the analysis shows that historical representation in dubbed films emerges through a cumulative process of transformation rather than direct transmission.

The study has revealed a multi-layered construction of the past. Dubbed history films orchestrate a coherent pattern of reframing that transforms the historical narratives at every hermeneutic stage: 1. Intralingual stage: written history already dramatizes, fictionalizes, or romanticizes the historical record. 2. Intersemiotic stage: Cinematic techniques intensify certain narratives while minimizing others. 3. Interlingual stage: Dubbing produces culturally situated renarrations that reshape characters, events, motivations, and worldviews. Together, these layers demonstrate that history, when mediated through film and translation, undergoes continuous reconstruction,

accumulating interpretive shifts that ultimately produce a culturally domesticated historical narrative distinct from both the historical record and the source film.

The empirical findings from four Hollywood history films and their Persian dubbed versions suggest that this third stage of mediation, dubbing, does not merely transfer linguistic content but at times actively reshapes the representation of the past. Recurrent patterns of selective appropriation, temporal and spatial framing, labelling, and repositioning of participants demonstrate how dubbing actively reframes historical meaning. Erotic and sexually explicit content, religious specificity, violent affect, and politically sensitive motivations are frequently attenuated or removed, while character relations and moral evaluations are adjusted.

These interventions, whether accidental or not, are indicative of a coherent narrative with harmonized representations of history and prevailing cultural norms. Many of the observed interventions can be understood primarily as routine forms of manipulation. However, in several cases, when examined cumulatively and in relation to their effects on narrative development and plot structure, these interventions may also contribute to shifts in character relations and narrative emphasis. It is in these cases that dubbing contributes not merely to linguistic transfer but to a more substantive mediation of the narrative that reframes moral codes, alters relationships, and redefines narrative causality, contributing to a reconfiguration of how historical events are narratively framed.

In this sense, dubbed history films constitute new historical narratives in their own right, rather than derivative or secondary texts. The cumulative effect across the four history films suggests a consistent pattern: historical narratives become less transgressive, less embodied, less violent, and more ideologically coherent when mediated through Persian dubbing conventions. This appears to confirm the study's central claim that AVT, particularly dubbing, participates in the construction and regulation of collective memory, reinforcing certain moral orders while constraining others. By situating dubbing within a multi-tiered model of historical translation, the article reframes AVT as an integral component of mediated historiography rather than a peripheral technical practice. Then, triangulating insights from historiography, translation studies, and film studies contributes to a deeper understanding of how mediated histories circulate across cultural boundaries and how translation operates as a powerful agent in shaping the narrative intelligibility of the past.

Yet it is important to mention that the analysis is limited in several respects. It is based on a small set of widely circulating epics broadcast by a single institution, and it focuses primarily on verbal changes in the dubbed dialogue rather than on image editing, paratexts, or audience reception. Moreover, the study cannot reliably determine the intentions of translators, censors, or broadcasters behind specific interventions. Its claims are therefore restricted to observable patterns in the data and to the interpretive frameworks employed.

Future research could extend this approach to a larger and more varied corpus of dubbed history films, including productions from different source cultures and

broadcasting contexts, and could incorporate audience-based and production-side perspectives to investigate how these mediated histories are negotiated, received, and contested. Comparative work across dubbing, subtitling, and remakes would further clarify the specific role of each modality in shaping narrative understandings of the past. Ultimately, this study underscores that translating history is never neutral: it is an act of narrative world-building with profound implications for how societies imagine and remember the past.

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# TRANSLATING THE GDR: NARRATIVE AUTHORITY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN UNIFIED GERMANY

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the historiography and memory politics surrounding the German Democratic Republic (GDR), using the concept of 'narrative translation' to analyse how dominant post-unification frameworks have recontextualised the socialist past. Drawing on Hayden White's theories of historical narrative and cultural translation, the study investigates the dominant narratives surrounding the GDR alongside counter-narratives such as *Ostalgie* and personal testimonies. Oral history interviews with East German translators and interpreters provide the main empirical focus, offering insight into how these professionals experienced the reevaluation of their expertise and values during the *Wende*. By integrating translation studies, cultural memory theory, and oral histories, the paper explores how certain representations of the GDR have become more privileged while others have been marginalized. In doing so, it considers the value of more plural translations of the socialist past and reflects on the relevance of this framework for other post-socialist or post-colonial contexts.
KEYWORDS: German Democratic Republic, History as Translation, Historical Narratives, Memory Studies, Oral History Interviews, Translation and Interpreting

## 1. Introduction

More than three decades after unification, Germany's social and political landscape remains marked by the divide between East and West. This divide persists not only through economic and political asymmetries, but also through competing narratives of how the GDR (German Democratic Republic) is remembered. A particularly entrenched binary continues to structure both public and academic discourse: on the one hand, the GDR appears as a repressive, isolated, and ultimately failed dictatorship; on the other, it is recalled through the register of everyday life, social stability, and lived socialist experience – an outlook often dismissed under the label *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for aspects of East Germany). This binary view has been reinforced since 1990 through memory-political infrastructures shaped by the institutional frameworks of unified Germany, which were predominantly influenced by West German perspectives. The result is a narrowed horizon of interpretive possibilities: rather than enabling critical engagement with the GDR as a complex historical formation, the binary tends to reproduce ideological camps and foreclose more processual, comparative, and multi-perspectival accounts. In this sense, the *Wende* (the 'turn' referring to the events around 1989–90 after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification) is not only a political rupture but also a narratological and epistemological one, which raises the question of how histories can be written without merely reproducing the terms of past conflicts.

This article takes that situation as a starting point and asks how such narratives gain authority – and what is lost when they become the default 'translation' of the socialist past

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for unified Germany. It proposes that the GDR's history can be reconceived by treating history-writing itself as a translational practice: historians, like translators, select, edit, and reframe past experiences in line with particular political and epistemic demands. The focus of this article is on the *Wende* and its aftermath, and on how the lives of people who worked as translators and interpreters have been rendered either invisible or suspect within dominant accounts that emphasise repression, isolation, and failure. Empirically, the study combines close readings of influential German-language histories of the GDR with oral history interviews of former non-literary translators and interpreters. The historiographical corpus comprises widely used academic publications on the history of divided Germany. These texts are analysed for recurring narrative structures, governing metaphors, and the positioning of GDR citizens within the historical plot. Particular attention is paid to how concepts such as repression, isolation, and failure are mobilised, how everyday life is represented, and how memories that deviate from the dominant frame are addressed or dismissed. The oral history corpus builds on semi-structured interviews with GDR interpreters and translators in non-literary domains such as technical or academic areas. These interviews are treated as narrative performances in which participants translate their own pasts into stories that negotiate professional and private identity, political change, and the moral vocabularies available after 1990. Oral histories have the potential to counter epistemic violence by centering lived experiences rather than abstract categories (see e.g., Smith, 2012), which can highlight the agency of East German translators in reshaping historical memory. Analytically, the two corpora are read side by side: canonical histories are approached as top-down narrative translations of the GDR past, while interview narratives are examined as bottom-up translations that may confirm, complicate, or resist the dominant scripts. This dual perspective makes it possible to reconstruct not only *what* is said about the GDR, but also *how* certain translations of the past come to count as authoritative history while others are relegated to the realm of nostalgia.

## 2. Theorising history as translation: narrative translation

In recent decades, scholars of history and memory have emphasised that the past is always mediated through language and narrative. In other words, history is never simply 'what happened' but is shaped by how it is told (White, 1973, 1987). Historians do not merely assemble neutral facts; they choose particular plots, metaphors, and genres through which those facts become intelligible as 'history'. For Hayden White, historical writing is a way of translating reality into a story, such that the historian effectively acts as a translator of the past, transforming knowing into telling for a given audience and context (1973, pp. 128–130, 1987). This view does not deny historical facts, but it recognises that facts are placed into narrative frameworks that are constantly subject to reinterpretation and rewriting. Each narrative gives meaning to the same events (White, 1987, p. 1). Historical writing is thus always an act of interpretation, not mere representation: the historian "translates" reality into narrative form and must decide which elements to foreground and which to

marginalise in the telling (White, 1987, p. 130). Barthes (1967, p. 120) argued that the apparent transparency of "realistic" historical narrative is itself an effect of discourse: by effacing the presence of the narrator, historical writing produces a referential illusion of direct access to the past, concealing the interpretive labour that underpins it. In other words, what seems like an objective chronicle is in fact a carefully crafted narrative that hides its own storytelling devices. Alun Munslow and other post-foundational historians have radicalised this insight into a broader critique of conventional historiography. Munslow (e.g., 1997, 2012) questions the assumption that even with perfect methods and complete sources one could produce a narrative that mirrors the past 'as it really was'. Drawing on thinkers like Frank Ankersmit, he points to a fundamental incongruity between the present and the past: the language and concepts with which historians describe events are irreducibly shaped by the conceptual resources and political vocabularies of their own time (Munslow, 2012, p. 150). On this account, every historical narrative is conditioned by the historian's position and cannot escape its own horizon. When historians speak about "objectivity" (Munslow, 1997, p. 6), they are therefore not stepping outside discourse but rather negotiating which translations of the past count as legitimate within particular professional and political settings (Munslow, 2012). In sum, the writing of history is a process of choosing and framing, so to say a translational act that inevitably leaves things out, highlights certain themes, and imposes a particular storyline.

This is where translation studies offers a particularly suggestive vocabulary. Scholars such as M.ª Carmen África Vidal Claramonte and Michael Cronin have argued that the tasks of historians and translators are structurally similar: both must take an existing text, archive, or experience and "give it new life" (Cronin, 2006, p. 254) for a different audience, often by retelling it in new words and from a different perspective. From this angle, historical knowledge is always mediated and recontextualised rather than simply transferred. Vidal Claramonte (2025, p. 6) stresses that translating history involves telling stories in the voices of those who have until now been silenced, while also recognising that each retelling is constrained by the translator-historian's context. Cronin urges historians to ask not only what gets translated into the authorised version of history, but also why so much is not translated and why certain experiences, actors, or temporalities are systematically omitted or pushed to the margins (Cronin, 2006). Historian and translator Luigi Alonzi has gone so far as to argue that every act of translation, including historical writing, grants an old text "new life" by inscribing it into a different temporal and cultural horizon (Alonzi, 2023, p. 12). This broad view of translation has inspired scholars to extend the term beyond interlingual transfers, to cover any shift of content between contexts or modes: from oral testimony to written archive, from local memory to national narrative, from one disciplinary discourse to another.

Building on this framework means moving beyond metaphor into concrete questions: *what* is being translated in each account, *who* does the translating, under what constraints, and with what social effects. For this purpose, I introduce the term 'narrative translation' as a socio-epistemic process by which past events are reorganised into narratives that are

legible and acceptable within a given ideological and institutional order. This definition foregrounds the idea that history-writing follows a kind of brief: it is shaped by purpose, audience, and context, and it responds to explicit or implicit demands about what must be foregrounded, how moral clarity should be achieved, and which interpretive frame should dominate. In this view, 'narrative translation' is not only interpretive but also a form of epistemic re-organisation, namely one that can render alternative narratives illegitimate or invisible.

**3. Translating the GDR: dominant narratives after 1990**

Post-1990 GDR historiography in unified Germany can thus be read as a large-scale translation project: it selects, structures, and communicates meanings that serve identifiable social and political functions, especially the legitimation of the unified liberal-democratic state and the construction of a 'shared' national identity (see e.g., Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999). In this translation, dictatorship and repression anchor dominant narratives of GDR history. However, this focus can sometimes overshadow the plural and heterogeneous everyday experiences of GDR citizens, including ambivalent or positive memories, which are at times framed as nostalgic or less relevant. The consequence is not merely a selective history but an illustration of how narrative authority is generated: what survives as 'history' is shaped by the translational filters of institutional memory, academic discourse, and public pedagogy.

The concept of 'narrative translation' highlights the selective, power-laden character of this process. In the German context after 1990, a well-established divide can be observed between accounts that foreground surveillance, censorship, and authoritarian rule on the one hand, and those that emphasise everyday agency, social stability, and lived experience on the other. Importantly, these narrative structures did not arise organically. They have served political and cultural functions in Germany since 1990, when historical interpretation became instrumental in legitimising the newly unified German state (Beattie, 2011, p. 24; Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999). Historiography, memory politics, and public discourse converged in presenting liberal democracy as historically normative and inevitable, while positioning the GDR as the negative foil against which the new state could narrate itself. At the same time, the process renders other translations of the GDR past, especially those that foreground ordinary lives, suspect or invisible, often by labelling them as apologetic or nostalgic. By using 'narrative translation' as an analytical lens, we can trace how these hierarchies between authorised and disqualified stories are produced and maintained, and how they might be opened to revision.

A distinctive feature of the GDR is the mode of its demise: rather than negotiating an internal transformation, East Germany was absorbed by an already existing West German state. The process of unification, marked by the absorption of East Germany into the existing West German state, resulted in an uneven distribution of epistemic authority, which reflects the challenges of integrating two distinct political and social systems. The absorbing FRG not only took over administratively but also gained the power to

institutionalise dominant historical narratives. Within this configuration, West German historians and institutions placed strong emphasis on the GDR's undemocratic nature, often framing it through the lens of the *Unrechtsstaat* ('illegitimate state') that highlights systematic rights violations and the absence of rule of law (Gieseke, 2014; Kunze, 2010, p. 402). Scholars and state bodies have underscored the SED regime's repressive tools: the Stasi secret police, the Berlin Wall, and the denial of basic freedoms (Horten, 2020, p. 50; Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999). As historian Konrad Jarausch notes, such accounts typically contrast the SED dictatorship with the democratic legitimacy of the Federal Republic and interpret GDR rule largely through the building of the Wall and the pervasiveness of the secret police. GDR society is thus frequently described as "thoroughly politicized," organised via party-affiliated mass organisations such that no space remained for a "normal" private life (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999, p. 4). While the analytical importance of dictatorship and repression is undeniable, the narratological effect of this framing is often totalising: once *Unrechtsstaat* becomes the master narrative, other dimensions of lived reality tend to be translated as either morally irrelevant, politically tainted, or signs of false consciousness (Beattie, 2011, p. 30; Wolle, 1998, p. 10).

Post-unification memory policies further entrenched these patterns. Post-unification memory policies further reinforced these patterns. In an effort to avoid the fragmented and delayed *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('coming to terms with the past') that followed National Socialism, the confrontation with the GDR past was made a federal project, with a strong emphasis on dictatorship as a central feature of interpretation (Haag, 2017, p. 47; Sabrow, 2009). One effect of this institutionalisation was the standardisation of public memory of the GDR: it came to be defined in official discourse as the 'second German dictatorship,' often explicitly linked to an anti-totalitarian narrative that positioned 1989/90 as a triumphant escape from tyranny (Sabrow, 2009). This produced a moral clarity useful for national integration but also marginalised the heterogeneity of lived experiences, especially those not easily told in terms of repression and resistance (Beattie, 2011, p. 29). Within this standardised narrative, several sub-plots recur with striking consistency. One is the framing of the GDR as a *Mauerstaat*, a walled-in society, functioning not only as a literal reference to the Berlin Wall but as a metaphor for social inwardness and intellectual stagnation (Horten, 2020, p. 78; Wolle, 1998, p. 8, 2011). Another is the depiction of the GDR as a Stasi-state, a society riddled with informants, which has reinforced the idea of a stagnant, fearful social sphere (Horten, 2020, pp. 60–62). Efforts to move outside these paradigms are often treated as suspect: intense public controversies have arisen when scholarship has challenged the dominant frames, for example, when highlighting everyday life or public opinion in the GDR in ways that complicate the tyranny narrative (see e.g., reactions to Hoyer's *Beyond the Wall*, 2023). Additionally, the motif of the "failed experiment" is regularly invoked: the collapse of the GDR is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of its systemic deficiencies, rather than as a contingent historical process with multiple possible outcomes (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999, pp. 9–11; Kowalczuk, 2015).

These dominant narratives were widely promoted through official channels and continue to shape public knowledge. Federal commissions, museums, school textbooks, and popular media all echoed the story of the GDR as a totalitarian SED regime (Beattie, 2011, p. 28; Sabrow, 2009; Müller-Zetzsche, 2020). For instance, the first federal commission on the "history and consequences of the SED dictatorship" explicitly cast its mission in anti-totalitarian terms, aiming to strengthen "democracy and German unity" by highlighting the GDR's undemocratic nature (Beattie, 2011, p. 24). Museums such as the Berlin Wall Memorial or former Stasi prison sites emphasise surveillance and oppression, while dissident testimonies and West German media reports reinforce this interpretive frame (Horten, 2020, pp. 85–88). In effect, a master narrative of the GDR was translated into the political language of the Federal Republic: The East German past was rendered as the antithesis of democratic West Germany, a cautionary tale that justified the post-1990 order. From this perspective, the GDR appears monolithic and self-evidently deficient. And because historians have typically presented such accounts with a great deal of archival evidence and factual detail, the narrative can seem 'objective', even though, as Barthes reminds us, such realist histories are achieving an effect of reality through discourse, not offering unmediated access to the past (Barthes, 1967, p. 69). For West Germans and others unfamiliar with everyday life in the GDR, 'history' thus came to mean a story that foregrounded repression above all, supporting an immediate post-unification agenda: reconciling and legitimising the new Germany by depicting East Germany as fundamentally flawed and by contrast highlighting the West's ostensibly superior freedom and democracy.

Within these broader developments, the *Wende*, the tumultuous period of 1989/90, occupies a central yet contested place. In early public discourse, the term *Wende* ('turning point') gained enormous popularity as shorthand for the break between 'before' and 'after' 1990 (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999; Sabrow, 2009). Yet the term was politically loaded from the start: On the one hand, the *Wende* served as the triumphant endpoint of a teleology running from dictatorship to freedom, with the FRG as the normative model against which the GDR is measured (Jarausch and Sabrow, 1999, p. 3; Beattie, 2011). At the same time, other strands of scholarship have emphasised the 'ambiguous revolution' of 1989 and pointed out that neither the revolutionary nor the reformist scripts were fully realised, that key turning points were shaped by miscommunication and contingency, and that the rapid shift from revolution to unification produced feelings of both liberation and loss (Sabrow, 2009; Grunow, 2020). These divergent framings underscore that the Wende itself is an object of narrative translation: was it primarily a story of civic revolution, of attempted self-reform, or of externally driven annexation by the West? Each interpretation translates the same sequence of events into a different story.

In recent years, the field of GDR studies has become increasingly self-reflexive about how 1989/90 is narrativised. Some commentators note that research on the GDR now extends 'beyond 1989/90', which treats the tumultuous transformation period and its long aftermath as part of the history of the GDR itself rather than as a post-socialist epilogue

(Fulbrook, 2023). Others have analysed how different media have staged unification as various kinds of story, thereby blending historical reconstruction with affective narratives that help forge a post-Wall national identity (see e.g., Mascha, 2012). Political scientists and memory scholars have highlighted the multi-directionality of memories of 1989, which shows that references to the 'revolution of 1989' can be mobilised by actors across the spectrum, from liberal democrats to the far right, each claiming to inherit the mantle of popular resistance or to defend the 'true' legacy of the *Wende* (Grunow, 2020). In all these cases, 1989 appears less as a fixed event and more as a repertoire of narrative resources that can be translated into different plots depending on contemporary needs.

**4. Everyday life and *Ostalgie*: counter-narratives**

One important counterpoint to the official historiography has been the emergence of everyday memory narratives. Since the late 1990s, oral histories, memoirs, and ethnographic studies have increasingly drawn attention to *Alltag* ('everyday life') in the GDR and to the personal experiences of ordinary East Germans that do not fit into the *Unrechtstaat* narrative. These approaches 'retranslate' the GDR past in a more plural key and try to recover voices and perspectives that had been marginalised. Studies of post-unification memory culture note that by the 2000s, *Ostalgie* had become a visible phenomenon: from films and consumer memorabilia to internet forums, many East Germans (and some West Germans) began commemorating everyday aspects of GDR life, often in a semi-nostalgic or ironic mode, as a way to reclaim parts of the past that were flattened or vilified in the official story (Boyer, 2006; Cooke, 2005). While some observers dismissed *Ostalgie* as a trivial longing for "GDR oddities" or a whitewash of dictatorship, others argued that it expressed a genuine need to remember community ties, social security, and identities that were lost or devalued after 1990 (Boyer, 2006, pp. 364–366). In the first two decades after unification, insecurity and social dislocation were very real for many East Germans: industries collapsed, unemployment spiked, and familiar social structures vanished virtually overnight. Oral histories and sociological surveys show that people felt an emotional need to remember aspects of the GDR, from childhood communities and workplace camaraderie to social benefits like guaranteed employment and healthcare, that had abruptly ceased or radically changed after 1990 (Boyer, 2006, p. 370; Hodgin, 2013). Such memories do not ignore the repressive or dysfunctional aspects of the GDR, but they insist that other aspects need to be considered as well. Cooke (2005), for example, critiques the framing of *Ostalgie* as mere nostalgia, arguing that it often functions as a counter-narrative to the colonising discourse of unification, to reclaim East German identities that were marginalized in post-1990 Germany.

In relation to the *Wende* specifically, everyday-life and *Ostalgie* narratives have played a crucial role in replotting 1989/90. Oral histories and biographical studies demonstrate that for many East Germans, the *Wende* was experienced less as a clear-cut "revolution" or ecstatic liberation, and more as a dense period of uncertainty, upheaval, and the rapid devaluation of prior life courses (Boyer, 2006, p. 374; Engler, 2019). People

describe the excitement of new freedoms and travel alongside the disorientation of economic displacement and cultural alienation. Berdahl (1999), for example, argues that the experience of the *Wende* varied significantly depending on regional and personal contexts, with some communities reclaiming GDR identities as an act of cultural resistance. This more ambivalent narrative complicates the triumphalist view of 1989 as simply the victory of freedom. It shows that the *Wende* also entailed losses, of social status, of identity, of a sense of security, that the master narrative of 'dictatorship-to-democracy' tended to downplay. Some scholars have noted that by the late 2000s, even museum representations and public discourse began cautiously incorporating everyday perspectives to present a more nuanced view of GDR history. The Wende Museum in Los Angeles, for instance, deliberately collects everyday artifacts to portray East German life beyond just oppression, which illustrates a growing Anglophone interest in *Alltagsgeschichte* ('everyday-history') of the GDR (Mascha, 2012). These developments underscore that the meaning of 1989/90 is not fixed; it is still being translated and retranslated in cultural memory.

This sustained plurality of memory suggests that the issue at stake is not a lack of evidence, but a contest of narrative frames. For some, the dominant frame – GDR as a repressive failure – remains imperative to uphold. For others, that frame is too limiting and needs to be revised or expanded to include everyday truths. The persistence of such divergent translations of the GDR past indicates that history-writing itself has become a battleground: whose translation of the past will be accepted as 'history'? It is against this background that the present study incorporates oral history interviews with former GDR translators and interpreters. Such first-person narratives offer a bottom-up perspective that can counterbalance top-down archival or policy narratives. The interview component is not used here as mere illustration; it functions as a kind of counter-translation of the GDR past and actively engages the question of narrative authority. If post-1990 public narratives have translated the GDR into a repertoire of repression, isolation, and failure, oral history allows us to 'retranslate' that past by foregrounding experiences and agency that the dominant narrative left out. In this sense, the method aligns with the article's thesis: it makes visible how alternative narratives became illegible under the hegemonic translation, and how they can be reclaimed and re-inscribed into history without devolving into nostalgia or apology. As Cronin notes the marginalisation of local voices in translation history (Cronin, 2000, pp. 45–47), we must ask why certain stories were *not* translated into the official history. These interviews attempt to bring those untranslated stories to light.

## 5. Translators' testimonies as retranslations of the past

The following section presents selected extracts from interviews[1] with non-literary translators and interpreters who lived through the *Wende*. These quotations are not

[1] The testimonies discussed here come from a corpus of currently 32 oral history interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025 with people who worked as (literary) translators and/or interpreters in the GDR. This corpus is growing steadily. The interviewees' professional profiles are diverse: four worked exclusively as literary translators, five combined literary and technical translation as freelancers, ten were specialised

intended to represent all interviewees in the corpus, nor to stand in for GDR citizens in general. Instead, they foreground a set of perspectives that often remain marginal in post-unification public narratives and illustrate that alongside standardised accounts of 1989/90 there are alternative experiences and interpretive frameworks in circulation. These translators' and interpreters' accounts are shaped by personal memory and by the time that has passed. As Aleida Assmann (2008) notes, recollection is filtered through present contexts, so retrospective narratives may be inflected by nostalgia or disillusionment. This study therefore does not seek to establish a definitive truth about GDR life, but to add nuance by foregrounding individual narratives.

For readability, the excerpts are arranged in a broadly chronological and thematic sequence, from the moment of the *Wende*, through the immediate post-unification adjustments, to later reflections on freedom and cultural change, and each is followed by analysis that connects the testimony to the paper's framework of 'narrative translation'.

### *5.1 Anticipating rupture*

One translator recalled their[2] uneasy prescience in late 1989: "When the Wall fell, we knew that things were going to change – not necessarily for the better. We knew that many of us would lose our jobs and that it would be much harder to find work in the West." (Interview A, my translation). This recollection is representative of what most interviewees remembered about the immediate period of the *Wende* as a very precarious time, and it captures a strikingly cautious, even pessimistic, expectation at the very moment often celebrated as a triumph. Rather than narrating November 1989 as pure euphoria, the translator emphasises foreboding and professional insecurity. Their use of "we knew" suggests that among East German citizens, there was a collective realisation that unification would be a double-edged sword. This perspective complicates the dominant 'liberation' script of 1989. It foregrounds what the master narrative largely omitted: the fear of displacement felt by citizens who understood that the opening of borders also meant the collapse of existing structures and the influx of new competition regarding their

technical translators, seven worked as both translators and interpreters, and six were interpreters employed by Intertext, the GDR's largest translation agency. Literary translators were based at various publishing houses, while technical translators and interpreters worked for Intertext (on permanent contracts or as freelancers), other VEBs (Volkseigene Betriebe, publicly owned enterprises), or the military. Participants entered the profession at different times, from the 1960s to the 1980s, bringing perspectives shaped by distinct historical and institutional contexts. To explore their work, identities, and self-understandings, I conducted semi-structured interviews. After a few initial questions on education and career trajectories, the interviews shifted to open-ended prompts that invited participants to speak freely about their professional and private lives in the GDR. Interview lengths ranged from 38 to 312 minutes, depending on availability and willingness to share. All interviews were audio-recorded and accompanied by field notes, with participants giving informed consent through signed forms and verbal explanation. Recordings were transcribed using the GDPR-compliant software aTrain (University of Graz) and analysed thematically in MAXQDA to identify recurring patterns and distinctive narratives across areas such as work, finances, education, and political or social influences. Transcripts and audio files are stored securely on University of Graz servers, with access limited to the interviewer to ensure confidentiality.

[2] To keep the interviewees as anonymous as possible, any gender-specific pronouns are replaced by they/their.

professional lives. In terms of 'narrative translation', this quote reveals an alternate reading of 1989: not as an immediate happy ending, but as the uneasy beginning of a difficult transition. It shows how GDR citizens translated the event in real time: not into the West's story of victory, but into their own story of uncertainty. By including this voice, we restore part of the historical texture that the celebratory translation of 1989 flattened out.

### *5.2 Experiencing the aftermath*

Another interviewee described the immediate post-*Wende* period in jarring terms: "I really felt like I was schizophrenic because I had a lot of work, and during the day I was around people who always had work… But then, in the evening, I would come home and most of the people – friends and neighbours – were unemployed. It was strange. And I had two small children, and many will tell you that it was difficult for families back then, much harder than in the GDR. […] It was an exhausting time, both mentally and physically." (Interview B, my translation). This testimony reverberates the previous statement and paints a vivid picture of social dislocation and personal strain in the early 1990s. The interviewee's feeling of being "schizophrenic" points to the extreme contrasts they navigated: in their professional sphere, they were overworked, yet in their personal life they were surrounded by friends and family facing sudden unemployment and hardship. Such a scenario was common in eastern Germany after unification: After the shift from a planned to a market economy, many East German firms collapsed under western competition, and unemployment surged in the early 1990s, especially in industry, where more than two-thirds lost their jobs. By 1996, around 40% of eastern workers had been unemployed at least once, women more often than men, and roughly three-quarters experienced major career disruption through retraining, occupational change, or early retirement, often accompanied by lasting insecurity and shame. Unemployment only began to decline from 2005, and by 2018 it stood just two percentage points higher in the East than in the West (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung, 2025). The quote highlights an aspect of the transitional turmoil often overlooked in high-level histories: the emotional and physical exhaustion of those trying to bridge two worlds. For this translator, the *Wende* narrative was not one of seamless integration but of living in two realities at once: one prosperous, one precarious. In the language of translation, they were caught between two 'target texts': the West German world of work with its new expectations, and the East German social world with its collapsing certainties. Their story underscores what a top-down narrative of economic 'progress' glosses over: the human cost of rapid systemic change. It resonates with Mary Fulbrook's observation that many GDR-trained professionals had to "become [professionals] anew" (2023, p. 288) under radically altered norms, essentially retranslating their lives and qualifications into a Western framework. This translator's experience confirms that the *Wende* was not simply a joyous opening of opportunities, but also a period of profound loss and adaptation. Including such accounts in our history is an act of retranslation that brings into focus the uneven distribution of gains and losses during the transformation.

### *5.3 Professional upheaval and devaluation*

Several interviewees commented on how their profession itself was transformed, and in many ways devalued, by unification. As one interviewee explained, "In the GDR, we had clear fee structures and a strong professional network. After the *Wende*, everything was uncertain. Suddenly, we were competing in a free market that valued speed over quality." (Interview C, my translation). Another noted: "In the GDR, translators were respected. We were seen as important cultural mediators. In unified Germany, we became just another service provider." (Interview D, my translation). These observations reveal a profound shift in professional culture. Under the socialist system, translators and interpreters enjoyed regulated pay scales, institutional support, and considerable prestige as cultural bridge-builders. The collapse of the GDR meant not only the loss of many translation posts but also the imposition of a Western market logic on translatorial work. The first quote highlights the chaos and precarity of that new market: established norms were replaced by open competition where quick turnaround and cost-cutting trumped the careful, deliberative approach that had been fostered in the GDR. The second quote underscores the loss of social status experienced by translators and interpreters. What had been an esteemed profession, became, in the interviewee's words, a commodified service in a larger and more impersonal marketplace. This echoes broader analyses of eastern professionals' fate post-1990 – many felt that their cultural capital evaporated or was discounted once Western structures took over (Grunow, 2020). From a narrative perspective, these quotes serve as counter-narratives to the celebratory story of market liberalisation. Instead of focusing on the efficiency and dynamism of a free market, these insiders translate that development as a story of uncertainty, loss of quality, and loss of respect. In the dominant translation of history, the GDR's planned economy is depicted as inefficient and restrictive, and the shift to capitalism is framed as a necessary correction. These testimonies draw attention to what was lost in the process: professional solidarity, clarity of standards, and a sense of purpose beyond profit.

### *5.4 Rethinking 'freedom'*

One theme that emerged strongly from the interviews is a critical reflection on the meaning of 'freedom'. An interviewee offered a nuanced perspective: "Most people see freedom in terms of travel and consumerism. [But] freedom is really about having the ability to make conscious decisions—deciding what you do with intention. There's a difference between freedom and freedom of movement, and most people equate freedom with freedom of movement. But it is also freedom to live a life in safety, in a country where you could rely on the state." (Interview E, my translation). The interviewee's distinction between freedom and freedom of movement resonates with broader philosophical debates about liberty, particularly Isaiah Berlin's differentiation between negative and positive liberty (Berlin, 1969). While the GDR restricted negative liberties such as freedom of movement and political expression, it provided certain forms of positive liberty, such as guaranteed employment and social security. The interviewee's critique of post-unification Germany's

focus on freedom of movement and consumerism reflects a broader tension between individual and collective freedoms. This perspective invites us to consider how different political systems prioritize and constrain these freedoms, and how these priorities shape citizens' lived experiences. The interviewee's reflection on freedom highlights the trade-offs inherent in both systems. In the GDR, the state's provision of social security and stability came at the cost of personal autonomy and political freedoms. Conversely, post-unification Germany's emphasis on freedom of movement and consumer choice has expanded individual liberties but often at the expense of social cohesion and economic security. This tension underscores the complexity of freedom as a lived experience, shaped by both structural conditions and individual agency. The interviewee's critique of freedom of movement must be understood within the historical context of the Wende and its aftermath. The rapid transition from socialism to capitalism not only redefined economic and social structures but also imposed new cultural and ideological frameworks. For many East Germans, the emphasis on mobility and consumer choice as markers of freedom felt alien and even disorienting, as it clashed with their lived experiences of security and solidarity under the GDR. This perspective reflects a broader critique of the unification process as a form of cultural and ideological colonization, in which East German values and experiences were marginalized in favour of West German norms. While the interviewee critiques the post-unification focus on freedom of movement, other testimonies in the corpus reveal a more ambivalent relationship to this form of freedom. For some, the ability to travel and access consumer goods represented a profound liberation from the constraints of the GDR. These differing perspectives suggest that freedom is not a monolithic concept but a contested and context-dependent one, shaped by individual circumstances, generational experiences, and social positions.

### *5.5 Speaking and belonging*

Another translator, reflecting on life decades after unification, offered a poignant observation about communication and social acceptance: "I have to be honest, I felt freer then [in the GDR] in the sense that people perhaps thought things through more with each other back then. Today, I often feel that when I say something that's a bit out of the ordinary, I get stared at, but I'm not understood." (Interview A, my translation). This remark is striking because it upends the conventional expectation: one would assume that free speech and open dialogue are far greater in unified (West) Germany than in the GDR, where censorship and conformity were enforced. Yet this individual's experience suggests a paradox: within the GDR's close communities (perhaps within the relatively safe confines of private circles or professional cohorts), they found more genuine exchange of ideas, whereas in today's ostensibly free society, they feel socially alienated when expressing an unconventional thought. We should be careful in interpreting their point: it does not mean the GDR had more freedom of speech in any formal sense. Rather, it highlights a difference in social norms and shared understanding. In the GDR, East Germans often communicated through a kind of 'reading between the lines', developing implicit trust and intellectual

camaraderie within small groups, in part because official discourse was untrustworthy. After unification, East Germans entered a public sphere dominated by West German norms and topics, and many have described feeling like second-class citizens whose perspectives were unwelcome or ridiculed (Müller, 2001; Ahbe, 2005). The translator's comment that they are "not understood" when they go "out of the ordinary" speaks to this sense of exclusion. It suggests that the terms of discourse in unified Germany remain subtly different from what they were used to; that there are unwritten rules about what can be said or how, and that their instincts honed in a different system now sometimes lead to social friction. In terms of 'narrative translation', this speaks to the idea that East Germans have had to translate themselves into a West German discourse that did not fully accommodate them. It also sheds light on why some East German memories became inarticulable: if voicing a certain positive memory of GDR life gets you "stared at," people may simply stop voicing it publicly. This translator's experience puts that in personal terms. Analytically, their quote shows how hegemonic narratives can silence dissenting memories without the need for formal censorship: social disapproval does the job. This dynamic is precisely what a narrative translation approach seeks to uncover: the ways certain narratives make others untranslatable or inconceivable. By reintroducing their voice into our narrative, we perform a kind of restorative translation – we acknowledge that the unified Germany's story of itself has not readily "understood" or incorporated everything that East Germans might want to say. This resonates with Spivak's notion of epistemic violence – how some voices are not heard or are misheard in the writing of history (Spivak, 1988). The translator's quiet lament about not being understood hints at the emotional toll of having one's experience 'partially untranslated' in the new collective memory.

### *5.6 Value changes and moral dissonance*

One lengthy interview passage delved into the moral and social upheaval during the early 1990s. Here we summarise its key points: The interviewee recounted how, at their workplace post-1990, two colleagues became rich by privatising major state-owned firms, which was a stark contrast to the original plan of the Modrow government that every GDR citizen would receive a share of public property. "That idea was completely pushed aside by the de Maizière government," they noted, "and then it was only about privatisation. They [those colleagues] became millionaires with what should have been my share." (Interview F, my translation) The interviewee described this outcome as a fundamental betrayal of what had been promised, leaving a lasting sense of injustice. The interviewee continued to express that the hardest impact was on the children – "they had to experience that teachers from one day to the next taught something completely different, completely different values. The students were totally disoriented. Which values apply now? What are the true values? The teachers, of course, totally lost their credibility, because from one day they were saying the opposite of what they'd said before." They then described the "complete revaluation of values" that had been upheld in the GDR – such as mutual help, solidarity, and collective decision-making – "all that didn't count anymore, and instead

everyone was encouraged to use their elbows, [to adopt] individualism, which to me is basically just concealed egoism at the expense of others. That collapse of values was enormous," they concluded (Interview F, my translation).

This testimony is remarkable for its blend of economic, educational, and moral dimensions. It conveys a profound sense of disillusionment with how unification was carried out. The reference to the *Treuhandanstalt* (the agency that privatised GDR assets) and the lost ideal of public shares touches on a common East German critique: that unification amounted to a sell-off of the people's property, benefiting a few and disenfranchising the rest. In historical narratives authored by the victors, the aspect of the unfulfilled promise of economic participation is often a footnote, if mentioned at all. But for those who lived it, it was a foundational trauma of the unification period. Narratively, it represents a translation failure: the story of unification told by West German leaders was one of restoration and renewal, but many East Germans experienced it as expropriation and broken promises.

Even more striking is the interviewee's depiction of the moral upheaval. The imagery of teachers overnight having to repudiate their previous teachings vividly illustrates the collapse of an ideological world and its replacement by another. For the students, and indeed for society at large, this was deeply destabilising. The immediate post-*Wende* years were marked by the delegitimisation of everything associated with the GDR, including its moral language. Values like solidarity or collectivism were suddenly disparaged as naive or even reprehensible, while Western values of individualism and competition were lauded. The interviewee calls the latter *verdeckter Egoismus* ('covered-up selfishness') – a sharp rebuke indicating they perceive the new ethos as morally inferior, just cloaked in respectable terminology. They describe the result as an enormous collapse of values. This perspective aligns with what some East German intellectuals have termed the 'colonisation' narrative of unification: the notion that the West not only took over East Germany politically and economically, but also imposed its value system, invalidating East Germans' life histories and ethical frameworks (Mascha, 2012). Indeed, references to unification as a form of internal colonialism, with Easterners as colonised subjects, emerged in the 1990s and have since entered academic analysis (Mascha, 2012, p. 50). This interviewee's account clearly resonates with that interpretation.

For the purpose of narrative translation, this testimony is like a rich, untranslated text that is brought into the target narrative. It reveals how drastic and disorienting the translational process of unification was on the level of values and identities for some citizens of the former GDR. The dominant historiography may note economic difficulties and 'transitional challenges,' but rarely does it capture the lived experience of moral vertigo that this interviewee describes. We see that people who had sincerely believed in certain socialist values like equality, solidarity experienced unification not as liberation into moral truth but as a mandated conversion and even moral collapse. This has direct implications for collective memory: it helps explain why even decades later, some East Germans remain defensive of the GDR's memory or express *Ostalgie*; it's not just nostalgia

for consumer goods, but a response to the feeling that their moral universe was delegitimised (Boyer, 2006, p. 373). As this interviewee implies, when such value transitions are forceful and uncompensated, people may seek alternative ways to 'reclaim what was omitted' (Grunow, 2020). The continued emotional charge around GDR history, e.g., arguments that East Germans were 'second-class' citizens or that unification was a Western *Anschluss* ('annexation'), can be traced to these experiences of broken continuity and disrespect. In essence, this account underscores the emotional and ethical consequences of the one-sided translation that took place in the 1990s.

Taken together, these interview excerpts illustrate how the *Wende* could be narrated in registers that sit uneasily with the dominant success story. Across different themes, such as employment insecurity, social fragmentation, professional revaluation, competing understandings of freedom, and experiences of being unheard, the accounts make visible the biographical and semantic work required to 'translate' oneself into post-1990 institutions and public discourse. Read as 'narrative translations', these testimonies do not function as representative evidence for 'the' East German experience; rather, they show the availability of alternative interpretive frameworks that are often marginalised when the GDR is narrated primarily through repression and failure. In this sense, the interview material operates as a counter-translation: it reintroduces textures of experience that complicate, qualify, and sometimes resist the standardised plots through which the socialist past is commonly made legible.

## 6. Conclusion: towards plural translations of the socialist past

Post-1990 narratives of the GDR can be read as 'narrative translation': they reorder events, assign moral vocabularies, and stabilise plots that make the socialist past legible within the institutional and political order of unified Germany. In much canonical historiography and public pedagogy, the interpretive centre of gravity lies in dictatorship, surveillance, and illegality, frames that are routinely condensed in concepts such as *Unrechtsstaat*, *Mauerstaat*, and the Stasi-state, and often closed by a teleology of inevitable failure. Read through the lens of translation, these recurring structures function as filters: they do not merely describe repression but also delimit which other experiences can be narrated without appearing naive, apologetic, or 'nostalgic.'

Placing oral-history interviews with non-literary translators and interpreters alongside these top-down accounts clarifies what such filters leave untranslated. The interview narratives do not negate repression; rather, they foreground additional dimensions of the *Wende* and its aftermath: anticipatory insecurity, social dislocation, professional devaluation, moral and semantic conflict over terms like 'freedom,' and long-term struggles over voice and belonging. Taken together, these testimonies show how unification was experienced not only as political transition but as an enforced recontextualisation of biographies and value systems, in which prior forms of expertise and ordinary life were reclassified in new hierarchies of legitimacy.

This study is interpretive rather than representative: the interview corpus reflects a specific professional group, and retrospective accounts are shaped by memory and later contexts. Even so, reading historiographical and testimonial narratives side by side demonstrates the analytic value of treating history-writing as translation. It offers a method for specifying how narrative authority is produced and for expanding GDR historiography beyond a binary in which dictatorship becomes the only meaningful plot and everyday experience becomes either irrelevant or suspect.

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# TRANSLATING HISTORY IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD: KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST THROUGH COUNTERFACTUAL MEANS AT THE DEUTSCHE HISTORISCHE MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition at the Deutsche Historische Museum (on display from December 2022 until March 2026) through a translational lens, proposing that it enacts a form of counterfactual historiography that can be understood as translation in the subjunctive mood. While the curatorial team insist upon a distinction between 'verifiable' alternatives and counterfactual historiography, this article argues that such a binary is untenable. Through an analysis of the exhibition's spatial and artistic design, alongside its use of primary sources, the article demonstrates how visitors are invited into an experiential process of discovery in which they critically assess historical alternatives through subjunctive translation. In doing so, the exhibition positions visitors as co-translators of the past, thereby fostering a critical and participatory engagement with the historicization process.
KEYWORDS: Counterfactual Historiography; Museums; Knowledge; Interpretation; Experience

## 1. Introduction

If the act of historical interpretation can be understood as translation (Burke, 2007; Alonzi, 2023; Savchenkova, 2024; Vidal Claramonte, 2025), it follows that the work of historical museums can be characterised as translation as well. The creation of historical exhibitions requires curatorial teams to translate the concrete events of the past into exhibitions that visitors then encounter in the present (Butler, 2024; Vidal and Campbell, 2025). In this way, Hilda Kean's argument that "[h]istory is not a given, but a construction involving choices drawn from materials garnered from the past made by different creators" (2017, p. 403) is clearly seen in a historical museum, where historical narratives are constructed and corresponding exhibitions curated with a precise purpose. Because such a framework highlights the constructed nature of the historical narratives that are presented in any exhibition, it leads us to question *how* history is translated there – that is, what historiographical strategies have been employed and which semiotic resources have been drawn upon in order to create a cohesive exhibition experience for the visitor (Ravelli, 2006; Neather, 2025). Yet, this translational process that lies behind any history exhibition is often entirely hidden (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 7), as visitors engage with the end product without necessarily questioning curatorial choices concerning the exhibition's narrative, and if other choices or angles could have been displayed instead. So, what if an exhibition were to invite their visitors into this historiographical process?

This is precisely what the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition at the Deutsche Historische Museum (German Historical Museum, hereafter referred to as DHM) in Berlin sets out to do. The full title of the exhibition is "Roads not Taken. Or: Things could have turned out

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differently"[1], and it functioned as the museum's main exhibition on German history while the permanent exhibition was being refurbished, running from December 2022 until March 2026. As the title suggests, the exhibition adopts a rather unusual approach, as it explores what almost happened (but ultimately did not) at 14 different 'turning points' throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This approach can be understood as counterfactual historiography, which, at its essence, involves investigating what actually happened through the lens of what did not (Black and MacRaild, 2000, p. 126). In other words, by questioning what could have otherwise happened (a 'what if'-style question), we can come to better understand why what actually happened indeed came to pass. Such reasoning is arguably implied in all history-making, counterfactual historiography simply brings it to the forefront; as Black and MacRaild put it, "no historian of the twentieth century has failed to wonder what human history's most miserable century might have been like without Hitler, or the two world wars, […] or the atom bomb" (Black and MacRaild, 2000, p. 126) – and, indeed, each of these scenarios are engaged with in one way or another in the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition. What is curious, however, is that the curators of this exhibition continually insist that they have not adopted a counterfactual approach, but rather one that focuses on 'verifiable' alternatives (by which they mean alternatives that can be proved to have almost happened through primary sources).

In this article, I argue that the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition enacts a form of translation in the subjunctive mood. This subjunctive translation proves the binary suggested by the curators between 'counterfactual alternatives' and 'verifiable alternatives' is actually false, and that, despite their insistence to the contrary, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition employs counterfactual historiography in a valuable way, as it invites visitors into the process of translating the past by asking them to critically judge for themselves the likelihood of the historical alternative exhibited at each turning point. The article proceeds in two stages: (1) an explanation of counterfactual historiography as translation in the subjunctive mood, where I unpick and challenge the curator's insistence that the exhibition does not utilise counterfactual historiography; and (2) an examination of the construction and content of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition (namely the spatial and artistic design of the exhibition and the primary sources displayed), whereby I show how the exhibition works to translate counterfactual alternatives of the past in a non-authoritative and experimental manner by engaging visitors in a process of critical discovery.

The article draws upon two main datasets: a selection of promotional materials created for the exhibition in which the curators outline their curatorial process, and my own fieldnotes taken during several visits to the exhibition in January 2025. Section 2 of this article focuses solely on the promotional materials, which I use to highlight and unpick the curator's seeming disdain for counterfactual historiography, interwoven with an explanation of how a translational lens confirms and redeems the use of counterfactuals in

[1] The German title of the exhibition is *"Roads not Taken. Oder: Es hätte anders kommen können".*

the exhibition. Key to this section is my suggestion that counterfactual historiography functions as translation in the subjunctive mood, which I explain by drawing upon Vidal Claramonte's writings on translating history (2025) and several seminal texts that set out the theory of counterfactual historiography (Hawthorn, 1991; Ferguson, 1999). Then, Sections 3 draws upon what is set out in Section 2, where a critical analysis of the exhibition's artistic and spatial design and use of primary sources shows how the exhibition translates the past through counterfactual means by inviting the visitor into an experimental process of discovery (Macdonald and Basu, 2007) that functions as a 'translational experience' (Blumczynski, 2023) as the visitor perceptually experiences the exhibition and the counterfactual possibilities it enacts. In all of this, I rely on Karen Bennett's understanding of translation as a "generative" rather than "reproductive" act, where "reproducing what is already known in a fresh context [creates] the conditions for new knowledge to be constructed" (Bennett, 2023, p. 456). This is precisely what I propose occurs in the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition: by reproducing narratives of the German past through a counterfactual lens, the exhibition creates the conditions for new knowledge to be created. This new knowledge comes in the form of a critical reflection on the past that the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition incites amongst visitors, meaning it is experienced in a manner that is personal to each individual visitor and not simply received unquestioningly as an authoritative singular narrative from the curators. In this way, the exhibition translates the past in partnership with the visitors, as, through the manner in which they enact counterfactual historiography in the exhibition, the curators create the environment that enables the visitor to translate the past for themselves, according to their own powers of judgement.

## 2. Translating the past through counterfactual means

### *2.1. Institutional position of the Deutsche Historische Museum*

There is a wealth of promotional literature relating to the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition. In this article, I am relying upon materials where the curators (and, in two cases, the President of the DHM) explain the exhibition concept and their curatorial process. For ease of referencing, I detail in the table below the various materials I am referencing.[2]

**Table 19.** Promotional materials relied upon

| **Source**[3] | **Description of specific sections utilised** | **Date published** |
|---|---|---|
| *Companion Catalogue* | 'Preface': an introduction to the catalogue written by Raphael Gross (President of the DHM). | 2023 |

[2] All of the materials referenced exist in English translation (from the original German) except for the *Companion Magazine*. When quoting from these materials I use the published English translation, except in the case of the *Companion Magazine* where the translation is my own, which is always signalled in the corresponding reference.

[3] Full references for these materials can be found in the bibliography.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 'A talk with Dan Diner on the exhibition concept': a transcript of an interview with Dan Diner, a historian on the curatorial team who originated the concept for the exhibition. The interview is led by Fritz Backhaus, the exhibition project lead. | |
| *Companion Magazine* | 'Interview mit dem Projektleiter Fritz Backhaus' [Interview with Project Lead Fritz Backhaus]: a question-and-answer style article detailing the curatorial process behind the exhibition. | 2023 |
| 'Roads not Taken' exhibition website | 'More story: President Raphael Gross': video of the President of the DHM discussing the exhibition. | 2022 |
| | 'Digital curator tour': video of three curators (Julia Franke, Lili Reyels, and Stefan Paul-Jacobs) walking through and discussing different elements of the exhibition. | |

As the data used is promotional material, it exists as part of the "uniform action governed by role expectations, norms, values and belief systems" that constitute any institution (Koskinen, 2014, p. 17). That is to say, the promotional material is produced by the museum for the purpose of promoting the exhibition in line with the institutional values that define it as a museum, and anything expressed by the individual curators in these materials must align with these values in order to be included. Because of this I will not be focussing on the individual curator's opinions or methods but rather treating them as a whole; that is, as representing the overall curatorial process inscribed by the institution.

On their website, the museum is "a place for strengthening historical judgement, where overarching philosophical, ethical and historical questions are negotiated" (Deutsches Historisches Museum, n.d.). This suggests that the museum seeks to engage the visitors in debates around the past (concerning 'philosophical, ethical and historical questions') rather than simply mediating authoritative narratives that visitors are not to question. This is perhaps made clearer in the German version of the website; the term translated as "historical judgement" in the English version is *Urteilskraft* [judgement power] in the original German, which suggests a sense of agency and ability on the part of the visitor. In other words, the museum is signalling that it is a place where the visitors will learn to judge historical narratives for themselves, rather than simply being a place where they passively and unquestioningly receive narratives about the past without critically assessing them for themselves.

This museological stance is very much in line with the New Museology movement that took hold in the 1990s,[4] which has seen curators move away from providing authoritative narratives in museum exhibitions and preferring instead to provide material that provokes critical reflection and dialogue amongst the visitors, who are left free to

[4] This movement was a response to growing complaints voiced in the latter-half of the twentieth century that museums were largely elitist and disconnected from society. As a result, this movement emphasises the social responsibility of museums by advocating for a much larger degree of community involvement, as well as a shift away from a focus on objects towards a wider focus on people and participation (McCall and Gray, 2014).

make up their own mind (McCall and Gray, 2014). In particular, the rejection of 'authoritative narratives' involved a call for a plurality of voices and perspectives when it comes to exhibiting the past, rather than exhibitions that suggest that there is only one objective historical narrative. This directly rejects a Rankean view of historiography, which aims to produce a single, impartial narrative of history "as it actually happened" (Hawthorn, 1991, p. 164; Ferguson, 1999, p. 42; Black and MacRaild, 2000, p. 40). Instead, the New Museology movement advocates for multiple narratives and perspectives of what happened in the past to be made available to visitors, leaving them free to assess these various narratives according to their own powers of judgement.

In this way, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition fits neatly within the DHM's vision of being "a place for strengthening historical judgement", as its approach in offering "alternatives" (Deutsches Historisches Museum, n.d.) to what actually happened invites critical reflection from the visitors as to how the events of the past came to be. Yet, as previously mentioned, throughout the promotional material for the exhibition, the curators routinely insist that their approach is not one of counterfactual historiography, but rather one that relies on alternatives that are 'verifiable' through primary sources. My attention will now turn to demonstrating how the curators define and explain the exhibition concept throughout the promotional materials, before then turning to challenge their rejection of counterfactual historiography.

### *2.2. The 'Roads not Taken' exhibition as defined by the curators*

As has already been stated, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition focuses on 14 different turning points throughout German history. And, for each of these moments, rather than focussing solely on the reality that did happen (as is the norm in historical museums) the exhibition contrasts these realities with another possible outcome that could have happened instead. For example, the first 'turning point' addressed is the peaceful protests in the German Democratic Republic in 1989, which ultimately led to the fall of the GDR and the reunification of Germany. The alternative suggested here is that the government of the GDR could have violently suppressed these protests, thus posing the question of whether this would have ensured the survival of the GDR as a nation.

Throughout the promotional material, three key themes relating to the exhibition concept continually reappear. The first and most significant of these is the (at points, rather defensive) insistence that the exhibition is not concerned with counterfactual claims but rather with 'verifiable' alternatives – that is, the exhibition only deals with possibilities that can be proven to have almost come to pass through primary sources. In the preface for the Companion Catalogue, Raphael Gross (President of the DHM) states that they do not "undertake a counterfactual retelling of history" but are only interested in "the moments for which we as a history museum have sources" (Gross, 2023, p. 8). In the video of him discussing the exhibition on the 'Roads not Taken' website, he similarly posits that the exhibition "does not elaborate on something fictional" (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2022b). Other members of the curatorial team express similar views: in an article in the

*Companion Magazine*, the exhibition project lead Fritz Backhaus states that counterfactual historiography is "exciting" but "difficult and problematic for a historical museum that must stick closely to sources" – instead, according to Backhaus, they "provoke thoughts" in the exhibition without going down a counterfactual route (Backhaus, 2023, p. 26, my translation). Moreover, in the interview that is recorded in the *Companion Catalogue* between Fritz Backhaus and Dan Diner (the historical advisor for the curatorial team, who is credited with having originated the exhibition concept), Backhaus asks Diner to explain how the exhibition "differs from counterfactual historiography" (Diner and Backhaus, 2023, p. 20), to which Diner responds:

> 'Counterfactual' means taking history in a different direction than the one that actually occurred, a direction that is then fully imagined. But the exhibition doesn't intend to narrate a different history. (Diner and Backhaus, 2023, p. 20)

To summarise, then, throughout the promotional materials the curatorial team repeatedly establish a binary between counterfactual historiography on the one side – which they see to be fictive, problematic, and imagined – and their curatorial approach on the other, which they emphasise does not deviate from history because it relies upon primary sources.

The other two themes that reappear throughout the promotional materials are interrelated, and hinge upon the above understanding of the exhibition offering verifiable alternatives; these themes are (1) that the exhibition exposes the process of historicization (i.e. the process by which the past is made into a historical narrative (Kean, 2017, p. 403)) and (2) that this exposure of how history is created is intended to incite visitors to reflect critically the past for themselves. Concerning the first of these, in the video of him explaining the exhibition published on its website, DHM President Raphael Gross suggests that the exhibition "actually does exactly what historians do, they try to put themselves into a historical situation, and ask: why did it actually come [sic] the way it did?" ( Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2022b). In a similar vein, curator Fritz Backhaus states in his article in the *Companion Magazine* that they have created an exhibition "whose theme is the process of reflecting on German history itself" (2023, p. 27, my translation). Moreover, in his interview in the *Companion Catalogue*, Dan Diner posits that the exhibition presents the argument that a better understanding of the unrealised historical possibilities helps us to understand why the past happened as it did, which in turn helps us better understand how we arrived at the present (Diner and Backhaus, 2023, p. 11), and that "in the exhibition […] the process [of historical thinking] is exposed" (p. 20). Relatedly, the latter theme expressed throughout the promotional materials – that the exhibition is designed to incite critical reflection amongst the visitors – is emphasised in similar terms to the aforementioned goal of the DHM to be a place that "strengthens historical judgement" (Deutsches Historisches Museum, n.d.). Fritz Backhaus literally states that the exhibition aim is "to encourage historical judgement", while Raphael Gross says that the exhibition

helps visitors "hone their ability to judge history and form their own opinions about historical events" (2023, p. 8).

To summarise, the curators suggest that their curatorial process instituted in the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition is one that is verifiable through sources even as it explores alternatives to what actually happened. They insist that showing the verifiable nature of these alternatives serves to illuminate the process of historicization, which thus in turn incites visitors to critically reflect on their preconceived ideas about the past. This process is founded on an understanding of counterfactual historiography that insists that this style of historiography cannot be verified and exists only in the realm of imagination, which thus makes it untenable in the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition. This is because, following the logic of the curators as expressed in the promotional materials, if the alternatives presented are not verifiable, then they cannot expose the historicization process because these alternatives would never have been a legitimate possibility anyway. And, if that were the case, then the visitors will not be led to think critically on how the past came to be, because the 'imagined' alternatives would seem too fanciful to take seriously. So, according to the curators, counterfactual historiography has no place in the exhibition. However, I propose that this does not have to be the case; in what follows I now show how a translational view of historiography legitimises theorising the curatorial process of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition as counterfactual, and how the binary expressed by the curators between 'verifiable' and counterfactual historiography can be exposed as false.

### *2.3 Counterfactual historiography as translation in the subjunctive mood*

Of course, the insistence of the curatorial team that counterfactual historiography is not based on verifiable evidence from the past is not entirely unfounded; counterfactual methods can indeed be used to consider entirely speculative and fictive scenarios, which is precisely what counterfactual fiction does. Indeed, counterfactual fiction was the first instance of a widespread engagement with this method of considering the past. In fact, in the words of historian Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, counterfactual fiction was, at his time of writing around the turn of the century, "applied with striking frequency to the subject of the Third Reich" (2005, p. 1) – Philip K. Dick's 1962 novel *The man in the high castle* and Robert Harris' 1992 novel *Fatherland* (both of which imagine a world in which the Nazis and their allies won WWII) are popular examples of this kind of fiction.

It is perhaps because counterfactual fiction 'came first', so to speak, that counterfactual historiography is still somewhat controversial, as, much like the 'Roads not Taken' curatorial team, certain historians critique it for being "too speculative" as a method (Hawthorn, 1991, p. 4; Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 1). Yet, as is shown through the comprehensive theories of counterfactual historiography that arose in 1990s, just because counterfactual methods can be used to conceive of completely fictive scenarios does not mean that they do not have value when used to consider possibilities that are more tightly aligned with the events that actually came to pass. Indeed, the two seminal theories of counterfactual historiography come from Geoffrey Hawthorn's *Plausible*

*worlds: Possibility and understanding in history and the social sciences* (1991) and Niall Ferguson's edited collection entitled *Virtual histories: Towards a 'chaotic' theory of the past* (1999), both of which are still referenced as foundational texts today (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, pp. 2, 23).

Both Hawthorn and Ferguson's principal argument in favour of counterfactual historiography is that it is in fact implicit in all historical reckoning, particularly when it comes to causation – that is, the consideration of why the events of the past occurred the way they did. Ferguson argues that "if we want to say anything about causation in the past […] we really have to use counterfactuals, if only to test our causal hypotheses" (1999, p. 81), and, in a similar vein, Hawthorn suggests that "the plausibility of [historical reasoning] will turn on the counterfactual it suggests" (1991, p. 16). In other words, both posit that the very nature of asking why something happened implies the question of why something else did not – in this way, counterfactuals constitute "the dark energy of history", often invisible but yet holding the "potential for explaining some of the most fundamental workings" of the matters at hand (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. vii). So far, then, this in fact resonates with the curatorial process as expressed throughout the 'Roads not Taken' promotional material, particularly regarding the suggestion that the exhibition exposes the process of historicization to its visitors.

However, what of the curatorial team's principal objection to the counterfactual method, that it deals purely in speculation and thus cannot be verifiable? Ferguson directly refutes such an idea, arguing instead that a clear distinction can be made between implausible counterfactuals (the sort more likely to be explored in counterfactual fiction, as referred to above) and plausible counterfactuals, the latter being "only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered" (1999, p. 86). This, of course, is precisely what the 'Roads not Taken' does, as we have seen through the curator's own words – the alternatives considered throughout the exhibition are largely (though not entirely, as I will show in Section 3.2) those for which the museum has primary sources, making them thus 'verifiable' options for the course that history could have taken.

Yet, I do not want to entirely dismiss the curatorial team's binary between verifiable alternatives and counterfactual alternative – Ferguson himself goes on to note that "the artefacts [historians] treat as evidence have often survived only by chance" (1999, p. 89). Ferguson's reasoning for making this point is that all evidence-based history is seemingly random, therefore the best one can do is "make tentative statements about causation with reference to plausible counterfactuals" and accept a certain amount of chaos as part of the nature of historiography (1999, p. 89). I propose, however, that a translational lens offers a more solid reasoning for undoing the binary between 'verifiable' and counterfactual alternatives.

To return to the idea with which I opened this article, conceptualising historiography as translation allows us to see how all historical narratives are constructed from a particular viewpoint and for particular purpose. As Vidal Claramonte points out, "[u]nderstanding

historical texts as translations […] helps us to understand that there is no single History (with a capital H and in the singular)" (2025, p. 8). In her work *Translating His-stories*, Vidal Claramonte shows how this 'history' is never neutral and unbiased because it involves the production of knowledge, which inextricably "has to do with the production and ostentation of power and with the strategies used by this power to represent the other" (2025, p. 6). In this way, she argues that what has become 'history' is simply the narrative perspective of the dominant voices of the time, a perspective that has been legitimised as the 'neutral' way of knowing the past because of the hegemonizing power of the voices that created it. In resistance of such hegemonizing voices, Vidal Claramonte highlights how translation can be a tool for those 'other', minority voices to fight back and reclaim their narrative space within the wider process of historicization. She writes that this "is not a matter of denying factuality but rather of putting facts on the table that have various interpretations and rewritings" (Vidal Claramonte, 2025, p. 7).

I propose that this translational understanding of history can be extrapolated out to apply to counterfactual historiography, and the fact that it is "not a matter of denying factuality" (Vidal Claramonte, 2025, p. 7) is key to my rebuttal of the rejection of counterfactual historiography espoused by the 'Roads not Taken' curatorial team. Indeed, the act of "putting facts on the table that have various interpretations" (p.7) is, in a way, precisely what the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition does – but, instead of a rewriting of history from a previously unheard minority perspective (as in the case studies looked at by Vidal Claramonte), the various interpretations offered in the exhibition involve a temporal transportation to consider what was indeed considered possible at the so-called 'turning point' in focus. In other words, the exhibition asks visitors to place themselves in the position of those alive at the time of the turning point in question and to use their powers of reasoning to assess an outcome that, at the time, seemed likely – perhaps even more likely than what actually ended up happening. I illustrate how this is enacted in the exhibition space in the next section, but for now it is enough to note that primary sources aid this process, but it is not entirely dependent on them in the way that the curatorial team suggests. Rather, the very act of using facts known to us in the present about the past creates a simulation for the visitor of the experience of considering a hypothetical as if it were still a future possibility, which it once was. In other words, the exhibition presents the "fields of experience" known to those who were alive at the time of the turning point in question, and these fields of experience involve the "social, political, and material structures that render these horizons possible" (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145). As such, the exhibition does indeed rely to a certain extent on primary sources to guide what historical alternatives are considered, but they are not the lynchpin of the historiographical process in the way the curators insist they are. Rather, the primary resource that makes the act of historical translation possible are the powers of reasoning of each individual visitor – in a sense, the very 'historical judgement' that the DHM seeks to promote.

As such, if the visitor's powers of reasoning are key to the mode of historiography employed in the exhibition, the following statement from Hawthorn is worth considering:

> …practical reasonings [are not] entirely pre-ordained by rules or reasons. They are conditional, subjunctive hypotheticals, a matter of counterfactual judgement. They turn on what agents more or less reflectively believe, in the light of their inclinations and the circumstances, to be possible. (1991, p. 15)

Leading on from this idea, I propose that the counterfactual historiography at play in the 'Roads not Taken' is an act of translation in the subjunctive mood, where history is translated through the visitors very reasoning as to whether a proposed hypothetical could have occurred or not, a reasoning which is enacted as if they are present in the moment of the turning point, rather than looking back on it as a moment that has already passed. In this way, the translational process functions as suggested by Luigi Alonzi, in that it is "also an act of synchronization which connects past, present, and future, disrupting and resetting time, as well as creating complex temporalities differing from linear chronology" (2023, p. 1). Thus, this translation of the past through counterfactual means is an act of "reconstituting 'past futures'" (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145), prompting the visitor to consider history in the subjunctive mood as they reason through events that at once could have happened but also did not.

To close this section, I return once more to the binary suggested by the curatorial team, that 'verifiable' alternatives are not the same as 'counterfactual' alternatives. I have shown that this is not a view shared by theorists of counterfactual historiography, and, more importantly, argue that this is not necessarily the key factor that drives the historiographical process of the exhibition. Rather, I propose that in disrupting the linear chronology of history, the exhibition translates the 'fields of experience' of those who were alive at the time of the turning point in question, thereby placing the visitors in their position. In doing so, the alternative proposed in the exhibition is translated in the subjunctive mood, as the visitor is asked to consider it as if it were a present hypothetical. This can be linked back to Bennett's understanding of translation as a generative act of knowledge production, where the restaging of what is familiar creates the conditions for new knowledge to be produced (2023, p. 456). In other words, by restaging the past into a counterfactual hypothetical, the past is translated in a new manner, in the subjunctive mood, which allows the visitor to consider it as if it was still a future possibility.

What follows from here is an exploration of precisely how the exhibition enacts subjunctive translation amongst the visitors – that is, how it brings the visitors into the 'fields of experience' of the particular turning points in order to consider the alternative routes of history as if they themselves are present in the moment of the turning point in question.

## 3. Counterfactual translation of the past as an experimental process of discovery

Having challenged the curatorial team's understanding of counterfactual historiography, I will now demonstrate how the process of translation in the subjunctive mood (which I propose equates to counterfactual historiography, as detailed above) is actually enacted in the exhibition. This examination looks at the spatial and artistic design of the exhibition and the primary sources presented there. I have chosen these lines of analysis because they are the essential building blocks of the exhibition experience, as elements which the visitors encounter perceptually. In this way, I am the examining the exhibition as a 'text' (Boria and Tomalin, 2019), just as one would analyse different aspects of a written text (such as the form, register, tone, etc.). The overall analysis in this section ultimately demonstrates how the exhibition creates the aforementioned 'fields of experience' that prompt the visitor to consider the historical alternatives presented as if they are experiencing them as present possibilities.

### *3.1. Spatial and artistic design*

The spatial and artistic design of the exhibition have been carefully constructed – in his interview in the *Companion Catalogue*, Dan Diner notes that "the tension between possibility and reality is dramaturgically staged" in the exhibition (2023, p. 13). What he means by this is that each 'turning point' that is addressed is contained within its own section of the exhibition, and, within each of these sections, there is a 'reality space', where what actually happened is addressed (including the context that led up to the event in question), and a 'possibility space' where what could have happened instead is explored. The two spaces are distinguished by their artistic design – in the 'Digital curator tour' video that is published on the exhibition website, curator Lili Reyels comments that they designed the reality space to be "strictly museum-like" (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2022a), keeping everything in black and white with structured text boxes. In contrast, the possibility space is "strongly staged in terms of design" with lots of colour and distorted images and text (DHM, 2022a). Figures 1 and 2 below show that this is the case in the exhibition's opening section, which focuses on the peaceful revolution in the GDR in 1989. The stark contrast between the 'reality space' and the 'possibility space' is clear, and, beyond the change in design, there is nothing else to mark the move from reality to possibility.

In this way, the exhibition physically enacts the ideological shift in museum practice that was heralded by the New Museology movement (discussed previously in Section 2.1) – that is, a shift from authoritative narratives to more open-ended discussions that are intended to incite the visitor to critically reflect for themselves. The visitors encounter this shift perceptually, and the information they encounter in each respective space mirrors the perceptual experience: familiar museum design tactics (a formal black and white design with uniform texts boxes) are utilised in the 'reality space' to complement the factual knowledge of what actually happened, while the unusual and noticeably different design of the 'possibility space' (use of strong colours on the walls and floor with slightly distorted images and cartoons that are not boxed in) aligns with the new counterfactual knowledge

of the past presented there. In each section of the exhibition, the visitor encounters the 'reality space' first. This plays a role in constructing the 'field of experience' necessary for the visitor to be able to consider the historical alternative through the mode of subjunctive translation because they are first brought to consider the context of the turning point in focus in a way that does not yet ask them to question anything but rather presents the knowledge offered as plain facts. Then, when they physically move into the 'possibility space', the strikingly different aesthetics prompts them to consider what is said in a different manner. In this way, the "'medium' and 'message' are identical" as "what [is said] and how [it is said] are two halves of the same apple" (Pearce, 1995, p. 15). Thus, as the visitors investigate how the design of the space has changed, so too are they prompted to investigate why the design of the space has changed, priming them to question the information relayed to them there.




**Figure 6.** Part of the 'reality space' in the '1989' section of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition. Image my own.

Moreover, the physical act of moving from one clearly defined space to another (that is, from the 'reality space' to the 'possibility space') enacts the disruption of a linear chronology that translates the visitor's perspective from the present to the past in order to consider the historical alternative presented as a "past future" (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145). The chronology is disrupted because the shift to the 'possibility' space requires the visitor to think back over what they have just learned in the 'reality' space, as they are prompted to question whether the alternative suggested would have been as likely as what eventually did happen. In this way they are made to reason in the same manner that those alive at the time of the turning point would have, which is precisely what I understand to be the process of subjunctive translation that occurs through counterfactual historiography.




**Figure 7.** The transition from the 'reality space' to the 'possibility space' in the '1989' section of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition. Image my own.

### *3.2. Primary sources*

In referring to primary sources, I mean anything sourced from the historical period being referenced, such as objects, videos, audio recordings, pictures, and documents. As discussed in Section 2.1, the curatorial team stresses that they only consider historical alternatives for which they have primary sources, and they even go as far as to suggest that the absence of primary sources renders an alternative not worth considering. In spite of this, I found that the number of primary sources (particularly objects) is in fact somewhat sparse. There are even sections where there are virtually no primary sources that concretely testify to the unrealised possibility; these sections are 1866, which explores the possibility of Austria having won the Austro-Prussian War, and 1914, which explores the possibility of the Social Democrats being able to prevent the outbreak of World War I.

However, there are instances where primary sources do lend particular strength to the likelihood of the proposed historical alternative. Perhaps the strongest example is a coin that is displayed in the '1848/9' section, which focuses on the possibility of a democratic-constitutional government being formed at the will of the people. Ultimately, this did not come to pass because the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV refused to accept the role of German Emperor (to which he had been elected by the people's representatives) because of his belief in the hereditary divine right of Kings over democratic election. However, a coin displayed in this section celebrates the election of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV as Emperor, having been minted prematurely before he declined the position. Some other particularly effective usages of primary sources are: facsimile examples of documents that were prepared in order to assume power over Germany if the Operation Valkyrie assassination of Hitler had been successful, which is the possibility explored in the 1944 section, and, a video of a speech recorded by the West German President that would

have been played to the public in the event of a nuclear attack by the USSR, which is the possibility explored in the 1961 section. These examples clearly show that the alternatives explored were considered as genuine possibilities for those alive at the time, and are presumably what the curatorial team have in mind when they emphasise the usefulness of sources in legitimising the consideration of the alterative in question.

The reason that sources so powerfully affirm these possibilities as legitimate can be explained using the concept of translationality as theorised by Piotr Blumczynski. He describes translationality as a "profoundly experiential" phenomenon (2023, p. 4) which "involves an experience of connecting – metaphorically, but through material, sensory mediation – with another reality across temporal and spatial distance" (p. 180). In this way, primary sources – particularly objects – directly facilitate this material, sensory mediation by their very existence; simply being in their presence translates the visitor's experience back through time in how it affirms the legitimacy of the hypothetical it is being used to support. This is put another way by historian David Lowenthal: "…relics […] confirm or deny what we think of [the past], symbolize or memorialize communal links over time, and provide archaeological metaphors that illumine the processes of history and memory" (1985, p. xxiii).

However, as I have suggested already, I propose that, while primary sources such as artefacts do strengthen the legitimacy of the alterative in question, they are not essential to enabling productive counterfactual historiography in the way that the curatorial team insist throughout the promotional materials. This is supported by the aforementioned fact that the exhibition is not replete with primary sources. At a different point in his work *Experiencing translationality*, Blumczynski describes the translational experience as profiling "an imaginary journey through time and space, activated at and by a special site", whereby "[t]he temporal dimension is compressed as one makes a translational connection with [this site]" (2023, p.146). This describes exactly what I propose occurs through the subjunctive translation of the past through counterfactual means: the very experience of being asked within the exhibition space to consider an alternative possibility for how the past could have occurred enacts this temporal compression, which can be directly linked to the aforementioned point made by Alonzi that the translation of history is "also an act of synchronization which connects past, present, and future" (2023, p. 1). This experience, facilitated by the spatial and artistic design of the exhibition, as explored in the previous sub-section, and at times strengthened by the primary sources on display, is the core of what the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition offers to the visitor. In this way, the strength or weakness of the likelihood of the suggested historical alternative does not actually matter – what matters more is the process of consideration that the visitors are invited into, where they decide for themselves how likely or not each possibility is. Thus, having illustrated how the mode of subjunctive translation through counterfactual means is enacted, I now focus on what the result of this translational experience is for the visitor – in other words, why staging a historical exhibition in such a way is a worthwhile endeavour.

### *3.3 'Roads not Taken' as an experimental process of discovery*

As I noted in Section 3.1, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition utilises the binary between authoritative narratives (traditionally used in museum exhibitions) and open-ended discussions (a style of exhibition argued for by the New Museology movement) in how it stages the exhibition, as the visitors first encounter the former style in the 'reality space', which then primes them to be all the more receptive to the questioning that is incited in the subsequent 'possibility space', as they are brought to question why the very design of the exhibition changes between the two spaces. As detailed in the previous section (3.2), it is this experience that is the driving force in engaging the visitor in the subjunctive translation, as it is the very act of moving through the exhibition and experiencing how it changes that primes the visitor to be curious about the historical alternatives staged within the exhibition.

In this way, the 'Roads not Taken' fits the style of exhibition that Basu and Macdonald call an "[experiment] in meaning-making" (2007, p. 3). They have based this understanding on the epistemology of the scientific age (inaugurated in the mid-seventeenth century), which moved away from the Aristotelian "authority of accepted truths" grounded in doctrine and rhetoric that dominated the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (2007, p. 1). In contrast, the scientific age demonstrated a "commitment to establishing truths about the world through the staging of experiment" (Macdonald and Basu, 2007, p. 1), with experiment understood as a means of discovery. Applying this to museum exhibitions, they argue for exhibitions that are constructed to generate knowledge, offering a "process of discovery" to the visitor (2007, p. 9), rather than a single authoritative narrative. Significantly, this process of discovery will differ for each individual visitor, as each approaches the exhibition with different levels of preexisting knowledge and interacts with it in different ways, meaning that no two visitors will ever experience an exhibition in exactly the same way, thereby enabling a plurality of interpretations.

This links back directly to Vidal Claramonte's point that "there is no single History", as well as her understanding of history translation as the process of "putting facts on the table that have various interpretations" (2025, pp. 8, 7). Indeed, as part of the 'experimental process of discovery' at work through the counterfactual historiography of the exhibition, visitors play "an active role […]; drawing their own observations and conclusions without the reassuring presence of an 'authority' to defer to" (Macdonald and Basu, 2007, p. 16). To put it another way, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition enacts a mode of public history that is concerned with "[helping] members of the public do their own history and [aiding] them in understanding their role in shaping and interpreting events" (Grele, 1981, p. 48). In this way, the 'process of discovery' that the visitors are invited into explores the process of history production – "doing their own history", in the words of Grele (1981, p. 48) – where, rather than simply being offered a finalised 'product' (i.e. an authoritative historical narrative), the visitors become translators of history alongside the curators as they are brought to critically reflect on historical alternatives suggested through the mode of subjunctive translation. And, as we saw in Section 2.2, inciting critical

reflection – or, what they termed 'historical judgement' – amongst visitors is a key goal of the exhibition according to the curators.

This reaffirms what I suggested in the previous section (3.2), that it is the process of consideration and critical reasoning that is most important in this exhibition. In the end it actually does not matter as to whether or not the visitor comes to a concrete conclusion about whether each particular alternative could actually have happened or not – it is simply enacting the experimental process of discovery that matters, as through this process the visitor learns to critically reflect on history for themselves. Indeed, from this experimental process of discovery enacted through subjunctive translation, "a more reflexive definition of history emerges as both open and co-constructed between the participant and the professional historian" (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. xi). It is thus precisely in this way that the visitors are taught to "[do] their own history", to borrow once again the words of Grele (1981, p. 148), as they are brought to reason for themselves without passively relying on singular, authoritative narratives. This process is the particular strength that comes from the museological strategy of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition: the very experience of the exhibition teaches visitors to judge history for themselves, as they learn to do their own history through this counterfactual method of considering "past futures" (Deluermoz and Singaravélou, 2021, p. 145) in subjunctive translation.

## 4. Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition at the Deutsche Historische Museum can be understood through a translational lens, and, more specifically, as enacting a mode of translation in the subjunctive mood. In doing so, I have challenged the curatorial team's insistence on a binary between 'verifiable' historical alternatives and counterfactual historiography, suggesting instead that such a distinction does not hold when considered in light of both established theories of counterfactual historiography and a broader understanding of historiography as a translational practice. Rather than existing in opposition, the 'verifiable' alternatives presented in the exhibition can be seen to operate as plausible counterfactuals, occasionally grounded in primary sources but, most importantly, activated through the visitor's own powers of reasoning.

By conceptualising historiography as translation, it becomes possible to move beyond the notion of a singular, authoritative past and instead recognise the multiplicity of narratives and interpretations that constitute what we come to understand as history. Within this framework, the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition does not merely present alternative historical outcomes but actively stages the conditions through which these alternatives can be experienced, assessed, and translated by its visitors. It is in this sense that the exhibition translates the past in the subjunctive mood: it does not ask what happened, but rather what could have happened, and, crucially, invites the visitor to inhabit this space of possibility as if it were still open.

Importantly, this process foregrounds the role of the visitor as an active participant in the production of historical knowledge. As has been shown, the exhibition creates an

environment in which visitors are not simply consumers of authoritative narratives but are instead positioned as co-translators of the past, tasked with evaluating the plausibility of alternative outcomes and, in doing so, reflecting critically on the nature of historicization itself. Ultimately, the value of the 'Roads not Taken' exhibition lies not in the degree to which its proposed alternatives can be verified, but in the extent to which it succeeds in opening up a space for critical engagement with the past through the process of subjunctive translation.

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# ‘THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY’: REIMAGING FORMOSA AS A TRANSLATION SPACE IN THE RED FORT MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: ‘The past is a foreign country’ is more than a metaphor for the strangeness of the past – it is often a reality of what Sherry Simon refers to as ‘translation space’, with its layers of everyday practices across time carried out in different languages and cultural norms. This article examines the reconstruction of a heritage site in Taiwan to explore how translation acts as a gatekeeper by selecting what aspects of the past are carried into the present. It explores both the physical space of the heritage site and the imagined space conceived by a foreign traveller’s diary and its translations. While the physical site anchors intangible memories in place, literary texts – containing the memories of individual writers (mediated through translators) – reactivate the ruins. The combination of the two spaces transforms the heritage site into a live performance of a (translated) past.
KEYWORDS: Translation Space, Museum Translation, Cultural Heritage, Discordant Translation

## 1. Introduction

> “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” (Hartley, 1953)

The well-known quotation from L. P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between* (1953) challenges the assumption, often upheld in historicist thought, that the past and present form an unbroken temporal continuum. Instead, the past can be so distinct in its behaviours, norms and values that it feels like an unfamiliar foreign country. The quotation is echoed in the title of historian David Lowenthal’s seminal work, *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (2015) in which he examines how memory shapes our relationship with the past. He presents a vivid visual account of how the past enters the present:

> the past is more and more bitterly contested, a prime arena of envious rivalry, clamour over purloined paintings […], the opening of archives and the closing of libraries, demands for national and tribal restitution, court trails over repressed and false memories, quarrels over memorials and monuments […] make the past the world’s largest – and most costly – legal arena. (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 15)

The winners of these competitions are the memories that are selected and reactivated through various modes, including the republication of literature, the erection of monuments or the inclusion of past artefacts in museum displays. Paul Williams echoes this view of contested histories in his study on memorial museums, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (2007), where he examines the global rise of memorial museums and their role in shaping collective memory.

While Hartley (1953) and Lowenthal (2015) use the metaphor of a foreign country to contrast the past with the present, the past can also literally *be* foreign in what the

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translation scholar Sherry Simon (2018) refers to as 'translation space', where cultural and linguistic tensions persist across time in contexts such as colonial histories, border cities and migrant societies. In such cases, the earlier inhabitants of the same territory may have spoken different languages and belonged to distinct cultures. Understanding that past, therefore, is much like navigating a foreign country – a process in which translation plays a crucial role.

The metaphor of the past as a foreign country also shifts our attention from the temporal to the spatial dimension of human activities. Space emerged as a major focus in the social sciences at the beginning of the 20th century and challenged the earlier prioritisation of time – a tendency "manifested through the lens of historicism" (Warf and Arias, 2009, p. 2), where human events were organised along a linear, unfolding temporal axis. The spatial turn, led by key thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre (1991), emphasises that space is not merely a neutral backdrop against which historical events took place, but is socially constructed and shaped by ideological forces as well as its users' subjective experiences (Warf and Arias, 2009, p. 3). By centring on the physical space shared by people past and present, it provides a tangible anchor for everyday practices, memories and the records that preserve them.

This research project carries out a case study examining the Red Fort,[2] a heritage site in Taiwan, and how it was recalled in the 19th century, as recorded in *Journal of a Blockaded Resident in North Formosa During the Franco-Chinese War, 1884–5* by Scottish merchant John Dodd. The Red Fort has been chosen for its significance within Taiwan's heritage restoration projects (再造歷史現場 [Regeneration of Historic Sites]) led by the Ministry of Culture, Taiwan (n.d.), and its complex history of construction and management under various colonial powers and foreign regimes. Dodd's journal has been selected for its detailed account of how he and other British nationals sought refuge in the Red Fort during the Sino-French War. The text offers a rich description of the physical features of the fort and the experiences of those who took shelter there; and it has served as an important historical reference in the Red Fort's restoration, as documented in restoration project reports (Li, 2019; Lin, 2020).

From this spatial perspective, this article explores the intersection of translation, memory and space as mediated through the museum exhibition and translated literature. It examines how the translation of a foreign traveller's journal, which is referenced in the restoration project of the Red Fort as a heritage site, is reimagined within the Red Fort's exhibition space. Such spaces – including the physical display room, the museum's digital interactive platform and historical theatre activities organised by the museum – are collectively conceptualised in this paper as translation spaces. Specifically, the project asks:

[2] Over time, the site has been known by different names, including Fort Santo Domingo, when it was first established by the Spanish in 1628, and Fort Antonio, following its takeover by the Dutch in 1644. Today, it is known to Taiwanese visitors as 紅毛城 (Hong Mao Cheng), literally 'Red Hair Castle', a reference to the red hair of the Dutch. This is also the official Mandarin name used by the museum, so I adopt it as a general reference for the site in this article, while acknowledging its historically shifting names across languages and periods.

How do the mediated translation and the reconstructed heritage site together create a reimagined space?

**2. Translation space and a spatial framework**

The spatial turn has been influential in social and humanities studies, and it has also been subject to engagement from researchers in the field of translation studies. The growing body of research on translation and space, notably inspired by Sherry Simon's works on 'translation spaces' (2018) and 'translation sites' (2019), has shifted the focus of translation studies from intangible discursive meanings to tangible geographical spaces. Simon defines multilingual cities as a space "where more than one language group feels entitled to *the same territory*" (Simon, 2021, p. 18, emphasis mine). A translational view of space thus draws attention to competition between languages and the flows in the directions of translations from one language to another, rather than assuming their co-existence.

Within physical spaces, acts of translation and their traces manifest in diverse material forms, such as shop signage and road signs, as well as conversations in grocery stores and local markets. In other cases, the surface of the city may appear monolingual and display a homogeneous linguistic landscape, but traces of users and uses of different languages can still be revealed in the stratigraphic layer of history – such as historical buildings and memorials; this is often with the cases of border cities. In yet other cases, the material traces are almost invisible and inaudible, but deliberate excavation – physically, as in archaeological work, or textually, through research using historical data – can reveal a hidden page in the history of the place. In such cases, it is hardly surprising that decisions about whether to uncover, preserve or erase the material traces of particular language users and their practices are shaped less by the past than by present concerns. As Westphal (2011) argues, exploration of the past "imagines the form that a place can virtually adopt" (p. 143). In this process of reimagining the past of a translation site, Simon (2019) argues that translation "participates in the aggression of overwriting, obliterating former histories" (p. 7) – that is, the past is reactivated and reconstructed only to serve present-day interests.

The link between literary writing and its geographical reference is particularly explored through the literary approach called 'geocriticism', or literary geography, which can be described as:

> a way of looking at the spaces of literature, broadly conceived to include not only those places that readers and writers experience by means of texts but also the experience of space and place within ourselves, our *situatedness* in space as a condition of our own existence (Tally, 2019, p. 49, original emphasis).

A key point in this theory is that geographical writing is not simply about archiving, describing or gathering descriptive information of a place, and it is not evaluated based on how 'accurately' it records a material space. Rather, the act of writing is an act of constructing space based on the relative positions of the characters, the writer and the

readers. Geocriticism views every writer as a cartographer and asserts that writing is an act of mapping that "makes place, establishing relations and assigning various levels of significance to different spaces and places" (Tally, 2019, p. 5).

Studies on geocriticism have drawn their understanding of space and place from human geographers such as Tuan (1977) and Lefebvre (1991). They regard space as an empty, three-dimensional physical entity without inherent meaning, which is then transformed into place when "humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way" (Cresswell, 2015, p. 17). Building on this distinction, space remains open to interpretation, with literature providing a crucial tool for imbuing space with meaning and shaping its affective significance.

To examine how the space of the Red Fort is constructed through museum exhibitions and literary translation, this study follows the triadic model of space from the field of human geography (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) to break down the focus of space into material, imagined and experiential components.[3] 'Material space' encompasses the empirical measurable and mappable phenomena, which include the physical features we can associate with a geographical location and that can be located using Global Positioning System (GPS), for example. 'Imagined space' is how the space is represented in modes such as maps and literary writings. 'Experiential space' is where everything comes together – including the physical, the imagined, as well as the subjective experiences of the users (those who visited the site, for example, in the case of this project). This space has, in particular, been much elaborated by Soja (1996) as 'thirdspace', which he argues is not just a combination of the other two spaces, but a 'thirding-as-othering' space that is "subjected to a creative process of *reconstructing* that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to pen new alternatives" (p. 5, original emphasis).

In this project, Soja's 'thirding-as-othering' can be understood as the creation of new meaning within a space that extends beyond the affordance of its material space and the individual memory as recorded in a traveller's journal. This enquiry into what can be extended beyond the combination of the material space and the imagined space also resonates with Tally's (2019) key argument: "Geocriticism must examine not only the real-and-imagined places of literature but also the conditions for *their possibility*" (p. 43, emphasis mine). With its primary focus on the literary representation of space, geocriticism offers two key insights. First, the imagined space in literature can never provide an 'accurate' depiction of a physical location. Like other forms of spatial representation – such as maps, drawings or photographs – literary renderings capture only a specific perspective, at a particular moment, based on the creator's subjective judgement about what is worth portraying. Many aspects of a space – such as its odours, temperature or the broader

[3]It is worth noting that since Lefebvre first proposed the spatial triadic model in his influential work *The Production of Space* (1991), it has been widely applied to different types of spaces, with varying emphasis on the factors driving their construction. The three dimensions of space have thus been given different labels over time – for example, as 'first/second/third' spaces; 'perceived/conceived/lived' spaces; or 'real/imagined/experiential' spaces. For present purposes, I have chosen to use the terms 'material', 'imagined' and 'experiential' to better reflect the nature of the data and the specific focus of this study.

context beyond the cartographic frame – are inevitably lost. Second, and more importantly, the value of literary representation does not lie in its precise mirroring of a geographical reference. Rather, it should be understood as a generative act that imagines new spatial possibilities beyond the limits of physical space.

**3. Negotiating the translation space: discordant translation**

Central to Westphal's concept of geocriticism is the notion that researchers should gather as many literary representations of a physical space as possible, so that different perspectives can be examined, thus bringing us closer to the 'accurate' depiction of the material space. Tally (2019), however, suggests that analysing a single work can also be valuable, as it reveals important insights about the individual writer's subject experiences (p. 49). I align with Tally's perspective and agree that achieving an accurate representation of a space is impossible – and, more importantly, that it should not be the goal, as space is constantly constructed and reconstructed. In this project, however, with its focus on a translation site and a translated literary work, the multi-layered and stratigraphic dimensions are already inherent in the analysis.

The translated literary work can be seen both as a dialogue between two voices and as a clash of two viewpoints. The position of the producer of the source text (ST) can be reinforced, challenged or overshadowed by – or co-exist with – the translator's during the translation process. In literary translation, Herman's (2014) concept of discordant translation specifically examines the interplay between the dual voices of the translator and the author, which highlights the literary devices that enable the translator to open up new possibilities within the ST.

In my case study, the literary space that was initially recorded through the gaze of a 19$^{th}$-century Briton residing in Taiwan is retold by a contemporary translator for present-day readers. The readers of the target text (TT), while inhabiting the same geographical location, have experiences of the place that differ significantly from those of the past, so a bridge needs to be made between the ST producer and the TT receivers.

To understand how the translator negotiates the imagined space in the text and manages the relationship between the ST producer and the TT receiver, we can draw a parallel between the translator–author relationship and the author–narrator dynamic in fiction. Benstock (1983) offers an insightful discussion on how literary devices such as footnotes allow the author to interrupt the narrator, pausing the primary text to draw readers' attention to the author's presence. Frequent interruptions through notes shift the focus and subordinate the storyline to the annotations. This shift can lead readers to question the narrator's credibility and the reliability of the story being told, especially when the narrator makes statements that seem unconvincing or nonsensical. Footnotes allow the author to intervene and guide readers to interpret such elements as irony, symbolism or deliberate stylistic choices.

Similarly, in translated works framed by paratextual information such as translators' notes and prefaces, the translator's voice becomes more pronounced. These interventions

shape how the ST author's voice is perceived or, in the words of Hermans, "stage the author's voice" (2014, p. 189), thus influencing interpretation and reader engagement. Hermans refers to this phenomenon as 'discordant translation', which is an extension of Cohn's (2000) concept of the 'discordant narrator'. Indeed, Cohn describes cases, similar to those outlined by Benstock (1983), where an author presents a narrator or fictional character whose speech or actions subtly signal the author's reservations or disagreement with their perspective. In discordant translation, the translator adopts a similar role and frames reservations about the ST author's voice. This effectively casts the ST author as the narrator while positioning the translator as "the authorial presence" (Hermans, 2014, p. 292), thus shaping which aspects of the author's voice are conveyed and how they are represented.

Hermans (2014) argues that the cultural and social significance of translation lies in the fact that it attaches value judgements to the ST and acts as an ideological filter shaping the reception of the translation (p. 298). In essence, translators perform the ST before TT readers, thus influencing its reception and interpretation. To go back to the concept of creating new possible space, we can argue that the new possibilities of the literary text (e.g. John Dodd's memories, as recorded in his own writing) are created when the translator frames this memory in a way that signals to readers whether or not it should be viewed as reliable. In this process, a 'thirding-as-othering' (Soja, 1996) space emerges from the ST through the performance of the translator and, subsequently, the incorporation of this translated work as an important reference to the restoration project of the heritage site.

## 4. Reimagining Formosa

The Red Fort is a key heritage site within the Taiwanese government's cultural initiative, 'Regeneration of Historical Sites' (Ministry of Culture, Taiwan, n.d.). This project is focused on restoring Taiwan's multicultural past through collective memory and has led to the transformation of ruined heritage sites into exhibitions, as well as a surge in the (re)publication of translated accounts from foreign residents and travellers. These historical records, which often refer to Taiwan as 'Formosa', are explicitly cited in the regeneration project reports (e.g. Li, 2019; Lin, 2020), thus highlighting their role in shaping contemporary narratives. By integrating the memories of foreign travellers and settlers, these restoration projects not only transport visitors to the past but also to foreign perspectives – literally embodying Lowenthal's (2015) notion that 'the past is a foreign country'.

To provide some background, Formosa is the geographical term referring to the island of Taiwan that appeared in the historical record of Western colonisers and powers. Legend has it that the term was first used by Portuguese sailors— as the feminine form of the Portuguese adjective meaning 'beautiful'—and then adopted by the Spanish and the Dutch, who very briefly colonised part of the island in the 18th century. The island has since been under the control of the Qing Dynasty of China and of Japan, and now has the

controversial status of 'Republic of China' – or, as some prefer, the geographical term 'Taiwan'. With this political tension, we have seen a more recent discourse start restoring the nostalgic term 'Formosa', once imagined by the foreigners, to represent the island in English.

Amid political tensions and an ongoing identity crisis, there has been a surge in efforts to redefine the island and its people by re-examining their historical connections within the wider world. Heylen's (2010) examination of a "transnational Taiwan as a cultural and historical imaginary" (p. 10) comments on the crucial role of integrating 'translational history' with historical sources drawn beyond the Sino-centric sources as an alternative way of seeing. There appears to be a deliberate effort to create an alternative construction of space – a new possibility that emerges from its existing material substance and extends beyond the frameworks established by Chinese-based historical accounts, many of which originate from Qing Dynasty sources. Consequently, it has been noted that, corresponding with the trend of awareness about Taiwan in the 1990s, there has been an increase in the translation of historical record of foreigners who resided in or travelled to Taiwan from the 18$^{th}$ century to the early 20$^{th}$ century (Lin, 2013). Most of these texts are the diaries or journals of individuals about their lives in Taiwan. While these individual memories do not provide a comprehensive overview, and the accuracy of their record of the past may need to be verified, they provide a vivid picture of what living in Formosa during those times was like – what the weather was like, the characteristics of the people on the island and what food they ate, for example.

In parallel to the excavation of the memories of these foreigners, there has also been an endeavour to create 'sites of translation' throughout the island – that is, an attempt to reconstruct the sites that had been established by foreign colonisers or settlers or associated with them – most notably, the Red Fort, or Fort Santo Domingo (established by the Spaniards in the north) and Fort Zeelandia (built by the Dutch in the south). These tangible sites facilitate tourists' imaginings of how Spanish and Dutch were once spoken on the island. The Red Fort especially functions like a tangible record of foreigners' footprints on Taiwan; the fort was first established by the Spanish, conquered by the Dutch, much neglected during the Qing regime and then subsequently became the site of the British consulate. After the UK broke its diplomatic ties with the Republic of China, the site was temporarily managed by Austria and the United States, until both of them also cut diplomatic ties with the Republic of China. The site contains a long memory of the island and was finally designated as a Class A heritage site in 1983. Since then, it has become an important stage for the reactivation and performance of the multicultural memory of Formosa.

In the following sections, I explore this process of reimaging Formosa from two perspectives: first, the Mandarin translation of John Dodd's memories associated with the Red Fort, by closely examining the journal he wrote when he took refuge inside the fort for three months during the Sino-French war in 1884–1885, and second, the reconstruction of

the Red Fort as a translation space. I illustrate how the two processes of recreating both the physical site and the imagined space reinforce each other.

**5. Reimagining Dodd's Red Fort in translation**

The Mandarin translation of John Dodd's journal was published in Taiwan in 2007. The translator is Jackson Chen [陳政三], and it was given the title '泡茶走西仔反：清法戰爭台灣外記' (literally, 'Brewing Tea and Battling the Xi-Zai: An Unofficial Account of the Qing-French War in Taiwan'). The cover page explains that the term 西仔 (Xi-Zai, literally, 'Western lads') in the title was how the Taiwanese at the time referred to the French. Additionally, the phrase 'brewing tea' evokes the image of British tea merchants in Taiwan, who, unable to export their tea due to the war, could do nothing but sit and drink tea while they waited.

Even before opening the book, the creative translation of the title signals to readers Chen's flexible and inventive approach. The European gaze in Dodd's work is shifted by the translation of this title – from 'Franco-Sino' to 'Qing-French' War – and the reference to the French as 'Xi Zai' is a product of the local Taiwanese gaze on Westerners, not Dodd's. The author–translator relationship in this translated text is explicitly questioned on the book's cover, where John Dodd is credited as the author and Chen as the 譯著 (literally, 'translator–author'). This unconventional term is further clarified in the preface:

> 修訂版全書十三萬字，原著譯文近六萬，換句話說，其他七萬多字全由筆者「囉嗦」包辦了(所以就「升格」為譯著者；原用「譯述」讀者不太瞭解其意，用「譯註」又無法涵括)，算是與傳奇人物陶德的再度跨時空合作。
> [The revised edition[4] totals 130,000 words, of which nearly 60,000 words are translated from the source text. In other words, the remaining 70,000-plus words are my 'verbose' contribution (hence [my] upgrade to 'translator–author'. The previous version used the term 'translator-narrator', but it confused readers, whereas the term 'translation-commentator' does not fully cover this work). [This work] can be seen as a renewed, cross-temporal collaboration with the legendary figure, John Dodd.[5]] (Chen, 2007, p. 3)

Chen's self-declaration of his role at the outset, along with the emphasis that he has added more than half of the material in the book, serves as a clear strategy for framing the relationship between the ST author and the TT reader. It positions Chen as a more central figure in the book than Dodd, the ST author. The translation thus shifts the book from a Westerner's gaze on Formosa to a local Taiwanese perspective on a Westerner's story of living in Formosa.

[4] In the preface, Chen (2007, p. 1) notes that this edition is a revised version of an earlier translation published by a different publisher in 2002. With that publisher now closed, the 2002 edition is no longer available. As the 2007 edition is the one referenced in museum restoration projects, this study does not examine the earlier version or compare the two.

[5] All English back-translations of the Mandarin text in square brackets have been made by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Another clear shift of the gaze is Chen's translation or addition of the word 'foreigner', including 外國佬 (literally, 'foreign bloke'), 洋鬼子 (literally, 'foreign devils') and 外國蠻子 (literally, 'foreign barbarian'), which are either derogatory or colloquial local expressions that have historically been used to refer to Westerners and imply that Westerners are uncivilised or inferior. This shift of gaze on the space allows examination of the geographical location of the space from different perspectives.

Chen's additions are most visible to target readers in the form of five 導讀 (*dao du*, literally guides to reading), which precede the five chapters. At the end of the book, he appended 30 short stories of his own, recounting historical events from the same period. Throughout the translation, the 250 footnotes Chen added repeatedly interrupt Dodd's voice and remind TT readers of his presence, sometimes visually occupying nearly half a page. Table 1 gives an overview of the of footnotes Chen created, showing how he engaged in a dialogic relationship with the ST author. The total number exceeds 250, because some footnotes are lengthy and perform more than one functions, therefore falling into multiple categories.

**Table 1.** Footnotes in the translation

| Footnotes | Functions | Instances | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Directly responding to Dodd's text | Explain | 22 | 9% |
| | Challenge | 22 | 9% |
| | Approve | 8 | 3% |
| | Subtotal | 52 | 21% |
| Not directly responding to Dodd's text | Add historical context | 195 | 77% |
| | Clarify translation strategies | 7 | 2% |
| | Subtotal | 202 | 79% |
| **Total** | | **254** | **100%** |

The table is broadly divided into two categories of footnotes. The first consists of notes that respond directly to Dodd's writing – that is, those explicitly referencing his name and specific wording or expressions in the ST. The second category, while still related to the ST, does not explicitly refer to Dodd or his views; instead, these notes read more as a parallel narrative that reflects the translators' own knowledge and insights into the events recorded in the diary's historical context.

Table 1 shows that the majority of the footnotes (79%) are Chen's additions; they do not directly respond to Dodd's words but provide additional contextual information – historical, social and religious, among others. As a historian specialising in this historical period, Chen incorporates numerous references from Qing China, Japan and France to offer further details about the wars, global politics and local practices. These comments are not always purely explanatory; many also convey Chen's personal views. For instance, when Dodd recorded celebrating Queen Victoria's birthday on 24 May 1885:

> Queen's birthday! Even in this remote corner of the world the birthday of Good Queen Victoria is never forgotten. (Dodd, 1888, p.155)

Chen adds a note that is not necessary for understanding Dodd's diary, but instead reads as an effort to engage readers in a point he personally wished to share:

> 維多利亞女王在位期間(1837-1901年)有部分與三度垂簾聽政的慈禧太后(1861-1908年主政)重疊，一西一中，表現得南轅北轍，一個重振日不落國威風，一個卻搞垮東方文明大國。
> [During the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), there was a period that overlapped with the rule of Empress Dowager Cixi, who governed three times from behind the curtain (effectively in power from 1861 to 1908). One in the West and one in China, their trajectories moved in completely opposite directions: one revitalised the British Empire, while the other brought about the decline of a great Eastern civilisation.] (Chen, 2007, p.125)

Such notes shift the reader's engagement away from Dodd as the ST author and redirect it towards an interaction with the translator – or in this case, with Chen as the translator–author, creating what is almost a parallel narrative alongside the main text.

Chen's translator–author status is even more explicitly established through footnotes that respond directly to Dodd's writing. In 22 instances, Chen elaborates on or clarifies Dodd's account, while in another 22 he corrects or challenges the reliability of Dodd's observations. Interestingly, Chen also asserts his authority over Dodd by occasionally endorsing Dodd's observations, thus positioning himself as someone able to evaluate and validate Dodd's account.

Chen's challenges to Dodd extend beyond matters of historical detail, such as place names or casualty figures. His most direct interventions concern Dodd's position during the war and the side he appears to support. In doing so, Chen guides readers in reassessing John Dodd as a narrator whose account is not entirely reliable and whose recollections invite scrutiny. During the period of the blockade, many local people in Taiwan suspected that the British supported the French and might even have been acting as spies. Chen raises this suspicion in the preface, in the reading guide preceding one of the chapters and in several footnotes. For instance, in the entry on 25 October, Dodd wrote about how he and his employers were unfairly charged as spying for the French

> For some time past it has been rumoured that certain Chinese have been in communication with the French, and suspicion for the past day or two has fallen on a foreigner. […] However, as the matter was placed in the Consul's hands, it will be perhaps as well not to make any further comment, especially as the writer was the man unjustly suspected and his Chinese employee. (Dodd, 1888, p. 69)

While Dodd asserts the injustice of this accusation, several footnotes by Chen guide readers towards a different interpretation, such as:

> 陶德報導充分顯露希望法國勝利的立場 […]，難怪陶德會被懷疑私通法國，成了列管的「黑名單」[Dodd's reporting fully revealed his hope for a French victory […], so it is not

> surprising that he was suspected of secretly colluding with France and was placed on a monitored 'blacklist'.] (Chen, 2007, p. 84)

In addition to his political stance, Dodd's observations of Taiwan's local customs and culture also face Chen's criticism. In one entry, Dodd (1888) describes the scene of a local temple ceremony and comments that the josses are "either printed black or have become dirty in appearance for want of soap" (p. 164), an expression that Chen translates faithfully into Mandarin. However, he adds a footnote commenting on Dodd's 'white superiority':

> 有的神像式因長久香火煙燻，而成黑色。陶德筆調狀似幽默，但其實帶著白人優越感的歧視寫法。
> [Some statues have turned black from long exposure to incense smoke. Dodd's tone appears humorous, but it actually carries a discriminatory undertone rooted in white supremacism.] (Chen, 2007, p. 131)

These comments about Dodd – particularly his stance during the Sino-French War and his exoticised view of local festival practices – clearly demonstrate how differing perspectives are negotiated through translation to influence the reader's perception of the ST author. The 'dialogue' that takes place between the translator and the ST author shows that the translator reports the author's voice alongside more visible strategies such as prefaces and notes, but also less visibly through omission and word choice. The book is Chen's heavily mediated report of Dodd's diary, rather than direct contact between the contemporary Taiwanese reader and Dodd.

From the analysis of the translation, it can be argued that, rather than attributing the imagined space directly to John Dodd's diary, it is more accurate to see it as a reimagined space produced through Chen's substantial mediation in his role as translator–author. This observation raises a further question: when Dodd's journal was used as a key historical reference in the site's restoration project, whose memory is being presented to visitors, and to what extent is the translator's stance visible within this space?

## 6. Reconstructing the Red Fort: combining the physical and the imagined

Although the history of the Red Fort can be traced back to 1628, the earliest material evidence of its history is a few bricks left from the Dutch period. The main structure of the current building is left over from its use as the British Consulate, but the site itself has undergone various renovations. In other words, the significance of this historical site perhaps rests not so much on its functioning as material evidence of the past, but rather on its role as a vehicle linking the past to the present. The museum exhibition is instrumental to facilitating the imagination of this travel to the past. By exhibition, I refer not only to the physical display, but also to the museum's interactive digital platform and theatrical performances. This expanded perspective captures more clearly how history is constructed at the site. In particular, the restoration project starting in 2017 placed greater emphasis on activities extending beyond the physical exhibition rooms – likely due to the

limited alterations permitted to the historic building – such as online interactive exhibitions and theatrical performances designed to create more immersive experiences of the past.

The exhibition constructs the Red Fort – and, more broadly, the city – as a translation space, where British residents once lived among local communities whose languages and cultures differed markedly from their own. The stories of several residents are interwoven in the exhibition narrative, including those of consuls and their families. Here, however, I focus specifically on references to Dodd, using his case as an example to show how his story enters the site and contributes to the construction of its historical narrative.

In the exhibition room, the most visible indication of the site's former foreign residents is conveyed through a display of their portraits– some in portrait form, others captured in scenes of daily activity – as well as material objects that once belonged to them. Figure 1 depicts Dodd (bottom) and his comprador Li (top), accompanied by a panel introducing the story of his tea enterprise.

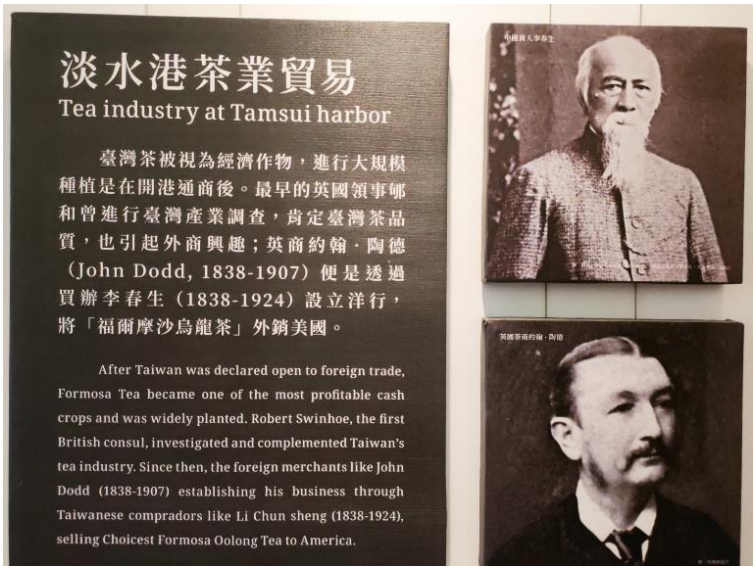



**Figure 1.** Text panel: 'The Tea industry at Tamsui harbour' (photo by the author). Image reproduced by permission of Tamsui Historical Museum, New Taipei City [新北市立淡水古蹟博物館]).

While Dodd's presence in the exhibition room is limited to his portrait and a brief description of his business career, the museum's online exhibition: 'The 160th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Tamsui Customs' (Tamsui Historical Museum, n.d.) offers a more direct engagement with his life as recorded in his journal, with references to his diary clearly cited. This online exhibition features an interactive game with multiple challenges, in which prominent British residents of the city are reimagined as gatekeepers. Among them, John Dodd appears as the gatekeeper of a boating event, adapted from an activity recorded in his diary. The sensory engagement with the boats is vividly described in Dodd's diary and has been turned into a multimedia game:

> 29th December. At 10 o'clock precisely the regatta commenced. The first was a rowing match between three local gigs (6-oared), Chinese crews. The second was a race between three six-

> oared gigs with foreign crews. The "Stokers" won, beating the other two crews of blue jackets. Then came a canoe race. After tiffin there was a sailing race between the *Cockchafer's* boats and local gigs. […] The prizes amounted to close on $150, the highest being $20 (Dodd, 1888, p. 95).

This diary entry led to the following passage on the website:

> 划船賽/ 早上十點英商陶德舉辦的划船比賽，正式開跑！總獎金高達150元！吸引許多隊伍熱烈報名。　第一場比賽由三支在地隊伍互相對抗，第二場有英國海軍在內的三支外國人隊伍競爭奪牌，下午更由英艦金龜子號船員對戰在地隊伍，戰況十分激烈！連舢舨船都被用來比賽。
> [Rowing Race/ At 10 a.m., the rowing competition organised by British merchant John Dodd officially began! With a total prize of 150 yuan, it attracted many enthusiastic teams to sign up. The first race featured a contest among three local teams. In the second race, three foreign teams – including members of the British Navy – competed for medals. In the afternoon, the crew of the British ship *Cockchafer* faced off against a local team in an intense battle, with even sampan boats used for the races!] (Tamsui Historical Museum, n.d.)

After this passage, a reference is added to indicate that it is an adaptation from Dodd's diary entry on 29 December 1884, although there is no mention of the Mandarin translation. What is particularly interesting here is how Dodd's memory has not only been translated linguistically into Mandarin but was been further transformed into a different semiotic mode: a digital game that is both visually and sonically interactive. The gaze of the narrator has shifted once again. In the diary, Dodd observes the race, but in this reimagined virtual space, he becomes the organiser of a racing boat game staged by British soldiers, while we, the contemporary readers, take Dodd's place as observers of the game.

Earlier, in the discussion of triadic space, I drew on Soja's (1996) notion of 'thirding-as-othering' as a process of reconstruction, which selectively and strategically draws from both imagined and physical space. Here, the exhibition curators of the Red Fort, as readers of Dodd's diary (already a highly mediated Mandarin version), effectively assume a role as a further mediator: they recreate the written material into visual form – again selectively and strategically – within the framework of the restoration project, the goal of which is to revitalise the ruined physical site through stories, memories, and visitor engagement. In this further layer of mediation, Dodd's memory is reimagined through a different semiotic mode – digitally interactive visual signs with their own affordances. The more critical elements of Chen's translation have been removed, as has Dodd's implicit sense of white superiority. Within the limited space of the exhibition, his memory is selectively deployed to create a playful, visualised representation of a group of British people as friendly, cartoon-like figures.

Dodd's memories, as recorded in his diary, have been incorporated into the exhibition in a variety of material forms. For instance, in addition to these onsite and online exhibitions, an annual 'historical site theatre' (古蹟劇場) with live performances is also held at the Red Fort site, featuring actors in period costumes portraying John Dodd, other British figures, Qing officials and local residents in an effort to recreate life around the fort

during that era. In this reimagining, Dodd's memory is brought to life by a local Taiwanese performer speaking Mandarin, thus creating a further mediated interpersonal encounter between his memory and the performer–viewer, beyond the interactions between Dodd, the translator and the reader.

Due to space constraints, this section can only provide a necessarily brief snapshot to show that Dodd's memory has been creatively woven into the Red Fort as a translation space in various modes – as an excerpt from his diary, a visual interactive game and a theatre performance. References to his journal are clearly cited on the website, but the translation is not cited. However, the restoration project documents and the research project team's report make clear references to Chen's translation. In fact, they clearly notice Chen's high degree of mediation and give their approval. In the working reports of the Historic Regeneration projects, Chen's translation is credited as an important source for the restoration project. Crediting Chen's voice over Dodd's is evident in the additional information they provide alongside the reference to John Dodd's diary:

> 文章內容很多是他個人對於戰爭的臆測。[…]譯者陳政三為了提高此書之閱讀性，特別在本書有疑誤之部分也補充了相關史料，進行了考證與詳細說明，確立了陶德書中之說法是否正確。
> [Much of the writing is his personal speculations about the war. […] the translator Jackson Chen has supplemented sections containing potential errors by providing relevant historical sources, conducting thorough investigations and offering detailed explanations to determine the accuracy of Dodd's claims.] (Lin, 2020, p. 137)

In short, the mediated version of Chen's translation has clearly shaped the restoration project that integrates Dodd into the Red Fort. However, while Dodd is made visible to the visitor, the translator is not. So how should we account for this dynamic between the ST writer, the translator, and the exhibition curator – who collectively construct the lived space of the Red Fort?

## 7. Conclusion

This research project asked: How do mediated translation and a reconstructed heritage site together create a reimagined space? By analysing the written translation of Dodd's memories of the Red Fort, as recorded in his diary, alongside the multimodal exhibition curated by the Red Fort Museum drawing from that diary, we can see that new possibilities emerge beyond what the material site and the textual record alone can afford. This reimagined – or 'thirding-as-othering' – space (Soja 1996), is generated through the selective and strategic combination of these two spaces into a new possible space.

New possibilities arise in the written translation through literary devices such as prefaces, footnotes and additions that constantly interrupt the ST author, thus elevating the translator to the status of a translator–author. The exhibition space also generates new possibilities through an assemblage of semiotic resources – including visual portraits, interactive digital games and live theatre performances – which selectively incorporate

aspects of the translated diary into the visitor experience. Intertextual links can be traced across these stages; however, Dodd's memories become increasingly distanced from their original temporal and spatial context.

Returning to Lowenthal's (2015) account of the contested past, we can observe how the ST writer, the translator and the exhibition curator – through their voices, the affordances of different semiotic modes and a layered approach to storytelling across temporal and spatial intersections – engage in a dynamic interplay, yet also compete, to produce a version of the Red Fort's past that leaves an imprint on contemporary readers and visitors.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

# TRANSLATING THE PAST: RETHINKING THE PRACTICE OF HISTORIOGRPAHY

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**History as a Translation of the Past: Case Studies from the West**, Luigi Alonzi (ed.), Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 241 pp., £81.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-350-33821-0

Recent debates in Translation Studies and in the humanities have challenged the idea that historians simply recover a stable past from an objective lens. With developments in conceptual history, historiography, and interdisciplinary approaches to culture, scholars have emphasized that the past is always mediated through interpretive frameworks shaped by language, concepts, and present-day concerns. In this sense, historical writing resembles translation: historians, like translators, must render past experiences, concepts, and discourses intelligible for contemporary audiences while preserving their historical specificity, thereby undertaking a negotiating task between the past and the present. This argument forms part of the central claim advanced by Luigi Alonzi in the edited volume *History as a Translation of the Past: Case Studies from the West*.

Alonzi's book challenges linear conceptions of history and instead suggests that historical understanding unfolds through processes of reinterpretation across time, cultures, and conceptual transformation. Bringing together scholars from history, translation studies, classics and cultural theory, this volume examines how the relationship between past and present emerges as a dynamic process of continuous mediation, reinterpretation and rearticulation through acts of translation. Across its nine chapters, it mobilizes a range of theoretical approaches to explore this translational dimension of historical knowledge. These include Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history (1989), the rhetorical approaches to political language developed by Quentin Skinner (2002), the historiographical reflections on narrative and temporality linked to Paul Ricoeur (1984), as well as perspectives from classical reception studies, translation theory, and eco-critical approaches. One way to read the work is through three broad dimensions of translation that structure the chapters based on their arguments: history, temporality, and semantics. Although the chapters are not explicitly organized in this way, this framework helps clarify the core concepts that connect the contributions.

This volume matters because it foregrounds the importance of examining how meanings evolve over time and how historical knowledge depends on processes of reinterpretation. Understanding the past enables a deeper awareness of how contemporary societies have emerged from earlier conceptual and cultural frameworks. In this sense, the book contributes to a more expansive understanding of history that encompasses not only human cultures but

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also the broader temporal layers through which meaning, matter, and life itself are continually transformed.

In the 'Introduction: Translating the past', Luigi Alonzi establishes the core theoretical foundation of this volume by situating history as a fundamental translational process. In this perspective, the historian appears not merely as an interpreter, but as a mediator across time. Drawing on George Steiner's notion of 'translator within' (1998 [1975]), Ricoeur's concept of 'correspondence without equivalence' (2006) and Walter Benjamin's reflections on the 'task of the translator' (1968), Alonzi argues that translation is an epistemological model for historiography. He then frames the volume as a work that goes beyond 'history and translation' to 'history as translation', concluding that historiography should be understood as a process of mediation and reinterpretation, rather than a simple representation of the past.

The first chapter, 'Herodotus translating the past', by Richard P. Martin, explores the translational dimension of early historiography through the example of Herodotus. Martin presents Herodotus not simply as a historian who records facts, but more as a *hermêneus* who interprets the unfamiliar customs and rituals for his target Greek audience, across linguistic and cultural boundaries. His narratives (*Histories*) therefore illustrate how historical knowledge emerges from interpretive performance rather than accumulation of objective data. In this sense, the narratives offer an early instance of cultural translation, in which Herodotus acts as both diachronic and synchronic translator. Martin further suggests that a historiographical source is never pure, being the result of a translational act where cultural differences are negotiated. To conclude, his analysis supports the volume's central claim by showing the persistent translational dimension of historical writing.

Lorna Hardwick's chapter, 'Translation and temporalities in classical reception histories: Narratives, genres, forms and the agency of translators', extends the above argument by exploring translation in reception of Greek tragedy and epic. She focuses in particular on the complex temporalities involved when ancient texts are reinterpreted across different historical contexts. Hardwick argues that ancient works already engaged with contemporary political issues such as war, violence, civil conflict, and that later translations and adaptations continue to reinterpret these themes in new circumstances. Through examples including modern reinterpretations by Tony Harrison, Blake Morrison, and Seamus Heaney, she demonstrates how translation relocates ancient narratives within new social and political frameworks. She also emphasises the agency of translators in shaping the ways in which these ancient texts acquire new meanings in the contemporary scenario. Hardwick thus challenges the notions of fidelity and authenticity, proposing instead that translation involves responsiveness to new temporal contexts. A key takeaway from her chapter is that translation is not a linear linguistic transfer but one that reorganizes temporality by reconstructing the relationship between past and present, thereby reshaping cultural memory and producing new historical meanings.

Karen Bennett's chapter, 'Flesh made word: Translational processes in the production of the synoptic Gospels', examines the translational processes involved in the formation of the synoptic Gospels, highlighting how historical texts themselves often emerge through layers of translation. She analyses how these narratives developed through complex interactions

between oral traditions, linguistic transformations and textual compilations. These processes involved both interlingual and intralingual mediation, as the narratives circulated among different communities before being recorded in the written form. From this perspective, the Gospels appear as products of reinterpretation and linguistic adaptation. Thus, this chapter reinforces the volume's main claim by showing that historical sources and knowledge result from complex processes of translation.

In the fourth chapter, 'The historian's dilemma: Domestication or foreignizing?', Peter Burke addresses the historian's dilemma between domestication and foreignization. Drawing on Lawrence Venuti's concepts (1995), he argues that historians must choose between adapting the past to contemporary frameworks or preserve its strangeness. Basing himself on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) theory of polyphony, Burke proposes the idea of 'polyphonic history' as a partial solution, suggesting that rather than imposing a single interpretive framework, historians should acknowledge multiple voices, perspectives, and temporal layers. In this sense, he emphasises the historian's moral responsibility towards the foreign past, seeking a balance between making the past comprehensible and preserving its difference. He thus implies that total fidelity to the past is impossible and that historians face a similar choice to translators.

In the chapter, '"Chance" in Max Weber's later writings', Keith Tribe focuses on the implications of translation for conceptual history through the example of Talcott Parsons' misinterpretation of Max Weber's concept of 'chance'. Tribe argues that Parson's English translation altered the semantic nuances of Weber's original term, producing a different theoretical understanding within sociology. Through this example, the chapter illustrates how translation can reshape the theoretical framework by transforming key concepts across linguistic and cultural contexts. He illustrates how the reception of Weber's work appears partly as the result of translational choices. This chapter therefore highlights the importance of translational awareness in conceptual history, reinforcing the book's argument that understanding history requires paying attention to the translational processes through which knowledge travels.

Kari Palonen's chapter, '"We politicians": Translation, rhetoric and conceptual change', examines political language as a site of conceptual translation by tracing the historical evolution of the term 'politician'. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history (1989) and Quentin Skinner's *paradiastole* (rhetorical analysis) (2002), Palonen shows how political actors actively reinterpret and redefine concepts in response to changing political circumstances. The author explains the transformation of the term 'politician' into a more neutral or even positive connotation (illustrated by the expression 'we politicians'), through the rhetorical strategy of *paradiastole,* in which terms are assigned new meanings. This shift in meaning resembles a translation-like mechanism, as it involves reinterpretation of existing concepts within new contexts. Palonen's chapter extends the volume's framework by showing that conceptual translation is not limited to historians, but is also performed by political actors.

In the seventh chapter, 'Translated history and historical time: Transtemporal understandings of Greek and Roman concepts', Alexandra Lianeri addresses the relationship

between translation and historical temporality by introducing the concept of transtemporal understanding. She explores how Greek and Roman concepts are translated and interpreted by historians into modern historical discourse. Drawing on the theoretical discussions of Skinner (2002), Koselleck (1989), and Lovejoy (1948), she emphasises that concepts carry multiple temporal layers that resist complete assimilation into modern discourse (which might be described as 'untranslatables'). Historical interpretation thus involves negotiating conceptual differences. Her analysis challenges linear temporality and reinforces the book's argument that historical understanding emerges through acts of translation across time, producing a dialogue between past and present.

Karin Littau's chapter, '"Just ask the stones'": Eco-translation, natural history and geomedia', broadens the scope of the volume by integrating perspectives from geomedia and ecocriticism. Moving beyond textual analysis, she explores how the continuous shifts in natural environments and material landscapes resemble translational process. Littau proposes the concept of eco-translation as a form of mediation between human and non-human temporalities. Her analysis suggests that translation is not exclusively linguistic but also extends to material and environmental mediation, and that history itself is mediated through non-textual systems. She challenges anthropocentric models that limit translation to linguistic communication. Inspired by Novalis (1992), her perspective demonstrates the flexibility of the translational framework for understanding diverse forms of historical transmission.

In the concluding chapter, 'The historian as a translator of the past', Luigi Alonzi synthesises the volume's arguments by conceptualising the historian as a translator who confronts the challenge of translating the untranslatable. Drawing on Ricoeur's (2006) idea of 'correspondence without sameness', he emphasises that historical writing involves translating past meanings into present language, a process that entails both interpretation and transformation since the historian negotiates between the perspectives of past actors and the expectations of contemporary readership. He proposes a 'general theory of relativity' in history that helps recognise multiple coexisting temporalities. From this perspective, translation emerges as a fundamental condition of historiography that encourages epistemological openness. By emphasising the role of the historian, Alonzi reiterates the volume's central thesis that translation is not merely a metaphor for historical interpretation but a process through which historical knowledge itself is produced.

Taken together, the chapters provide a rich interdisciplinary exploration of the relationship between translation and history. Alongside fields such as Anthropology and Cultural studies, the book brings into dialogue translation studies and historiography—two disciplines that have rarely been considered together—thereby opening new avenues for interdisciplinary research. By foregrounding translation as an epistemological foundation in historiography, the volume promotes a reflection on how meanings from the past are continuously reinterpreted with changing contexts.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

## EMOTIONAL TRANSLATION OF HISTORY

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**La traducción emocional de la historia. La memoria traumática en la obra de Svetlana Alexiévich**, by Margarita Savchenkova. Granada: Editorial Comares, 2024, 136 pp., €14.25 ISBN 978-8-413-69773-4.

Margarita Savchenkova's volume on the emotional translation of history is extremely relevant, as the world is now witnessing war, ideological conflicts and changing times. Counting on more than one perspective on historical events avoids the potential danger of a single narrative which is seen as the absolute truth as dictated by the power elites. The author warns the readers about how historical texts are just one of the multiple translations of reality which can be used to rewrite the past. Her main goal with this monograph is to offer a translation analysis of historical narratives focused on trauma and to raise awareness of the importance of understanding history in its plurality to inspire other academics to explore and bear witness to the stories of trauma survivors represented in Alexievich's compilation of testimonies.

Resorting to canonical authors such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Potter, the four chapters that make up the volume are based on the notion that objective reality does not exist but is built through language. The author insists on the fact that language is never neutral, as there are always ideological traces which are linked to the exercise of power. Thus, in the first chapter, Savchenkova starts from the idea of the desacralization of the original, according to this poststructuralist view. She uses the example of Ridley Scott's film *The Last Duel* to lay the groundwork for the topics that will be addressed later, while observing that, through deconstructivist ideas, she seeks to unravel what is "real", thus placing the focus on how language and translation contribute to the construction of reality. The chapter explores different theories on the role of language as an inexhaustible source of meanings and interpretations (p. 27), seeing that it is an instrument of power.

In the second chapter, the author focuses on the expansion of Translation Studies with the most recent definitions of the field, such as the concept of "tangible translation" (p. 40), which highlights the potential of objects to translate, but also to be translated, as well as the omnipresence of the translation process as an interdisciplinary act following the outward turn (Bassnett & Johnston, 2019). She engages in a debate which tries to define what translating means and how Translation Studies have gradually become more interdisciplinary, following the different turns. The translational turn, as well as other later 'turns' which would ultimately lead to the outward turn (p. 35), prompted researchers to look beyond the autocomplacency denounced by Bassnett (p. 32). These new perspectives allow the consideration of new

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definitions of texts as well as the inclusion of new objects of study, such as the body (now integrated in academia to a considerable extent) or objects, which are not static, but tell stories and are translatable.

In the third chapter the author focuses on history and memory to offer an interpretation of both elements from the perspective of Translation Studies. She analyses the understanding of history before the linguistic turn and insists on the important role that memory plays in constructing new narratives of the past, where the study of trauma has an impact on a linguistic and emotional level. She begins the chapter by pointing out that knowing plural stories allows us to comprehend the past beyond the dominance-imposed versions of the elites. Addressing history as rewriting and thinking of it as one of the multiple translations of the past leads to a new understanding of the concept of memory. She does not only talk about memory linked to recollection, but also about forgetting and how it can protect or relieve people from trauma. In addition, silence can sometimes speak louder than an oral story (p.58), as trauma can be incomprehensible and fall beyond intelligibility and language. Indeed, memory cannot be but fragmented and partial, given its inherent emotional factor. This means that traumatic memories are subject to manipulation but narrating those traumatic events can also be therapeutic and revitalising. By resorting to concepts such as 'second witness' and the figure of the interviewer, which will be key in Savchenkova's analysis of Alexieviech's work, the author proceeds to the fourth chapter.

In the fourth and last chapter, the author offers an analysis on Alexievich's *Voices of Utopia Series* and identifies the main strategies used by the writer and the interviewees to emotionally translate experiences. She contextualizes the author, winner of a Nobel prize, whose work can be defined as a novel of voices where rewritings of emotions and trauma can be observed. Savchenkova's corpus of analysis consists of fragments from the five novels in the series and a large number of interviews. It should be noted that each volume contains between 500 and 700 testimonies, interviews which Svetlana Alexievich has reedited throughout the years. This means that the work escapes categorical definitions and poses challenges as to what literary genre it belongs to, but it is clear that Alexievich creates a new translation of the past, transports the reader to the traumatic events being narrated and allows them to empathise with what happened in the form of emotional translations and rewritings of the past.

To conclude, this is a relevant contribution to the field when considering the current global situation of war and conflict. In the first three chapters, Savchenkova builds an extremely solid theoretical framework which undoubtedly contributes to clarify the evolution of Translation Studies and how the discipline has started to consider new objects of study, such as a memory, emotions, objects or silence. This leads to a detailed and well-illustrated analysis offered in chapter four, followed by relevant conclusions which raise awareness of the importance of counting on a plurality of voices and the need for rewriting history beyond the official and canonical versions traditionally considered to be objective. All of this highlights the significance of ethical practices in translation to negotiate difference, overcome frontiers and give voice to silenced collectivities.

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# "AGAIN, BUT FOR THE FIRST TIME": TRANSLATING HIS-STORIES THROUGH A FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHICAL LENS

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**Translating His-stories**, Mª Carmen África Vidal Claramonte, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026, 72pp., £18.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781009673167, £55.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781009673174, £23.00 (eBook), ISBN 9781009673181.

In 2012, Christopher Rundle posed a thought-provoking question: are we, as translation scholars, interested in exploring "what history can tell us about translation," or, conversely, "what translation can tell us about history" (p. 239)? But what if the boundaries between these disciplines are less clearly demarcated—more porous, more intimately entangled—than this formulation suggests? If we take up this challenge and move beyond strict oppositional frameworks, further questions emerge: how does our understanding of history shift and become enriched when we consider its linguistic materialization—historiography—as already a form of translation? And, in turn, how might viewing historiography as translation recalibrate and expand our sense of what translation itself entails? It is precisely these questions that María Carmen África Vidal Claramonte (2018, 2026) has taken up in recent years through a sustained engagement with the work of historian Hayden White and the subsequent development of critical historiography and its connections to subaltern studies. By foregrounding the notion of historical imagination (White, 1973; Funkenstein, 2019)—that is, the historian's ability to imagine and reenact the past in order to create a meaningful narrative in the present—critical historiography has enabled history to escape positivist Rankean frames of objectivity and neutrality, ultimately contributing to the emergence of critical rewritings, or retranslations, of previous historical accounts.

In her earlier monograph, *La traducción y las historias. Nuevas vías para la investigación* (2018), Vidal Claramonte laid the theoretical groundwork for this line of inquiry by conceptualizing the historian as an intralingual translator of reality. In *Translating His-stories* (2026), she revisits these premises through a feminist lens. Rather than focusing primarily on the epistemological status of history as translation, she now analyzes how women writers and translators rewrite—and thus retranslate—"again, but for the first time" (p. 2) narratives previously told by men. The title itself neatly encapsulates this intervention. While several Romance languages employ a single term for both 'history' and 'story' (a semantic overlap long emphasized by critical historiography), English maintains a distinction between the two; yet by hyphenating his-story, Vidal Claramonte not only translates that entanglement but also foregrounds how the masculine subject has been historically authorized to narrate the past. In doing so, she echoes feminist critiques associated with the

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notion of 'herstory', which gained prominence in second-wave feminist discourse in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly through writers and activists such as Robin Morgan.

*Translating His-stories* is further divided into five short chapters or sections, followed by a brief conclusion. The first section lays the theoretical foundations on which the rest of the book builds, documenting the points of contact between translation and critical historiography. As Vidal Claramonte argues, both historians and translators are agents who selectively choose between different options (which facts, which words, respectively). Consequently, rather than there being only one possible account of the past, critical histories highlight the importance of retranslation, insofar as they can fill in the voids that previous narratives—as history-from-below and *longue durée* accounts demonstrate—have often created by neglecting the lives of subjects deprived of power. As such, Vidal Claramonte's defense of history as retranslation finds parallels with Marie-Alice Belle's (2014) contention that,

> Nowhere is the rejection of a teleological approach to translation history as clear as in the recent debates on the issue of retranslation, as Antoine Berman's initial hypothesis of a gradual progression towards a fuller and more faithful rendering of literary texts through their consecutive translations (Berman, 1995, 2009) has been re-placed by theories stressing the multiplicity of human, historical, social and material factors involved in the retranslation of a given text. (p. 45)

Drawing on Salman Rushdie, Vidal Claramonte thus calls for the "chutnification" of history (Vidal Claramonte, 2026, p. 10), that is, the accumulation of multiple historical retranslations as a means of correcting what White termed the "doxa" of the "historiographical establishment," namely, "the perspective [that] endeavored to make the general public believe that historical discourse was unbiased, and that the story was a mirror image of the facts" (p. 5). In doing so, Vidal Claramonte seems to echo the words of subaltern thinker Ashish Nandy (1992), when he stated, "one must always choose the slave because he represents a higher-order cognition which perforce includes the master as human, whereas the master's cognition has to exclude the slave except as a thing" (pp. xv–xvi). In other words, against History as a materialization of power, the response is not to erase these dominant accounts but to layer them, as in a palimpsest, with alternative ones that explore the lives of, or are written by, those who have often been marginalized, thereby "deconstructing the homogeneous and supposedly universal foundations of patriarchal logocentrism" (Vidal Claramonte, 2026, p. 17).

In the second section, Vidal Claramonte reviews the works of several fiction writers who "have reflected on what history means and how it represents the past, in other words, how it is constructed, reconstructed and translated, generally from the viewpoint of the conqueror" (p. 12). The author cleverly organizes this discussion under the different aspects that these novelists of 'historiographic metafiction' (Hutcheon, 1989) problematize in their narratives, namely, teleology (the creation of a chronologically ordered, albeit artificial, historical account), voice (the question of who is granted legitimacy to narrate a (hi)story),

monoglossia (the lack of alternative voices beyond the narrator of historical facts), and textuality (the prominence of the textual evidence against other, often marginalized, media, such as orality).

It is in the following three sections that Vidal Claramonte explicitly zeroes in on retranslations penned by women. Each revolves around a distinct literary genre—myths, fairy tales and children's literature, and fiction originally authored by male writers. Echoing Chimamanda Adichie's call to avoid the danger of a single story, the third section examines how, particularly since the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s, women writers have retranslated myths and traditional narratives to produce original works that restore agency to female characters long silenced by the patriarchal gaze. In this context, Vidal Claramonte pays particular attention to the work of writers like Madeline Miller, Christa Wolf, and Anne Carson, who are inspired to tell classic myths and epics again, but for the very first time. She argues that these retellings can indeed be regarded as feminist translations once we move beyond "narrow Eurocentric definitions of translation" (p. 23) which, not unlike positivist historiography, restrict our understanding of this practice as a univocal and unified linguistic transfer that limits the translator's agency to reinterpret the text. The retranslation of a myth, Vidal Claramonte points out quoting Karpinski (2012, pp. 7-8; as cited in Vidal Claramonte, 2026, p. 23), is

> transformative rather than imitative in that it makes the target language grow at the same time as it ensures survival of the original by making a foreign text perform new meanings in the target culture.

Section Four considers a genre that has traditionally perpetuated, perhaps more than any other, the male gaze, relegating women characters to a submissive position: Western fairy tales and children's literature. The section focuses not only on retranslations of well-known stories (such as *Little Red Riding Hood*), but also on original works that challenge the patriarchal structure underpinning these stories altogether. Particularly noteworthy—especially given Vidal Claramonte's (2022, 2025) expertise in the visual arts and their relation to multimodal translation—are her analyses of the visual paratexts accompanying some of these tales and the ways in which authors like Niki Daly or Nancy Sheppard deploy them to introduce non-Western perspectives. Equally welcome is her engagement with feminist translation scholars (Knowles and Malmkjaer, 1996; Castro and Spoturno, 2021) as a way to critically examine how children's herstories can also function as vehicles of ideology (Vidal Claramonte, 2026, p. 24). These herstories oftentimes reinforce white liberal Western versions of feminism, or what Vidal Claramonte terms the "Disneyfication" (p. 33) of fairy-tale retellings. In doing so, she carefully demonstrates that such retranslations are not always emancipatory and thus successfully manages to avoid the risk of essentializing gender identities.

Whereas Sections Three and Four provide a wide-ranging overview of diverse texts, Section Five adopts a more focused approach, centering on four women writers and translators. This shift enables a nuanced and deeper engagement with the specific strategies

through which they rewrite and retranslate dominant male narratives: Jen Bervin's intersemiotic translations of Shakespeare in *Nets* (2004/2019); Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014), a retranslation of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* told from the perspective of Alison and recast in a contemporary setting in Nigerian English; Caroline Bergvall's homophonic and experimental rewritings of *The Canterbury Tales* in *Alisoun* (2019), which similarly revisits the figure of Alison through a queer and feminist revisionist lens; and Erin Mouré's 'perverse translations' (Simon, 2006), or translations, of Fernando Pessoa's work, relocated in a contemporary Canadian context. Given the concise format of the Cambridge Elements series, it is in this section that Vidal Claramonte most compellingly demonstrates how translation operates not only as a means of rereading the past, but also as a conceptual framework that expands our understanding of rewriting itself. By devoting sustained analytical attention to these works, she shows how translation contributes meaningfully to both the reconfiguration of history and the theoretical expansion of what we understand by translation.

*Translating His-stories* convincingly demonstrates that contemporary translation theory—thanks to its outward turn (Bassnett, 2012; Bassnett and Johnston, 2019; Blumczynski, 2023), recent feminist and queer approaches to translation theory (Castro and Ergün, 2017; Baer, 2021), and multimodal studies (Boria et al., 2020; Vidal Claramonte, 2022, 2025)—is fully equipped to contribute to an understanding of history that challenges its presumed objectivity and aligns it with the insights of critical historiography. If there is a possible limitation, it lies in the tension between the book's theoretical alignment with critical historiography—which does not deny factuality (Vidal Claramonte 2026, p. 3)—and the fact that many of the retellings examined here draw on fictions rather than (fictional) documentary materials. This tension, however, may be read as an invitation to further reflect on the porous boundaries between fiction and factuality. Although briefly mentioned (Rundle and Rafael, 2016), a deeper engagement with critical historiographers who explicitly address interlinguistic and intersemiotic translation in their work (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2000) might have also nuanced the dialogue the book so productively initiates. Yet, as Vidal Claramonte herself suggests in her '(un)concluding remarks', this Element is less a closure than an invitation. In fewer than sixty pages, she opens promising paths for future research, encouraging us to further explore how feminist, queer, postcolonial, racial, political, and class retranslations might converge within an increasingly intersectional framework for thinking history as translation. In this sense, the rise of feminist translation history monographs (e.g., Brown, 2022; Misiou, 2023; Castellano-Ortolá, 2024; Gehmacher, 2024) also offers us the chance of exploring how such projects intersect with critical historiographical methodologies, further evidencing the porous, entangled, and intimate relation between these two fields.

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