



Byron Ellsworth Hamann. *The Translations of Nebrija: Language, Culture, and Circulation in the Early Modern World*

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The Translations of Nebrija deploys bibliographical and book historical methods to challenge and reveal the epistemological pitfalls of the entrenched disciplinary divides of “colonial” and “European” studies. By tracing the circulation of Antonio de Nebrija’s Castilian-Latin dictionary across Europe, America, and Asia in the early modern period, Byron Ellsworth Hamann sheds light on the complex networks of early modern globalization, which do not obey Old World-New World binaries, and shows that scholars’ failure to delve into the European models for dictionaries of Castilian-to-Native American languages has led to problematic evaluations of prehispanic cultural practices and concepts.

The first two chapters of Hamann’s book reconstruct a genealogy of the many editions and “multilingual offspring” (Arabic, Nahuatl, Quechua, Tagalog, Tuscan, and more) of the Spanish humanist Antonio de Nebrija’s Castilian-Latin dictionary between 1495 and 1614 (3). A stemma nicely visualizes the Nebrijan tree that Hamman details in prose, evincing his painstaking work to identify and disentangle Andean, Mesoamerican, Spanish, Flemish, Italian, and Philippine branches (6-7). Across these first two chapters, Hamann highlights selective aspects of the different editions’ transformations, such as lexical additions and orthographical changes. This attention to variation, however, is largely descriptive, leaving the reader wanting a deeper analysis and wondering what the point of all these bibliographical details will be.

Chapter three takes a dazzling interpretative turn that suddenly makes clear why Hamann has taken such pains to follow the linguistic and spatial translations of the first part. Here, Hamann argues that it is only by knowing the “complex backstory” of the Nebrijan editions that we can fully “appreciate when entries are included in a dictionary simply because they had already been included in Nebrija, and when...they have been added...in order to capture distinctive features of life in the New World” (85). In three case studies, Hamann shows that scholars’ failure to compare dictionaries of Castilian-to-Mesoamerican languages with their Castilian-Latin models has led to misinterpretations of Zapotec categories for divination, Mixtec glyphs for altars, and Nahua expressions of luminosity. He thus convincingly makes the case that “it is only by taking the Renaissance foundations of our prehispanic knowledge



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seriously” that scholars can better understand and read Native American ruins and painted manuscripts (121).

The force of chapter three’s revelations wanes, however, in the fourth chapter on marginalia, which reads like an essay apart. Here, Hamman contends that the marginal glosses of dictionaries made in Mesoamerica offer “residues of actual conversations” between missionaries and native interviewees that “could be deeply hierarchical, riven by inequality and coercion” (114). His heavy emphasis on Jacques Derrida as a theoretical frame detracts from these important reflections on the ethics of book-centered interactions in the past, as well as our interpretations thereof in the present.

The Translations of Nebrija has its shortcomings, principally the description-heavy bibliographical work of the first two chapters – some but not all of which is necessary to support the author’s larger claims. Nonetheless, Hamann’s book will be of interest to scholars of any discipline interested in forging global and cross-cultural practices for the history of the book. It both reconstructs transnational networks of circulation and brings Euro-centric methods for the study of printed books and manuscripts to bear on Native American artifacts and epistemologies, showing what scholars of each side of the Atlantic lose when they ignore the other.

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