9.6 We Better Laugh About It: Álvaro Enrigue and Maia Gil'Adí (EH)

Transcript

Emily Hyde

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Emily Hyde, one of the hosts and co-producers of this season, season nine, which is broadly dedicated to the novel and to its relationship to technology. Today, we're here for a conversation between the novelist Álvaro Enrigue and the critic Maia Gil'Adí. Álvaro Enrigue is a Mexican novelist who writes in both Spanish and English, and he is the author of two novels that have been translated into English by Natasha Wimmer, with a third on the way. *Sudden Death* won literary prizes in both Spain and Mexico, and *You Dreamed of Empires* was a New York Times top 10 book in 2024. They'll be followed in the next year or so by a newly translated novel called *Now I Surrender*. Enrigue is also a literary critic. He is associate professor of romance languages and literatures at Hofstra University in New York. Welcome to *Novel Dialogue*.

Álvaro Enrigue

Thanks very much, Emily. Thank you for inviting me to your space.

EH

And today, playing the role of critic in our conversation is Maia Gil'Adí, the Fannie Gaston-Johansson Assistant Professor of Latinx Studies at Johns Hopkins. She is the author of *Doom Patterns: Latinx Speculations and the Aesthetics of Violence*, just out from Duke in January. It's a book that examines how portrayals of destruction paradoxically also foreground pleasure. And I think in this book, Maia is interested in how historical violence can be joined for readers with humor, with beauty, with the grotesque. Who better, therefore, to talk with the author of *You Dreamed of Empires* [laughter], a book that is both gorgeous and grotesque. It's a book that's filled with slapstick humor, and also extreme violence. It's a book that really, really tries to depict certain characters', shall we say, over-reliance on hallucinogenic mushrooms, but also pays tribute to the savvy knack for self-preservation of a very real historical figure, Hernán Cortés's enslaved translator, Malinalli. I am very much looking forward to this conversation and learning more about this book. So, Maia, I'm going to just turn things over to you right now, and I'm going to fade into the background.

Maia Gil'Adí

[laughter] Thanks so much, Emily. I hope you don't fade too much. And I'm, so excited to be here, so excited to talk to Álvaro about this book. I think I told you both, I taught this in a grad seminar called “Race, Aesthetics, Speculation.” And I'm so fascinated for some of the reasons that Emily was saying about the ways in which violence is portrayed in this really gorgeous, aestheticized language. And I thought maybe we could in start from the beginning itself, Álvaro, and talk a little bit about that email that opens the book, before you get to the story itself. In the English version, it's to Natasha Wimmer, and in the Spanish, it's to Teresa, who I'm assuming is the editor of the book in Spanish.

ÁE

The copyeditor.

MG

And, in the English translation, you note the foreignness of Nahua, but also its sensuousness. And you say to Natasha that the language helps, quote, the brain learn new things. And in the Spanish, you talk about it as what, you say, an ideological motors of the language. So I don't know, I thought maybe you could talk a little bit about the role of translation in the book, both the translation that's happening within the process of the book itself, and the translation that you as author are doing of the Nahua into Spanish, and then the translation that's happening between Spanish and English readers, if that makes sense.

ÁE

Yes, it makes a lot of sense. And I have to tell you that I'm teaching a seminar now, undergraduate, that is named “Monsters and Mutants.”

MG

Amazing.

ÁE

New, new Latin American literature. So there is—I think that we are traveling in the same layer of the stratosphere in these days.

MG

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Same wavelength.

ÁE

Same—well, it speaks something about our time. I think that it speaks a lot. The fact that you can teach classes on new literature that is science fiction, that is apocalyptic, that there's a lot of things there that I can talk about for hours to avoid speaking about my own work. [laughter]

Yes, the letter is part of the novel. We were very careful in both the Spanish and English edition, and then in the others, but I'm never sure because in other languages, I just get a book at the end, and who knows? And I don't understand anything, so who knows? [laughter] But it's very important that the letter is inside the novel because it's fiction. The fact that, as you notice, that in Spanish it is a letter to Teresa, and in English it is to Natasha, speaks about one thing that I believe that I don't know if it's related to translation or not, or not, to the factual act of translating things. I think that I think in translation, like in a bigger field, the letter has a very practical origin. It was originally an email to Teresa that was—it's a procedural thing. The first persons that read a book when I finish, of course, is my wife, of course, is a very few friends. There is people with—no one writes alone, as you both know perfectly, you are always surrounding the people that is making your book much better. And so, in that process, the first reader that is a professional reader in English is Natasha. When I finish a book, I send it to Natasha, and to see, to try to lure her, to convince her that she should do this one too.

And then Teresa is, was, she's retired now, and I don't know, I think that I will never write again, because I will not be able to work with her. Teresa just retired, but she was the legendary copy editor. The process of editing is different in Spanish and in English. And in Spanish, the copy has much more power over the book than in English. It's a person, it's really the person that produces the book, not the editor, but the copy. The editor in Spanish is more like the publisher, someone that reads the books and has ideas. But I worked, I don't know, since I became an adult writer, because I became a writer very young. Since I became an adult writer, Teresa has been my editor. And more than anything, Teresa has been the editor. I don't know, Sergio Pitol, she was the editor of Enrique Vila-Matas and Javier Marías when they were young. She's a character in Bolaño's books. So Teresa is a legendary thing; that's something that maybe an English reader naturally doesn't understand. That it's a letter that goes to an historical figure.

And there was an original email because I sent her the original, the publisher had already read it, but I sent her the original and she was like, “Álvaro, this is—come on. The names, no one will read this in Spain. What are you thinking? What are these words? Can you put the words in Spanish? You don't speak Nahua, don't pretend.” And I was like, “no, no, no, no, there is sense.” So, so I wrote an email saying basically that, no, the brain is wired to read these things. And a Mexican reader of this book will not understand the word either. Nevertheless, they will keep going and your readers will keep going. So we modified that, while we were like transforming an original in a book that are different objects, that was included as a letter to the Spanish readers. And when the first proofs arrived, my wife, who is Argentinian, saw them all in my desk and says, “and what about the Argentinian readers? The Spaniards have more information about the Nahua world than us. What about the Paraguayans? What about the—” So it became just a letter and not, like, a letter for readers. And I think that is what really modified it because then it became fiction.

So I think in the book of—not of mine, but of Natasha, as a completely different book. I think about it as a second opportunity, really. So always the English, the version in English is longer because I already saw what happened in Spanish with it. I can change a few things. And more than anything, there is this French thing that is the wisdom of the stairs. You get offended in a party. Someone tells you something insulting and you just leave. And when you're in the stairs, you remember the correct answer that would insult your enemy and destroy their security forever. So, the version in English has that flavor for me. The things that I missed in the first edition, I can do in English. So I always write more chapters and there are additions there.

It's a book that is how I think that books are, that is, it's a living book. I don't know. There is always this, that the critics speak a lot about it and it's more simple than—I wish it was a super complex thing, but it's a very simple thing—in the same way, I think that the book is not like a magical object. The book is not a dead object, even when it will survive our biology. No, it's a living thing. So for me, it's important to leave registers of the reality that brought that book in the book. In that same sense, this constant transformation of the book makes me feel that I'm writing a living thing.

The great privilege of publishing in English for me is to see Natasha work because it's like—this may sound narcissist, but it's like an after-death experience. I wrote a book and then I see myself writing the book through this medium that is Natasha's. It's fantastic. And she's amazing. My wife always laughs about the process of—my emotional process with Natasha, that is like, "no, Natasha is not good anymore. No, Natasha is not doing it well." And then it's like, "wow, Natasha is doing the really interesting things." And then when she finishes, it's just impressive. No, it is not my voice. It's her voice, but it's a very solid voice. And then during the—that infernal thing that are the book tours, many times we get to read together and it's just fascinating for me how different and how equal they translate. Natasha is saying what I am saying, let's say in a deeper level, but it's certainly her language. I see, Maia, that you read it in Spanish or had it in Spanish. My Spanish is much more "coarse," you say, "coarse" than her English. She's writing for an audience that will not recognize the Mexican Spanish. So I do many things with language that come from the everyday language in Spanish, that is of course, much more base, much more vulgar, a little bit more obscene. And she kind of fixes that, producing a discourse that is very solid. So the translation is—it's really another life for the book. And I just love that.

MG

Well, I guess I'm wondering about the balance that you wanted to take between humor and the extreme violence that's happening. That's one question. And the other is where you see the role of the political and of history in the novel. Because on the one hand, it's all about this particular encounter of colonization, which is thwarted right until the last two pages, right. This counter-history that happens only at the end. And then on the other hand, it seems to be really interested in the palace intrigue, maybe as a genre, right. They're just waiting around, eating food, taking baths, eating mushrooms, tripping balls, waiting for something to happen, nothing happens, right. So, is this—it's also impossible to read this book without thinking about Trump 2.0 and this moment of totalitarian authoritarianism, even though I know that you wrote the book

before that. Can you just speak more about what you saw as the role of the political and of history in a book that seems to not necessarily foreground the political?

ÁE

Well, I can begin there because maybe the second question appeals to a way of telling that I think comes from a mysterious place. No, I don't have a theory about it. I don't have a theory about it. It's just, I can't—no, I can—I can write things that don't use humor, but it's not in general. And that has to do with family context. I belong to this enormous family that, we're not very good at reproducing. The Enrigues we are, but it's a weird surname. Nevertheless, the family was big, or is big, you know? And when the grandparents still lived, we would go to Jalisco, to Guadalajara and sit in these tables that are now seemingly mythical to me because it was an enormous table in which everybody look alike and spoke the same weird way. And it was an enormous, enormous family. And the one who would win could be the one who told the funniest story. And the Enrigues are good at telling stories. No, if I invite you to have lunch with my parents, you will have the afternoon of your trip because they are everybody's natural comedians. So that comes from there. In fact, I feel like the complete clumsiest of them all. My brother, my sister is just the most hilarious human being that there is. So, there is a cultural value of the ability to laugh about the tough parts of reality that is an essential part of my family life, but that explodes in the Mexican culture. That is, to speak about Mexico is like to speak about the galaxies. No, it's an enormity that is difficult to grab and is ridiculous to pretend to explain, but it's not easy to be Mexican. Let's say in that time, no, it's not an easy—a country that has [unintelligible], in many senses. In many others, yes, it's a rich country, it's an enormous country, has been since early in the 20th century, an industrial power. There are advantages there, but at the same time, the story is very difficult, and the levels of oppressions, the difficulty to become a democracy, all of that, that was so painful. I think that was survived by the people developing this amazing sense of humor.

To go to Mexico is to laugh about things that are not laughable, by the way. But it's a way in which you, and here I connect with the second part of your question, it's a way of articulating your politics in the conversation. When the reality is unbearable, like it is in the United States, we better laugh about it, and we better laugh about it, not because we are escaping from it, not because I will not read the papers, because now the politics are not the ones I like, it's not because of that, but because it's a form of resistance. The word resistance has been so used in the last 10 years that it’s completely empty now, so let's try to remember what was the meaning of resistance. To laugh about the powerful is something that, I don't know, right now I can laugh about Claudia Sheinbaum as much as I like, because we live in a democracy and we have a left-leaning government, et cetera, but when I was a child, you didn't laugh about the president. It was a dictatorship and it was not funny. So the political resistance to that oppression, resistance like in the physical term of it, was to laugh. It's a way to open a window and just make you fly higher than the figure that is oppressing you. Let's say like, it is like a gas theory, and I could go here, of course, to something that I would love to do in a novel that is speaking about farting. [laughter] I will not, but that's exactly what it is, there is a lot of pressure in a nation, and humor lets the gas go.

And you can keep going with your life by one side, but by the other side, you are truly minding the powerful. I don't think that what we are doing now in the United States is—I'm American too, I can talk about this—is to cry about what the powerful do, it's a mistake, what we must do is laugh about what the powerful do, we must bring them down to our level because they are like us, they just were more evil, and they got there because of that. So there is all this, like, political use of humor that, of course, is, I think, very clear in the novel when, when I'm speaking about Hernán Cortés, but it should be also when I speak about Moctezuma, because it's not that they were saints. No, Moctezuma was not your little friend, no, they were mean people, and if you're Mexican, it's difficult to find a central space, but I'm always trying to find it because I'm the youngest boy, whatever, [laughter] I'm always trying to find that central—that space of equilibrium that is very uncomfortable in Mexico, of course.

And that maybe in the U.S. you can read with more freedom, and you can laugh a little bit more, because you will not be in Moctezuma team or Cortés team necessarily. And those politics that express in the novel in many ways, and one of them is humor, simply, and this is a tradition that is in the novel, that the novel is invented by Cervantes, the modern novel, as a tool to laugh about the powerful. It has always been there. It's Don Quixote, it's still the most hilarious book that you can read, I don't know, Sterne is very good too, and very funny too, there are very—the *Gulliver's Travels* are fantastic. There are very good, fun literature, there is no way to avoid the problem of politics when you are writing. There is no—the gesture of writing is already a political gesture: claiming a voice.

What I'm saying there is very, very obvious, but it's real. Writing implies that someone with no space will open space to be listened to, and is not always a nice person. It can be obscure, nevertheless, it's always politically charged, and the political is unavoidable, and in this novel more, now, I will level it a little bit more to the pedestrian level, but when—my first wife is American, she stayed in Mexico, she still lives in Mexico City, she was, she's the typical American expat in Mexico City, and the first time she visited me in Mexico City, in the remote 20th century, she comes out of the plane in the Benito Juárez airport, takes a taxi, and the cab driver, the first question he asks is, are you with Cortés or with Moctezuma, so it's that, I don't know, that abyss, it's still dividing somehow. It's still, I don't know if "dividing," that's a word that we use too much in these days. It's still a living problem for a Mexican, so to write about this, of course, that was a political gesture.

EH

Can I jump back in and tell you the funniest moment that I thought, I think I actually did laugh out loud, and I'm sure it was not, well, we'll find out if it was intentional, and I also just have to specify that I was reading, I guess, Natasha Wimmer's book, right, so we could ask her. [laughter] But at the very end, Cortés wakes up from his dream, and the entire, like, devastating history of centuries has just played out over a couple of pages, and he wakes up, and he thinks, "I'm gonna win," and I just thought, "that was hilarious, that was totally hilarious," because that is actually how the authoritarians in our lives, right now, think. Like, there are bad guys, and good

guys, and you win, or you lose, it's completely unsubtle, and, like, a bad action movie, or something out there, that's just playing out in our politics, in this country in particular. And I just thought that, that little phrase, like, “I'm gonna win,” just struck me as hilarious, and devastatingly, a devastating political critique at the same moment.

ÁE

No, I think you are right. I don't remember how it was in Spanish, and I will not make the ridiculous things of going to pick up the original and see what it say [laughter], but what I can tell you—because, of course, I only remember the book that I'm writing—but what I can tell you is that it was fun for me to write this book. That I was having fun playing with these characters as if they were these bronze figures, these enormous figures that changed the world forever, and at the same time, there was, again, in that humorous take of a very important moment in history, an important political affirmation for me, that is, I don't know, “the people from Pennsylvania didn't vote for Trump, all of that is the dream of Hernán Cortés, and we live in a fantastic world, in a fantastic world, in which Tenochtitlan is still a floating city, in which there was not Atlantic trade, in which the boats could navigate—” There were other options, because—so the thing with Mexican history, and Maia was going there [laughter], and I could hear the things that where behind her when she stopped. The problem with Mexican history, and in general, Latin American history, is that the thinking frame that we call postcolonial theory doesn't work well, because it's the moment in which that began. So there are parts of postcolonial theory that you can apply to Mexico, but most of it works for the British Empire, that was completely different, that was thought in different terms. Of course, the British Empire cloned many Spanish institutions, but the process was completely different.

I remember a moment of revelation for me, as a young critic that wanted to become a famous writer, but could not, and didn't know what to do. One day, listening to Octavio Paz in a theater, someone says something, I don't remember exactly, or maybe it was the TV, I don't know [laughter]. But someone, maybe Said, says something about postcolonial, and Octavio Paz says, “calm down, New Spain was a kingdom. We were not a colony, we were a kingdom.” That is a revelation. And of course, my whole intellectual life is an eternal discussion with Octavio Paz, in which I feel that I will lose, but I'm always discussing with his books. I don't agree with so many things that he said. Nevertheless, these pieces are very important. These pieces of information are very important for my internal conversation. And he's right, at least in a nominal level. It's the moment of the encounter between Moctezuma and Cortés is the moment that unties the whole, to say it in easy classroom terms, politics of extraction, that eventually would be installed in the American continent.

But that moment is, it's like the very startup of modernity, in the sense that everything that will follow comes from that encounter. No, the world really changes there. And not only changes—of course, the amount of money that will arrive to Europe changes. But it's a moment in which finally, that I think that is the most important thing about the fall of Tenochtitlan, finally, the route to China is open. Now you can reach China in a boat. Instead of two years, it will be three months. Go and come. And in three months, you can fill a boat with coins, with silver coins,

send them to China and return them with merchandise. That means that the Chinese economy can be monetarized, and it's finally part of the world and everything changes forever. And all of that happens in that encounter, that I don't know if I was able to transmit that in the novel or not, that was really minimal. It was really a little thing. The Moctezuma empire, as much as we love to imagine it as an enormous thing, was smaller than Spain. It was not—it was smaller than Texas. It was a small empire. And the Spaniards were these disoriented criminals [laughter]. Well, they had commit a crime of lesa majestad, I don't know how you say—less majesty, you say in English. They had disobeyed the governor of Cuba, which meant that if they return to it, they would be hanged. That's why they do this crazy thing that is going all the way to Mexico City, because they were criminals. No, it was, we win or we are dead. So they do just this silly thing that makes Hernán Cortés think in the novel, I won. I will win. It's going to be cool. That sadly is what happened by the way.

MG

And I think in hearing you speak about it, it makes sense why all the waiting and the eating and the eating mushrooms and the not really doing anything is the bulk of the book. And that's what we would see or read or understand as the moment of history, which is the counter history happens in the last two pages, right. Which makes you rethink am I in Montezuma's nightmare or dream or, right, this moment. Can I jump into a totally different topic?

ÁE

Please, please do, please do, because I will repeat myself. [laughter]

MG

Emily talked about her favorite laugh-out loud-moment. I am kind of obsessed, and it's my favorite moment in the book, when Caldera walks into the city, he walks into Tenochtitlan and gets lost to the reader, right. We never see him again. And it seems to me to be an opportunity in which a man can think of himself outside of empire, while women, especially Malinche, Malinalli, as a translator, is locked into the, into the narration. She's locked in this castle. She's locked into the narration that is Cortés. And I wonder, so is it an opportunity for a man to be outside of empire? Or is it also, is the book talking about, going native as an opportunity to lose yourself in the city in this way? There's all these moments in which he's looking at himself in the dress of the other and saying, oh, I wish I looked like them, but I don't. And yet he allows himself, or the novel allows him to get lost in this space. And we never get to encounter him. So it's, it's such a beautiful moment of a character extracted from empire from both sides. And yet, we have to then deal with the characters that are left behind and are the byproduct of history.

ÁE

So there are characters like that in history. And this is not an historical novel by any means. Very clearly, Moctezuma never listened to T. Rex. [laughter] It's not an historical novel, certainly. But

they, there were historical—I think constantly, since I discovered his existence, I'm always thinking in Gonzalo Guerrero, that this other Spaniard that had been in a shipwreck, I never can pronounce that word that his ship had sunk, and arrived to Yucatán with Gerónimo de Aguilar. And when, when Hernán Cortés finds them in, in Cozumel, when, when, when Cortés asks for them as part of the bounty that he's asking from the people of Cozumel, Gonzalo Guerrero sends a message that, I think that it's in the novel, I don't remember. He says, "no, I will not become a Spaniard. And if you try to come here, I will kill you. I am a warrior. I have Maya children. My wife is Maya. And get out of here. We don't want you to do what you did to the Caribbean people." Because we forget that that information was general.

The people from the Americas knew perfectly who the Spaniards were. It is not true by any means that Moctezuma had dreams and saw a comet. All of that was written later, by indigenous people, by indigenous people, but in the College of Santa Cruz of Tlatelolco, by indigenous people who spoke Spanish, wrote in Latin, and wrote in Latin characters, Spanish and Nahua, and were in many cases, professors of Latin or professors of math that were indigenous, because the separation between indigenous and European people happens a little bit later than the foundation of the College of Tlatelolco. In that moment, there is not this idea of who's better with this and who—there is not a notion, there is not a word for European in Nahua, for example. There is not a word for Nahua in Nahua. Before the appearance of the term, "us from here," that is how you say, "people from the Americas in Nahua," appears the term "black people." So the Nahuas had a word for black people before they had a word for them. So in the beginning, it was very chaotic.

Nevertheless, everybody knew what had happened in the Caribbean. The Europeans knew and the Mexicans knew. Moctezuma was following the ships because he knew what these people could do to you. So there is this myth of the horse, for example, that I put a lot of blood on it in the novel. I know that Moctezuma thinks that they are like, in the beginning, that they are one thing, the horse and the person. They knew perfectly what horses were. They used horses in the war in Yucatan. When they arrived to Veracruz, the Nahuas are already sacrificing horses. They know exactly the biology of the horse and they know that it's not an antler, not a deer without antler—they knew perfectly what they were. And I think that there is even, of course, this is what José Emilio Pacheco would call an Nescafé theory. But there is even a biological trace of that. We all Mexicans have a 10% of Taino genetic information, which means that there was exchange between the Mexican and the Caribbean people, because I suppose that a lot of Caribbean people came to Mexico running from the Spaniards. So people knew what was going on. There is not that ignorance.

So in that sense, Caldera is, let's say, in a political level, Caldera is the person that is saying, no, I will not participate of this. The character of Caldera that involved a lot of work for me had to be very peculiar. Had to have a sexuality that was accepted in that period. In the 19th century, no, but in the 17th century was perfectly acceptable to be gay. "Gay" is a 20th century category, of course. But it was a form of king. Only the kings had beds. And these people spent a lot of time in boats and a lot of time in campaigns. So to sleep with your cousin was like a thing. You shared the bed. And things happened. So the sexualities in this early 17th century and 16th

century were much more fluid than in the Victorian period that was previous to us. That was really the odd period. Foucault is right when he says that we should forget the 19th century. He's absolutely right there. Everything that is wrong comes from the 19th century.

So Caldera had to have a more fluid sexuality because, and that will question him, make him question the rest of his loyalties. He has a loyalty to the King of Spain, but not really. Because the King of Spain represents this very masculine world that for him is a little bit scary. And I think that that's very graphic in the novel. He is a successful conquistador. He has that. But when all the boys are together, he is not comfortable because he knows that they will do what a bunch of boys do when they are together. So he's uncomfortable with that. So his alliance, it's always a little bit moved to the left. He has a memory for one side of what happened in the Caribbean. And by the other hand, he's a character that is closer to us. I certainly believe, and I have not to go far to answer, but I certainly believe that when St. Paul answers, I think that's Romans, I think that it's in Romans, but I don't know. I have to return to that. When someone asks him, why should we keep writing if the end of the world is coming? What's the sense of writing if we will be the last generation? He says, because we have to leave testimony. Because the only thing we can do as humans is leave testimony. You can pretend to make money. You can do silly things around. But the only thing that cares once you are gone is that you leave testimony.

So for me, it was important that there was a character that was able to give testimony for us. Someone that could be closer to Emily, Maia, and Álvaro chatting here. And that's why Caldera knows Michelangelo. That's why Caldera is much more sophisticated than the other conquistadores. The conquistadores were sophisticated people. They were not soldiers. They were rich kids that had invested in an enterprise and ended up fighting a war in which, by the way, the soldiers were indigenous people. They were just the captains. They were very few. The war was fought between the Tlaxcaltecas and the Huejotzingos and the Mexicas, not between the Spaniards and the Mexicas. The Spaniards were just like the cream in the cake. And when they win the game, they were and they moved to Mexico City. What they do, it's a tiny little Spanish city in downtown Mexico City that is surrounded by the same indigenous city that was there before their arrival. The process of colonization happens much more later and has much more to do with libraries, universities, reading books than with the actual combats that were epic and enormous for the proportions of the time. But if you think in a Napoleonic battle, they were nothing. They were tiny little combats compared with the things we saw again in the damn 19th century, not to speak about the 20th century.

So Caldera does that. And what you are very perceptive, Maia, no one has asked me before, is the role of Caldera in relationship—this is critical thinking in all its expression—Caldera and Malinalli in the novel switch places. Malinalli, not really, because at the end in the novel, not in reality, sadly, decides to betray Cortés. But Malinalli, there is a moment in which she says, well, "if I will—if I want the benefit of my children, I will go with these guys. That's what I have now. I can be a slave in the Maya world, and I can be in this adventure. I will just go in this adventure." That is pretty much the same thing that Caldera does. Caldera, there is a moment in which he says, well, bye-bye. [laughter] I'm not interested in this. And he just leaves, and of course, because of that, becomes an interesting figure.

EH

That's fascinating, because if they cross, they're both translators, too. They're translating between cultural scenes, between adventure, between... They're just making choices, but the etymology of “to translate” is “to carry across.” So I like that image of those two characters just crossing through the center of the novel and carrying on in different directions.

ÁE

And they cross, and that's—well, a generational mark, of course, because what we read when we were in college, they cross, too, in terms of language and in terms of gender. The revolution is a revolution that happens in the body of the characters, not in the abstract idea of class. We all were deformed by Chomsky. We all read Chomsky before we could understand him and have these very bad readings of his idea of grammar. Nevertheless, we applied it, and that's how it is if you belong to Generation X. That crossing is complete. It includes what we would call a few years ago, and we don't call it anymore, and it's a relief, “intersectional.” Luckily, that fashion has gone. But we were forming those terms, of course, as academics. So it's more like the body, or I was thinking more in the body politics than in the class politics or even the imperial politics.

EH

So every season on Novel Dialogue, we ask a signature question of all the novelists. And this season, the question is this. If you could live anywhere else in the world for one year, where would it be, but also when would it be, and how would it be, and why?

ÁE

I don't have not a single thought about this question that you are asking, because I have thought about it many times in my life. I don't know why, but I do. And I would live, if I could pick, I would live in southern France in the 11th century, just after the warming of Europe, right, when the wolves are retiring, the lords, the medieval lords are still not all powerful. And there are these hippie, crazy, heretic communities growing all over the place. And they are inventing things that I care a lot for, like love, like sports with balls. They invent soccer, they invent tennis, they invent things that I still love playing every day. And they do it like in a very peaceful moment. There is this moment in which they say, let's make a church, but let's make it taller than any church ever. And let's make it out of glass so you can see the light of God. It's this moment of modernization that is just previous to the crusades. The crusades come and everything is a mess again. Accumulation of power, accumulation of money. But there is this fantastic space there.

If I had to place that in Mexico, because I'm Mexican, I could never ever go to the Mexica kingdom. I could never ever be under Moctezuma. If I had to pick, I would go to Tlaxcala, the enemies of the Mexicans, the ones who really want their life. And that were a nation that was

much more, I don't, we cannot use the word democratic, of course. But they had a life that was more similar to a good, productive republican life than the life of the Mexica under the empire of Moctezuma. The city of Tlaxcala is a really interesting example. It was formed by four neighborhoods and each neighborhood had a representative and that representative would roll with time from one family to another. So they live in this productive world in which the property of land was shared, as in all of the Americas. But it was administered not for a line of criminals, that is what big kings end up being always, but by different heads of families that could generate this, I don't know if ideal, there is nothing ideal, but more comfortable world.

I would certainly not live in the contemporary world. I'm so curious, so curious about the past. And I don't care about the future that much. I have environmental responsibilities, but I don't want to live forever. I would like to live forever, but the other way around. To be able to see, to follow the time arrow the other way around and to be able to see those things that are in the past.

EH

I think that's a perfect spatial description of *You Dreamed of Empires*, right? Which is: the past, the past, the past, the present happens in about two pages and the future's implied.

ÁE

And it's about desire, you know? It's all about desire and the desired future.

EH

Yeah. Yeah. Well, thank you so much for being here on *Novel Dialogue*. Thank you both.

MG

Thank you so much.

ÁE

Well, thank you for this opportunity to have a conversation with brilliant people. Thank you, really, for inviting me.

EH

At the end of another *Novel Dialogue*, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. And we invite you to check out other episodes with novelists on

the podcast, including Sheila Heti, Mariana Enriquez, Brandon Taylor, Katie Kitamura, and many, many more. From all of us here at *Novel Dialogue*, thank you for listening.