

A Short Manifesto for Decolonising Multilingualism

If We Are Going To Do This...

If we are going to do this, if we are going to decolonise multilingualism, let's do it as an attempt at a way of doing it.

The only way to decolonise is to do it. It needs some forethought but ultimately it needs actions which are redolent with decolonising attempts, adding to critical learnings of previous decolonising attempts. It needs people who are able to embark on such a journey and return with tales to tell of what happens when decolonising is attempted in foreign languages learning. The tales are messy, compromised and always within what Spivak calls the 'double bind' (Spivak, 2012), a place within which there will always be dis-ease and a sense of not having reached a resolution. A place which, in critical terms, will always be found wanting, bearing traces of that which it wishes to divest.

If we are going to do this, let's cite with an eye to decolonising, citing from the global South, giving multilingual scholars much more airtime than usually accorded, alongside more women, who are the ones tasked with the teaching and interpreting of languages for the majority of the world's population, through the mother languages.

But let's not just do that. Let's also cite from indigenous peoples who know all about the loss of land and language; and from the displaced peoples – the refugees, asylum seekers and diaspora who are now placed in the frontier spaces where transactions of bodies, words, beliefs are dissolving the known

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world. And let's do this all with an eye to those fluent-in-too-many-colonial-languages aspects, which are part of the critical context, and double bind of all multilingual working which I have been formally educated into to date. And where there is no hope of the *scholare* which affords material relief such that thinking, reading and writing might be achievable (Bourdieu, 2000). Let's stop pretending our ways of knowing, our epistemologies, are the only valid ways of knowing something. Let's work harder to cite those who live and work in languages other than English, or at least other than English first. The experts by experience, where experience is often carried through generations, have much that is stored in the scars and the skin, and to know in these ways means taking a journey away from books and firewall-protected double-blind peer-reviewed articles in top-ranked journals.

So, readers, this short book will not just cite all the usual suspects all over again – I respect their work greatly and many are working as I am, in elitist, top-100 universities, cycling the canonical white English language texts between students and conferences, masking the multilingual by the requirements of clarity, cohesion, transparency and an academic publishing world of words which keeps on putting English first, and then putting those first whom the counters find to have the most citations, in English. And that is not a decolonial practice. It's quite the opposite. And it administers more colonial metrics.

If we are going to do this, let's not only cite with references to publications.

Words – black against a white page – are part of the flattened out hegemony of a text-based literacy within which the spoken word is so deprived of oxygen that it cannot live and there can be no pedagogy of the art of the vocal or what Freire describes as 'pronunciar o mundo' – pronouncing the world (Freire, 2006). There is a different power to the spoken word, a solidarity with the oral and performing arts which have long been the places where indigenous and precarious knowledge has been stored, memorised and shared. There is a protocol which is followed in the folk tradition whereby storytellers, poets, musicians tell from whom they learned a thing, an ancestry which respects the fact that none of us ever create a single word without our

mothers, grandmothers, our elders and teachers and the sounds all around us.

If we are going to do this, then we need to rethink our copyright and intellectual property claims.

It remains a lived reality that property is theft, not least in the eyes of indigenous and colonised peoples. 'Accept theft or die' is N'gugi Wa Thiong'o's call (N'gugi Wa Thiong'o, 1986). We need models of a creative commons and of stewardship, of the return of land and of language to common care from the sites of bureaucratic control, standardisation and curricularised codifications. Such sites of control serve those wishing to deploy human capital, not those striving to care for the persistent diversity of human life, and human languages and the myriad forms their sharing and learning may take. A language cannot be owned; nor can its teaching. It is the first sharing that occurs in human life between the child and parent, the first whispered words of hospitality. These are the places a serious decolonising attempt of multilingualism will need to explore to stand any chance of finding a way out of those insurmountable difficulties notions of property have caused within the Western philosophical and epistemological traditions.

If we are going to do this, then let's improvise and devise. This is how we might learn the arts of decolonising.

We aren't going to get it right first time. Or even the tenth time. It's not something you can clean up theoretically or conceptually and have a correct methodological framework for developing. It's going to be messy, it's going to be like all creative human endeavour, it's going to need some awkward practice, uneasy rehearsals, the development together of new scripts which we trace out from having made it up as we went along the journey with others. And it is not about knowing lots, but about particularities and granularities of experience. The colonised cannot know decolonisation in the same way as the coloniser, but as with all experiences of violence there are some structural similarities to the ways in which the damage to both will manifest. Colonisation works within the framings of trauma and decolonising will work in the nooks and crannies

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of unstable behaviours, memories, numbness and vivid recall. A similar description is found in Ijeoma Oluo's descriptions of tackling racism (Oluo, 2018). Unlearning habits of oppression and inequality is not straightforward or neat and tidy. And this should not be an excuse for inaction. It will mean sometimes language is where we relive those violences and struggle with their ongoing effects, as we try to use them in recovery (Costa & Dewaele, 2014).

If we are going to do this, then we need different companions.

We might need to be allies, perhaps, but I'd prefer co-conspirers, in that wonderful sense buried in the etymology – '< French *conspire-r* (15th cent. in Littré) (= Provençal *conspirar*, Spanish *conspirar*, Italian *conspirare*), < Latin *conspīrāre* lit. "to breathe together", whence, "to accord, harmonize, agree, combine or unite in a purpose, plot mischief together secretly"' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The idea of allies – as with ideas of perpetrator and victim, of coloniser and colonised – always draws thick lines where porosity exists. It's vital that privilege and position are part of our ongoing reflection on where we speak from and on behalf of whom, but it's not the end or even the beginning of the story. In conspiring, we have a sense of participation in a collective, porous endeavour, not of stepping out of the world in whose suffering, loss and oppression we are so implicated, nor by believing we have the answers and expertise to clean up that very mess. Autonomy is an important principle in this work, but the mess we have made, of peoples, land, languages, rivers and the air, is no respecter of nationally drawn postcolonial boundaries and any decolonising foreign language learning endeavour worth its salt will need to remember the intimate connections between land, language and its need of the air for speech, any speech, anywhere, to find articulation.

It was not only Bakhtin who understood that we are made through dialogue with others; we are permeable beings, in his dialogic imagination, with transindividual subjectivities. This logic is at the heart of *ubuntu* understandings, which have been widely posited as a counterbalance to the Cartesian dualisms of individual mind and individual body, which allowed the kinds of abstractions and divisions to take form which are intrinsic to the

colonial and neo-colonial logics. *Umntu nguntu ngaabantu* – ‘a person is made by other people’ – is the Xhosa expression, pointing to a transindividuality, and dialogic constitution and change wrought by those with whom one speaks. It follows that the way in which this dialogue is constituted – in Bakhtinian terms – its diglossia and heteroglossia – will be part of the material formation of ever-changing subjectivities.

An intentional decolonial multilingualism will need to pay attention to who, and in which terms, quite literally, it is in dialogue. If that dialogue is constituted only in Anglo-normal or all too colonial linguistic and discursive terms, then some work will need to be on the cards.

If we are going to do this, we will need artists and poetic activists to break the hold of the discourse of the colonising multilingualisms and foreign language pedagogies and their performative assumptions.

Struggles need their fools, the Lords of Misrule, the place of the carnivalesque, the people who start out on a crazy journey, looking and sounding very unlike the mainstream, weaving their words in daring ways which are poetic and different and without doubt often foolish enough to be dangerous to all that is normative and believing in its own parameters. Mary Carol Combs wrote a wonderful piece about ‘goofiness’ in language teaching (Combs, 2014). Speaking words which change the dull echo-chambers of the soundscape; speaking words which are not a backing track but which will be heard. It’s part of the co-conspiring work. And poetry remains, according to the Welsh poet writing from within what he understood as colonial conditions, ‘that which enters the intellect, by way of the heart’ (R.S. Thomas).

If we are going to do this, let’s do it in a way which is as local as it is global; which affirms the granulations of the way peoples name their worlds.

In this wee book I insist on my own local geographies, my kinships with places as their own genealogies of experience and decolonisation. Colonialism is about a particular violent set of practices and knowledges, which insert themselves into and write over particular local contexts. So, naming the small

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places, the townships and abodes, the places where dwellings have been made and lives are lived out, often a long way from the centres of decision-making power, but where decisions are made to retain local naming practices – these matter to the decolonising task. I speak in this book of Camas, of Iona, of St Porchaire, of Whirinaki, Biberach an der Riss, Dodowa. These are places in which a vernacular persists and with their own ways of pronouncing their place in the order of things which has a defiance and a resistance when spoken by visitors. They are often unassuming places but their retention of local names with their own meanings requires a respect of them with the decolonising journey. But this is not simply about localisms, but rather the way the patterning of this can be found globally to resist, subsist, struggle on, or to die away but be retained and returned in fragments of oral narrative and story.

Finally, if we are going to do this, let's do it multilingually, let's language it.

For the last few years I've been holding the threads, as a leader, of the at times technocratic, at times intellectually stretching, at times creatively glorious space in which a large, multi-million pound grant project – Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State – has been attempting to decolonise various academic disciplines and methodologies. It is a complex project which has taken place with refugees and displaced or oppressed peoples worldwide and in a range of conflict zones, with researchers working, and mostly failing to work, multilingually in their academic practice – both individually and collectively, across a range of elite and grassroots multilingualism. From our trials and errors and moments of bright breakthrough have come the beginnings of both a creative practice for researching multilingually, and theorisation of what this might mean methodologically, critically and ontologically.

From the devising of online siege-breaking Arabic curricula in the Gaza Strip to the refugee detention centres of Bulgaria, from the appeal courts for asylum claims in Europe to the recovery attempts of child soldiers in Uganda, to the dance performances of Dangbe young people in Ghana, researchers have

worked with diaspora arts from former British colonies to make attempts at decolonising language methodologies and pedagogies. The multilingual attempts have failed as much as they have succeeded in cracking open a space where we might begin in the mother tongues of all who are present and allow ourselves to make a way for our work, multilingually, deliberately shirking the pull to a single language for ease of administration. Interestingly, the multilingual attempts which have most succeeded are those which have been least engaged with the learning of other colonial languages.

And in this, let there be no 'us', except as an imaginative, *ubuntu* force. For it is vital to recall that to decolonise has to be a process of learning with and through difference and that the hope for an arrival at a common, collective place of understanding is to deny the necessity of constant difference. Those moments of connection can only be fleeting, made in ceremony and performance and ritual events, but not enduring, for this moment in history. The imagination can hold out for a unity, a oneness, as I have found repeated time and again in the autoethnographic experiences I describe here from participant observations. But structural inequalities cannot be overcome in a research project or even in a family set of relationships. They endure and must be endured, as part of the disquieting and enduring dis-ease of all activism that is at the heart of all critical and decolonising work.

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Obedience

I spent the day in obedience
Unwriting all that has been written.
Unwalking the beech strewn paths.
Unthinking all that has been thought
Unfeeling all sensuous sensation.
I let the water lap around my skin
then unlapping, let the water join the mist.
I held only air.
Spoke only with silence.
Touched only where the shadows lay.
I reeled in every prayer, unhooked the bait,
Threw the fish back into the water.

Decreated I surveyed the battlefield.

Warriors are not warriors outwith wartime.
Warriors are gardeners, poets,
spirits of the living,
spirits at one
with the dead.

Decreated, I tore the many words from my lips,
the many thoughts from my mind,
the hopes from my heart.

Decreated I left the dance floor.

And for a while
my land had rest from war.

Alison Phipps, 2018

This short book offers a critical and autoethnographic glimpse into some of the learning which has come from the decolonising attempts and the many errors and lessons involved in trying to decolonise language learning and multilingualism. In it, I situate myself in a variety of roles, but primarily as a language non-knower in situations where the normal power relations of language are reversed. I do so by taking at face value the critical injunctions to write in such a way as to unsettle the arrogance of ignorance derived from institutional authority which can often lead to the fragmentation of bodies of knowledge. Such fragmentation gives rise to a misguided elitism which, in turn, creates tensions and contradictions between theory and practice.

Often theorists devalue practice whereas practitioners dismiss theory as unnecessary and cumbersome while not realising that there is always a theory that explains practice, acknowledged or not. And in both, the light and shade of languaged experiences are masked.

I deliberately work with defamiliarising, hyper-local and poetically, rhetorical strategies which can throw the reader into a critical stance or puzzlement – what does that mean? Where is that? I've never been there? I've not heard of that? This is an attempt to unsettle and allow a world to be brought into view, which is not framed in the usual Englishes, or through recourse to the usual centres of power or canonical authors. This is poetic work trying to offer countervailing examples to the prevailing spirit of neo-colonialism, of 'upscaling' and homogeneity. In his essay *The Redress of Poetry* Seamus Heaney reflects that:

in the activity of poetry too, there is a tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales – a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation. (Heaney, 1995: 3–4)

Heaney's understanding draws directly on Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, where she writes:

If we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the light scale ... we must have formed a conception of equilibrium and be ever ready to change sides like justice, 'that fugitive from the camp of conquerors'. (Weil, 2002: 171)

It is in this vein of redress, of equilibrium, that I offer this as an attempt at multilingual justice. An attempt. A struggle to decreate.

I have also chosen to adopt the set of working principles outlined above to guide the work, attempting to enact a critical narrative but also to entice the reader into dialogue through a decolonising foreign language journey I have undergone myself as part of the larger project I outline above.

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While this journey has been undertaken in many different contexts – in my own home with those seeking refuge, in detention centres, in classrooms, on remote Scottish Islands, in the Gaza Strip, the Arizona desert, the rainforest of the Dangbe people – I specifically chose here to draw on the lessons I have learned from indigenous people and those seeking or waiting for refuge with whom I have come into relationships, work and patterns of life which have required me to struggle, to unlearn and to decreate.

In Part 1, I look at the lessons learned from injury, from the use of my own vulnerability and pain, a starting point for resisting certain forms of knowledge, and practice. In Part 2, I consider a different linguistic vulnerability and wound, created in the light of and despite my many colonial multilingual fluencies, that of the lack of my daughter's tongue, as her foster mother. Finally, in Part 3, I consider the language lessons, in particular from Sophie Nock (Nock, 2005; Nock & Crombie, 2009) and through her teaching and my learning of *te reo*, the Māori language, and decolonial methodologies from Piki Diamond and Chaz Doherty (see Buissink *et al.*, 2017) and from Linda Smith (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) in the context of the bicultural decolonising processes underway in Aotearoa New Zealand.

I end with the example of Aotearoa. While far from perfect and in many ways just taking its first hesitant steps, the work of biculturalism in Aotearoa, and of mutual decolonisation between Pākehā and Māori, has already brought new, creative forms of process and possibility into being. The political settlements made in both *te reo* and in English show how conceiving of justice and dialogue multilingually requires an expansion of thought, a hospitality to words, a decreation of all the practices which have been forged linguistically and destroyed rights of land and livelihood across generations (Durie, 1998).

In *Te Kawa o Te Urewera* (Te Urewera Board, 2017), a work of poetic, human ecological policy-making and philosophy for such decolonising and decreative work, the newly recognised legal personality of Te Urewera, the land, is the central focus, upon her return to the stewardship by Tūhoe, as another example of *ubuntu*, transindividual dialogical thinking, affect and action.

This disconnection from the land is the primary violence of settler colonialism, cultural, technocratic and linguistic

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For this reason, I chose to embark on this decolonising story by also breaking into my own prose, with poetry, with the spoken-word lessons of the elders, and with gifts in the feet.

Gifts Are in the Feet

You say 'the gifts are the feet'.
It is wartime.
So shall I walk away
Shall I flee to the hills
Cross the seas
Ford the rivers
In spate?

If I wear out
My shoes
Will the ache fade
Will the longing
Recede
Will I stand at last
Somewhere on the heart's
Edge
And sing
Again.

Of love.

I say the gifts are in the tears
I say that salt and water
Show what needs
To flow.
I say stay with the river
On your face,
Feet on the battle ground
Gifts come from the grieving earth
Watered with the
Longing in my eyes.

Alison Phipps, 2018