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An editorial: Introducing the Special Issue of Decolonial Subversions

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The origins of the Special Issue

This Special Issue of *Decolonial Subversions* originates from a desire to engage more deeply in the debate and discussions which formed part of the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute's research season series on *'Cultural Urgencies: Actions toward representation, equity, justice and well-being'* (University of the Arts, London 2021). *Cultural Urgencies* convened a roundtable on linguistic diversity with invited speakers Khairani Barokka, Alexander Ding, Mark Ingham, Eila Isolatus, Gillian Lazar and Tim Stephens who, at the time, were artists, scholars, and practitioners engaging, in different ways, with the decolonising the university movement, and with linguistic diversity from within the UK and European universities; but also collaborating, writing and researching beyond national and regional borders. We recognised that the discussions that took place were unfinished and wanted to expand the conversations on the potential of linguistic inclusion in higher education, which from our point of view needed to explore the role of language in knowledge production.

During and post-pandemic, we began engaging with scholars from the Global South mainly through the medium of English to discuss access, representation and educational outcomes within higher education and their intersection with society more broadly. At the same time, we were aware that structural and race-based inequalities within the Global North did not begin with the murder of Stephen Lawrence in the UK, or the murder of George Floyd in the

US, but in fact began much earlier. We are also mindful of what we see as the conflation of equality, diversity, inclusion and racial justice work within British universities seeking more equitable access, inclusion and representation within a sector that remains largely intact, with a more radically envisioned decolonising the university agenda. An agenda which seeks more radical structural change in order to challenge 'epistemological racism' (Cooper and Thesen, 2014, p.180) and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). For instance, Hirmer (2020, p.121) writes 'in fact it appears that "decolonial" is often used as a mere cosmetic ... label that eludes radical rethinking and profound restructuring' of institutional knowledge making practices and assessment regimes. Furthermore, and despite recent and often sustained initiatives to decolonise the university curriculum, systematic discussion around language use and multilingualism is often missing from critical debates and scholarship (Ndhlovu and Makalela, 2021) and academic practices and publishing. These discussions are taken up by Istratii and Hirmer (this Issue) as well as by Canagarajah (2022), all of whom advocate strongly for the diversification of scholarly writing practices in order to represent alternative epistemologies.

The coloniality of language and power

Although not always at the forefront of decolonising theory, practice and research, language is interwoven in complex ways with race, empire and colonialism (Motha, 2014; Veronelli, 2015). Coloniality, described as that which survives colonialism (de Sousa Santos, 2012; Grosfuguel 2007; Maldonado Torres, 2007), created an epistemic hierarchy of privilege where Western knowledge counts for more than so called non-Western knowledge from the

Global South[1]. Coloniality also helped to construct 'a linguistic hierarchy between European languages and non-European languages' (Grosfuguel, 2007 p. 217) and their racialised speakers. wa Thiong'o (2014) has argued for some time for the visibility of non-European languages in the academy in post-colonial contexts. Yet, not much has changed, claim Ndhlovu and Makaleka (2021), with former colonial languages (English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and so on) necessary for access to higher education and still used more or less exclusively for learning, teaching, and research publication in many Higher Education institutional contexts. Contemporary attitudes and resistance towards the legitimacy of certain languages for academic knowledge production have their origins in the colonial project.

The British colonial legacy saw the uninterrupted rise of English as a language of power and status. Linguistically this meant that the use of English was and is still promoted as a powerful model for communication. The colonial narrative saw proficiency in European languages as good and the linguistic complexity of 'local' languages as problematic. The multilingual speaker - proficient in minoritized community languages - was and is still positioned as deficient, and even deviant, in various African educational contexts according to McKinney and Christie (2022) and Monz (2020). There is a complex intersection between multilingual higher education and human rights, as discussed by Rao (2020, p. 6) who found that there was little '...awareness among students of the intersectionality of language as reflecting, constituting, and reproducing privilege, discrimination and exclusion'. Additionally, Andreotti et al. (2015, p.30) remind us that people working and publishing in

[1] We recognise the importance of the World Bank categorisation of the world based on geography, nation and income https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html. Following scholars such as Kerfoot and Hytlenstam (2017), we see the Global South as a useful metaphor for resistance and challenge as well as marginalisation, racialization and income disparity caused by global capitalism and ongoing coloniality. Also see Veronelli (2015) on "The coloniality of language".

their own or otherwise dominant language from within HEIs are all implicated to some degree as universities continue to benefit from the impact colonialism has had on others. As Guest Editors[2], we acknowledge our complicity as we write in ways which may exclude as much as they include. In doing so, we accept our connection to the coloniality of language as we write and publish from Britain and in English. Language was and is still very much a part of the neo-colonial project.

Framing the Special Issue

There has been significant effort, and in some cases violent uprising, in support of decolonising universities (see for example: Bhambra et al., 2018; Ritchie this Issue), their curricula, and the creation of more equitable access in Latin America and South Africa, but also more recently in the US, parts of Europe and elsewhere. A common aim is to encourage universities, their faculty and students to begin to talk about and challenge traditional ways of knowing and doing in relation to teaching, learning and research in order to reverse longstanding inequalities and ideologies with origins in the colonial past. However, and despite changes within some universities, there are scholars who question whether 'academic decolonising' is possible (Moosavi, 2022). At the same time, there has been an increase in the linguistic diversity of universities around the world, although what this means ,and for whom, can differ for stakeholders in different contexts, according to Madiba (2018). We suggest that making linguistic diversity in the academy visible beyond the purely performative can engender a sense of well-being, belonging and social justice, but more profoundly has the potential to decentre dominant ways of knowing and being.

[2]Victoria, a female academic of mixed heritage living and working in England who uses a historically and culturally valued variety of British English as a dominant language. Gillian, a white Jewish female academic who grew up in South Africa and lives in the UK, uses historically and culturally valued standard English as her dominant language.

Andreotti et al. (2015) acknowledge the challenges of entering into difficult conversations within the context of HE; and we agree that universities can be important spaces for contestation, for entering into dialogue about decolonial and anti-colonial struggles, something contributors to this Special Issue have engaged with. Drawing on Mignolo and Walsh's (2018) 'practices of decoloniality' we have sought to create a critical space for contributors to *speak back* in languages other than English in order to resist and look beyond some of the dominant epistemologies and ideologies that disproportionately affect the Global South resulting in unequal access to resources and power. The Special Issue is multi-/trans-disciplinary, multilingual and multimodal. Given this breadth, there has been a deliberate attempt to avoid overtly specialist language or to enter into conceptual or ontological debates of interest and relevance only to specific disciplinary traditions.

The contributing authors make rich and varied contributions to the Special Issue that draw on different languages, modes, formats and contexts through which they link to (different) perspectives and traditions of knowledge-making. Living and working in very different geopolitical spaces: Algeria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, South Africa, India, Indonesia and the United Kingdom, contributors write predominantly in English (except Barokka) but also make visible the languages that are meaningful to them; in doing so, give voice and visibility to *invisibilised* languages and people present in their research and practice. These strategic choices include, but also move beyond, former colonial languages in the academy, as contributors experiment with genres, registers, formats and the boundaries of what is, or should be, considered academic. Contributors are academics, comedy writers, poets, and researchers in anthropology, gender and religious specialisms. This diversity creates a welcome unevenness which serves to deepen and enrich the Special Issue as a

whole, as each contributor addresses the issue of decolonising the university and the making visible of language in relation to this in ways that are sensitive to their own contexts and positionality.

Introducing the Special Issue contributors

The first contribution is a poem meant to be read as a creative intervention, rather than as academic writing. **Khairani Barokka's** translingual poem breaks the straitjacket of academic language and knowledge production. Her poem *'prayer doa in which di mano: english inggris, baso minang and dan bahasa indonesia fight berseteru'* is written in Bahasa Indonesia, Baso Minang, and English, as Barokka explains 'privileging those with a working understanding of how all three are used--deliberately using Edouard Glissant's concept of opacity in not translating for those who understand only English. I'd not read a piece that was written for people who have experience of all three languages, without need for explanation, and decided to write one; there are, after all, many of us.' Readers may wish to respond by falling back on norms and expectations of monolingual academic publishing we are familiar with, yet Barokka pushes us gently, subtly challenging expected norms of readership and audience as dictated by the Anglophone Centre.

Maria Sílvia Cintra Martins explores the challenges inherent in the translation of texts from every day discourses (chants and myths) into academic discourse genres through longitudinal work with indigenous students at a Brazilian university. Martins argues the academy must '...overcome a worn-out way of referring to orality, where indigenous people would be characterised as primitive and savage users of oral language, whereas civilized people (mainly from the West and Northern Hemisphere) would be characterised as the most

advanced human beings and users of written language' (p.x). A question emerging from her research is what knowledges and languages indigenous and racialised students have and how they can be best represented in academic knowledge production. Her contention is that written academic discourse is 'averse to the presence of orality', ending with the caveat that languages need to be not only made visible but also embedded within the curriculum in order to decolonise.

Nour Elhouda Souleh's paper draws on a powerful biography and feminist autoethnography providing insights into the experiences of an international doctoral researcher and scholar in the United Kingdom. Souleh challenges the discourses of academic writing for imposing particular colonial ways of thinking and writing; contending that both creative writing and stand-up comedy offer forms of resistance which enable speakers and writers to create alternative modes of thinking and being. Souleh's life trajectory draws sensitively on coloniality, culture, indigeneity, and expectations of a hijab-wearing Muslim woman in a Western academy inflected by her female-dominated past. By drawing on lived experiences in Algeria and the UK, this contribution invites the reader to reflect on Algeria's colonial heritage and present day relationship with Europe. For Souleh, a consideration of linguistic diversity must extend beyond language to include alternative genres of writing as a way of pushing back against epistemic violence in the White, male, Western academy and to challenge colonial oppressions of the past and present.

Writing from post-apartheid South Africa, **Linda Ritchie** engages with the contested and inter-related issues of teaching, Shakespeare and the literary canon. She reports on a

'decolonial pedagogic initiative' to teach *Julius Caesar* through a translanguaging lens to students at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Texas, with the aim of subverting ideas about language, power and coloniality. The intervention required students to recontextualise the play using their own linguistic and cultural lenses in response to the dominant discourse of Brutus, a powerful senator. The article explores possibilities for translanguaging in the classroom and to what extent the inclusion of multiple languages can subvert colonial notions of language, power and race by challenging monolingual ideals about the exclusive use of English embedded within classroom practices. While the translanguaging intervention did not challenge the status of English, this contribution underscores the importance of raising awareness of linguistic and racial representation in historically White institutions.

Shahina Parvin, who taught anthropology at Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh before moving to Canada for her Masters and Doctoral studies, provides a powerful autobiographical account of her experiences as a Bangladeshi skilled migrant and scholar in Canada. She recounts the othering effects of the preference for so-called native speakers and pressure to conform to standard Canadian English language, which position speakers of varieties of English from the Global South as deficient and their writers as linguistically lacking. She describes the pain and psychological damage caused by the inferior non-native-speaking identity she was forced to adopt. Parvin argues that despite championing multiculturalism, Canada's '...colour blind approach has perpetuated dominant power relations and colonial politics', pointing out that her 'self-blame' about her English 'language deficit occurred within a neoliberal 'colour blind' higher education system that perpetuates racism by ignoring the needs of individuals. Her paper delineates her resistance to these

views, and enables her to begin to deconstruct the notion of the 'native speaker' and its links with coloniality.

Romina Istratii and **Monika Hirmer** discuss how *Decolonial Subversions*, the multilingual and multimodal online platform they founded, engages with decentring approaches to publishing. Their essay reflects some of the bold and deliberate choices they have made as they develop an online platform that challenges the privileged status of written English over other languages and over oral or visual modes of communication. They share a vision that promotes multilingual contributions and opens up 'conceptual repertoires' in order to move closer to true diversification of knowledge production. A strength of their vision is in recognising the epistemic violence perpetuated by insisting on publication in English. In doing so, they elevate the role of language and communication within scholarly publication. Istratii and Hirmer reflect ethically and with caution on the process, as pushing the boundaries of high quality and peer reviewed work is not without its challenges, raising questions of whose language and whose academic labour is needed.

Suresh Canagarajah, in collaboration with **Victoria Odeniyi** and **Gillian Lazar,** moves beyond the expected genre conventions for an Afterword quite deliberately by taking as his starting point questions from the editors of the Special Issue. In response to the questions posed, we learn of Suresh's life trajectory and how some of his major publications are interwoven with personal experiences in Sri Lanka and the US, and were motivated by academic inequalities. He suggests that a productive - yet gradual - step towards decolonising academic knowledge is to think of all languages as being equally legitimate resources for

knowledge making. Adopting a kind of strategic resistance from within, Suresh advocates a subtle democratising and diversification of the traditional and often tacit conventions of the research paper, among his other recommendations. Canagarajah suggests that if Northern scholars care sufficiently about decolonisation they should be able to offer selfless time, energy and other resources 'while keeping a safe distance'. The piece gives all readers much to think about, but steers Northern scholars in particular towards what can be done -in very practical terms - in order to diversify academic publishing.

Our work as editors

We met with the majority of contributors online to discuss in English proposals written in English and the ways in which we felt we could or should support contributors with the process of text production and accessing online resources. Early on, we learnt from prospective contributors first-hand how choosing to speak one language rather than another is often seen as a political, even dangerous, act in certain regions and situations. We had lengthy discussions about global reach, cultural and linguistic representation and the politics of translation. Indeed, translation emerged as crucial for the Special Issue which began with a

multilingual Call. Consequently, it was necessary to draw on a wide network of multilingual scholars, reviewers and translators and we were fortunate that network members were conscientious, curious and asked many questions.

We were convinced from the outset that the use and representation of multiple languages can and should be seen as a form of decolonising praxis within Northern universities; yet we were mindful that perspectives and experiences change across time and space. We sought contributions that would make visible different languages, modes, formats and contexts through which to offer often under-reported perspectives while remaining accessible to a diverse multilingual audience. While we were committed to moving beyond an English-only publication, one aspect of the project we had not given much attention to was which languages should be represented, preferring to leave the decision to contributors. Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that an aspect of the Special Issue we are especially pleased with is the representation of languages from the Global South. Reflecting on the process of curating the Special Issue we can say that we have learnt a lot, realised through collective effort.

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