

The languages we speak and the empires we embrace: addressing decolonization through the gaze of the empire

Paula Alexandra Ambrossi 

Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL,
United Kingdom

Corresponding author. E-mail: p.ambrossi@ucl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In this article I make a case for differentiating the process of decolonization in education from the process of dismantling the values of the empire and their continuing, subliminal role in our thought and practice (the gaze of the empire). I argue that ignoring the empire within (particularly the word ‘empire’ itself) is what sustains the colonial gaze and what constitutes decolonization’s greatest obstacle. I employ a poststructuralist, Foucauldian framework, which helps me explore notions of power and knowledge through language and the gaze. To illuminate discussions, I make use of some of the historical context necessary to understand the spirit and the tragedy of empire, with its language as principal instrument, as well as some of the literary aspects (Magical Realism and poetry) that have been used to gaze at the colonized and redeem the conqueror.

KEYWORDS: decolonization, education, curriculum, modern foreign languages, Indigenous cultures, the colonial gaze, empire

In terms of decolonization, the teaching and learning of foreign languages (FLs) offer a unique platform for the epistemological act of reflection (Yancey 2016), without which change can at best be perfunctory. However, decolonization at home (in postimperial nations) involves a different challenge. It is a different question to ask how we can challenge the postimperial values that subliminally shape and sustain a curriculum than to ask how we can decolonize that curriculum. The terms ‘empire’ and ‘the colonies’, as concepts, each bring forth different connotations. For the former, we need introspection and the acknowledgement that some of the imperial values in question are not as ‘post’ as we would like to think.

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How then, do we decolonize the curriculum when we, as I will argue, still embrace Western imperial values surrounding knowledge? Thus, I claim that it is the gaze of the empire at home that we need to dismantle, or at least acknowledge and critique, if we want decolonization at home to succeed.

I make the distinction between the colonial perspective (of members of colonized communities, particularly those in the Americas) and the empire at home: the Western, post-empire perspective, for example, in Great Britain, France, Spain.

In order to explore the dynamics at work between decolonization and power in terms of knowledge and the identity implicit in language, I employ a poststructuralist framework as applied to the conception of ‘the gaze’ (Foucault 1980). Thus, I discuss issues around the power of language and culture to differentiate them but not to extricate them from economic power. In this respect I ask what the subject knowledge of decolonization entails in education.

RESEARCHER IDENTITY: THE EMPIRE AND THE COLONY

At times I use my own language and identity background, examining how these problematize each other in the present context. The problem arises when I use ‘we’ to refer to those in the place where I have taught and lived for over thirty years, and then ‘we’ to reflect my being originally from a colonized culture in the Americas (Chile). I could say that I am addressing you from the ‘we’ that comes from my experience of having once been an FL teacher in the UK, of being a parent in the UK, and of currently being a teacher educator and researcher in the UK, which often puts me at the service of the empire. I could equally say, however, that I am addressing you from the ‘we’ that allowed me to pay particular attention to these issues: that is to say, the ‘we’ that makes me a hybrid individual and that often puts me at the receiving end of colonial (and postcolonial) attitudes and initiatives. For clarity of argument, it seems necessary that I pick a side, but that would not reflect the appropriate complexity of perspective, for I clearly am both ‘we’ and ‘they’ ... but perhaps not so clearly. The fact that I feel at home in both instances does not make me ‘one of us’ in the eyes of UK empire, and I have been made to feel that at times. I shall therefore use ‘we’ and ‘they’ judiciously. If, however, my attempt fails at times, it is because not taking sides in one’s identity is a struggle in the home of the empire.

THE GAZE: FROM EMPIRE TO COLONY

My argument posits that the ‘colonial gaze’ when used within the home of empires occludes the factors that sustain what is termed ‘colonial’ attitudes at home and is, therefore, inadequate to address issues of decolonization within postimperial nations. The gaze of the empire is, I claim, what feeds the colonial gaze. In this sense the former provides a perspective on the latter, allowing us to focus on the source of (the values that occasion) certain injustices, not only the injustices themselves. To this effect, I clarify first what is meant by ‘gaze’ in Foucauldian terms and,

second, how this gaze reflects the values of the empire with a particular emphasis on the context of FLs teacher education.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1979) Michel Foucault develops the idea of the Enlightenment in Europe as an age of coercion by means of observation. The newly found power of science over nature became the potential control of the human, classifying and defining people according to observed behaviour. To fall outside expected norms was, hence, described as to be bad or wanting, criminal or mad, etc. Social norms or expectations around human behaviour were particularly arbitrary and dependent on the institutions that made them. For instance, the Western ‘disciplinary gaze’ entails sanctions—what Foucault called ‘micro-penalties’—which are not only still familiar to us today but things that the gaze will have us believe have always been there: ‘micro-penalty of time (latenesses, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behaviour (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body (“incorrect” attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency)’ (Foucault 1979: 192). Foucault’s ideas on power and the gaze are exemplified in his reference to the 18th-century English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, whom Foucault describes as ‘one of the most exemplary inventors of technologies of power’ (Foucault 1980: 156). Foucault reflected on Bentham’s conception of the prison building shaped as a panopticon—a circular, doughnut-shaped building with individual cells open to the centre, where inmates could be constantly and unimpededly observed from a central tower. The psychological ruse was to make prisoners feel under constant surveillance, even when (unknowingly to them) no guard was present. The phantom gaze of the guard is thus internalized in the prisoner, who carries the gaze with him much more efficiently than an actual guard could do. Thus, the gaze, which always protects the interests of power, checks the behaviour—and ultimately even the intentions—of others, including our own: we scrutinize ourselves to remain within the norm. In other words, anyone’s gaze is a potential arbiter of our conduct: the gaze of those in power or the gaze of its sympathizers (in power by proxy).

The fact that power could be sustained and non-conformity identified by ultimately anyone’s gaze meant that there was no longer a need for a central ‘control tower’ so to speak. Anyone’s gaze could potentially become a finer channel of power and oppression. Foucault observed:

The economic changes of the eighteenth century made it necessary to ensure the circulation of effects of power through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions. By such means power, even when faced with ruling a multiplicity of men, could be as efficacious as if it were being exercised over a single one. (p. 951)

Moreover, ‘Power’, he remarks, ‘is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth [i.e. kings]; it becomes a machinery that no one owns’ (p. 156). The gaze becomes a specialized and weaponized instrument of coercion, and power and its effects are, Foucault suggests, the ultimate possession; the be-all and end-all of the gaze. Empires, which are my concern

here, dealt exclusively with power and any values that supported their keeping or augmenting it. The gaze, which is anything but passive, entails a ‘reifying oversight, which by putting everything/time it sees (the spatial and temporal detail) in its “proper” place constitutes an action, implicates itself essentially in the disciplinary/imperial project [, rendering] its imperial essence invisible’ (Spanos 2009: 28).

Norms and political ideologies functioned accordingly. The values that needed to be maintained and encouraged were values that served the empire—for instance, competition, ambition, growth, ruthlessness or ruse, adventure and risk (neoliberal standards today). Every new technology was put at its service; every discovery or invention, whether abstract or concrete, served the values of the empire first, often through its finer, intellectual, highly or poorly educated channels: ‘It is the “murky shallows”, not only of policy debate but also of political argument, that we must scour in order to enrich understanding of the way in which the empire was imagined’ (Bell 2007: 22). To succeed, empires needed the kind of ‘order and discipline’ that guaranteed their survival, dominion and expansion. The gaze of the empire was thus embodied, first, in the gaze of its own people at home, towards an object outside of it—the imperial notion of Britishness entailed mainly not being ‘the exotic other’ (Said 2003) or not being the ‘imperial other’ (Colley 1992); and, second, in the gaze of the colonizer who becomes the immediate channel of power for the empire abroad—the conquistador par excellence, the first and last panopticon guard on duty.

After that first ‘imperial gaze’ comes, I suggest, the gaze of the colonizer. The colonial gaze differs in that its executor is a native of the colony, whether direct descendant, hybrid, or Indigenous. Even if the values maintained in the colony were still those of the empire, the parameters of action were more modest (though no less ambitious), more immediate, and comprised a variety of voices, including that of the Indigenous elites (Olko and Szemiński 2018). Most importantly, the colonial gaze is constantly transformed by the cultures it encounters. Its possibilities are different through the acquisition of new vocabularies. For instance, regarding the observation of nature, some Indigenous languages contain concepts that have no equivalent in English (Kimmerer 2013: 49). What cannot be translated cannot be observed, and without language there is no possibility of abstraction and control. The gaze of the empire was blind to certain aspects of Indigenous culture. The colonial gaze however, had a greater sense of something existing beyond their immediate comprehension, for the descendants of the first colonizers were in situ, and confronted by their own and the Indigenous people’s daily lives.

The here and now of the colony had very different concerns than those of the empire at home, far away. The colonial gaze is, therefore, a colonial concern. Myriad subsequent, mixed ethnicities continue to inhabit that complex, multifaceted colonial gaze, that guardianship, as if that gaze had always been their own, even in the physical absence of the empire, until that postcolonial moment, when they realized that the gaze never was, or that it was only theirs in part. Such communities or new nations can challenge the colonial gaze, even bring down their statues, but what happens in the home of the empire is something altogether different. Bringing down statues in the home of the empire encounters great opposition. I cannot bring down

what makes me fundamentally me, or at least, if I attempt to do it, I need to know what it is that I really am. England, France, Spain, and the rest are not colonies to be decolonized: they are empires still to be de-imperialized (awkward term). Any attempt at ‘decolonization’ in the home of the empire is only an attempt at dealing with otherness, not with itself. The term ‘colonial’ sets us off already on a wrong turn, for it brings to mind what happens or happened somewhere else, to others. These words matter.

THE GAZE OF THE EMPIRE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The ‘progressively finer channels’ that Foucault mentions are manifest in the structures of knowledge and power of universities, both at home and in the colonies. Such power goes from admissions procedures (who is deemed appropriate to be a student?) to reading lists (the examples of excellence and ways of knowing given to students), to academic journals (whose voice and ways of knowing and expression are accepted for publication?).

There is always, Foucault (1980) observes, a single individual capable of sustaining hegemony on behalf of the ‘core values’ of power. What I call ‘imperial values’ for the purpose of this discussion are those values that have aided the expansion of empires and answered to their need for constant growth, accumulation, and control. Empires did not relinquish this power with the advent of democracy: they simply accommodated themselves to the new names of similar practices (Bell 2007)—for instance from ‘slavery’ to ‘indentured¹ servants’, from ‘empire’ to ‘neoliberal nation’, from ‘colonies’ to ‘commonwealth’, and from ‘subjects’ to ‘citizens’. Citizens (subjects) are thus encouraged to show allegiance to the nation (empire) and its progress; they have impressed upon them the need for ‘pride, steadfastness and proactivity’ in one’s institutions (Prior 2018: 209). These values are instantiated academically by Western tenets of ‘excellence’ and ‘standards’ in knowledge, and by its accumulation via appropriate selection procedures. Those who fall outside such values are reprimanded with a micro-penalty of terms such as ‘unapplied’, ‘disorganized’, ‘dogmatic’, ‘unfocused’, ‘unreflective’, ‘uncritical’, and in some cases, even ‘lazy’ (Garza et al. 2022). Those who do apply themselves are sometimes publicly praised by the empire, for instance in the award of OBEs and MBEs.²

Although institutions like universities set up bodies of experts to address these sources of unfairness or prejudice and often carry out wider consultation when setting up their official procedures (as is the case with initiatives of inclusion), once these protocols, procedures, or initiatives are on the ground, there is always one person, one gaze, capable of accepting or rejecting someone else’s action on behalf of the values of the empire. Take the Teaching Standards in the UK, for instance.

¹ After the abolition of slavery in 1833, the British used indentured labourers until the 1920s. These were employees within a system of unfree labour, bound by a signed or forced contract (indenture) to work without pay for the owner of the indenture for a period of time (*Online British Empire Glossary*, July 2023. See also Connolly 2018).

² Order of the British Empire and Member of the British Empire.

Those who wish to become teachers need to meet all these standards. During their school placements they are continuously observed by the class teacher, and periodically and officially by a university tutor. Standards such as whether pupils under their care are showing signs of progress in their learning, or whether a student–teacher is able to plan and deliver lessons that support and challenge pupils, are assessed through observation. The decision as to whether, for any particular lesson, the student–teacher has met some or all of the standards falls onto one individual observing. One gaze. If two people or a panel are observing or discussing a student’s progress, it becomes a question of how similar or different their points of observation are, based on the one principal gaze of the standards, which no one owns as author. The rejection of a candidate, student, or applicant, therefore, can always be distanced from the observer by the clichéd claim: ‘It is not personal.’ The failure is always felt as a failure of the one being observed. Individual decisions on others’ academic or practical performance are thus backed by the gaze that claims to adhere to set standards of excellence or ‘good practice’. In this way, it is claimed, we approach equity and equality, so who could possibly be against it?

At this point I want to comment on the binary nature of the gaze which runs through my argument. I see the gaze as a binary event, in that it involves the one who gazes and the object of observation. It is true that there may be many types of gaze we can ‘put on’, many perspectives by which to judge or praise others, but as an experience the gaze always involves a coming and going between two stances. We cannot pay attention or focus our gaze on two things at once, and although a multitude of gazes may be upon us and even within us, we can only deal with one of them at a time. This is why the panopticon is effective; there is no hiding from ‘the one’ that is (or potentially could be) observing ‘me’. If the gaze is not felt as a personal experience, it has no power.

In Western universities, the gaze that beholds me when I act, whether that gaze comes from outside or from within, is always traceable to the gaze of old, half-asleep empires. A gaze somewhat diluted with time but only in the peripheries. That is to say, there will always be those who are in the privileged position to indulge eccentricity in their gaze, for better or for worse. Such ‘eccentricities’³—from foibles and petty obsessions to hobby-horses and hang-ups—may be particularly relevant amongst the immigration officials, admissions officers, and examiners whose decisions can radically alter the course of people’s lives. The gaze inhabits certain criteria: for instance, repetition of the phrase ‘standards of excellence’ allows those in power to claim that decisions made are ‘objective’—finer channels of power operating in disguise.

THE LANGUAGE OF EMPIRE: POWERFUL INSTRUMENTS

One of the relevant places where the discourse around decolonization can occur is the FL learning context, particularly in respect of training to teach. The title of this

³ In Latin America, Europeans and the English in particular are commonly thought of as ‘eccentric’, comically perhaps but not entirely so.

article is in fact dedicated to considering this. Through the languages we embrace we negotiate group membership by positioning ourselves and the other (Kim and Angouri 2023). Through text and talk we manage knowledge that includes or excludes others (van Dijk 2014), making language the basis of all power (Lakoff 2000). If identity is the development of our personal, verbal narratives, then the success or failure of identity is a linguistic concern (Cameron 2000).

I have been involved in teacher education and FL pedagogies for almost twenty years, and the languages we embrace do say something about the gazes we hold dear. What does it mean to teach and learn the languages of our own or other people's past and present oppressors? Language and culture at the service of power become instruments easily weaponized. Language carries the gaze that needs to be stealthily disseminated by any invading empire, as it sets the parameters of thought and action; it declares what is possible, what is valid knowledge, and what is not. As such, I argue, speaking the languages of empire (e.g. English, Spanish, French) is a mode of sustaining hegemony—nurturing organized systems of power, knowledge, and identity that benefit postimperial nations in their new and innocuous Western guise of democratic, neoliberal nation-states. For example, Fabien and Said (1986) observed how the use of French in Congolese children's education was a vehicle towards the future of a profitable but dependent colony. Equally, the education Indigenous people received from empires was always an effort to support and expand the empire's oversight over them and their land. Already in 1531, the conquistadors brought Spanish teachers and nuns in an effort to educate the female Indigenous population (Steinrutriguez 2012). Whilst Portuguese and Spanish missionaries and administrators were encouraged to learn the local languages, this was a mere pragmatic exercise to further Western interests concerning, for example, Catholicism, tax collection, and forced labour (Olko and Szemiński 2018), it did not result in a valorization of the Indigenous languages. In Chile, by the end of the 19th century, the 'colonial state' organized town schools for the small southern mixed communities, expecting Mapuche⁴ children to join and be 'educated out' of their own culture (Serrano 2019). Mapuche people did not live in nor accept the concept of 'towns' as such; they saw the land (pachamama⁵) as their boundless home. Western empires did not understand this geospatial perspective. In geographical terms, the colonial gaze has been described as 'how the colonizer saw and understood colonial space and the subjects within it ... [for instance] how the colonizer was able to see fully populated spaces as "empty"' (Nelson 2011: 162), which is why I call Chile a 'colonial state'. Through the newly formed states the language of empire was used to consolidate its gaze.

Although only the elites benefited both at home and in the colonies (Kuchta 2010), the harm done by empires to the Indigenous populations was devastating⁶ and linguistically tragic (Waldron 2021). When Christopher Columbus arrived in

⁴ The largest of many ethnic populations in Chile.

⁵ Meaning 'world mother' in the Quechua and Aymara languages of the Andestragei.

⁶ Also inadvertently devastating in terms of the introduction of new pathogens that killed over 90 per cent of the indigenous population in some South American regions (Saavedra Osorio 2019).

what we now know as the Bahamas (he died believing he was in the west of India), he found a variety of interconnected languages amongst the Indigenous communities:

The Arawakan-speaking Antilleans were the first to bear the misnomer ‘indio’ (Indian) and the first to suffer the conflicts, coercions, forced conversions, and epidemics that characterized the conquest. ... Thus, it is often from our linguistically and culturally segregated perches, isolated by today’s maritime political borders, that we glance at each other across the Caribbean Sea or look back toward what was a far more interconnected pre-conquest Caribbean. (Waldron 2021: 82)

Universities, as institutions of power, work within a postimperial framework of ‘traditional’ expectations of ‘excellence’, ‘accumulation’ of knowledge and resources, ‘selective processes’, etc. reflected amongst other things in how they expect students and staff to speak (pronunciation), how they ought to write (spelling and syntax), and how they should structure and present their thoughts and ideas (argument). These expectations can be oppressive to anyone from a disadvantaged background but particularly so to non-white ethnic minorities on campus (Luckett 2016; Mwangi et al. 2018; Griffith 2022; Tichavakunda 2022), who tend to be visually classified as potential representatives and reminders of Britain’s colonial past: ‘We’re here because you were there’ (Patel 2021). ‘Funds of knowledge’, an approach that has been widely adopted but also critiqued and researched in the USA, has been viewed by some, for instance, as an attempt in schools to shift ‘definitions of academic success’ (Rodriguez 2013: 101). Yet such a daring approach would not be out of place in higher education, and it has indeed been contemplated as a ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’ (Rios-Aguilar 2017).

We have been raised to believe, in the home of the empire and at home in the colonies, in Western conceptions of excellence and knowledge that construct the world geographically, culturally, and politically by division (e.g. nation-states), by classification (developed/developing worlds, white race/mixed/other, etc. Willinsky 1998), and by dualisms that separate mind from world in the Cartesian sense (nature/nurture, objective/subjective, material/spiritual, etc. Oliveros and del Pilar Santamaría 2015). It thus seems counter-intuitive to us not to seek measurable excellence in our accumulation of knowledge; and the more atomized that knowledge is, the easier it seems to us to measure, control, and use it and its language implicit in the gaze, as instruments of power over others.

THE SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE OF DECOLONIZATION

Learning English as a foreign language in a Latin American or African country is different from learning French or Spanish as an FL in a postimperial country. I am here concerned with the latter, inasmuch as it is typified by postimperial nations (e.g. the UK, France, Spain, the Netherlands) learning the language of other, equally powerful past empires. Learning these languages gives postimperial neighbours the possibility of access to (and power over) colonized countries. Having myself come from an old Spanish colony (Chile), I have learnt to consider ‘the gaze’ when I teach Spanish to UK citizens. I reflect on the content that I decide to impart,

and, as [Winters \(2017\)](#) suggests we should do, I spend time reflecting on the ideas and values that drive my pedagogy and my students' responses. This has led me to review my own 'philosophical story', so to speak ([Johansson 2019](#)), and ask myself why I am here at all, training teachers in a British university to teach Spanish. Could it—should it have been—otherwise for me? Had it not been for the conquistadors taking Spanish to the Americas I would not be in my current situation. But to wish the conquistadors away is to wish myself away. I am here because of the tragedy of their being there. How much of me is a conflict? Anecdotally, I share below a statistical answer—my own, broad ancestry DNA results—in order to ask the reader where, in the 'ethnic origin' of countless forms I have had to fill in, they would place me. Or would they need to 'gaze' at me before committing to an answer?

Africa: 2% ⁷

Indigenous Americas: 36%

European: 62%

During my thirty years in England, I have not been able to 'live beyond' race, as [hooks \(2012\)](#) puts it, for about 38 per cent of my time (proportional to my DNA). I have had to learn to think about my race every now and then—to tick my ethnicity as 'white(ish)/other'. Although before coming to the UK I would never have classified myself as white, it is clear that to some people I am white, whilst to others I am a mix. It depends on the gaze that beholds me (and the ears that hear me), and not only in my own view of things, the latter being structured by the former. The personal experience of one's race is one of the reasons why it is difficult to have discussions around decolonization, racism, or inclusion in institutions that attempt to broach such issues ([Winters 2017](#); [Ashby et al. 2018](#); [Searle and Muller 2019](#); [Miller-Kleinhenz et al. 2021](#)). But to suppress one's personal experience achieves only superficial or ineffectual change for the institution. It is pointless to wish myself away, but it is not pointless to ask myself why it may be useful to the institution to see me as an ethnic minority, when to others I am clearly not a typical representative of such. It is not pointless either to ask why I am here: why the language of an empire is being taught to the children of another empire. Of course, there will always be benign and admirable reasons to learn other languages, even postimperial ones. The Western thought disseminated by empires is only an issue when it believes itself superior to other ways of thinking and acts accordingly. I am a firm believer in the access to different ways of being that engagement with foreign literature can give us; each empire has its own culture. However, worthwhile as a pursuit as this is, markers of the intrusion of empire are still manifest there. Why, for instance, is the experience of the world of Indigenous peoples often portrayed in postcolonial literature in the form of Magical Realism?⁸ In a critical review of the literature on

⁷ Most people in the world carry at least 1 or 2 per cent of African DNA ([Mountain et al. 1993](#)).

⁸ Originally a German concept, this is a line of Magical Realism associated more commonly with writers such as Salman Rushdie or Gabriel García Márquez. Choudhury uses this type of Magical Realism as a

anthropological Magical Realism, Choudhury observes how this genre has experienced criticism in terms of its imperial connotations. He mentions one cultural theorist, Timothy Brennan, who considered that:

both Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez have enjoyed too privileged an upbringing to comprehend and accept a system of values that is totally divorced from science. Bound by a rational mind, the reader is forced to escape into the magical world within the text. Cooper claims that this is one of the inherent contradictions of the genre: 'Magical Realism attempts to capture reality by way of a depiction of life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious. In the process, such writers walk a political tightrope between capturing this reality and providing precisely the exotic escape from reality desired by some of their Western readership' ([Cooper] 2004: 32; Brennan 1989). (Brennan, in Choudhury 2014: 18)

Thus, being born in South America, in the case of García Márquez, is not an automatic ticket to understanding or expressing Indigenous value systems. Both writers have an already Western perspective (as I do) acquired through parents and their colonial communities—ways of thinking that I am not certain are possible to shake. Contemporary authors who write historical fiction—for instance the Colombian writer, William Ospina—can open up new perspectives on issues of conquest and invasion, but new perspectives that still have the stamp of Western thought and values.

It is very difficult to come face to face with our own value systems, to see them from outside as it were, for what they are. Carl G. Jung, during his 1924 visit to the USA, had the opportunity to experience the unsettledness it provoked. A chieftain asked him whether it was not obvious to the white man that the sun was God. Worshipping the sun, added the chieftain, was of benefit to everyone, including the Americans (who wanted the practice abolished). Quaint as such notions may have appeared to Western minds a few centuries ago, we may be more willing to listen now. The 'magic' of such ideas conceals aspects of our lives that science has occluded. Aspects that perhaps should never have been relegated to the status of magic, but could instead have been retained within our funds of knowledge. Jung recollects the encounter:

There for the first time I had the good fortune to talk with a non-European, that is, to a non-white. ... I was able to talk with him as I have rarely been able to talk with a European. ...

'See', Ochwiay Bianco said, 'how cruel the whites look. Their lips are thin, their noses sharp, their faces furrowed and distorted by folds. Their eyes have a staring expression; they are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something; they are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want. We do not understand them. We think that they are mad.'

I asked him why he thought the whites were all mad.

'They say that they think with their heads', he replied.

'Why of course. What do you think with?' I asked him in surprise.

methodology of exploration of a text, demonstrating the genre's ability to liberate the text from Western confinements.

‘We think here’, he said, indicating his heart.

I fell into a long meditation. For the first time in my life, so it seemed to me, someone had drawn for me a picture of the real white man. (Jung 1995: 298)

Real inasmuch as it was drawn from a different perspective (non-white, colonized, marginalized, etc.); a perspective that would have been impossible for Jung to experience himself. In a way, Ochiwiy Bianco was describing the colonial gaze: dissatisfaction with one’s lot, a distorted search for something better, greater, more powerful, and a disregard for others and their difference, implicit in the absence of the heart in thinking. Thinking with one’s heart⁹ entails the body in nature, which includes others; what *feels* right becomes part of thinking. The Western mind calls here for caution, lest we succumb to sentimentalism and ‘indiscriminate’ compassion. Choudhury praises Anthropologically Magical Realism for disarming the Western reader, as it uses ‘a trickster’s ruse to, as the critical theorist Gayatri Spivak might phrase [it], “uncoercively rearrange” the manner in which rationalist readers are trained to think’ (Choudhury 2014: 24). In his encounter with the chieftain, Jung certainly appears disarmed: he is placed in front of a mirror that forces him to reflect—but there is no trickster’s ruse here, only actual experience. Jung’s extensive understanding of the historicity of human nature, and particularly his interest in Eastern philosophy, does not make him the typical Western reader that Choudhury has in mind. The ‘rational reader’ and the ‘empiricist’ in the latter case are classical examples embodying Western conceptions of knowledge, defining how things are and ought to be for everyone, where science and positivism in particular dictate how we ought to understand and navigate the world, and where anything outside our realm of explanations and articulation is reduced to the magical. For Jung, in place of reducing such cultural differences to the realm of the ‘magic’, he saw ‘the ‘dignity’ of the individual Indian as founded on their lives being ‘cosmologically meaningful’ (Jung 1995: 300). Jung saw Westerners’ lives as limited and impoverished in this respect—although still superior. Are we with Jung here in theory and practice?

Although Magical Realism can help us approach a text differently, other people’s culture is not a magical story. The gaze of empire makes us position what perplexes us as being outside objective experience or in opposition to Western empirical conceptions of truth and reality, relegating the reality of others to the realm of dreams and fantasy. I doubt that Indigenous communities thought (or think) of their relation to the world as ‘magical’ in terms of not being part of their daily experience.

Thus, when we bring Magical Realism to the Western educational context, as I have often done, we must remember that we are only passing the ball (the same perspective on what counts for ‘real’ knowledge) from one empire to another. The question is how do we—how can we—really blow the whistle and stop mid-game in our own practice? It seems to me that the ever-finer channels of

⁹ Following one’s heart is not the same as thinking with one’s heart; the latter implies reflection, or a moderated, tempered rationality.

control do not allow for the possibility of crying foul. We disqualify those who appraise our practice negatively if we deem them lacking ‘rigorous’ foundations for doing so. For what is rigorous, for example, about thinking with one’s heart? We cannot measure the heart’s influence, for better or for worse, in our actions, but we can speak in terms of our moral conduct (and duties) towards ourselves and others. The subject knowledge of decolonization thus resides in unpicking what the latter consideration entails, particularly when considering cultures that have been marginalized by empires. This implies critical reflection. Accepting that having the ball thrown at us from an unexpected direction will unsettle us (hurt us even) will be part of the course. But it may unveil the gaze of the empire within us, at the personal level (its finer channels), forcing us to look at ourselves and our practice anew; untaming our ways of knowing, that we may gain genuinely new perspectives. Illusions of perfection aside, what would it mean, for instance, to have a cosmologically meaningful life when it comes to our conceptions of knowledge? It seems an academically unimaginable proposition, absurd even. Perhaps we may not need to go so far. In her eulogy to the Appalachian Mountains where she grew up, bell hooks speaks of a community that, like the Indigenous people amongst them, grew up with the wilderness of nature inside them, untamed. She adds, ‘Living in the Kentucky hills was where I first learned the importance of being wild’ (hooks 2012: 1). Such importance sits in opposition to the ideals of the enlightened empire, where every move is a move towards the control of nature: the taming of the wilderness and of people. What remains wild (in the eyes of the empire) is where the empire absents itself. To have a good life whilst holding onto what is considered wild is a show of strength, resourcefulness, defiance even, and not a source of quaintness and magic.

LANGUAGE AS THE REMAINS OF THE EMPIRE AND ITS VERY FOUNDATIONS

Ri qach'ab'äl, ja ri' ri ruk'aslem ti qab'anob'al, wi xtikäm, chuqa' xtikäm rik'in ronojel ketamab'äl kiya'on kan ti Qati't qamana.

‘Our language [Kaqchiquel] is the vital oxygen of our culture and, should it die, with it dies the ancestral knowledge that it embraces.’ These are the words of Cecilia Tuyuc, [Guatemalan] activist in Indigenous tongues. (Santamaría 2020)

Not all Indigenous languages and cultures were decimated in the Americas. The quote above expresses the link between language and identity. The fact that language and national or communal identity are linked serves both the conqueror, in their efforts to subdue, and the conquered, in their efforts to emancipate. However, those ever-finer channels of power instantiated through education systems but ultimately through individual persons (educators), amount to a formidable fortress around the empire. When such a system consigns Indigenous languages (and the identities contained therein) to oblivion, is emancipation possible at all? Even the clamour against the injustice and violence that Indigenous

communities (who now constitute most of ‘the poor’) suffered is phrased in the tongue of the aggressor—how else can the aggressor understand? Cecilia Tuyuc’s own first name is in Spanish. South America’s greatest writers and poets wrote in Spanish. The highly acclaimed verses from *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* by Neruda (1945) offer one example. Dorfman reflects:

sube a nacer conmigo, hermano, *rise up and be born again with me, my brother*, the whole furious history of Latin America retold with outrage for the forgotten and violated lives of the myriad poor and dispossessed, with reverence for their dignity and labors. (Dorfman 2003, C1, my italics to highlight the translation of Neruda’s lines).

Although there may be some poetic reverence here, I find that the most telling lines in Neruda’s verses are those betraying a cry of annihilation, the imperial event horizon from which nothing returns. Macchu Picchu, like all empires, rose through the blood of the countless slaves and workers who forged it, just like Chilean colonial wealth rises through the workers in the Atacama copper and salt-pit mines:

You won’t return from the depths of the rocks.

You won’t return from subterranean time.

Neither will your hardened voice return,

Nor will your drilled-out eyes.

(Neruda 1945, my translation).

Whatever and whoever does come back will be made of something else, like Cecilia’s language (one of twenty-two Mayan languages), dressed in the garb of the Spanish alphabet. The original written form of Kaqchiquel, if there was one, may be lost to her forever. But does this matter? Whether there was a written form of her language or not, has something essential been lost? To say yes, is to have the Western gaze that gives the written word supremacy over oral traditions.

Poetry, for instance, is the most salient art form in Mapuche culture. Elicura Chihuailaf-Nahuelpán, a celebrated Mapuche poet and author, refers in one of his verses to ‘a key that no one lost, and that therefore no one will ever find’ (Chihuailaf-Nahuelpán 2019). I interpret his lines as signifying the key to the re-emergence of the Mapuche culture—a key which is not to be ‘found’ or ‘recovered’ by anyone, let alone Chilean poets or activists in the Spanish tongue; the latter can only be witnesses to the Mapuche people’s own recovered history (Crow 2006). Chihuailaf-Nahuelpán also writes in Mapudungun (Mapuche language in roman alphabet) when he wishes to do so. His use of Spanish as an instrument of expression serves a good purpose. Thus seen, how might Neruda’s poetry be different from Chihuailaf-Nahuelpán’s in terms of who speaks for whom? If identity is inextricably linked to language, and the elixir of language is poetry, then voice does matter. As hooks says, poems ‘call us to remember and mourn, to know again that as we work for change our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting’ (hooks 2012: 8). The struggle of memory in Neruda’s case, historically

placed, cannot be the same as Chihuailaf-Nahuelpán's. Where Neruda's clamour against injustice has the foundations of empire (Spanish as mother tongue), Chihuailaf-Nahuelpán has only the empire's remains (Spanish as the language of the oppressor of five centuries). Chihuailaf-Nahuelpán's insights are not framed in or derived from the language (the gaze) of the Spanish empire, but he may employ whatever is useful about it (what remains) in the act of interpretation from the Mapuche gaze into the Spanish language.

What else never returns because of undaunted empires? The oppressive gaze of the empire has, through exploitation and disdain, converted the word 'Indian' in South America into a derogatory term, an insult to be such addressed. Centuries of believing that to be civilized meant to be more Spanish or European-like have engendered a sort of identity dysmorphia in its people, who do not identify with nor favour Indigenous features and ways of being. A walk along a high street in Santiago de Chile will seldom show advertisements portraying Indigenous actors. Caucasian beauty cannons are portrayed and projected. Fake mirrors which both hide and illuminate the tragedy of colonization.

the mestizo^[10] individual was usually conceived of as occupying the intersection of two social constructions: as an improved Indigenous individual but, on the other hand, as a synonym of degeneration due to the mixture with the same Indigenous element. ... [De la Cadena \(2006\)](#) highlights the role of Latin American states in the constitution of racial regimes of power in relation to privileged social groups that impose their image on those considered to be inferior. ([Brallec 2020](#): 5)

When Indigenous populations are stripped of their land and forced to disperse or to 'town up', a loss of cultural identity and language seems to ensue. Centuries of education through the finer channels of empire have encouraged people to believe themselves of Spanish descent in order to belong and participate on a supposedly equal footing. As a Chilean citizen, the Spanish tongue seems to have always run through my veins, being both the remains and the foundations of the empire. How then, under such circumstances, could anyone bring up the idea that perhaps Spanish is not our language after all? Who is the 'we' in that thought other than the conqueror's mestizo child? All children want to belong to their most admired parent. The cultural and racial mix of the Indigenous/Spanish person produced a troubled ancestral identity, for we do not know who we were. Our Indigenous ancestry cannot be traced by kinship, but only geographically, through impersonal DNA analysis that tells us nothing about who we are because for the empire, the names and lineage of our Indigenous ancestors never were of enough consequence for records to be kept.

THE LANGUAGES WE EMBRACE

What then, does it mean that we unquestionably teach and embrace the languages of empire? Whose values are we advancing? Might this be a case of 'How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb?' ([Kubrick 1964](#)) or, in my case, how we learnt to stop remembering the horrors of conquest and invasion, and learnt to love

¹⁰ An individual of European and indigenous descent.

Spanish. Seen from a Western perspective this may sound absurd: why challenge or endanger our very position as English, French, or Spanish FL teachers? But this is the very thought I want to explore, because it is inseparable from our gaze and our sense of identity, two aspects that are inseparable from issues of decolonization. The language we decide to teach matters just as much as the concepts (i.e. of knowledge, power, identity, etc.) we employ in the process, for our conclusions are an artefact of our methods. It is highly unlikely that we will ever have Nahuatl (Aztec) or Quechua (Inca) in Western curricula, but if Spanish is to usurp them, then, whose Spanish do we bring to them? whose pronunciation do we favour? and on whose behalf do we ‘correct’ grammar?

The literature on the decolonization of modern FLs has furnished many important questions (Panford 2021), and I argue that rather than a change of questions, challenging the gaze of the empire changes our focus when addressing those questions. It puts the onus on our underpinning assumptions, at the foundation rather than surface level. For instance, should the notion of ‘competence’ be reassessed to include the incommensurability of human experience? Should the highest marks be awarded instead for participation? Such reflections touch on our personal core values; they uncover our gaze(s).

In relation to writing studies, Yancey conceptualizes the characteristics and features of effective reflection in what she calls a ‘rhetoric of reflection’. This comprises: ‘Epistemological value and practice; its unsettledness; its location in community; its attention to vocabulary; its role in curriculum; its relationship to difference. ... [W]riting reflectively, as a mechanism for claiming and legitimating learning, provides a unique path towards making knowledge’ (Yancey 2016: 303, 305). I extrapolate Yancey’s ideas in what I would add is the necessary and precursory notion of humans as reflective beings who have the capacity not only to think and write but to be, in essence, reflective. As such, when considering decolonizing strategies in education, the questioning of epistemological value and practice is a necessary endeavour, meant to make us challenge our assumptions around knowledge—how we construct it and what aspects of it we value through our practice and assessment. This can produce an unsettledness that we ought to be willing to experience: to be thrown off balance can give us new perspectives. Reflection is thus necessarily perspectival and located in community: we reflect from the paradigm of a particular community of practice; we are unsettled in particular, not random ways, for our unsettledness can be someone else’s daily practice or experience. For instance, we can become unsettled when confronted by someone else’s different use of (our) language. As such, we can make them feel that their tools of expression appear deficient, inaccessible, jarring or simply inadequate. Of particular relevance when challenging the imperial gaze, we have reflection’s relationship to difference: the enactment of feeling different to expected educational norms; the feeling that we do not belong to the community of practice we find ourselves in or are addressing.

This type of reflection encourages us to weigh our rhetoric against our practice, and to be willing to experience some cognitive dissonance in the exercise. The discourse of empire that runs through higher education is a discourse of self-

interest. Even in collaborative work there is the sense of competition, both within and between institutions, in the accumulation of knowledge, history, success for the institution, with the selection of the best students, staff, resources, location, or strategies that benefit the institution. Our values, therefore, are shaped accordingly. This sort of reflection puts us in a better position to explore how the imperial gaze works through our institutions. A gaze that we, its finer channels, defend. In this sense, we are the subject knowledge of decolonization: our values concerning what counts as knowledge and success. However, is it possible to abandon the gaze of empire when it is the only gaze we have ever known?

Perhaps the FL context is both a relevant and a hostile place to challenge the gaze of empire. European empires may see no reason to relinquish power within their confines. They use the very attributes of past empires to entice students, inspiring language learners with ‘the best’ of what those Western empires have accumulated, including whole continents (learn Spanish, and South America, with all its wonderful literature, is yours), thus unwittingly maintaining their status.

Admittedly, change has never come easily to education (Jónasson 2016; Chu 2019; Reay 2022; Unterhalter and Kadiwal 2022). In HE, the sense of tradition, stability around practices, structural management, quality assurance, and public (student) opinion can be perceived as preferable to the potential instability of change (Chu 2019). For instance, Morley observed that ‘Quality assurance is perceived as an instrument of containment, in opposition to critique and intellectual creativity’ (Morley 2003: 162). This reflects notions of power within HE that are hostile to change. The idea of challenging the Goliath of Western institutions, like universities, can be disempowering and demoralizing. Some ethnic minorities prefer to compartmentalize their lives and submit to the traditions of universities rather than contest them (Griffith 2022).

To challenge the imperial gaze, we need what Yancey (2016) refers to as, an epistemological reflection that unsettles us: a revision of the ways our conceptions of competition and accumulation interact with our notions of classification, knowledge, and excellence, which may exclude or negatively define learners. To be capable of contemplating that something different could be of equal or greater value is tantalizing. What would it mean, for instance, to uphold the idea that excellence can only be found in genuine collaboration—not disguised competition; that conceptions of knowledge must include human intuitions (thinking with the heart) because of the incommensurability of human experience I mentioned earlier. As Parra¹¹ (1966) mused, what our feelings can comprehend, our knowledge has yet to imagine. Once knowledge is tempered by the heart, its measurable accumulation loses track (feelings have no benchmark). These are questions meant to challenge our role of being one of the many finer channels of power. I believe that if we were to engage with processes that dismantle our imperial gaze, decolonization in society, not just in education, would more naturally follow.

¹¹ Chilean artist, composer, and ethnomusicologist.

CONCLUSIONS

The word I have challenged here is ‘decolonization’. As I have suggested, it sets us off on a fool’s errand because the home of the empire cannot be decolonized. We need to gaze at the empire rather than at the colony. Uncover the empire from its cozy slumber, so that we may confront its gaze. To ignore it, is to sanitize the idea of those (past) empires, because it allows us to ‘move on’ and ‘turn the page’ on them as if they were a thing of the past. Ignoring the empire within makes us think of decolonization as something related to performance: it dissociates us at a fundamental level of reflection by joining us at the peripheral level of actions. The colonial gaze is a symptom that persists under the careful gaze of the empire, with us serving as its finer channels.

This is the subject knowledge of decolonization, which is in no way restricted to FL learning, and which is not to be found in a textbook or a resource but in the personal values that sustain the gaze of empire. Anyone willing to be unsettled by the challenge is aptly qualified to do something about decolonization, regardless of their background.

I have not argued here for the banishment of Western, postimperial languages in our classrooms. There is much we can learn from the arts and literature of other cultures, even imperial ones. As an example, we could argue that to hope for radical change in higher education is a quixotic venture; but having met Don Quijote¹² I am energized by the acquaintance and understand the challenge it entails. I only argue for a more radical critique of what decolonization really means and necessitates—one that challenges the decisions that governments, universities, schools, teachers, and we ourselves take on behalf of an ‘educational good’. The hope is to awaken a consciousness of what it is that we are really doing when we, for instance, uncritically embrace the languages of Western empires in the context of a rhetoric of decolonization.

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¹² Don Quijote is the main character in Miguel de Cervantes’ novel (1605) of the same title, a classic of Spanish literature. A quixotic venture is like Don Quijote: ‘extremely idealistic; unrealistic and impractical’; but inspirational nonetheless.

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