

Translanguaging as decolonial praxis: Pedagogic and epistemic thrusts in the politics of official knowledge

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Abstract

Epistemic ruptures in normative conceptualisations of language bring into sharper focus the absurdities of education in entrenched linguistic and disciplinary regimentations. At a time when neoliberal forces push educational processes farther from traditional disciplinary arrangements and towards nuclear marketisation of knowledge and processes of knowledge production, the convergence of epidemiological and social crises occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic forces educators to recalibrate pedagogical structures that have guided schooling processes for decades. Drawing insights from two emergency remote courses, this article examines the pedagogical and conceptual thrusts of translanguaging in US higher education. It outlines specific ways in which the institutional formations of knowledge – its (re)production, structuration and transaction – undercut the logic and political potency of translanguaging. Specifically, it locates translanguaging within a broader constructionist linguistic ontologism, which now provides conceptual tools for readjusting the epistemic aperture through which new cultural attitudes to knowledge – and to education – can materialise institutional transformations towards what Lewis Gordon (2021) calls ‘teleological suspension’. While public consciousness remains inured to the presumed cultural neutrality and political benignity of schooling as pervasive social practice, this study contends that it is precisely in the ubiquitous subtleties of institutional formations that the politics of official knowledge exercises most effectively its technologies of cultural control, and of exploitation. As such, the epistemic shifts which translanguaging and similar expressions of constructionist linguistic ontology invite extend far beyond language policy changes and point to radical social transformations.

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Submitted: 2021-11-30 Accepted: 2022-04-01

KEYWORDS: TRANSLANGUAGING; DECOLONIAL; ONLINE LEARNING; LANGUAGE; HIGHER EDUCATION; DECOLONIAL PRACTICE

1 Introduction

The public crises of the recent coronavirus pandemic offer a potent metaphor for understanding the disconnect between the linguistic and ideological structuration of schooling and the inherent complexity and fluidity of learning – as an adaptive process. As spikes in the number of Covid-19 cases triggered cascading shutdowns of public spaces, including academic institutions, viral epidemiology rapidly rearranged value systems that previously seemed settled under the prevailing neoliberal condition. In these crises and disruptions, unsettled norms and priorities, like dust flung from an old carpet, reveal other norms, patterns and priorities that, while constitutive of education *writ large*, had come to be buried under and entangled with long periods of institutionalising learning and social relations. The shift to remote learning and the loosening of sacrosanct rules of schooling brought to the fore old conversations about the nature of learning, the nature of knowledge as constructed – and political – and, broadly, the link between school and society (see e.g., Dewey, 1938/1998). For instance, in contrast to the competitive individualism of an expanding large-scale international testing regime that drives a neoliberal education reform agenda of human disconnection for the sake of profit, the pandemic shows the necessity of human connection and interdependence and that successful capitalist economies depend on an exploited essential worker class whose histories and identities – cultural and linguistic – are denigrated and marginalised, through a Eurocentric standardising curriculum, from full political, economic and cultural participation (see e.g., Becker, Hartwich and Haslam, 2021; Spreen and Cone, 2022).

This opportunity for renewed conversations in education provides a lens and unique evidence to re-examine recent developments in applied and educational linguistics, specifically translanguaging and its appropriation in schooling contexts. Certainly, linguistic diversity scholarship has for long raised concerns about the disconnect between the monolingual and exoglossic design of mass schooling and the rich linguistic diversity of a multilingual world (see Djité, 2008; García and Kleifgen, 2018; García, Skutnabb-Kangas and Torres-Guzmán, 2006; Koffi, 2012; Makalela, 2015). But translanguaging marks a major departure that is a source of both excitement and consternation (see e.g., MacSwan, 2017; Otheguy, García and Reid, 2019) primarily because it does not seek merely an accretion of discrete languages à la additive multilingualism, often stylised as ‘mother tongue-based multilingual education’ (MTB-MLE), which appropriates structural linguistics assumptions of languages as discrete,

bounded and autonomous entities susceptible to hierarchical arrangements (see e.g., Brock-Utne and Skattum, 2009; Ouane and Glanz, 2011). Rather, it fundamentally reconceptualises linguistic phenomena and seeks to deploy that new understanding pedagogically (García and Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García and Reid, 2019). Thus, like a pandemic that disrupts set priorities that guide institutionalised social relations as well as private life, translanguaging disrupts and reorganises settled assumptions about the nature of language – in practice.

Translanguaging,¹ itself a piquant expression of what I characterise elsewhere as ‘constructionist linguistic ontology’ (Odugu, 2020:295), mobilises in education a corpus of critical interventions in integrationism that clarifies the irrefragably constructed nature of a fictitious ‘scientific’ object of linguistic study (see e.g., Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Yngve and Wąsik, 2004). The debate over the claim that translanguaging articulates more accurately the nature of the linguistic systems of bilinguals and multilinguals is, however, not about the nature of language *per se* but about the disruptive implications of translanguaging for institutions, systems and norms that form the social architecture of modern life. There is hardly any risk in conceding the impossibility of tangibly distinguishing one linguistic system that corresponds to a ‘named language’ from another linguistic system corresponding to another ‘named language’, both cognitively constitutive of the phenomenon of bi/multilingualism. Put differently, it should not be controversial that diverse linguistic phenomena are cognitively unified, not isolated, *if* the primary concern is to deepen our understanding of language and linguistic behaviours and to reorganise our conceptual toolkit to adapt that new understanding to different scholarly contexts.

However, translanguaging is not merely academic; it ushers conceptually a radical political project of resistance against the colonial matrix of power and knowledge through which deeply entrenched monolingual educational, political, economic and cultural arrangements (and the meretricious monolingual approaches to linguistic diversity that attempts to challenge them) sustain a global culture of racist extractive colonial capitalist heteropatriarchy in the guise of modernity (García and Alvis, 2019; García et al., 2021). In seeking to reconstitute linguistic ontology beyond normative monolingualism, translanguaging, therefore, has tall (i.e., both exciting and terrifying) implications for calcified assumptions on which stand multiple disciplinary traditions, and for language standardisation and education policies that map the structuration of knowledge production and transaction. Pursued with the critical historiographic insight appropriate to its theoretical vision, translanguaging, like the broader radical constructionist ontologism it represents, additionally undrapes the scope of the relationship between conceptual standardisation of language and the political institutionalisation of knowledge, both as forms of power,

control and violence. It animates, linguistically, the complicity of education in the link between knowledge and power, theory and praxis, history and *doxa*, as expressions of an onto-epistemic technology for the (re)production of categorial colonised subjects/ivities.

There is now growing interest in adapting translanguaging to traditional classrooms as a decolonial strategy, although these efforts are largely in anticipation that a ‘translanguaging pedagogy’ and the inclusion of marginalised voices of ‘racialized bilinguals’ constitutes or, at least, contributes to decolonial praxis (see e.g., Chaka, 2020; García et al., 2021; Liberali and Swanwick, 2020; Rodrigues, 2018). This strategy of ‘winning small battles in diverse institutions... before [mounting] a frontal assault’ on the institutional structures (Canagarajah, 2006:612) imagines coloniality as frozen (rather than rapacious in its political agenda), and these pedagogical shifts, actual victories. It is less clear, however, how drawing on translanguaging pedagogy to ‘write back to empire’ in the context of an *elective course* (de los Ríos and Seltzer, 2017:62) contributes to dismantling or reconstituting the standards-driven structures through which schools deracinate and lock students into perpetual exploitative economic and political conditions and struggle.

This challenge is not peculiar to K-12 schooling. University courses designed to support minoritised students’ academic success and their use of ‘vernacular discourses’ typically allow this only in minoritised students’ communities or ‘safe zones’ and informal contexts in the academy; students are still expected to ‘master academic discourse to communicate successfully in the college setting’ (Canagarajah, 1997:75). Indeed, Canagarajah recognises that while teachers possess relative autonomy in developing subversive textual practices in higher education courses, such pedagogical deviations from normative language practices and the scholarship that informs them (e.g., the integration of so-called African American Vernacular English in scholarly writing) cannot by themselves ‘sustain the larger institutional changes needed to legitimize’ other varieties of linguistic practices, especially since these subversive scholarly and pedagogical practices depend on the powers bestowed on the authors by the same institutions (Canagarajah, 2006:612). If translanguaging is a decolonial tool in and beyond classrooms, how does the task of reconceptualising the nature of language confront the colonising institutional formations of schooling whose design, *ab ovo*, was intended for the political construction and consolidation of the nation-state and its arbitrary claim to a monopoly on violence (Ramirez and Boli, 1987)?

To take the scope and political project of a constructivist linguistic ontology seriously, the question is no longer about whether translanguaging accurately depicts linguistic phenomena or whether it is desirable to appropriate it in education. It is rather whether translanguaging can survive and, more crucially,

systemically disrupt the colonality of institutionalised knowledge. That is, can translanguaging sustain its political purpose and force a radical reconstitution of current structures and processes through and in which knowledge and power – the institutionally embodied currencies of education – have come to be constitutive of the imperialist technologies of capitalist exploitation and oppression? The political task of deconstituting and reconstituting educational, political, economic and cultural institutions invoked by translanguaging, like the task of ‘disinventing and reconstituting languages’ (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007), cannot be easily accomplished through fragmentary or faddish perfunctory appropriation of translanguaging in traditional schooling practices entrenched in a *démodé* social contraption of a colonial industrial era. These questions, pursued in the context of two online summer courses, preoccupy my confrontations and entanglements with colonality and the counter project of decoloniality. The questions arise from the conviction that decoloniality does not owe its origin to, nor is it exhausted in, academic inquiry but marks the *re-existence* (see Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) of those whose *existence*, while forcefully *resistant* to ongoing colonial violence, is not reduced to or exhausted (i.e., both *consumed* and *wearied*) by it in a perpetual ontological reactionary pose.

Now, the historical forces and processes responsible for the standardisation of language and the institutionalisation of monolingualism unfolded cheek by jowl with, and are often precisely the same, historical forces and processes responsible for the standardisation and conscription of knowledge and learning processes in what continues to thrive, despite vicious critiques, as an oppressive ‘traditional’ education (see Dewey, 1938/1998; Freire, 1970). How, then, can translanguaging go beyond appeals to individual educators immersed in ‘traditional’ schooling systems; appeals that, if heeded, can certainly (a) disrupt classroom cognitive and sociocultural dynamics of meaning-making and power relationships, but (b) leave largely intact *institutional structures* that produce and sustain Eurocentric knowledge epistemes – of standardising and universalising deprovincialised cultural phenomena – with their overriding power dynamics (e.g., disciplinary fragmentation of knowledge, stringent prescriptive Eurocentric curricular requirements, grades-based reward systems, etc.), which regulate and normalise multiple forms of systemic violence – physical, symbolic, epistemic, cultural, economic and more (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Carnoy, 1974; Foucault, 1995; Kupfer, 2015)?

The quest to appropriate translanguaging in formal schooling is certainly an important development that retools the project of linguistic diversity. But it is even more important to recognise that educational institutions provide the intellectual and material infrastructure for erecting *boundaries of occlusion* – the Manichaen duality of legitimate vs illegitimate knowledge, of modern/

advanced vs primitive/barbaric traditions, of developed and under/undeveloped civilisations, of being and non-being – that set the stage for deracination, not only in terms of the loss of indigenous cultures and traditions through schooling but, importantly, the blurring of that boundary that deprovincialises and marks Eurocentric realities as universal and subsequently makes their exploitative impacts more fecund and seemingly ‘natural’, even benevolent (see Fanon, 1967; Grosfoguel, 2012; Mignolo, 2013; Santos, 2007). Thus, to fully activate the political potency of translanguaging for broader and deeper social and cultural transformation, and to mobilise the critiques of education as an imperial apparatus, we need renewed appreciation of the scope and pervasive regulatory mechanisms through which the institutionalisation of particular linguistic practices and knowledge epistemes becomes socially operative in a neoliberal world.

Stirred by these questions and growing clarity about the link between translanguaging and the broader project of decoloniality, I examine my own engagement with – both entanglement in and resistance to – the pedagogical accoutrements of institutionalised education in two pandemic-induced online summer courses. The inquiry is guided by the specific question: does the flexibility of remote learning in a pandemic provide meaningful opportunities for transgressive translanguaging pedagogic practices that can subvert or supplant entrenched structures of coloniality in higher education? This is largely an introspective inquiry, to assess my own translanguaging pedagogic practices as a tenured university faculty in the US. As Mignolo reminds us, if decoloniality is a necessary response to coloniality, a prerequisite for grappling with decoloniality is to ‘know your place in the colonial matrix of power, where you have been placed and classified’, as it is impossible to ‘observe’ that matrix from outside because ‘there is no outside: we are all in it’ (Mignolo, 2017). To postsubaltern reason, there is no alternative to establishing a locus of enunciation from which other loci can be observed (Mignolo, 2000).

2 Translanguaging, decoloniality and the politics of official knowledge

A key step in activating the transformative politics of translanguaging is to historicise it. The emergence and growing popularity of translanguaging since the mid-1990s tellingly coincides with the rise of neoliberalism and the deepening of manufactured crises of modernity: state violence, racism, sexism, xenophobia, economic inequalities and exploitation (including the strangulation of economic opportunities, land dispossession and displacement, and the consequent violence that fuels a global refugee and migration crisis), and escalating ecological degradation and catastrophes (see Faber and Schlegel,

2017; Mulvey and Davidson, 2018). Not only had mid-century anticolonial and independence movements and their accompanying rights-based international politics failed to materialise the meliorist aspirations for equitable global prosperity, social conditions have arguably worsened in many parts of the world. Even the philosophical pillars and political apparatuses of modernity were already floundering in the face of a series of palpable crises, as these pillars were not only ideological (see e.g., Del Noce, 2014) but also constituted the financial technologies of an increasingly contested mechanised world (Ossewaarde, 2018).

The deepening of human and ecological crises, extending from the 20th into the 21st century, occurs at the same time that Western critical tradition, which undertook to sort out the age-old quest for emancipation, waxed and waned in its political vision (see Santos, 2014). Relatedly, the *language* of that Western critical thought, trapped as it is in solipsistic esoteric disquisitions, appears to have lost touch with the lived realities of exploitation, trauma and struggles that are the object of its inquiry. To the forementioned introspective posture, this piece itself can be read both as partaking in this obscurantist reconditism that excludes colonised people from scholarly discussion about them and as part of a self-critique of the same – a form of speaking back to an ivory tower of bondage, in its own language, in the quest for decolonial self-redemption. As further clarified below about the quest for inclusion, the decolonial starting point, then, is to take more seriously, not the exclusion of colonised indigenous voices, but the Westernised scholar's (self-)exclusion from what decolonial scholars call 'pluriversal dialogue', the entanglement of incommensurable and equally valid cosmologies that cannot be contained in the universalist language of Euro-modernity (Dussel, 1995; García and Alvis, 2019:33).

In this context, translanguaging symbolises the unflagging struggle (of those whose voices and identities are stampeded, but not vanquished, by colonial capitalism) to reckon with and overcome the strictures of what is among Euro-modernity's signature bequests; namely, the absurdity of a global monolingual, often standardised exoglossic, schooling culture that proscribes learners' organically complex and emergent repertoires in a linguistically rich, diverse and dynamic world. From a translanguaging perspective, characterising the global schooling culture as monolingual encompasses a battery of cherished interventions – bilingualism, multilingualism, plurilingualism, codeswitching or codemeshing, etc. – that form the conceptual lexicon of 20th-century scholarship on linguistic diversity. Lumping these terms together with monolingualism holds a crucial clue to the distinctive epistemic tenor of translanguaging because, as García and Li Wei (2014) note, 'these terms [bilingualism, multilingualism and plurilingualism] have one thing in common – they refer to a plurality of *autonomous* languages, whether two (bilingual)

or many (multilingual), at the individual... or societal level' (11, emphasis added). Thus, while different in their affirmation of linguistic diversity, bi/multi/plurilingual approaches share a fundamental linguistic episteme with monolingual assumptions about language autonomy – and hierarchy (Odugu and Lemieux, 2019). Curiously, though, translanguaging scholars' insistence on 'bilingualism' as linguistic marker for the colonised and linguistically marginalised (e.g., 'racialized bilinguals' in García et al., 2021) perpetuates this arithmetical contraction of structural linguistics.

If we take this epistemic shift seriously, then we must also take seriously the rhizomatous structures through which that homogenising Eurocentric episteme pervades schooling, meaning-making and the politics of official knowledge. What qualifies as accepted or official knowledge has never been neutral, and how we produce and legitimise knowledge was always as volatile and contested as who has access to it, in what contexts, by which modalities and for what purpose (Apple, 2003, 1993). Multilingual approaches certainly engage with conceptualisations of the historical and cultural politics of knowledge, although MLE's political commitments hardly extend beyond concerns about the inclusion of the linguistically marginalised in schooling processes whose value is taken for granted. Driven partly by justified, even if uncritical, desires to uplift linguistically marginalised peoples, MLE advocacy research participates in an unctuous concern not only for equal access to 'quality' education but, broadly, the development (i.e., modernisation/Westernisation) of 'underdeveloped' societies (see e.g., Wolff, 2016). It is this broader agenda, propagated on the aegis of the nation-state and its international organisation surrogates, that traps MLE in the universality of history and its unflinching Eurocentric coordinates.

Translanguaging proposes to channel, through education, a linguistic reconstitution of meaning-making and of social imaginaries as a radical inclusionary strategy, and thus marks an epistemic departure from mono/multilingualism. Yet, it is unclear that translanguaging has fully embraced the political vocation of this epistemic departure; advocates of translanguaging remain nostalgic of the presumptive benignity of schooling and its role in the project of colonial Euro-modernity (see e.g., García and Li Wei, 2014). If translanguaging tethers its politics too closely to the appeal for *inclusion* in Euro-modernity's capitalist project, the promise of social *transformation* towards which the arc of its episteme bends remains unfulfilled. In the uncompromising logic of Euro-modernity, inclusion has always been a form of exclusion, and the propensity of schooling to deracinate follows as its primeval act of epistemic and cultural extraversion (Hountondji, 1996).

As part of the broader imperialist intervention that sought to mould diverse indigenous linguistic phenomena after European artefacts, monolingual

approaches to schooling contribute to the ideological labyrinth for the superordination of Eurocentricity over an incommensurably diverse linguistic ecology worldwide and the erasure of other indigenous memories. While the quest for access to ‘quality’ education, with its signature rectitudinous policy appellation (think: ‘Education *For All*’, ‘*Sustainable Development Goals*’, etc.), evokes imaginations of schooling as a benign tool for both intellectual enlightenment and the equalisation of social opportunities, classrooms across the world remain sites of cultural and epistemic violence and the making of colonial subjectivities. Freire long drew this link between the classroom and imperialist oppression: between the ‘narrative sickness’ of education embodied in the ‘fundamentally *narrative* character’ of the teacher–student relationship and Europe’s *necrophilic* magisterial comportment in relation to the rest of the world (1970:71).

To elaborate, schools partake in the politics of occlusion, and of death – what Achille Mbembe (2003) calls ‘necropolitics’.² They propagate the quotidian apparatuses through which the coloniality of power remains operative – and ubiquitous. Understood as an operational element of a broader matrix, schooling is paramount for regulating specific practices and historical choices that constitute the dicta and demands of coloniality, choices through which our bodies, as colonised subjects, are reduced to machines for extractive colonial capitalism and its exploitative, racist and heteropatriarchal governance regime (Suárez-Krabbe, 2021). Those demands are inscribed in academic curricula as they are manifest in the institutionalisation of schooling and the alignment of schooling with other features of that matrix.

It is primarily in and through schooling that Euro-modernity foists a *one-way reality* – the idea that, contrary to most indigenous onto-epistemic ecologies, the existence of reality is fundamentally material, and its manifestation, universal – at a time when even Western physicists acknowledge that we have little understanding of the nature of material reality beyond the extensions of our consciousness. If, as quantum physics reveals, (a) the ‘laws’ of physics behind the certainties of everyday life and its treasured enlightenment technologies do not apply at the subatomic levels, which are supposedly the material building blocks of all reality, and (b) we now confront the possibility that there is nothing real about the properties of any material object that physics measures, and further that it is indeed measuring those properties that brings them into existence (see Becker, 2018; Smetham, 2010), then there is new urgency to dismantle the occlusion and necropolitical practices through which Euro-modernity seeks to stampede and bury other onto-epistemic possibilities under the mirage of universalism.

But a political engagement with necropolitics, like decoloniality, cannot be reduced to a mere critique of Eurocentric curricula and pedagogies, although

this is an important part of it. Moving from mere critique to decolonial praxis recognises the unbroken historical link between schooling today and the creation of the colonised world as epistemic sites that experienced and still experience colonial genocides, a ‘theft of history’, epistemicides and linguicides (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018:3). The experiences of colonised peoples are shot through with the imperialist quest to foist *knowledge* rather than *knowledges*, from the Native American boarding school and anti-literacy laws targeting enslaved Africans in North America to missionary and eventually colonial education across Alkebulan, Abya Yala and elsewhere.³ If the genealogy of the classroom, as a site of epistemic struggle, points us to colonising exercises and incidents of ‘dismemberment’ – the ‘colonial technology of planting European memory’, starting with the violent attack on and ‘decapitation’ of indigenous knowledge systems and their bearers (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018:11; also wa Thiong’o, 2009) – decolonial curricular praxis must engage in reparative acts of resistance that transform the ‘Western bourgeois genre of Man’ into the reality of being human as praxis characterised by ‘deep and active interconnectivity’, to evoke Sylvia Wynter’s critical intervention (Desai and Sanya, 2016:710–711).

Reimagining and ushering in a new genre of the human towards deep and active interconnectivity cannot emerge, therefore, from current schooling curricula that treat coloniality as collateral to an innately benevolent tool of enlightenment. Schooling under Euro-modernity has been as historically committed to *inscription* as to *erasure*. At the onset of imperialism, Europeans were keenly aware of and benefited from remarkable intellectual flourishing in other parts of the world, some of which are remnants of earlier contacts and conquests. But Europeans worked aggressively to decimate these thriving systems and institutions of knowledge, such that, as Tim Allender (2016) notes about India, ‘[e]ven in the late 1870s [British] government bureaucracies were closing down irreplaceable sites of higher Indian learning’ (34). Evidence of these intellectual advancements and the transcontinental networks and exchanges they fostered remain today: from the University of al-Qarawiyyin (جامعة القرويين) in Arabic or ⵜⴰⵎⴻⵔⴰⵏⵜ ⵏ ⵓⵎⵓⵔⵉⵏ in Berber) in Fez, Morocco, which is the world’s oldest continuously running institution of higher learning, and the University of Sankoré in Timbuktu, Mali, both in Africa, to the Nalanda University in Bihar, India.

Colonial violence, the primordial tool by which symbolic and other forms of violence became systemic in education, sets up an image of reality as a static object, distinct from and cognitively apprehensible by a rational subject, rather than a process that is undergoing constant transformation in the process of that apprehension by interconnected subjectivities. If, as Freire notes, ‘thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world’ (1970:77), then schools can be thought-*less* (i.e., thought-constricting, and so, irrational) places

that advance a shrivelled view of reality loaded with universalist objectivism – a view of a static reality waiting to be domesticated. That shrivelled one-way reality receives a new lease of life in every era of international education initiatives, from colonial education to universal basic education, to Education For All, to Education 2030. In today’s policy terms, domestication appears in the neoliberal forms of *standards*, *accountability* and *competition*. Test-driven accountability and standards-based education supply chains repeatedly show demonstrable agility in reordering axes of knowledge to neoliberal capitalist ends and away from decolonial transformations at a time when the unsustainability of its continuing traumas are hardly in question (Li, 2020; Stein, 2019).

Adapting translanguaging to this colonising schooling agenda with its emerging global testing industrial complex (see Addey et al., 2017; Tenam-Zemach, Conn and Parkison, 2021) may accomplish much in classrooms but still to neoliberal exploitative ends. Indeed, García and Li Wei (2014) knew that even ‘teachers who adopt translanguaging as pedagogy in today’s schools often end up valuing it only as a way to ensure that students learn *content* and *academic language*’, since schools are unlikely to adopt translanguaging systemically or embark in structural self-transformation (93). Yet, García and Li Wei share a bilingual (English and Spanish) teacher’s chart of class rules as illustrative of translanguaging in a New York school. While the rules were generated by the teacher and students, as evidence of collaborative power redistribution, the rules tell students to always ‘*raise your hand, listen, pay attention, be ready to learn, keep hands and feet to yourselves, remain quiet, remain seated, do your work, do your homeworks, walk quietly on line*’ (García and Li Wei, 2014:129, emphases added).

Obedience and the corporeality of the organisation and regimentation of schooling are paradigmatic pedagogic techniques for the production of docile bodies, of producer-consumer-citizens, with the body functioning as a governable composite symbol arranged in strata (intellect, emotions, behaviours, beliefs, etc.) to maximise social control and to regulate differences in conformity with accumulative consumerism (Bánovčanová and Masaryková, 2014). The quest to establish a Freirean dialogic student–teacher relationship in a traditional classroom is fraught and always reproduces the dynamics of a system that is designed to inhibit the creative power of all involved (Freire, 1970). Indeed, it is often in ‘traditional’ classrooms that students ‘learn’ about and are *tested* into compliance on Freire’s ‘banking concept’ critique. To this end, the disruptive crises of the Covid-19 pandemic can be viewed as tragic (indeed, apocalyptic) but also a revelatory opportunity to confront, pedagogically, coloniality’s domestication propensities. For if the coloniality of knowledge/power constitutes material and symbolic violence, the efforts to appropriate translanguaging in traditional classrooms have yet to go farther than a denunciation

of colonial and narrow representations of the rich and complex intellectual accomplishments of marginalised students in those institutions of schooling (see e.g., de los Ríos and Seltzer, 2017).

3 Translanguaging, remote learning and institutional practice in times of crises

If, as noted in the introduction, transitions to remote learning in response to overlapping pandemic crises are not as notable as the deeper assumptions they reveal about schooling and society, any pedagogical changes in this context ought to be understood in light of those broader systemic struggles. It is now clear that, even with over 500 million cases, nearly 7 million deaths and the incalculable economic costs to date, the real story of Covid-19 is not simply the epidemiological or economic catastrophes that continue to reverberate worldwide. The pandemic serves more to reveal – and exacerbate – (a) deep social inequities and systemic injustices that pervade our already fractured fragile existence and (b) the sharp disconnect between the normative institutions and systems that organise social life (politically, economically, intellectually and culturally), and the lived experiences of individuals and communities who, though sharing a common public space, exist in radically different universes of realities.⁴

Education is at the forefront in the systemic constellation of institutions, social hierarchies, ideologies and governance practices responsible for the disparate impacts of this pandemic. Specifically, higher education is both prime victim and, one might argue, source and sustenance of colonial neoliberal capitalism, as manifest in the vocationalisation, massification and marketisation of knowledge, and the strangulation of autonomy in the interest of reified capital (Bhopal and Shain, 2016; Gray, O'Regan and Wallace, 2021; Santamaria, 2020; Tett and Hamilton, 2021). The case against neoliberalism, approached with a critical race or decolonial lens, is not new (see e.g., Coates, Ferber and Brunsma, 2018). But the neoliberal 'normation' and the statisticisation of disciplinary power, to cite Foucault, which locates education at the apex of an interlinked labyrinth of institutions, systems and traditions that co-act to colonise and control, assures that the invasive technologies of these interacting forms of power remain invisible – by becoming ubiquitous and, thus, 'natural'.⁵

To take issue with the banally invisible, I made some modest but targeted pedagogical moves to engage students in disrupting some tactics through which schooling exerts power and control. Doing this when the virologic trajectories of Covid-19 and escalating global pandemic upset entrenched cultures of learning was auspiciously strategic because educational institutions at this point were renegotiating core operational infrastructures (not only moving to

remote learning but also providing ‘free’ access to otherwise expensive course texts, enacting default Pass/Fail grade policy changes, offering automatic deadline extensions, etc.), all aberrant accommodations unthinkable in normal times. Emerging research also demonstrates how online learning and web-based computer-mediated communication enables students to deploy multiple linguistic resources that challenge the English-only monolingual ideology of higher education (Ndlangamandla, 2020). But the pedagogical decisions under consideration here betoken a more deliberate departure from normative instructional practices that have guided higher education for centuries.

Below, I outline key elements of these decisions in the context of two remote summer courses at a Midwestern liberal arts institution in the United States. At the start of the first course in Summer 2020, the institution, historically a predominantly ‘white’ institution, was wrestling, as were many US universities, with concerns about racial bias in the charged context of the police killings of George Floyd and other unarmed African Americans. Both courses ran synchronously on Zoom for four days each week over a four-week period. Each session was recorded and posted on the course management platform for subsequent review by students and instructor, and these recordings are augmented with a personal journal as data sources. The data were analysed through an iterative deductive-inductive reading and re-reading of the data in search of patterns and discontinuities, images and metaphors, and unnamed questions and obscurities on one hand, and a recursive engrossment, a sort of *deep introspective observation* (i.e., thinking about my own unfolding thinking and pedagogic choices) in the context of both courses and my journey as an Alkebulani US-based scholar and educator on the other, which is strategically directed at subverting what, following the Cartesian move to distance the object from the subject, has materialised in the presumed superiority of variable analytics.⁶ The accounts of the pedagogical changes below are accompanied by continuing reflections on the viability of translanguaging as a tool for necessary radical decolonial transformations.

3.1 Pedagogical subversion, abandonment and resistance

The two summer courses in question were designed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic as electives in an Educational Studies sequence. Both courses were transdisciplinary adaptations from another course on ‘Education and Development’, and each offers a thematic historiographic survey of education and social change in Africa, the so-called Global South, and beyond. Like the parent course, both courses (a) broadly engage contested histories, theories and practices of education and ‘development’ (i.e., social change) and (b) do so by exploring a specific theme: language (Summer 2020) and gender (Summer 2021). This parent course is informed by my own developing engagement with

decolonial praxis through my teaching, not only the scholarly explorations of so-called Southern epistemologies.

Unlike the parent course, however, both courses are deliberately subversive in three key decolonial acts of abandonment – and of resistance. First, they virtually abandon the written text as prime instrument for the codification and transmission of official knowledge. Excepting a few scholarly articles assigned as ancillary sources, the courses adopt film – broadly defined – as both source and lens, with the respective full course titles as ‘Africa in Films: Language, Education, and Development’ and ‘Africa in Films: Gender, Education, and Development’. Course materials include documentaries, features, biopics, lectures/presentations, news clips, etc. that were made in, on, or about Africa, and students are encouraged to bring films from their own repertoires. It was beneficial that, as instructor, I started off with a sparse library of films compared to print texts.⁷ This act of abandonment also applied to all students’ work, not only the traditional ‘reading’ assignments.

This resistance move is crucial for decoloniality precisely because, first, literacy practices related to encoding and decoding (i.e., reading and writing), fluency, comprehension, etc. are paramount textualised strategies for normalising monolingualism. Moreover, it is in and through the written text that students imbibe notions of language hierarchy with the explicit, even if normalised, hostilities to non-European linguistic and cultural realities. At a deeper level, canonising and monumentalising writing as language par excellence was among the most effective strategies for the suppression of the world’s rich linguistic ecology and the invention of indigenous languages in the epistemic mould of Europe’s reimaginings of its own linguistic history (Heller and McElhinny, 2017). A direct historical thread runs through that earlier colonial assumption that ‘people without writing systems were... less civilized’ because ‘alphabetic writing systems were... superior to others’ (Heller and McElhinny, 2017:38) and the normative course texts, reading programmes, literacy assessments, academic language, bilingual education and so forth that are part and parcel of schooling today (Enright, 2011; Gee, 2015). Normalising monolingualism and canonising the written text concretise, historically, a deeper colonising reality: the alphabetisation of knowledge and rationality as the superordinate register of knowable reality that now confers legitimacy and power in contemporary politics of official knowledge.

The second pedagogical decolonial act of abandonment pertains to assessments. The conventional written assignments, reading reflections, quizzes, tests, exams, research papers and the like were replaced with three adaptable tasks: a daily analysis, a thematic workshop and a culminating project. These items are distinct from traditional assignments in that, while there exist guidelines that clarify the purpose and suggested structures for each task, students

had full prerogative to decide whether and how these were completed. For the daily analysis, all course members, including the instructor, shared how they engaged with the films (or readings, when relevant) for each Zoom class session, linking them to other resources and prior experiences. The structure ranged from a detailed multi-paragraph post on Zoom Chat, to a verbal narration, a single-sentence question and dialogue among students who share a similar background (e.g., international students or students who identify as indigenous from the South American and African contexts). Similarly, for the thematic workshop, students elected to work solo or partner with a peer to facilitate class discussions on a theme relevant to the course. Students determined the format and specific foci of that workshop and assigned additional preparation materials of their own choosing to the class.

For the final project, students were invited to outline a vision for the world or any society, taking into account key lessons they took from the course. The project could be completed as a paper, a presentation, a creative/artistic work or any other modality the student considered suitable for their ideas. Here, students' creative eloquence was more evident, with the projects ranging from a research or narrative paper (27%) to presentations of varying structures and lengths that used different media and targeted different audiences (33%), with the rest unevenly split between a poem, an artistic illustration, an infographic flowchart for public advocacy and a musical composition.

Assessment practices in education are deeply contested, and trends may be shifting from assessments *of* to assessments *for* learning (Blum, 2020; Stiggins, 2002). García and Li Wei (2014) identify assessment as a key frontier on which the futures of translanguaging as a systemic educational practice will play out. Standard-based assessment practices, peppered as they are with tests of all sorts, rubrics, marking guides, guidelines, criteria, etc., traditionally operate as prompts for educators to render 'transparent' to students (by way of literal explication) meaning and meaning-making practices that are symbolic of the stasis and semiotic infrangibility of material reality. Further, these prompts codify shared layers of expectations of various stakeholders – learners, educators, accreditation agencies, (neoliberal) institutions and governments (Ajjawi, Bearman and Boud, 2021). Rethinking student work and assessment practices, then, goes far beyond eliminating unproductive anxiety-inducing and distracting tasks that undermine deep cognitive and emotional engagement.

The third, and perhaps most obvious disruptive pedagogic act, was that students were encouraged to engage their full linguistic and other cognitive, cultural and semiotic repertoires, even if these were illegible to other members of the learning community. To clarify, these courses were designed to feature films that showcase the interfluent complexity of linguistic practices in real-life contexts, distant from the monolingual prescriptions of formal schooling. The

students themselves came from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds and cultural experiences.⁸ Their academic backgrounds ranged from upper-level undergraduates to non-traditional and graduate students with decades-long professional career histories. Thus, when confronted with ambiguities, as was frequent (e.g., when subtitles were unavailable or insufficient in a film to clarify unfamiliar cultural or linguistic nuances), students relied organically on their peers' repertoires of expertise and cultural knowledge to collaboratively (re-)construct meaning purposefully. Thus, students readily deployed their personal or shared linguistic and cultural resources – sometimes to enhance collaborative meaning-making, and at other times, to challenge that very collaborative process and its outcomes. Since the reflection here is largely autoethnographic, as noted earlier, a deeper engagement with student experiences and outcomes requires a separate piece.

There are certainly pedagogical and political benefits to engaging in 'creative insubordination' that contributes to the ludic culture of a school and also activates productive meaning-making through collaborative inquiry (see e.g., Crowson and Morris, 1985:64, Grando and Lopes, 2020). Yet, it is precisely because schooling remains steeped in epistemic closures and disciplinary decadence (Gordon, 2016) that one becomes incited to insubordination in the first instance. As the next subsection elaborates, the impact of traditionalist institutional formations in sustaining colonial exploitation through pedagogic practices is not negligible.

3.2 Limits of creative insubordination

The pedagogical acts of abandonment and resistance described above bespeak my own growing disquiet with academic processes that, while readily eloquent in their critiques of the coloniality of knowledge/power, retain, and in many ways deepen – through the normation of accountability and standardisation – the pedagogical and institutional practices through which knowledge colonises. How, then, do these modest pedagogical acts of insubordination, including classroom translanguaging practices, help to disrupt the complicit link of schooling to the broader colonial axes of power? What lesson can be drawn from these experiences on whether the confluent forces of translanguaging and systemic disruptions in a global pandemic, coupled with emerging (Zoom-era) technologies that promise both personalisation and humanification of learning, are potent enough to destructure and supplant remnant epistemic fixities of traditional schooling and decolonise learners' creative agency beyond standardised norms? Or will translanguaging become yet another casualty innovation of a system that thrives on coopting and defusing its critiques?

It was striking that my review of Zoom session recordings shows that students frequently mobilised autobiographical narratives as assets both

to co-construct meanings for themselves and their peers and, importantly, to anchor that meaning forethoughtfully. This future-facing positioning is particularly notable for a course that is designed broadly as a *critique* of the development-as-progress narrative and of education's role in the process. Yet, students' autobiographical reflections were still tinted by the regulatory mechanisms of the traditional classroom. That regulatory function surfaces in at least two pedagogical and epistemic thrusts illustrative of the tension and contradiction of a decolonial classroom.

First, students' bold moves to historicise themselves autobiographically in deconstructing Occidentalised econometric narratives of development, which notably heavily influenced many of their consequential choices (e.g., academic and career paths), reveal the enduring subliminal imprints of their prior schooling. Students described their previous schooling as prioritising cognitive passivity, arbitrary rewards (e.g., grades and credentials), and social control over their deep cognitive engagement, productive intercourse with their lived experiences and full active membership in their communities. Yet, they did so with deferential cognisance that our courses operated within and were still haunted by the familiar institutionalised arbitrariness that governed their earlier scholastic passivity. For instance, students were more hesitant to challenge or disagree with me (compared to their peers), even when I made counterfactual, contradictory or problematic claims in deliberate effort to test their intellectual independence and active ownership of the learning process.

It is even more striking that, as the recordings show, I tended to speak with intellectual authority, exuding an *au courant* progressivist 'sage-on-the-stage' deportment, often relying on my studied familiarity with the subjects. The apparent double-talk and (mis)alignment here illustrate the tensions and inconsistencies inherent in classroom decolonial practices (Ferreira and Mendelowitz, 2009). Thus, while the *stage* may have been banished or deconstructed, the *sage* remains in the room as preeminent custodian of legitimate knowledge, including about the value and limits of decolonial practices. Notably, then, the psychological hangover of traditional education seems non-discriminant of academic status as it is equitable in its subliminality. Moreover, for university courses in which students' accomplishments are ultimately whittled down to rankable numerical artefacts by an instructor whose authority wends its way into transcripts and GPAs, these tensions and inconsistencies are certainly unsurprising.

Underlying this pedagogic thrust are tensions and obscurities surrounding a second, more pernicious constraint against which the broader social and political impact of translanguaging and remote learning can be measured. Schooling on Zoom made even more manifest our ingrained habit of purifying ourselves of important elements of our *lived* experiences to the dictates of

a deracinating process, transferring to a virtual classroom the silencing and distancing practices of the physical classroom through which a gulf was already established between the learner and schooling. Students and instructor alike physically or digitally modified our backgrounds to present an image that was worthy of the uncluttered intellectual linearity of schooling. The management of (virtual) backgrounds serves as a metaphor for distancing the *lived* self from ‘learning’ and for alienating oneself from the experiential intimacies that trigger access to one’s diverse linguistic repertoire, which is itself the product of those intimacies. Remarkably, students were asked during the first Zoom session and encouraged throughout the course to share physical artefacts from their immediate environment as an explicit inducement to bridge this artificial gap between the self and the object of knowledge.

To illustrate, I once brought to a Zoom session an infant (whose arrival amidst a pandemic rearranged my priorities), in an effort to model the possibility of viewing the complexities of our lived experiences as curricular ‘text’ for understanding, as an initial act of resistance, ‘where [we] have been placed’ in the colonial matrix (Mignolo, 2017). An anonymous student feedback triggered additional reflection on my struggle to balance parenting and teaching in real time. In a course that explores colonial and neoliberal entanglements, the intellectual exercise of critique was in direct confrontation with the crisscrossing inroads of the systemic and institutional in the personal, and the alienation of the self from the object of schooling collapsed the metaphorical and literal in the unrelenting cultural politics of grand-scale imperialism.

4 Conclusion

A translanguaging decolonial confrontation with the deracinating propensities of schooling needs to go beyond mere inclusion of students’ entire linguistic and cultural repertoires to a more strategic reckoning with abjectified institutionalised processes that turn learning into denatured acts (i.e., performances) of individuals whose neoliberal existence as android executors of preset cultural practices suppresses their real existence as producers of culture – and reality. Indeed, deracination is not so much about uprooting one from one’s culture – often imagined as mummified markers of exotic indigeneity – but about invisibilising the political boundaries between the exploitations of colonising universality and the incommensurable multiplicities of the otherwise. Invisibilising the quotidian ubiquitous, in the political project of imperialism to control reality by controlling the mind, ensures the cultivation of a one-way reality that obscures imperialism’s (and schooling’s) primordial Eurocentric locus of enunciation. Deracination, as Satadru Sen (2003) argues about the

education of elite children in British colonial India, ‘was not the loss of morality and culture; it was the blurring of boundaries in a political conflict’ (21).

Decolonial futures, the political vocation of translanguaging, open wider possibilities for education and society to shed the shrivelled epistemic fundamentalism of objectivising, homogenising, Eurocentric universalism. That vocation begins with recognising in current schooling the Manichaean *boundaries of occlusion* that divide valid knowledge and invalid knowledge, modern/advanced and primitive/barbaric, developed and under/undeveloped, being and non-being, Western and ‘restern’/other – all choreographed to script by a patently invasive coloniality. Boundaries of occlusion, similar to ‘geopolitics’ (Grosfoguel, 2012; Mignolo, 2013) and ‘the abyssal line’ (Santos, 2007), mark the separation, in colonial thinking, of the ‘zone of being’ from the ‘zone of non-being’ (Fanon, 1967). While that which is located in the zone of being, on the Eurocentric sphere, is (re)presented as superior and natural, other funds of knowledge and realities – those of the colonised – are *marked* as inferior and unscientific.

Lynn Mario T. M. de Souza (2021) reminds us that the historical processes of occlusion at work here paradoxically render colonised indigenous ecologies both *visible* (i.e., *marked* as local and contained within its limit of indigenous barbarity precisely for the political purpose of *unmarking* and foisting Eurocentric knowledge as universal and natural) and *invisible*, by way of exclusion. De Souza notes accordingly that while ‘this process originated in the factor that most marked the visibility of the colonized native, the resulting pattern of coloniality that then became hegemonic made “invisible” the same colonized native and all that pertained to him’ (2021:xiv). To that end, then, the inauguration of a decolonial process must include on one hand the provincialisation or the marking of Eurocentric colonising knowledge and realities so as to de-universalise them, and on the other hand the deprovincialisation or unmarking of colonised onto-epistemic ecologies (de Souza, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Obviously, that latter project, of deprovincialisation, does not reconstitute a new universalism from the Global South; it rather reorganises an onto-epistemic architectonic that makes more visible the locus of enunciation out of which all knowing and being unfurl – as inherently interactive/relational processes of ontologic transformation. By the same token, in place of the ‘geopolitics of sensing and knowing’ (Mignolo, 2011) and its epistemic silos, deprovincialising Southern ecologies readjusts our aperture on reality and knowledge as dialogic. That is, it leads us away from a decadent universalism and towards what Lewis Gordon (2021) calls ‘teleological suspension’ and better recognition of the transformative encounters of which all knowledges,

civilisations (Western and otherwise) and all reality are integratively constitutive in pluriversal formation. In the twin decolonial project of provincialisation and deprovincialisation, that which negates and occludes by flaunting a phantasmic universalism is redeemed (i.e., put in its place) by that which is occluded and negated.

The political vocation of translanguaging, especially at a time when escalating global pandemics reveal coloniality's deeper fault lines, shows both its epiphanic and transfigurative deportments. It is not enough to recognise and encourage students to fully engage their rich, dynamic and emergent linguistic repertoires in the classroom if the multiplex of empirical, cultural and imaginative features of which that diverse linguistic repertoire is constitutive are negated systemically. What translanguaging seeks to accomplish in the classroom *pedagogically*, it must seek, with equal and immediate commitment, beyond it *politically*. Otherwise, it risks becoming a mission with a vacuous purpose. To think *beyond* the classroom cannot be reduced to the binaries of inside vs outside the classroom or school. For schools and their classrooms are not only extensions but, crucially, expressions of a historical and cultural process. It is to think beyond those binaries, to deinstitutionalise schooling (Odugu, forthcoming) and to think and act *historically*. As de Souza puts it, what we can see in the politico-theoretical developments of translanguaging, that is the 'move away from abstraction, universality and homogeneity towards a focus on "acts or practices", is a growing awareness of the role of historical and social context in issues related to language and pedagogy and the need to focus on the subjects involved: language users, learners, meaning-makers' (2021:xiii). If we are to make sense of 'the ideological and political import of bringing subjects into discussions of language, pedagogy and meaning-making', we must simultaneously ask: 'Why were they not there to begin with?' (de Souza, 2021:xiv). That broader political project of rectifying, systemically and institutionally, colonialism and the complicity of schooling in maintaining colonial relations, must be the arrowhead of translanguaging.

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Notes

1. For associated terms, see translanguaging practice (Canagarajah, 2012) or vague linguistique (Makoni and Makoni, 2009).

2. For related conceptualisations of the politics of nonlife as the manifestation of coloniality in an era of the Anthropocene, see also Povinelli (2016) and Suárez-Krabbe (2021).

3. Using Alkebulan and Abya Yala does more than project more autochthonous alternatives to the colonial misnomers, Africa and Latin America respectively, as constructs of indigeneity have historically been fraught with ambiguity. It is rather a tempered reminder that the *right to name* (i.e., right to name 'others' but not be named by any other), which marks the praxis in the drama of European 'discoveries' and 'ownership' of the world (see de Souza, 2021; wa Thiong'o, 1986), was never relinquished by those caught in the web of imperialism. Naming (i.e., telling what things 'are', which encapsulates the knowledge production and transaction function of schooling), thus, links the traditional formations of schooling to the exploitative deprecation and near total genocide of other indigenous communities.

4. The pandemic has impelled traditional economic (including neoliberal) juggernauts to recognise that, as Dennis Snower noted in his opening address to the G20 at the 2020 World Policy Forum, out of the inspirations arising from 'over 400 years of hard work, honesty and trust that was required for flourishing market economies... grew *institutions, social hierarchies, ideologies and governance principles* that have often tended to become self-serving – exploited by the privileged few for their own personal advantage, to the detriment of the broad human needs and purposes that they were originally meant to serve' (Snower, 2020, emphasis added). And this is if we accept – and we should not – that those 400-years' work was honest and originally meant to serve broad human needs and purposes.

5. While Foucault's take on neoliberalism, especially based on his 1979 lecture 'The birth of biopolitics' has been contested, the broader political agenda of Foucault's work undoubtedly swings in the direction of critique and an anticipation of creative resistance (see e.g., Newheiser, 2016; Zamora and Behrent, 2016).

6. For works that deploy similar analytic strategies, or demonstrate the origin and dynamics of autoethnography as a decolonial (or postcolonial) strategy, see, respectively, de los Rios and Seltzer (2017) and Pathak (2010).

7. While designing these courses, I recruited a group of three undergraduate international students at the university (one from Africa and two from South America) to assist in identifying, annotating and cataloguing films that addressed the course's key themes: language or gender, education and development/social change. All three students had studied overseas for part of their secondary schooling, and this month-long engagement resulted in over 50 films that were accessible through popular streaming services (Amazon Prime, Hulu, Netflix, YouTube, etc.). Students in both courses were provided access to all films through the university's library subscriptions. The inspiration for an Africa-in-film course comes from guest-lecturing in Sinfree Makoni's course with a similar title at Penn State University.

8. While some students enrolled in the course to gain better understanding of how to help 'poor' and 'developing' countries to develop, others were more interested in challenging notions of development and the disparate measures used in assigning hierarchical values in territorialised fixities.

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