



# Revocalising human geography: Decolonial language geographies beyond the nation-state

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## Abstract

This paper emphasises the decolonial importance of geographical engagement with the materiality of language as an embodied and embedded relation. It shows how abstractions of language(s) as discrete, codified and possessable objects participate in a ‘coloniality of language’ that risks obscuring alternative geographies of language within, against and beyond the territorialised monolingualism of the colonial nation-state. Through considering Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero’s analysis of Western modernity’s systematic ‘devocalisation of logos’ from a modernity/coloniality perspective, I argue that geographical consideration of language as a ‘revocalised’ relation could contribute to moving beyond colonial and (ethno)nationalist geographies of language.

## Keywords

conviviality, decoloniality, multiculture, multilingualism, nationalism, language geographies

## I Introduction

Multiple geographers (for example, [Jazeel, 2017](#); [Müller, 2021](#); [Radcliffe, 2017](#)) have highlighted how the decolonial imperative of ‘delinking’ ([Mignolo, 2007](#)) from Eurocentric knowledge and power relations requires work to fracture the anglophonic hegemony of geographical knowledge production. A plural, polyphonic geography aspiring to expand the scope of its political articulation by speaking with and working for lives and spaces beyond the confines of West must more seriously engage with the diversity of languages in which these lives and spaces are experienced, imagined and negotiated. Most language users communicate in fluid linguistic repertoires comprising of overlapping, hybrid varieties, and local knowledge ecologies and epistemologies risk being flattened, assimilated or domesticated as a

result of ongoing processes of ‘linguistic imperialism’ ([Phillipson, 1992, 2010](#); see also [Santos, 2016](#); [Spivak, 2009](#): 200–225). Materially, addressing this requires greater institutional support for language learning, translation and multilingual collaboration. My aim in this paper, however, is to additionally stress that decolonising geography’s engagement with language difference and multilingualism requires further conceptual efforts to move beyond a limited understanding of language(s) as merely a means of *naming* the world, towards a deeper appreciation of language as an embodied and relational

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part of *being with and of* the world. In a context of hardening nationalism and nativist hostility towards racialised cultural difference, critical attention to how a convivial, embodied multilingualism exists in tension with racialising, nationalist language ideologies should be an important consideration for geographers engaging not only with internationalist, but more critically with anti-nationalist solidarities.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the following section, I argue that as part of a complex colonial apparatus of language, race and power, the construct of standardised and territorially bounded national languages cannot be fully extricated from ongoing processes of racialisation and colonisation. In doing so, I adopt a ‘coloniality of power’ (Mignolo, 2000a, 2000b; Quijano, 2000) approach to questions of race, arguing that although forms of language standardisation and control and imperialist expansion of course existed prior to the fifteenth century (see Lane et al. (eds), 2017; Bohata, 2004), modern categories of racial difference emerged in the colonial context of this period as part of a complex strategy of appropriation and domination of people, lands and languages. Building on work in linguistics on the discipline’s colonial history and more recent decolonial efforts (see, for example, Blommaert, 2008, 2014; Deumert et al., 2020; Errington, 2008; Irvine, 2008; Makoni, 2013, and 2007 with Pennycook; Pugach, 2012), I outline the racial underpinnings of the ‘monolingual paradigm’ (Yıldız, 2012) and the ‘coloniality of language’ (Veronelli, 2015), whereby some forms of expressivity – typically languages with grammars, dictionaries and standardised national forms – are codified as Languages capable of efficiently conferring meaning, while colonised others are disregarded as meaningless sound, wasted words, phonic matter ‘out of place’ (see Pickering and Rice, 2017). Concluding this section and leading into Section Two, I suggest that both the ‘monolingual paradigm’ (Yıldız, 2012) and the ‘coloniality of language’ (Veronelli, 2015) rely upon abstractions of language(s) into disembodied, possessable objects. As such, conceptualising alternative, decolonial language geographies within, against and beyond the territorialised monolingualism of the colonial nation-state requires a more critical engagement with the aspirations and

affects of language as a social and spatial relation, rather than as disembodied linguistic structure, always-already ‘pure form’ (Moten, 2003: 109). There is a need for geographers to develop a more expansive engagement with the materiality of language as an embodied and embedded, social and spatial relation and, as an element of this, turn critical attention to the ‘people’ element of the ‘one–nation, one–people, one–language’ geographical imaginary, specifically with regards to how that people – and their linguistic expression – come to be racialised in relation to a set of nation-state borders. While arguments to this effect have been discussed in critical sociolinguistics (see, for example, Abdelhay et al., 2020; Flores and Rosa, 2015; Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook, 2018), the lived-in materiality of language(s) as a relational practice has to a very limited extent been drawn into debates in human geography.

Section Two offers a suggestion of how such a reconceptualisation might proceed, through discussion of Italian feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero’s (2005) philosophy of vocal expression. While Cavarero’s analysis of Western metaphysics’ systematic ‘devocalization of logos’ (40) has prompted re-evaluations of the significance of the vocal in various academic fields from education and politics to performance and critical legal studies (Bertolino, 2017; Eidsheim, 2011; Richardson, 2011; Schlichter and Eidsheim, 2014; Thomaidis, 2015), the implications of her seminal *For More than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005) seem not to have been considered in significant depth by human geographers. More sustained engagement with Cavarero’s call to (re)conceptualise voice as a means of embodied, noisy, affective relation, I argue, if running alongside consideration of the implications of her philosophy from a modernity/coloniality/decoloniality perspective, could contribute to developing alternatives to the (ethno)nationalist geographies of language outlined in Section One of this paper. Cavarero’s emphasis on the singularity, embodiment and relationality of vocal expression, furthermore, could offer a means of connecting human geography and critical sociolinguistics in pursuit of more integrated interdisciplinary approaches to understanding language practices in

terms of ‘spatial repertoires’ (Dovchin et al., 2015; Pennycook, 2018; Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015) and ‘semiotic assemblage’ (Canagarajah, 2018; Pennycook, 2018), while still also carefully attending to the persistent dynamics of colonialism/coloniality structuring linguistic space.

Finally, in Section Three, I signal some of the potential implications and applications of such revocalised, decolonial geographies of language. Considering multilingualism as an everyday, embodied instantiation of convivial multicultural, I suggest that the importance of the everyday collusions of ‘interpretation, translation, stuttering and the partly understood’ (Haraway, 1991: 195) should resonate more broadly, beyond the relatively small number of geographers working explicitly on issues of language(s). Especially given Cavarero’s focus on the relational spatial politics of the ‘absolute local’ that arise from multiple singular voices speaking in resonance (2005: 204–205), attention to decolonial, revocalised geographies of language should be seen as an integral part of broader geographical efforts to articulate the spatial, political and ethical implications of communication and connection, representation and relation, beyond the limited political horizon of the nation-state.

## **II Decolonising geographies of language**

Over the past several decades, there have been welcome calls for more sustained geographical engagement with the multilingual ways in which the majority of the world’s population live their lives (Smith, 1996; Valentine et al., 2008), alongside related criticisms of the anglophone hegemony of disciplinary geography (Desforges and Jones, 2001; Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Gutiérrez and López-Nieva, 2001; Müller, 2007, 2021; Paasi, 2005). In particular, supposed ‘moments of untranslatability’ (Jazeel, 2019: 12, see also Apter, 2013) in encounters with non-anglophone onto-epistemologies have been discussed as a potential site of decolonial knowledge production and redress of epistemic privilege (Asher, 2013; Jazeel, 2017; Müller, 2021; Radcliffe, 2017). Zaman (2020: 11), for example, has argued that

degrees of incommensurability across language difference can ‘alert us to and emphasise postcolonial difference and how experiences and lived understandings of migrants are often flattened out to make sense for and from European perspectives’.

Such calls for increased sensitivity to the role of linguistic and epistemic difference in the shaping of multilingual spaces and relations are an important and welcome move against the persistent ramifications in academic geography of ‘linguistic imperialism’, processes by which linguistic diversity is suppressed as colonisers’ languages are imposed on colonised/colonialised populations (Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Gutiérrez and López-Nieva, 2001; Phillipson, 1992, 2010). Such critiques have also prompted increased though still limited numbers of translations of geographic scholarship from the Global South. Worth particular mention in this regard is Christen Smith’s, Archie Davies’ and Bethânia Gomes’ (2021) translations of the Brazilian thinker and activist Beatriz Nascimento, the work of Lucas Melgaço (2017) to bring Brazilian geographer Milton Santos to an anglophone readership, and Antipode’s Translation and Outreach programme. While translation undeniably constitutes an important and generative, though by no means frictionless, means of addressing the linguistic, cultural and geopolitical imbalances of power that continue to shape geographical knowledge production, my argument here is that efforts for decolonising geography can and should go further by considering the diversification of the ‘languages of geography’ in conjunction with exploring (de)colonial of ‘geographies of language’. In other words, the task of decolonising language geographies requires conceptual efforts to challenge not only colonial linguistic hierarchies, but more radically the underlying abstraction of language(s) as discrete, codified and possessable objects that they and the territorialised monolingualism of the nation-state rely upon.

### *I The monolingual paradigm and the coloniality of Language*

The convergence of geography and linguistics as modern academic disciplines dates back to their joint

role in imperial expansion and nation-building in the late 19th century. The naturalisation of a connection between a standardised mother tongue and a territorially demarcated motherland was a key instrument of colonial statecraft, with the use of language mapping in (re)inscribing territorial boundaries being well documented and discussed by human geographers and sociolinguists alike (Dunlop, 2013; Jagessar, 2020; Jones and Lewis, 2019; Phillipson, 2010; Schwarz, 1997). ‘Linguistic landscapes’, the presence or absence of written languages in the material landscape have similarly been analysed by both geographers and sociolinguists as a means of claiming, maintaining and contesting colonial territorial control (Azaryahu and Kook, 2002; Nash, 1999; Zelinsky and Williams, 1988).

While the relationship between language standardisation, territorialisation and the construction and bolstering of national identities has been extensively discussed (Bonfiglio, 2010; Knox, 2001; Mac Giolla Chríost and Aitchison, 1998; Segrott, 2001; Williams and Smith, 1983), this has not always been with a critical eye to the fundamental co-constitution of the ideologies of nativism, nationalism and racial exclusionism (see, for example, Chatterjee, 1999; Valluvan, 2017; and from a linguistic perspective, Makoni and Pennycook, 2007: 7–8). However, the language ideology that sees individuals as having only one, discretely demarcated and codified mother tongue that links them almost organically to core kinship networks and nation-state formations, described by Yasemin Yıldız (2012) as the ‘monolingual paradigm’, cannot be abstracted from colonial processes of expropriation, exploitation and racialisation.

The ‘monolingual paradigm’ (Yıldız, 2012) – and corollary conceptualisations of multilingualism as simply the pluralisation of monolingualism, an individual’s ability to use distinct, discrete, countable language systems (see Pennycook and Makoni, 2019) – is a historically contingent product of colonial state-building during the age of European imperial expansion. Critical sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have highlighted how more than simply the imposition of colonisers’ languages, it was the differentiation, codification and systematisation of hybrid, fluid linguistic repertoires that

served as a key instrument in the colonial enterprise of positing racial difference as the archetypal indicator of rationality, civility and literacy (Abdelhay et al., 2020; Irvine and Gal, 2000; Ndhlovu, 2018; Pennycook and Makoni, 2019). In the ‘Languages’ section of volume one of the third edition of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1909: 350), for example, Irish linguist George Abraham Grierson (1851–1941), after revealing that ‘nearly all the language-names have had to be invented by Europeans’ since ‘few natives [...] are able to comprehend the idea connoted by the words “a language”’, goes on to posit linguistic categories that reflect a language ideology of distinct linguistic varieties as ‘authentically’ belonging to distinct ethnic groups residing in clearly demarcated territories. Evidently confounded by how to categorise Brahui languages according to this ideology, for example, he summarises:

Under any circumstances it is possible that the Brāhūī alone retain the true Dravidian ethnic type, which has been lost in India proper by admixture with other aboriginal nationalities such as the Mundās. This is suggested by the linguistic circumstances and is worthy of investigation. (1909: 382).

The broader corpus of Grierson’s work on the linguistic varieties of South Asia, especially the nineteen-volume *Linguistic Survey of India* (1898–1928) for which he is better known, is significantly more complicated and critically self-reflexive than represented by the Languages section of the *Gazetteer* (see Majeed, 2015, 2018a, 2018b). In a later volume of the *Linguistic Survey of India*, for example, Grierson admits that the boundaries between South Asian linguistic varieties that he describes and depicts on dialect maps are but ‘conventional methods of showing definitely a state of things which is in essence indefinite’ (1927: 30–1, quoted in Majeed, 2015: 222). Regardless of this openness regarding the provisional and partial nature of the linguistic representation in the *Survey*, this ‘conventional method’ of systemising, simplifying, categorising and codifying linguistic multitude was predicated on notions of linguistic and racial authenticity, and served to order and contain speaker groups within territorial boundaries. This

'conventional method' of European linguists bolstered an ideology of unified, distinct, autonomous and possessable language systems as co-constitutive with the constructs of race and (ethno)nation. [Irvine and Gal \(2000: 47\)](#) describe a similar process in nineteenth century linguists' classifications of languages used in Senegal:

The ways these languages were identified, delimited, and mapped, the ways their relationships were interpreted, and even the ways they were described in grammars and dictionaries were all heavily influenced by an ideology of racial and national essences.

In many contexts (see, for example, [Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985](#); [Monaghan, 2012](#)) speakers communicated through complex, hybrid ecologies of linguistic repertoires and registers, where not every communicative act could be identified as belonging to one or another discretely bounded language ([Pennycook and Makoni, 2019](#)). The very notion of 'a language' was in many cases a colonial imposition, operating on assumptions of racial difference and serving to reinforce territorial boundaries, leading linguists such as [Makoni and Pennycook \(2007\)](#) to argue for the decolonial 'disinvention and (re)constitution of languages'.

With racialising codifications of language came racialising hierarchisations of language. Seemingly as a matter of course, in the Languages section of the *Imperial Gazetteer*, Grierson notes whether each variety is 'civilised' or 'uncivilised', 'cultivated' or 'uncultivated', whether it is 'capable of expressing ideas' (1909: 367, 369, see also discussion in Section Two below) or can boast a literature 'of merit'. [Severo and Makoni \(2020: 157\)](#) have described the employment of racialising language hierarchies during the enslavement of African people brought to Brazil for colonial exploitation. The term 'Ladino', they observe, was used to refer to those whose degree of acculturation by virtue of knowledge of Portuguese allowed them 'some differentiated status in the slave trade', while 'Boçal' was used to refer to those with no knowledge of Portuguese and who were therefore, in the eyes of the coloniser, 'ignorant, rude, lacking in human feelings and intelligence'.

This imposition not only of language per se, but of language ontologies that are fundamentally entangled with the constructs of race, nation and epistemic privilege, [Veronelli \(2015\)](#) has described as the 'coloniality of language'. Drawing on [Quijano's \(2000, 2007\)](#) distinction between colonialism and coloniality as the 'long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration' ([Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243](#)), she writes:

The coloniality of language is an aspect of the process of dehumanizing colonized people through racialization. Because racialization is inseparable from the Eurocentric appropriation and reduction of the universe of the colonized, the relation between language and racialization is performed within a Eurocentric philosophy, ideology and politics, which include a politics of language (119).

According to the coloniality of language, the language(s) of the coloniser are valued as Languages – coherent, rational and bounded structures of signification and representation, words that are 'capable of expressing ideas' ([Grierson, 1909: 367, 369](#)), meanings that are abstracted from contexts and the bodies that might speak, sign or whistle them and fossilised in grammars and dictionaries. Colonised/colonialised expression, meanwhile, is construed as 'languageless' ([Rosa, 2016](#)), meaningless, without 'Eurocentrically valorised expressivity' ([Veronelli, 2015: 119](#)). From such a perspective, we can better understand the 'importance fondamentale' that [Franz Fanon \(1952: 13\)](#) ascribes to language, noting as he does in Charles Lam Markmann's translation that 'the Negro of the Antilles will be proportionally whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language'.

Though not always articulated in terms of coloniality, these processes are still very much active in reproducing the entanglement of race, nation and linguistic authenticity and authority. Racialised speech continues to be used as a bordering technology to confer or deny citizenship, construct the

citizenry as monolingual, and thus to ‘draw a border around the spoils of British colonial conquest as a final act of colonial theft’ (El-Enany, 2020: 127). This occurs most obviously through increasingly onerous and externalised language testing regimes as a formal requirement of citizenship or residency (Blackledge, 2005, 2006, 2009; Carlson and Rocca, 2021; Extra et al., 2009; Khan, 2020). Kamran Khan’s (2019, 2020; Khan and McNamara, 2017) work on the nexus of race, citizenship and language as part of the ‘securitisation of English’ in the UK’s English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policies since 2001 has shown how the multilingualism of racialised subjects has been construed as indicative of a ‘failure to integrate’ and thus constitutive of a national security threat (see also Cameron, 2013). Emma Hill’s (2020) research with Somali Scots in Glasgow has similarly evidenced how migrants’ language practices continue to be assessed always through a bordering lens of integration, even after the formal granting of citizenship rights (see also Blommaert, 2009; Flores and Rosa, 2015).

Language repertoires and speech communities comprising of minoritised languages offer particularly productive terrain for exploring the relationships between language and place with relation to race, coloniality, nativeness and nation (O’Rourke and Pujolar, 2013; O’Rourke et al., 2015). Across Europe, the emergence of language revitalisation policies aimed at creating ‘new speakers’ – those who come to a language by means other than intergenerational transmission – of minoritised languages has troubled traditional conceptions of language as rooted in familial (and especial maternal) relationships (see Bonfiglio, 2010), exposing tensions around which speakers can lay claim to linguistic authenticity, authority and ownership. This is further complicated by the fact that some movements for the standardisation and territorialisation of minoritised languages have been analysed as both a form of anti-colonial response to linguistic imperialism, and a potential reflection of dominant (ethno)nationalist discourses (see, for example, Costello, 2015, Johnson, 1993 on Irish; Byrne, 2020 and Woolard 2016 on Catalanian; or Kaur and Shapii, 2018 on Malay). Urla et al. (2018), however, have critiqued

this so-called ‘reproduction thesis’ that views minority language movements as reproducing dominant language ideologies and their attendant hierarchies. As they argue with specific reference to the Basque context, ‘the conditions of minoritized languages and advocacy efforts are rarely rehearsals on a smaller scale of majority language dynamics. They generate ironies, predicaments, and innovations that need to be appreciated in their full complexity’ (43). In the context of the British Isles, for example, the socio-linguistic circumstances of minoritised languages such as Welsh or Scots Gaelic occupy an especially ambiguous position with regards to coloniality, race and nation. The historical work of Lucy Taylor (2017, 2018) on Y Wladfa, Welsh colonies in Patagonia, has identified policies of language minoritisation and oppression of Welsh speakers in the nineteenth century as a key ‘pivot point’ in Welsh participation in British imperialism, challenging a simplistic ‘agentive-coloniser’ versus ‘victimised-colonised’ binary. In part due to this complex colonial legacy, Jones and Lewis (2019) have emphasised the great potential of the Welsh context for geographical engagement with language, going so far as to argue that ‘few locations in the world reflect such an intense interplay between geography and language as does Wales’ (7). As I further argue in Sections Two and Three, more sustained geographic engagement with the multi-scalar relationships between language, place and power – in Wales and beyond – could offer a means of reworking the relevance of ‘the local’ in minoritised language contexts without reproducing the sorts of (ethno)nationalist, essentialist territorialisations of language and race outlined in this subsection.

## 2 ‘Back to the rough ground’!: Materialising language geographies

Both the ‘monolingual paradigm’ (Yıldız, 2012) – the notion that everyone has one ‘true’ language, their mother tongue, connecting them to racialised kinship networks and nation-state formations – and the concomitant ‘coloniality of language’ (Veronelli, 2015) rely on an abstraction of language(s) as property, as an object authentically and/or authoritatively owned rather than an intersubjective action

performed. This view of language(s) as discrete and disembodied systems of signification that certain groups of people – as outlined in the previous subsection, typically imagined as national communities of racialised native speakers – can authoritatively deploy, authentically possess and legitimately inherit precludes a more relational understanding of language as a communicative, performative action through which meaning is not only intersubjectively sedimented and contextually arrived at, but also potentially obfuscated, perpetually negotiated and often inchoate. Debates in sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and the philosophy of language in this regard have to a very limited extent been drawn into geographic engagements with language and multilingualism, that to a certain degree continue to be limited by a structuralist approach that conceptually treats languages as possessable, rational systems of representation that can somehow be abstracted from the embodied subjects who communicate through them.

This tendency is particularly evident, paradoxically, in new materialist approaches that would seem to promise a collapsing of dichotomies between matter and meaning, but in which a conflation of language with representation is reified through somewhat reductive moves against the Saussurean strawman of Language as an abstract and disembodied structure of signification. It is held almost as axiomatic in much new materialist, and especially nonrepresentational, writing that, as Karen Barad (2003: 801) puts it,

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’ – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation.

There have in more recent years been calls for geographers to move beyond this reduction of language to a vague form of ‘cultural representation’ and to engage more creatively with the material affects and aspirations of languages as they are actually used. Focussing on the geopolitics of language diversity and multilingualism in Sámi contexts in the Arctic, for example, Ingrid Medby (2019, 2020,

2021) has drawn on Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language to outline the ‘ample scope for more sustained critical geopolitical engagement with language and language-use’ (2021: 12). She moves against the tendency of some nonrepresentational theories to dismiss language as a rarefied system of representation and advocates instead for a ‘conceptualisation of language that recognises that this too exceeds representation’ (2021). The work of both Medby and Wittgenstein urges for a more expansive geographic engagement with the significance of materiality for language, for a view of language not simply as a means of naming the world, but as an embodied and relational part of being with and of the world. As Wittgenstein, translated by his student Gertrude Anscombe, notes in the *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*), famously ushering us back to ‘rough ground’, ‘we are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm’ (*PI*, para: 107–108).

On a similar note, several cultural geographers theorising in a nonrepresentational vein (see, for example, Boland, 2010; Kanngieser, 2012, 2015; Kanngieser and Beuret, 2017; Revill, 2016), especially those working in geography’s intersections with sound studies and musicology, have begun to explore the sonic materiality of spoken language in soundscapes, with particular attention to the spatial, political and ethical implications of ‘the acoustic qualities and inflections of voices – the timbres, intonations, accents, rhythms and frequencies’ (Kanngieser, 2012: 339). Kanngieser’s (2012) efforts to outline an affective, ‘acoustic politics of the voice’ (348), for example, offer some important reflections on the role of paralinguistic ‘soundings, gestures and affective transmissions’ (337) in processes of collaborative meaning-making, albeit arguably while sidestepping some of the knottier complications of the relationship between voice and language, which in turn runs the risk of flipping from abstractions of language as representational structure to the other extreme of reducing (spoken) language to ‘pure’ materiality.

There remains, however, a need for such engagements with the relevance of materiality for geographies of language to more explicitly

articulate the connections between abstractions of language to property and the structures of coloniality, language, nation and race discussed in the previous subsection. As I shall argue in the following section, Western modernity's systematic 'devocalisation of logos' (Cavarero, 2005: 40) is central to the workings of the previously outlined coloniality of language. Articulating these connections more explicitly, as I then argue in Section Three, might allow the relevance of decolonial, 'revocalised' geographies of language to resonate more clearly beyond the remit of the relatively small number of geographers working explicitly and specifically on issues of language and/or soundscapes. While the implications of these arguments for decolonising translation in and of geography are beyond the remit of this paper, it is here also worth noting that a more expansive geographic engagement with language and translation as a social and spatial, relational practice could productively shift the focus from the supposed unassailability of epiphanic 'moments of untranslatability' (Jazeel, 2019: 12) towards a more nuanced engagement with the frictions and disjunctions of the political and ethical labour of translation itself, especially as it occurs in embodied, everyday settings of partial or uneven linguistic fluency.

In this section, I have argued that while attempts to diversify the *languages of geography* through translation and institutional support for language learning are an important and necessary aspect of efforts to decolonise the discipline, these efforts should run alongside more nuanced and rigorous conceptual engagements with the 'lived-in' *geographies of language* within, against and beyond the colonial nation-state, that risk being obscured by a tendency in disciplinary geography to conceptually abstract language to a disembodied, possessable system of signification. In the following section, I draw connections between Italian political philosopher Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of the vocal and colonial logics of waste and property as a potential means of pursuing decolonial alternatives to the (ethno)nationalist geographies of language outlined in Section One.

### III Waste and voice: Revocalising language geographies

In *The Empire at Home* (2021), a rigorous refutation of any 'postcolonial cut' that would supposedly mark a clean transition from a system of imperial-states to nation-states in the late twentieth century, James Trafford exposes the ongoing coloniality structuring and allowing modern Britain to (continue to) exist. He describes the colonial expropriation and exploitation of lands, resources and peoples as relying on the incorporation of nature into property regimes, a process propelled by logics of waste – lands and resources deemed 'uncultivated' were/are decried as wasteful, with only the coloniser judged industrious and rational enough to exploit them to their full potential. Trafford summarises:

The foundations of private property lie in these ideologies of labour as improvement and action, providing the means for transforming nature as waste into nature as property (25).

If, as I argued in the previous section, the 'coloniality of language' (Veronelli, 2015) can be understood to rest on the abstraction of language(s) as property, how can alternative, decolonial language geographies begin to be developed through considering linguistic analogies to Trafford's argument? How might we conceive of 'uncultivated languages', 'wild tongues' (Anzaldúa, 1987) as yet 'uncivilised' and 'untamed' by colonial regimes of labour and private property? What parts of language are dismissed as 'waste', superfluous to the purposes of signification, and what labours make them property? In this section, I suggest that reading Trafford's formulation of the colonial relationship between nature, waste and property alongside Italian feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero's (2005) analysis of what she describes as Western philosophy's systematic 'devocalization of logos' (40) can provide a generative starting point for exploring geographies of convivial, embodied language-use that exist in tension with colonial language ideologies of territorialised and racialising monolingualism.

Adriana Cavarero's work can be situated in the intersection of political philosophy and feminist thought. Alongside Judith Butler, she is considered one of the foremost thinkers in continental feminist philosophy, whose work over the past four decades has explored the political and ethical implications of the concepts of relationality, plurality, vulnerability and violence. In this section, I first establish the need to consider Cavarero's philosophy of vocal relationality in the context of coloniality/modernity, before suggesting lines down which a decolonial geographic engagement with her work might proceed.

### *I For More than One Voice in geographies of language*

Through close analysis of a wide array of theoretical work spanning from classical metaphysics to modern linguistics and philosophy, in *For More than One Voice*, Adriana Cavarero (2005) details how the phonic, relational and material aspects of human voices have been systematically muted, 'devoiced', as part of a logocentrism that has prioritised logos as structure, reason and signification. Drawing from Hannah Arendt's political philosophy of plurality, Cavarero approaches questions of relational ontology and its politico-ethical consequences through engagement with vocality, deploying the 'material relationality of singular voices' (13) as a challenge to the solipsistic universal categories of Western metaphysical political theory – "man", "subject", "individual" in their 'classic Cartesian clothes' (173). She critically analyses how the 'devoicing' of Platonic metaphysics and its subsequent evolutions throughout Western philosophy has dismissed the material, vocalic aspects of (especially spoken) language as being somehow separate from and inferior to its abstracted referential content (61–83), to the impossible promise of the 'pure semantic' (136). In Cavarero's words (and those of her translator, Paul Kottman), through such processes,

The voice thus becomes the limit of speech – its imperfection, its dead weight. The voice becomes not only the reason for truth's ineffability, but also the acoustic

filter that impedes the realm of signifieds from presenting itself to the noetic gaze (2005: 42).

In this view, language is considered as such only to the extent to which it is seen to attain or aspire to rational signification. Paralinguistic forms of expression, semantic excess, obfuscated or 'opaque' (Glissant, 1990) meanings which in their materiality – and, Cavarero would stress, in their singularity – exceed their 'pure' function as linguistic signs are considered waste – 'dead weight' (Cavarero, 2005: 42), peripheral and extraneous to the aspirational precision and clarity of 'Eurocentrically valorised expressivity' (Veronelli, 2015: 119).

In *For More than One Voice*, Cavarero does not discuss the 'devocalisation of logos' and its 'wasteful' vocal by-product in the context of coloniality; her arguments are squarely situated within the remits of the traditional Western philosophical canon. 'It has been said', she quips, 'that the entire history of philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato' (42), offhandedly disregarding a diverse array of non-Western philosophical traditions and the dialectical relationship their thought likely had with that of the Western philosophers she does engage with (see, for example, discussion of the relationship between Indigenous thought and the European enlightenment in Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). Reading her philosophy from the geopolitical perspective of a modernity/coloniality framework that understands the epistemic framework of European modernity as mutually constitutive with coloniality (Mignolo, 2000a, 2000b, 2007; Quijano, 2007), however, allows for a clearer articulation of the connections between Western modernity's 'devoicing of logos' and the processes informing the coloniality of language outlined in the first section of this paper.

Western modernity's 'devocalised' ontology of language which holds the 'true' purpose of human communication as, in the words of Grierson in the *Imperial Gazetteer* again, 'expressing any idea which the mind of man can conceive with ease, elegance and crystal clearness' (Grierson, 1909: 367), relies on the categorisation of colonialised expression as meaningless, linguistic waste, as a 'little-touched jungle of uncultivated dialects'

(Grierson, 1909: 349). Cavarero notes that in order for Man to possess such a ‘system of signification that [...] subordinates verbal signification to mental signifieds’ (34), there is a need for ‘whatever is left over [to be construed as] an insignificant remain, an excess that is disturbingly close to animality’ (Cavarero, 2005: 35). What she does not explicitly articulate in *For More than One Voice* is that this hierarchical apportioning of the categories of humanity and animality, this bordering between a ‘devocalised’ system of signification and its meaningless ‘insignificant remain’ (*ibid*), emerged as a means of legitimising European colonial conquest (Dussel, 1995; Mignolo, 2000a, 2000b; Quijano, 2007) and continues to participate in assemblages of racialisation as ‘a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans and nonhumans’ (Weheliye, 2014: 3). In other words, and in line with critiques of the occasionally universalising tendencies of some posthumanist approaches that profess to ‘found a biological sphere above and beyond the reach of racial hierarchies’ (Weheliye, 2014: 53), any conceptual move to ‘revocalise’ abstractions of language(s) must also carefully attend to the coloniality of language by which some forms of expression have been, quite on the contrary, reduced to ‘simply sound’ (Cavarero, 2005: 179) and denied the capacity to ‘express ideas’ (Grierson, 1909: 367, 369). Put otherwise, moves to (re)conceptualise language as a relational and material practice should entail a careful reckoning with the political and ethical implications of that relationality.

Decolonial feminist engagements with materiality and embodiment in and beyond geography (for example, Gökariksel, 2016; Gökariksel and Smith, 2017; Mountz and Hyndman, 2006; Moss and Dyck, 2003; Spillers, 2003; Wynter, 2003), if not positioned simplistically against Language as always-already ‘pure form’ (Moten, 2003: 109), could prove generative for exploring the political and ethical consequences of (re)conceptualising language as an ‘embodied, embedded, enacted and distributed’ (Pennycook, 2018: 89) practice that actively participates in dynamic, more-than-human, ‘semiotic assemblages’ (Pennycook, 2018: 91), but crucially from a perspective that does not overlook

coloniality and racialisation as an integral structural component of such an assemblage. Alexander Weheliye (2014, see also 2005), for example, has advanced the Black feminist thought of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter to propose *habeas viscus* as a corrective to the universalising biopolitics of Foucault and Agamben, emphasising that the work of these thinkers does not ‘demote[e] race and gender to the rank of the ethnographically particular, instead exposing how these categories carve from the swamps of slavery and colonialism the very flesh and bones of modern Man’ (2014: 29–30). My argument here is that a similar sensitivity is needed for decolonising and ‘revocalising’ the colonial geographies of language outlined in Section One of this paper. As Weheliye continues, in reference to Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Agamben’s analysis of ‘Muselmänner’ in Nazi death camps:

While this form of communication does not necessarily conform to the standard definition of linguistic utterance, to hear Aunt Hester’s howls or the Muselmann’s repetition merely as pre- or nonlanguage absolves the world of Man from any and all responsibility for bearing witness to the flesh (2014: 127).

Cavarero’s feminist philosophy of vocal relationality, I suggest, if read through the geopolitical lens of a modernity/coloniality framework, could provide a generative starting point for exploring alternatives to the coloniality of language (Veronelli, 2015) and the abstractions of language to a rational, possessable system of signification that it relies upon. In particular, Cavarero’s emphasis on the politics and ethics implicated by ‘the uniqueness and the relationality that the vocal manifests’ (2005: 42), I argue in the following section, carries particularly salient implications for efforts to conceptualise decolonial geographies of language within, against and beyond the territorialised monolingualism of the colonial nation-state.

In this section, I have adopted a coloniality of power framework (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007) to argue for the co-constitution of Western modernity’s ‘logocentric’ (Cavarero, 2005) reduction of language to the always-already ‘pure semantic’ (Cavarero,

2005: 136) and the ‘coloniality of language’ (Veronelli, 2015), by which some forms of expression are judged capable of conferring this abstraction of disembodied signification, while others are deemed extraneous to this purpose, as noisy linguistic waste ‘without Eurocentrically valorised expressivity’ (Veronelli, 2015: 119). As such, efforts to decolonise geographic knowledge production require not merely a multiplication of languages as a stand in for multiple *epistemologies*, but critical engagement with multiple language *ontologies* and how these variously contribute to (re)producing and resisting the concomitant ideologies of nationalism, nativism and racism. I have additionally stressed that moves towards ‘revocalised’ geographies of language must involve more than acknowledgement of the material sonority of speech, but also engage with its relational constitution and the ethical-political consequences that ensue from this.

#### **IV The resonance of decolonial, convivial geographies of language at the ‘absolute local’**

Cavarero’s revaluation of the vocalic in *For More than One Voice* is not merely a theoretical exercise, but a proposal for radically rethinking the relationship between politics, space and speech (2005: 16, 200–209; Cavarero et al. 2018). As she specifies, still in Paul Kottman’s translation (2005: 178–179),

The point is not simply to revocalize logos. Rather, the aim is to [...] finally mean it as sonorous speech – in order to listen, in speech itself, for the plurality of singular voices that convoke one another in a relation that is not simply sound, but above all resonance.

In emphasising the primacy of a ‘uniqueness-in-resonance’ (199) at the foundation of a politically responsible ‘revocalisation of logos’, Cavarero advocates for a relational conceptualisation of politics ‘that does not appeal to territory or identity myths of community’ (209). Instead, she reads embodied, reciprocal speech, the collusion of the semantic and the vocalic, as the expression of a radical, unrepeatable and relational uniqueness of existents that goes beyond the collective difference of ‘belonging

to this or that identity group, this or that language’ (209). Advancing Arendt’s notion of political space beyond a public/private divide, she instead proposes that a ‘revocalised ontology’ can allow us to engage with a politics of the ‘absolute local’, a ‘relational space that does not concern what those share it are, but rather who they are’ (204–205, emphasis added), a primary uniqueness that is communicated through the reciprocal, relational speech of singular voices in resonance. The absolute local, she specifies, is generated by a situational ‘taking place of politics that has no predefined borders, nor any fixed or sacred confines’ (204):

It is not a nation, nor a fatherland, nor a land. It extends as far as the interactive space that is generated by reciprocal communication. It is a relational space that happens with the event of this communication and, together with it, disappears (204–205).

Reconceptualising language(s) in this way, not as an abstracted, disembodied and universalising system of signification, but as above all the embodied and embedded, social and spatial, vocal and semantic relation at the site of the ‘absolute local’, could allow for engagement with more dynamic, relational geographies of language that exist in tension with the territorialised and racially encoded monolingualism of the nation-state.

In a context of hardening nationalism and nativist hostility towards racialised cultural difference, such a project gains greater political importance. For most of the Polish nationals quoted in Botterill and Burrell’s (2019) exploration of shifting racial hierarchies and exclusions in the months following the Brexit vote in the UK, for example, it was the vocal aspects of speaking in public in Polish or ‘with an accent’, or of being spoken to excessively loudly due to an assumed inability to understand English, that marked them as sounding ‘out of place’. Focussing attention more explicitly and specifically on such ‘revocalised’ relations across language difference might allow for more possibilities for articulating an anti-nationalist, convivial, decolonial politics that moves against the (re)bordering of ‘Europeanness, whiteness and belonging’ (Botterill and Burrell, 2019: 27). Geographies of language could be

explored through the political and ethical implications of flexible convivial relations, ‘multicultural intimacies’ (Nayak, 2017) and ‘connective interdependencies’ (Neal et al., 2019) at the site of the ‘absolute local’, rather than in terms of assimilationist integration to the nation-state.

As Sivamohan Valluvan has argued of ‘everyday multiculture’ as a ‘political repertoire that ably subverts the nationalist attempt to monopolize class for its own political ends’ (2019: 36), geographical attention to the polyphonic, cacophonous resonances of everyday, lived-in multilingualism could provide an ‘important resource and reference that, if properly commanded, hints at the possibility of a post-nationalist politics of solidarity’ (Valluvan, 2019: 40). Valluvan’s work offers a critical reading of conviviality as a more politically generative alternative to rather attenuated conceptualisations of multiculturalism as but the mere *recognition* of difference. Instead, he argues,

Convivial moments [are] where identificatory terms of communal difference circulate, but are not bound to the metaphysics of modernity and its move to code the world’s peoples discretely along certain communitarian sets (Valluvan, 2016: 214).

Convivial multiculturalism, from this perspective, is not simply the act of *naming* difference, but, chiming closely with the ‘absolute local’ that Cavarero sees ensuing from the plurality of singular voices in reciprocal speech, becomes the dynamic and contested process of ‘the remaking of difference’s everyday resonance’ (Valluvan, 2016: 208). Valluvan does not discuss language difference and multilingualism explicitly, but I here argue that attention to ‘revocalised’ multilingualism as an embodied instantiation of convivial multiculture could contribute to a greater understanding of how interactions and relations across difference – that are often disjointed, fumbling and by and large ‘less-than-fluent’ – exist in tension with racialising, (ethno)nationalist language ideologies of territorialised monolingualism and the concomitant ‘coloniality of language’ (Veronelli, 2015). A relational and revocalised conceptualisation of language and multilingualism might allow geographers to a greater extent

to tune into what Anoop (Nayak 2017: 291) has described as the ‘auditory interruptions’, the ‘scratchiness and bumpiness that lie in the grooves of many encounters with difference’ and that can disrupt the ‘sonic melody of multiculturalism’ as it is deployed in whitening narratives of nation.

In Jenny Cheshire’s (2020) comparative analysis of Multicultural London English and Multicultural Paris French, for example, the differing national ideologies and social policies of the French and British nation-states over the long *durée* are shown to have different constraining effects on the extent to which something akin to Cavarero’s ‘absolute local’, a ‘relational space that does not concern *what* those share it are, but rather *who* they are’ (2005: 204–205, emphasis added) can emerge. In diverse neighbourhoods of London, Cheshire observes, Multicultural London English arises ‘in the informal spontaneous interaction of linguistically diverse multiethnic peer groups [...], including speakers with no immigrant background’ (2020: 310). Their way of speaking, borne of the multicultural conviviality of singular voices in resonance, is understood as ‘characteristic of particular communities of practice rather than of a bounded speech community’ (310). Multicultural London English is seen as an expression of belonging to – and, importantly, participating in – a socially mixed, multiracial and multiethnic community in London (323), rather than to nationalism and its ‘impulse to index conceptions of space, culture and political community to tidy taxonomies of race and ethnicity’ (Valluvan, 2020: 1463). By contrast, in Paris, a capital city of comparable size, population density and migration history to London, no such multiethnolect could be observed, with the young people from Parisian banlieues who participated in the study conveying no sense of belonging to the city, but instead focussing on more bounded, static categories of racial and ethnic difference (Cheshire, 2020: 316). The various reasons that Cheshire suggests for the different outcomes of superdiverse language contact in these two cities – including spatial politics of housing, education and national ideologies – are an important reminder that ‘multilingualism is structured and regimented by spaces and relations between spaces’ (Blommaert et al., 2005: 205), and that convivial, ‘revocalised’

geographies of language exist in tension with the territorialised and racially encoded monolingualism of the nation-state.

Similarly, Welsh geographers [Rhys Jones and Elin Royles \(2020\)](#) have proposed that in the face of the persistent sway held by the ideologies of nation and authenticity, critical geographers might attempt to advance a more flexible, inclusive and multi-scalar reconceptualisation of the notion of authenticity by spatialising it, understanding it to ‘derive from its localized sincerities’ (1103), such that ‘understandings of a particular group identity can vary – and can be held to be equally sincere – across space’ (1096). Their understanding of ‘sincerity’ as ‘meaning what one said within particular social situations’ (1096) resonates with Cavarero’s understanding of meaning not as abstracted structure or rarefied rationality, but as relational, embodied and vocal. While Jones and Royles explore the potential of ‘the spaces and scales of sincerity’ through the case of Welsh geographies, the affinity between their understanding of sincerity as ‘meaning what one said within particular social situations’ (1096) and Cavarero’s call for the revoocalisation of logos offers great potential for exploring ‘decolonial geographies of multilingual relations, especially in contexts of degrees of mutual incomprehensibility or partial fluency.

Turning away from conceptualisations of language as an abstracted system of signification towards an understanding of language as an embodied and embedded relation could allow for connections to be articulated between Cavarero’s (2005: 204–205) emphasis on the dynamic ‘taking place’ of the ‘absolute local’, and geographic scholarship (see, for example, [Amin, 2012](#); [Massey, 2005](#); [Neal et al., 2019](#); [Zaman, 2020](#)) on conviviality, community and multiculturalism that moves against representations of locality as, above all, static, bounded, communal homogeneity. As such, the importance of the noisy and frictional realities of truncated multilingualisms ([Blommaert et al., 2005](#)), as they exist within, against and beyond the territorial monolingualism of colonial nation-states, should resonate more broadly, beyond the relatively small number of geographers working explicitly on issues of language(s) and multilingualism.

## V Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that in order to decolonise geographies of language, materially and epistemologically, increased availability of material resources for language learning, translation and interpretation should be accompanied by conceptual efforts to move beyond reductions of language to symbol or structure, to always-already ‘pure form’ ([Moten 2003: 109](#)). Efforts to decolonise geographic knowledge production require not merely a multiplication of languages as a stand in for multiple *epistemologies*, but critical engagement with multiple language *ontologies* and how these variously contribute to (re)producing and resisting the ideologies of nationalism, nativism and racism. Decolonising territorialising and racialising language geographies further requires more than merely *recognising* ‘Indigenous’, ‘heritage’, ‘community’ or ‘minority’ languages, more even than addressing the unequal and racialised way in which proficiency in ‘one too many colonial languages’ ([Phipps 2019: 2](#)) can be conceived as a marketable skill or resource, a cosmopolitan ‘value asset’ ([Blommaert et al., 2005: 197](#)), while other speakers’ multilingualism is conversely attributed no ‘Eurocentrically valorised expressivity’ ([Veronelli 2015: 119](#)) and is therefore dismissed as ‘languagelessness’ ([Rosa 2016](#)). Such an approach risks obscuring that it is not certain ‘languages’ that are colonial, but rather bounded, logocentric conceptualisations of what ‘a language’ (and therefore related categories of monolingualism and multilingualism) is and is for.

Instead, there is a need for careful engagement with the political and ethical implications that ensue from a conceptualisation of language neither as enclosed, possessable object nor as abstract structure, but as an affective and embodied relation between communicating subjects. Abstractions of language(s) into discrete, codified and possessable objects not only preclude engagement with the affects and aspirations of languages as they are actually used and experienced by communicating subjects, but moreover risk perpetuating the coloniality of the territorialised and racialising monolingualism of nation-states.

In a context of hardening nationalism and nativist hostility towards racialised cultural others, interdisciplinary dialogue between human geography and sociolinguistics working to challenge conceptualisations of language(s) as discrete and autonomous systems of representation that can somehow exist independently of the bodies that communicate through them acquires greater political importance. As such, efforts to conceptualise decolonial, ‘revocalised’ geographies of language and the convivial space of the ‘absolute local’ (Cavarero, 2005: 204–205) that ensues from noisy, translingual processes of ‘remaking difference’s everyday resonance’ (Valluvan, 2016: 208) should be seen as an important part of broader efforts to articulate the spatial, political and ethical implications of communication and connection, representation and relation, on multiple, intermeshing scales, beyond the limited political horizon of the nation-state.

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