The World's Languages in Crisis (Redux): Toward a Radical Reimagining for Global Linguistic Justice

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The world's languages are in crisis. At least half of them are being transmitted to future generations at a declining rate, meaning that this century will conclude with thousands fewer languages than it started with. Activists and scholars around the world have now been working to address this crisis for several decades. I take it as self-evident that this is a good and important goal, requiring no justification, and in that spirit, I argue in this essay that addressing this problem requires a radical reimagining of what it means to call this situation a 'crisis.'

Current hegemonic understandings of this global crisis can be traced back thirty years, to 1992, when the linguist Michael Krauss published a highly influential article titled "The World's Languages in Crisis" (Krauss 1992). This article was not the first to draw attention to the global catastrophe of rapidly diminishing linguistic diversity,[1] but since it has had an enormous impact both within academia and in popular discourses, Krauss's article provides a useful starting point from which to begin our radical reimagining. A sense of the article's impact can be seen simply by looking at its citation count relative to other articles it was published alongside, in a special section of the journal *Language* focusing on endangered languages; the other articles average around 80 citations each,[2] whereas Krauss's totals almost 1,900 citations. But beyond simple citational metrics, this article is significant in how it laid the foundations for

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[1] Importantly, activist discourses regarding threats to the existence of specific languages predate academic concern about this global problem by several centuries. See, for example, the discussion in McEwan-Fajita (2020).

[2] The other articles average 79.8 citations each as of April 5, 2021.

the field that has today become known as 'endangerment linguistics' (Rehg and Campbell 2018).[3]

Two aspects of the article underlie its impact. First is its effort to present a global overview of language endangerment, using statistical descriptions of the 'vitality' of languages around the world. Second is the effort to mobilize linguists to address this situation by characterizing it as a crisis, comparable to the global biodiversity crisis. This includes Krauss's description of the problem as one of "catastrophic destruction" (7) that "diminishes our world" (8), and which, if left unaddressed, would result in future generations (of linguists) cursing the present one. He concludes (10) by saying that linguists "…must do some serious rethinking of our priorities…"

Some linguists did, at least partly, rethink some of their priorities, giving rise to the field of endangerment linguistics. This field has sought to document languages, measure their vitality, map their distribution, and work towards revitalizing them. However, linguists acknowledge that these efforts have largely failed (Seifart et al. 2018). There are at least two reasons for this failure. One is the scope and complexity of the problem: a wickedly intricate problem on a planetary scale, as 'solvable' as climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, and gender inequality. On this account alone, endangerment linguistics would deserve tolerance for its 'failures,' and patience for its progress towards a distant goal. However, I have argued elsewhere (Roche 2020) that this failure also arises from within linguistics, in the analytical modes adopted by the field, and typified by Krauss's article and the scholarship and activism that emerged from it.

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[3] Roche (2020) provides a historical overview of the emergence of this field since the late 1980s.

My aim in this article, then, is to stimulate a radical reimagining of this problem. Although sympathetic to the broad goals of endangerment linguistics, my approach differs primarily in examining the problem as a political issue: language oppression rather than language endangerment (Roche 2019). In order to advance this interpretation, I take the two key terms of Krauss's analysis—'the world' and 'crisis'—as inspiration.

To begin this task, I re-examine what it means for the world's languages to be in 'crisis,' drawing on Gramsci's description of a crisis as a time of dynamic and indeterminate tension when one political regime is transitioning to another. I demonstrate how the present moment is not simply a crisis in the usual sense of an *emergency*, but also a crisis in this Gramscian sense—a moment of historical tension in which language oppression and revitalization coexist. Taking this new understanding of crisis as a starting point, I then move on to discuss how 'the world' has been under-theorized in relation to this crisis. I discuss several ways the crisis of the world's languages might be theorized, before turning to historical anthropology to help me construct a global framework consisting of four key elements: nationalism, colonialism, racism, and capitalism. I look at how each of these elements, and their articulation into a world system, has produced linguistic injustice and language oppression. I argue that it is this system which is in crisis, transforming, perhaps, into a regime of greater linguistic justice. In the conclusion, I argue that it will take work—intellectual and political struggle—to help bring about a just transition to a world of greater linguistic justice.

In doing all of this, I have two main aims. One is to show how disciplines beyond linguistics can be drawn on to build a theory of global language oppression, in order to design more effective interventions in this situation and help create a just transition to a better linguistic future.

Secondly, I also aim to show how concerns over the elimination of languages can, and should, be integrated into critical analysis of the contemporary world system. As an initial inter-disciplinary effort, this article necessarily paints in broad brush strokes, with the intention of mapping out a rough, general structure for thinking through this problem on a global scale, and opening conceptual and bibliographic doors that will hopefully help pursue the problem further. In doing so, this article will inevitably make points that sound overly obvious to some readers, but completely novel to others. However, this will hopefully provide a common ground for future efforts to critically analyze the relationship between languages and the world system.

Crisis

Let's begin by thinking about the 'crisis' of the world's languages: not (only) as an emergency requiring urgent attention (Krauss), but also as a crisis in the sense meant by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1971; Jones 2006; Fraser 2019; Forgacs 2000).[4] For Gramsci, crisis was a period of time in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born." It is a chronic rather than an acute condition, characterized not only by its prolonged duration but also its indeterminate, contradictory, and fluctuating quality: the impossibility of definitive resolution. Importantly, Gramsci saw crisis (specifically, what he called 'organic crisis') as produced not by a

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[4] Gramsci was trained as a linguist, and Peter Ives has examined his political ideas in light of linguistic theories of the time, but without any particular attention to the concept of crisis (Ives 2004; 2008).

disfunction of the system, or by external efforts to undermine it, but rather by contradictions inherent in the normal functioning of the system.

The expression of these contradictions gives rise to an 'interregnum'—a period between two reigns or regimes—during which competing resolutions to these contradictions are expressed simultaneously (Bauman 2012; Babic 2020). Such periods of interregnum are characterized by what Gramsci called 'morbid symptoms,' including the rise of authoritarian leaders and fascism.[5] I argue that the world's languages currently exist in a moment of global interregnum, and that understanding this is central to how global linguistic justice is achieved and language oppression addressed.

This interregnum manifests at both the global and state levels in the simultaneous co-existence of language oppression and revitalization. For example, the 2018 publication *Cataloging the World's Endangered Languages* (Campbell and Belew 2018) provides an assessment of global patterns of language oppression, finding that nearly half (45.6%) of the world's languages are 'endangered'. At the same time, it also lists 69 languages as undergoing revitalization, i.e., reversing language shift and overturning historical patterns of language oppression.[6] Meanwhile, a recent international survey of language revitalization efforts (Pérez Báez, Vogel, and Patolo 2019), attested to 245 cases of language revitalization

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[5] For a forensic analysis of the original text in its historical context, see Achar (2019).

[6] See Appendix 4.1 'Awakening languages listed in the *Catalogue of Endangered Languages* (Belew and Simpson 2018), with approximate date of death of the last native speaker (if known) and approximate date revival effort began (if any)'.

spread (unevenly) across all regions of the globe.[7] The survey also found that over half of the revitalization efforts surveyed began after the year 2000, suggesting an increasing rate of revitalization. The world is therefore currently characterized by unprecedented levels of both language oppression and revitalization.

This contrast between simultaneous oppression and revitalization appears starkly at the level of individual states. In Australia, for example, the trajectory since the start of colonization in 1788 has primarily been one of domination, violence, and oppression continuing to this day. A high proportion of Indigenous languages have been subjected to language oppression to the point where they no longer have any speakers,[8] while three national surveys of Indigenous languages have documented a consistent decline in the number of languages used, as well as the number of 'strong' languages.[9] At the same time, however, Australia has also become the site of a significant 'renaissance' in Indigenous languages Troy and Walsh 2010), with successful ongoing reclamation

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[7] These regions included Africa; Australia; the Caucasus; East Asia; Europe; Mexico, Central America and Caribbean; Near East; North America; Pacific; South America; South Asia; and Southeast Asia. Absences from the article's dataset reflect methodological shortcomings *at least* as much as actual gaps in the distribution of language revitalization activities.

[8] The first National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS 2005) states that from 250 Indigenous languages originally spoken in Australia, only 145 were still in use at the time of the survey.

[9] The three National Indigenous Language Surveys (NILS 2005; Marmion, Obata and Troy 2014; NILS 2020) note the following trends: an overall decline in the number of 'strong' languages (18 in 2005, 13 in 2014, and 12 in 2019); a decline in the number of Indigenous languages still spoken (145 in 2005, 120 in 2014, and 92 in 2019 [excluding revitalizing languages, which are included in the total but appear to have been excluded from this figure in previous surveys]).

and revitalization projects being carried out in dozens of communities,[10] and growing public presence of Indigenous languages in general. Australia's Indigenous languages, then, can be described as existing in both a state of 'efflorescence' (Roche, Maruyama and Virdi Kroik 2018)[11] and ongoing elimination. These tensions manifest most clearly in moments of backlash against the reclamation and public use of Indigenous languages, demonstrating that although Indigenous language reclamation is *possible* it is far from being widely *supported* (Roche and Troy 2020).

Finally, such contradictions between ongoing efflorescence and elimination also play out in the context of individual languages. In part this is seen in the widely noted 'revitalization paradox' whereby communities express strong desires to revitalize their languages, but their participation in revitalization is limited by a host of competing priorities, historical legacies, and structural violence.[12] It also manifests in the ways that revitalization projects often fail to achieve the results desired by communities, even when adequate resourcing and supportive policies are present, and communities comply with 'best practice'. Richard E Littlebear expressed this sentiment in 1997 when he described how communities did everything they were advised to do—develop a writing system, make a

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[10] The third National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS 2020) lists 31 varieties currently being awakened in Australia; *Cataloguing the World's Endangered Languages* (Belew and Simpson 2018) lists 35 languages as 'awakening'; the global survey of revitalization efforts (Pérez Báez, Vogel, and Patolo 2019) lists 9.

[11] The term 'efflorescence' was used explicitly as an antonym to 'crisis' and carries the sense of "economic prosperity, human flourishing, cultural creativity and surprise" (Roche, Maruyama and Virdi Kroik 2018: 6).

[12] The term originates with Rindstedt and Aronsson (2002). See Roche (2019b) for a critique of the concept.

dictionary, employ linguists, train linguists in the community, get government funding, open bilingual schools, develop culturally-relevant materials, work with language masters, record elders speaking, make videos of cultural activities, and make CD-ROMs— "and still the languages kept dying" (Littlebear 1997: xi).[13] Cases such as Ireland also demonstrate the same point: despite strong government support and dedicated resourcing, and despite active revitalization programs and the creation of new speakers, intergenerational transmission of Gaeilge continues to be eroded.

These tensions between oppression and revitalization globally, nationally, and within individual communities are the 'morbid symptoms' of a world in crisis: an interregnum during which the old—a world of oppression, elimination, and linguistic injustice—is dying, but the new—a world of revitalization, maintenance, efflorescence, and linguistic justice— cannot be born. Both versions of the world are immanent in the present moment: the world is saturated with simultaneous possibilities for linguistic justice and injustice. Researchers and activists concerned with resisting language oppression and promoting language revitalization need to insert themselves into this field of potentiality and work towards resolving the crisis, at whatever scale, in favor of linguistic justice. But in order to do so, they need an understanding of the global system that they work within, and against: which is to say, they should be focusing on the world as much as, if not more than, the languages in it.

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[13] In a 2011 publication, Te reo Māori activist Wharehuia Milroy lists the same activities and expresses the same sense of frustration in an interview with Chris Winitana, see Winitana (2011: 311-312).

The World

Although Krauss's article was framed as examining the world's languages, and the field of endangerment linguistics has generally claimed to address a global problem, I argue that we have never been truly global in our thinking about this issue. This is partly because of the uneven political economy of knowledge production around 'endangered languages,' whereby "theory is typically generated in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, and then applied elsewhere" (Roche 2018: 275). This inequality is further consolidated by economies of academic value that confer prestige on 'the global' as a scale of theorization and attention, but do nothing to interrogate what constitutes 'global' analysis; 'global' therefore often operates as a "self-congratulatory synonym for trans-Atlantic, circum-Pacific, settler colonial, or other less-than-global formations" (Roche 2019c: xiv).

The impacts of quasi-globalism and skewed economies of knowledge production can be seen in the relative paucity of scholarship on language endangerment and revitalization in the People's Republic of China and India—the world's two most populous countries—and on Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and Nigeria—the world's three most linguistically diverse countries. They also manifest in individual works, such as the *Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization*, which contained two case studies from Africa, but three from the Arctic, or the volume *A World of Indigenous Languages* (McCarty, Nicholas, Wigglesworth 2019), which, in ten chapters, includes only one from Africa, and one from Asia. Scholars and case studies from the Global North predominate to the exclusion of those from Asia and Africa, while the claim continues to be made that a global problem is being addressed.

These exclusions and inequalities are exacerbated by a lack of explicit world-scale theorization in relation to language oppression. There have been attempts, such as Louis-Jean Calvet's (2006) 'Ecology of World Languages,' which looks at language constellations as 'gravitational systems,' or Abram De Swaan's (2013) 'Global Language System,' which places all the world's languages into a four-tiered hierarchy of peripheral, central, supercentral, and hypercentral languages. But neither of these frameworks has attempted to explain global patterns of language oppression, and the static hierarchies they present appear to have little value in explaining the dynamic tensions of the current interregnum. Instead, both models view 'the global' as an ahistorical hierarchy of languages, largely eliding the processes and players that create and maintain it.

In order to construct a vision of the global that will help in explaining and intervening in the present crisis in the world's languages, it is necessary to look far beyond linguistics and allied disciplines. Following I will look briefly at several ways of thinking globally. Although I ultimately settle on an approach grounded in global historical anthropology, I also briefly introduce several other ways of thinking the global that others might find productive in their efforts to reimagine the global language crisis,. These include world-systems analysis, global studies, and global justice studies.

World-systems analysis is primarily associated with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein and his many interlocutors (Wallerstein 2004; Arrighi 2010; Amin 1974; Frank 1998). This transdisciplinary approach is deeply historical, working at scales of centuries and focusing on processes rather than events, and emphasizing cyclical over linear time. World-system analysis offers us two useful concepts. One is the concept

of the longue durée, which is not simply a long period of time, but more specifically a durational span bracketed by the start and end of a period in cyclical time, from rise to fall. The second is a focus on tensions between change and structure, and efforts to understand when change is substantive rather than superficial.[14] However, the 'world' in world-systems analysis is somewhat less inclusive than it sounds, as it refers to a geographically expansive, self-contained economic system rather than a global scale.

Global studies, meanwhile, provides us with a scale that is actually global. It is also distinguished from world-systems analysis by its relatively shallower temporal focus on the 'long present'—the era of globalization since the end of the Cold War—and thus focuses on a span of decades rather than centuries (Juergensmeyer, Sassen, and Steger 2019). An important landmark in this literature has been the trilogy of works by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996; 2006; 2013) on cultural globalization. For my present purposes, it is worth noting an emerging sub-field of global studies—transformative global studies—which centers a commitment to radical, progressive social change on a world scale (Hosseini et al 2020). Global studies more generally, and transformative global studies in particular, can contribute an understanding of how longue durée processes manifest in the present, and how language oppression and revitalization are connected to both processes of historical change and social struggle.

This literature on transformative global studies links to work on global justice. Global justice literature often has a strong distributive focus,

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[14] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2019:112) captures the idea of superficial change with structural continuity with her concept of *gatopardismo*—"the policy of changing everything so that everything remains the same."

looking at material aspects of global inequality, such as the glaring and growing disparities of income both within and between countries (Armstrong 2019; Fraser 2008; Nussbaum 2006). This work also has an important historical dimension, seeking to examine how addressing historical injustices integrate with other international mechanisms that aim to create a just world order (Lu 2017; Ivison 2020). This provides a normative aspect to discussions of global linguistic justice: a description of how things, ideally, might look, and how greater justice might be achieved.

Ultimately, the approach I am suggesting integrates elements of all these literatures through the lens of global historical anthropology. Rather than a distinct theory, field, or literature, as with world-systems theory, global studies, or global justice studies, global historical anthropology consists of a constellation of researchers, including Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003), Eric Wolf (2010), Anne Stoler (1995; 2006), Patrick Wolfe (2016), and Sidney Mintz (1986). Their work is characterized by an assertion that a longue durée view is necessary to understanding the present.[15] A second characteristic that unites these scholars is their position within developments in anthropological theory since the 1960s, as described by Sherry Ortner (1984; 2016): all of them belong to the school of anthropology that emphasizes structural, materialist interpretations over 'culturalist' ones (most famously the work of Clifford Geertz). These scholars thus aim to explain contemporary inequalities in specific locations by recourse to historical processes that are interlinked on a global scale, and their analysis typically aims at addressing, or at least highlighting the harms of, these inequalities.

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[15] Thus, although Appadurai is a historical anthropologist of the global, he is excluded from this set by his focus on the 'long present'—the era of 'globalization' that emerged following the end of the Cold War.

This approach informs the analysis that I present in the following section, where I describe the underlying structures of the world system that have produced the current global crisis of languages: both the acute emergency of massive, widespread elimination of languages, and the chronic indeterminate tensions between language oppression and revitalization. In line with the global historical anthropologists mentioned above, I see this world-system as emerging at the time of the European colonization of the Americas. Since this period is also the time in which modernity arose, I call this world-system the 'modern world system' (Mignolo 2011). Following, I examine nationalism, colonialism, racism and capitalism as the key constitutive elements of this world system, looking at how each works to produces language oppression, and all interlock to create an integrated system.

The Modern World System: Nationalism, Colonialism, Racism, and Capitalism

Nationalism

One people, one language, one territory. This nationalist logic emerged in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as a reaction, philosophically, to Enlightenment rationalism, and politically, to French imperialism. Language was seen as the key defining character of a people.[16] Considered pre-rational and pre-political, language was thought

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[16] The Romantic, nationalist linking of language and nationhood is often associated with Johann Herder and Johan Fichte, but elements of it can

to express the unique soul or essence of a nation, an idea which has now become, globally, "the most common theme" (Fishman 1996: 13) linking language and nation.

When wedded to the system of territorially sovereign states that emerged in Europe in the mid-seventeenth century, the nation-state was born, giving both territorial form and juridical force to the ideology of nationalism. This enabled state power to be leveraged against languages and communities that fell within the nation-state's borders but did not conform to nationalist ideology: Indigenous, minority and tribal languages, the languages of diasporas and mendicant groups, dialects, jargons, patois, creoles, slang, cants, and koinés. The state not only had the capacity to render such languages illegitimate, but also to exclude them from institutions and processes that would enable their development and reproduction, including planning, mass media, the linguistic landscape, and education. When state power is invested in a national language, the inequalities produced by this abandonment lead to language oppression.

Today, the nation-state is the primary political unit of the world system (Hage 2016; Jones 2016; Miller 2019), and the predominant source of language policy and politics. Although trans- and inter-national institutions exist, such as the United Nations, European Union, African Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, they are all predicated on maintaining the fundamental principles of non-interference and territorial integrity of nation-states. Nonetheless, stateless nations—Tibetans, Kurds, Oromos, Balochs—are also able to both resist and impose language oppression, often by tapping into transnational civil society. Reactions to monoglot nationalism around the world, in the form

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also be found in the work of John Locke, Gottfried Leibniz, and Bonnot de Condillac.

of independence and autonomist movements, often take nationalist form, reproducing the logic of one people, one language, one territory, endeavoring to capture or create state power for their nation, and oppressing the languages of second-order minorities in the process (Roche 2019a; Jaffe 1999).

Finally, it is important to note that nationalism and colonialism emerged together, mutually informing and reinforcing each other. Mahmood Mamdani takes as paradigmatic of this process the emergence of Castilian dominance in Spain, which involved not only the Reconquista, expulsion of the Moors and Jews, and the subordination of Valencia, Catalunya, Galicia, and the Basque kingdom of Nafarroa, but also expansion into, and linguistic dominance over, the Canary Islands, vast territories in the Americas, and the Philippines (Mamdani 2020). European nationalism was therefore not an isolated phenomenon internal to Europe, but one which was made possible through the conquest of the 'new world'.

Colonialism

Colonialism and nationalism not only arose together, but also mimicked each other. This is seen clearly in Eugen Weber's classical work on French nationalism, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, which details the oppression of minoritized languages, such as Occitan and Breton. Weber declares that France "can itself be seen as a colonial empire shaped over the centuries: a complex of territories conquered, annexed, and integrated in a political and administrative whole" (Weber 1974: 485). He even reads French history through Frantz Fanon's classical work on colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 2007), which he finds to be "an apt

description" of what happened in France.[17] This fact—that state-building includes the incorporation and colonization of contiguous territories and adjacent peoples—has given rise to the oxymoron of 'internal colonialism' (Hechter 1977).

Thus, state-building often blurs into what is classically considered colonialism, including invasion, settlement, economic exploitation, and other forms of imperial domination (Mamdani 1997; Stoler, McGranahan and Perdue 2007). Settler colonialism deserves special attention as a particularly violent form of colonialism (Elkins and Pedersen 2005; Verancini 2010; Morgensen 2011; Short 2016; Carey and Silverstein 2020). This practice, which continues today in places like Australia, the USA, and Ethiopia is predicated on the seizure of land, the elimination of the native through murder, massacre, assimilation, and other measures, and their replacement with settlers. Settler colonialism has, perhaps unsurprisingly, produced some of the highest rates of language oppression in the world (Mufwene 2002).

Other types of imperial domination (such as franchise colonialism and indirect rule) also destroy patterns of pre-colonial multilingualism (Canagarajah and Liyange 2012). Every form of colonialism involves some sort of civilizing program that promotes some languages as superior and advanced, while denigrating others as savage, backwards, and unsuited to civilized or modern life. Particularly insidious aspects of colonial language oppression are the practices of knowledge production that aim to define and codify languages of dominated populations. Sometimes this

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[17] Unfortunately, Weber goes on to reverse his position, arguing that Fanon's characterization of colonialism 'underrates' "the choice and the autonomy of the colonized" (492). He therefore not only rejects the application of Fanon's ideas to France, but also Fanon's position on colonialism more broadly.

knowledge production erases distinct languages, and in other cases it creates divisions where local knowledge recognizes wholeness. In both cases it facilitates domination. In some colonial situations, the language of the metropole (French, Amharic, English, Mandarin, Thai) is imposed. In others, the metropole imposes a local lingua franca (Swahili, Urdu, Quechua, Malay) at the expense of other languages. In all these cases, colonialism violently disrupts local language regimes and enforces new hierarchies in ways that produce language oppression (Errington 2007; Heller and McElhinny 2017; Fabian 1986; Mannheim 1991; Leow 2018; Trautmann 2006).

Finally, the 'postcolonial' life of many states, following the so-called 'decolonization process' of the mid-twentieth century, closes the loop between nation and colony (Thornberry 1989; Kingsbury 1998; Churchill 2003; Robbins 2015; Pearson 2017). Newly independent states—such as Indonesia, Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—have retained the territories and hierarchies established under colonial rule, shifting the locus of domination but not removing its structures or logic, and thus continuing practices of colonial language oppression, regardless of whether they promote the language of the former colonial power, or a new state language (Quijano 2000; Grosfoguel 2006).

Racism

A key ideological motive and justification for colonialism is racism: the sorting of human populations into value hierarchies on the basis of purported ruptures in the spectrum of biological difference. Racism demotes some lives to a plane of insignificance, enabling them to be

disposed of or exploited with impunity. It enables the massacres of settler colonialism, the paternalism of indirect rule, and the depravities of slavery (Wolfe 2006; 2016). Racism also enables language oppression: the language of the racial other can be suppressed, disesteemed, and eliminated precisely because they are considered racially inferior. At the same time, the elimination of linguistic diversity has also been a constitutive element of racialization processes, which include the destruction of prior forms of difference to create new contours of racial distinction and belonging, such as the emergence of whiteness in the USA from a diverse European population that originally spoke a variety of languages, but were homogenized as white in part through language shift to English.

As suggested by the American experience of language shift and racialization, race is also foundational to the nation-state, and the practice of what Nikhil Pal Singh (2017) calls 'racial nationalism.' Michel Foucault has traced the history of such racial nationalism, arguing that it is foundational to a mode of state power he refers to as biopower; racism creates a basic fissure in the population between those who can be killed and those who must be made to live (Stoler 1995; Foucault 2003; Su Rasmussen 2011). Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007:28) has summarized the impacts of such state racism as "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." The life-and-death nature of racial oppression is also a driver of language oppression; the desire to live (and to live better and longer) is a powerful driver of coerced language shift (Roche 2021).

Beyond the individual nation-state and particular imperial formations, race also operates globally to create a 'color line' separating whites (and their languages) from everyone else (Du Bois 2015; Lake and Reynolds 2008). In the same way that racial nationalism maintains a

binary distinction within the state, the global color line creates a world order that distinguishes between white and non-white states; a global white supremacist political order (Mills 1997). This racialized hierarchy, coupled with the legacy of European colonialism, supports practices of linguistic imperialism (Philipson 1992) that enable the continued dominance of languages such as English, French, Russian, and Spanish around the world.[18]

In thinking about how race and language are entangled in the world system, it is essential to consider the complex contours of the global color line. In Mongolia, there are white supremacists who align themselves with 'the West' against an Asian, Chinese Other (Billé 2015). The European racialization of Ethiopia's dominant Amharas as 'black Caucasians' facilitated ideological and material support from Europe for their conquest of non-Amharan peoples and the creation of the Ethiopian empire (Marcus 1971). In India, Hindu nationalist ideologies draw legitimacy from myths of Aryan racial origins (Leidig 2020), and facilitate, among other things, racism against various populations from the country's northeast, who are perceived and treated as racially Other (McDuie-Ra 2015). In all these cases, white supremacy at the global level provides both a template and justification for localized regimes of racial supremacy—but little is known about how this manifests raciolinguistically to produce language oppression.

Finally, it is also essential to note how racism integrates with the ideologies and practices of capitalism to be discussed in the following section to create racial capitalism. The concept of racial capitalism

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[18] Philipson's book on linguistic imperialism focuses on English, but provides important tools for thinking about how linguistic dominance is maintained more broadly in 'post-colonial' contexts.

describes how the pursuit of accumulation necessitates the creation and exploitation of racial difference (Robinson 2000; Melamed 2011, 2015; Leong 2013). Predicated on the hierarchy created by the global color line, racial capitalism enforces the status of whiteness (and its languages) as property, and relegates all non-white peoples, and their languages, to varying states of exploitation.

Capitalism

Eric Wolf (2010), in his seminal study *Europe and the People Without History*, traced the expanding network of capitalism and its destructive saturation of life in every corner of the globe. Sven Beckert describes the early phases of capitalist expansion, pre-dating and providing the foundations for industrialization, as 'war capitalism,' characterized by "[s]lavery, the expropriation of indigenous peoples, imperial expansion, armed trade, and the assertion of sovereignty over people and land by entrepreneurs" (Beckert 2014: xv). These 'entrepreneurs' often blended into the metropole state, giving rise to 'company states,' such as the British East India Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Dutch East India Company, and so on (Philips and Sharman 2020).

Capitalism has driven the murder of Indigenous people and the destruction of their communities in order to seize their lands and render them profitable through a variety of destructive practices of primitive accumulation (Cocker 1998). It drove the trans-Atlantic slave trade that not only displaced and debased millions of Africans, but also wreaked ruin on African societies (Rodney 2018). It also created massive social dislocation through enormous programs of indentured labor (Lowe 2015). Settler

colonialism, slavery, and indentured labor have combined to produce a boundless process of population transfers that Achille Mbembe (2019:11) describes as "repopulating the planet through human predation."

Every commodity chain that exists today is historically entangled with this process of capitalist expansion that disrupts communities and contributes to language oppression. Consider: tea in northeast India, the influx of indentured laborers into the region, and the dispossession of local Indigenous groups (Sharma 2011; Baruah 1999); nutmeg and the massacre, enslavement, and exile of the Bandanese people (Collins and Kaartinen 1998); palm oil and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples throughout Indonesia (Human Rights Watch 2019); rubber and the violence of the Belgian Congo or the Putumayo River region of Columbia (Taussig 1984; Hochschild 1999); sugar and cotton and the plantation economy of the Caribbean and US south (Mintz 1986; Beckert 2014); the mining and fossil fuels industries and the violence needed to abolish sovereignty and seize land in order to gain access to these resources (Huseman and Short 2012; Lawrence and Larsen 2017; Sehlin MacNeil 2018). Even capitalist mediums of exchange—gold and silver—have contributed to this violence. Consider the dispossession and enslavement that took place under the Spaniards at Potosi, the Andean 'mountain of silver' (Mann 201) or the violence against Indigenous peoples in the gold rushses of nineteenth century Australia and North America (Mountford and Tuffnell 2018).

And while new resource frontiers continue to be opened in the twenty-first century, capitalism has also expanded into a neoliberal mode, centered on finance capital and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005; Foucault 2008). This has also seen the hollowing out of the nation state (privatization of public institutions, and the devolution and

outsourcing of governance) as well as new forms of colonialism via economic domination (backed up by military intervention; Harvey 2003). This new modality of capitalism renders disposable all forms of social life that cannot produce or be reduced to economic value (Bauman 2004; Evans and Giroux 2015), including languages (Piller and Cho 2013). Predominated by trans-national corporations rather than company-states, neoliberalism is every bit as violent and destructive as its precursors in the classical period of global primitive accumulation that accompanied the emergence of nation-states, colonialism, and racism in the modern world system.

Beyond Crisis: Towards Just Transition and Global Linguistic Justice

Nationalism, colonialism, racism, and capitalism. These four elements produce a world system that destroys languages. Languages that cannot be identified with the state or nation, that are spoken by racial Others or inferiorized 'natives,' that stand in the way of more accumulation, or that cannot be converted into sources of profit, do not matter. They are either abandoned to the slow violence of language oppression or eliminated, often with impunity. This is why at least half the world's languages are now being subjected to coerced language shift. This is Krauss's crisis.

But the present also exists as Gramsci's crisis, an historical moment characterized by *both* language oppression *and* language revitalization. This interregnum, this moment of indeterminant, contingent flux, provides an unprecedented chance to consider what a more linguistically just world would look like, and to start working towards that.

This crisis is not simply an emergency, as Krauss argued, it is also an opportunity to begin imagining and working towards a better future.

Donald Sassoon describes the moment of Gramscian crisis as "like crossing a wide river: the old riverbank is left behind, but the other side is still indistinct; currents might push one back and drowning cannot be ruled out" (Sassoon 2021: 2). This warning reminds us that just because the old *appears* to be dying, does not mean that the new will necessarily be born. Nor will the old necessarily die; it may reassert itself in its full brutality and oppressiveness. Or the new may be born and it might be something even worse. Therefore, it is irresponsible to assume that the world system will *just transition*, spontaneously, to a more just future. There is no arc of inevitability—progressive, declinist, technological, accelerationist, or evolutionary—that will take care of the future for us. Instead, a *just transition* towards a world of greater linguistic justice is something that needs to be theorized, planned for, and worked at.

Crucially, this theorizing, planning, and work cannot simply focus on language. Instead, it needs to focus on the root causes of language oppression: nationalism, colonialism, racism, and capitalism. It is only in confronting these destructive elements and their articulation within the modern world system that a future of greater linguistic justice can be created. In this sense, the struggle for linguistic justice must be truly global, and it must work in solidarity with other struggles that seek to create a just transition in the world system: anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and decolonial movements.

However, at the same time as being global, and aiming for a total transformation of the world system, the struggle for linguistic justice must also be multiple and local: as diverse in its tactics, strategies, and goals as the communities that seek to reclaim their languages and fight language

oppression. These diverse local struggles will almost certainly include some elements of: efforts to create new speakers and signers and generate new forms of multilingualism (Hinton, Huss and Roche 2018), to heal intergenerational ruptures (Olthuis, Kivelä and Skutnabb-Kangas 2013) and address trauma caused by colonial violence (Aikio-Puoskari 2018), to re-establish the relationship between language and land (Hermes, Engman and McKenzie 2021), and create new social institutions that enable communities to produce and reproduce their languages autonomously (Meissner 2018). But how these elements come together in local struggles "within the cracks of the global capitalist system" (Grubačić and O'Hearn 2016:15) will differ vastly between communities: there can be no single vision of linguistic justice.

Moving towards these futures of greater linguistic justice requires attention to the current crisis, as a moment of both emergency and indeterminacy, and how decisions made and actions taken now are crucial to what comes next. That's why discussions of global linguistic justice are so important, not just in terms of understanding the many intersecting dimensions of our current crisis, but also in terms of fostering the radical political imagination (Lear 2008; Hage 2015) and necessary will to ensure that the future is more just and less oppressive than the apocalyptic half millennium that has led up to the present. And it's also why critical theorizing and radical mobilization need to start taking languages seriously— because any transformation that leaves languages behind will not be a just transition.

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