



**David Gramling**  
University of Arizona

## **REVIEW ESSAY:**

*Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate*

by Alison Phipps

Multilingual Matters, 2019. 101 pages.

Since Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's potent directive in 2012 that "decolonization is not a metaphor," work in various fields of research, teaching, and activism has sought to understand how to go about right-sizing a potential recourse to decolonial thought, if they are to do so at all. What structures, contexts, concepts, practices, curricula, institutions, states, and phenomena can and must be decolonized? And then: how much of that can-and-must urgency centers the historic and ongoing theft of Indigenous land, culture, and meaning by colonial profiteers on all continents? Several books and edited volumes have been developed recently to help answer these questions for the specific practical matrix of Additional Language Learning, the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages, and critical multilingualism studies, as well as for various area studies and national philology arenas. Regine Criser and Ervin Malakaj's collection of essays *Diversity and Decolonization in German Studies* is due out in early 2020 with Palgrave, and Donaldo Macedo's *Decolonizing Foreign Language Education: The Misteaching of English and Other Colonial Languages* appeared in early 2019 with Routledge.

Alison Phipps's 100-page address *Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate* (Multilingual Matters, 2019) departs from these edited-volume formats and their multiperspectival, additive efforts to assemble loosely kindred contributors. Instead, Phipps leads with a lyrical voice of memory and experience (her own together with those of intimate, critical friends along the way), which helps her demonstrate that multilingualism can never be adequately posited from a technocratic or academic angle alone as a 'challenge' to be valiantly curricularized or implemented. This book "struggles to decreate" a myth of multilingualism that, in Phipps's view, supports rather than undoes colonial legacies and persistences. Characterizing her own personal multilingualism as that of someone who'd become fluent in simply too many colonial

languages, Alison Phipps warns that the once emergent, and now burgeoning, discourse of multilingualism in Global North institutional settings may have added up to another net loss for most human speakers, and that “multilingualism and its attendant language pedagogies are largely experienced as a colonial practice for many of the world’s populations” (1).

Animating Phipps’s book is a conviction that the contemporary concept of multilingualism has been alluring to progressive policy-makers, curriculum-reformers, and theorists precisely to the extent that it has required from them next to no risk of loss, and presents no threat to their idiom of power and its indebtedness to colonial structures. Phipps considers herself utterly implicated in this equation. Largely additive, celebratory, and affirmative of the neoliberal zeal for human capital, multilingualism as a concept needs, in Phipps’s estimation, to be decolonised before it can be of true meaning and promise beyond the walls of the globally-ranked university. In the testimonial form that *Decolonising Multilingualism* takes, Phipps centers Indigenous knowledge traditions from the language(s) of *Te reo* to Xhosa to Ubuntu to Chicanx to Scots in order to re-people the ground for new “language routes” to multilingual justice.

This book is a testimonial, in part because it gives an embodied, poetic account about the pain, disorientation, incompetence, and transformative deceptions of linguistic becoming. Identifying her own “colonial multilingual fluencies” (58) as a methodological problem, Phipps recounts her decision in Ghana during a research trip to accept a traditional healing treatment for a wounded anterior ligament in her ankle from a member of the project personnel, who had told her in Ewe that “I can work on the ankle, the traditional way. But it will be painful” (20). It is in the recounting of this experience that Phipps turns to Elaine Scarry, observing that “pain is also language-destroying” (19), and she experiences the healing practice as a momentary (but potentially durable) decreation of her colonial fluency, allowing for the experience of a cultural shift at great risk to her person, much like Geertz noted in his 1973 account of the participant social relations surrounding a Balinese cockfight he attended. “Something substantial has to be risked,” writes Phipps of the preconditions for multilingualism in general—which is always, for her, essentially also a decolonial multilingualism: “some threshold has to be crossed into something which is not knowable.” (78)

And so, it was not Phipps’s endeavor to learn the healer’s Ewe language that implied a multilingual struggle to decreate coloniality, not any muscular struggle to acquire competence, but rather her willingness to be put entirely into his hands, despite great pain; to cede epistemic prerogative to that peopled ground that had been delegitimated, systematically over several centuries, by colonial multilingualism itself. Rather than becoming more-lingual, the path toward decolonial multilingualism in Phipps’s testimony was to become less-lingual, to undergo “a decreation of the ability of the body to do anything more than scream” (24).

Such is, of course, a hard sell in policy-making conversations with, for instance, the Council of Europe or the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. And yet, this is precisely what Phipps is programmatically calling for: a willingness to “risk decreation by trying language routes offered by those who, consciously or not, suffer the indignities of colonial language pedagogical practices” (92). The key answers these language routes offer “are underground, behind the shutters and the many diaphanous curtains” (151) of Sub-Saharan African refugee transit cities, and not—or not predominantly—in university seminar rooms.

The notion of decreation comes to Phipps through the poet-philologist-translator Anne Carson and the radical theologian Simone Weil. For Weil, “we participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves” (43). This is a surprising but potentially axiomatic principle for contemporary multilingualism, in that it recommends we divorce our thinking from those forces which directs us to build up “our” competences and skills, to ever-optimize ourselves toward a debatably humanitarian intercultural-communicative competitiveness on global markets. Decreating the hunger for competence opens the possibility that we become able to get “the gist” of the symbolically strange around us, that we thereby help create the world, that we become willing to take previously implausible “language routes” that do not trade on the “privileged, literacy-rich, resource-intensive ways in which my own many colonial languages have been not simply learned, but refined, and learned for refined, elite endeavors” (41). The “gist” that is witnessed in the various autoethnographic chapters of *Decolonising Multilingualism* is of course a multilingual gist: the gist of refugee transit districts in Ethiopia, where Ge’ez and Arabic scripts mix and where the nine languages of refuge-seeking Eritreans are spoken. This gist is also the gist of Home Office English and support-agency-English and UNHCR paperwork, where linguistic referentiality is torn through by the pressures of genre, of justification, of compliance, and of plausibility. Triumphant Euro-American concepts like intercultural and global competence cannot accommodate these multilingual ambiguities. Instead, as Phipps says about herself, and her interlocutors for and with whom she translates: “We will make silent eye contact as the news sinks in. Then we will laugh and shake our heads” (46).

Phipps’s lyrical book shakes up a discourse on multilingualism that can easily revert to self-satisfaction, and even reactionary collusion with resurgent forms of coloniality. *Decolonising Multilingualism* is a potent, passionate, and important warning, an act of witnessing, and a voice of true reason amid the globalized race for profit in linguistic and symbolic commodities.

### Works Cited

Tuck, Eve & K. Wayne Yang. 2012. “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1(1): 1–40.