Towards a sociolinguistics of potentiality: Linguistic citizenship, quasi-events, and contingent becomings in spaces of otherwise

Abstract: In writing of the economies of abandonment of late liberal globalization, Elizabeth Povinelli also points to the potential for SPACES OF OTHERWISE, those spaces of “curiosity and risk, potentiality and exhaustion” which open possibilities for more ethical becoming and the emergence of new forms of sociality and social life (2012. The will to be otherwise/the effort of endurance. South Atlantic Quarterly 111(3). 453–475: 454). This Special Issue aims to contribute to an expanded, southernized sociology of language and sociolinguistics by exploring what role sociolinguistics can play in thinking through and with these spaces. It brings together a set of papers from southern contexts rarely represented in sociolinguistic research (Crimea, Mozambique, Palestine) spaces of grim endurance where suffering is chronic rather than catastrophic, and a study of the metaphorical south in the north, where migration imperatives land people in situations of precarity, in this case, Sweden. An illuminating invited commentary offers a novel perspective on the key theme QUASI-EVENT threading across all the papers. In exploring the construction of spaces of otherwise, authors use the southern concept of Linguistic Citizenship that construes language as a site of political struggle. This framing offers an alternative approach to a politics of language where potentialities for otherwise can be attended to. The papers show how, through acts of Linguistic Citizenship, participants bring potential worlds into existence, however fleetingly. From the chronicling of these ‘quasi-events’ emerges a sociolinguistics of potentiality, one which contributes to an understanding of what enables some emergent forms of life to endure and others not. The sociolinguistics of potentiality is an invitation to listen beyond and within ‘noise’ to those who inhabit

This Special Issue is dedicated to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Manuel Guissemo.

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discounted bodies and speak unvalued languages, to move beyond ‘community’ and ‘selfhood’ to becoming otherwise with others in projects of world-building, simultaneously prompting research which seeks to be ‘ethically otherwise’.

**Keywords:** semiotic practices; Linguistic Citizenship; sociolinguistics of potentiality; quasi-event; sociology of language; decolonial sociolinguistics

### 1 Introduction

In writing of the economies of abandonment of late liberal globalisation and late settler colonialism, Povinelli (2012: 454) simultaneously points to the potential for “spaces of otherwise”, those spaces of “curiosity and risk, potentiality and exhaustion” which open possibilities for more ethical becoming, and the emergence of new forms of sociality and social life.

This Special Issue aims to explore what role sociolinguistics can play in thinking through and with these spaces. It brings together a set of papers from contexts rarely represented in sociolinguistic research, some of them spaces of grim endurance where suffering is “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime” (Povinelli 2011a: 13), others where migration imperatives and/or the threat of political violence land people in situations of precarity and ongoing or “routine crisis” (Muir 2021). To these spaces, blackness often “fix[es] bleak boundaries” (Baldwin 1984 [1955]: 87–88).

While foregrounding the strain of inhabiting these zones, Povinelli (2011a) also seeks to understand the conditions under which something new is produced, and what enables it to endure or ensures that it does not. She asks: “How do new forms of social life maintain the force of existing in specific social spacings of life? How do they endure the effort it takes to strive to persevere? And how in answering these questions do new, if not ontotheoretical, then political and ethical concerns emerge?” (2011a: 109). The Special Issue addresses, in particular, the ways in which the study of semiotic practices and their entanglements with bodies, artefacts and the material environment may contribute to a sociolinguistics of potentiality – to an understanding of what enables some emergent forms of life to endure and others not.

Each of the contributors to this Special Issue draws upon Elizabeth Povinelli’s theorisation of “spaces of otherwise” to examine the ways in which different material and discursive arrangements (agencements) enable the emergence of new practices, as well as the conditions under which these practices either endure or disappear. Here the notion of “quasi-event” (Povinelli 2011a, 2011b) is central – those happenings that live in “the fog of becoming; in a potential realm where something might happen if and when the conditions for support and endurance emerge” (Povinelli et al. 2014a: 2).
§ 1). In their intimations of potentiality, quasi-events resemble Santos’ (2018: 29) notion of “ruin seed” – an “absent present, both memory and alternative future at one and the same time”. Ruin seeds capture the past ways of knowing, being and languaging which remain alive in memory, and those that emerge dynamically in interstitial spaces of interaction. Both Povinelli and Santos are concerned with the specific assemblages of concepts, materials and discourses, however fleeting, that provide the conditions for new forms of sociality, and more equitable and ethical engagements with others. Both are acutely aware of the risks to those who dwell in these spaces in seeking to live otherwise (Povinelli 2012; Santos 1995: 489).

Povinelli’s exploration of the struggles taking place in such spaces thus resonates with the rapidly growing body of work on epistemologies of the South which seeks to illuminate knowledges grounded in the experiences of “all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” (Santos 2018: 1; also Connell 2007; Mignolo 2000; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Here “South” is understood as a metaphor for marginality and coloniality, the racialised structures of power and prescriptions of value that survive colonialism and are kept alive in contemporary structures of governance (Quijano 2000). In the work of excavating the “silences, silencings and unasked questions: suppressed traditions and subaltern experiences, […] ununderstood intelligibility, forbidden languages and lifestyles” (Santos 1995: 481), a focus on language, languaging and other forms of semiosis is central in identifying invisibilised agents and practices (Kerfoot and Tatah 2017). The politics of language inherited from late liberalism (and perfectly adaptable to neoliberalism) has proven inadequate to understanding the potential of language in transformative change. Linguistic Citizenship (LC) (Stroud 2001; Stroud and Heugh 2004), by contrast, offers an alternative approach to a politics of language where potentialities for otherwise can be attended to.

Linguistic Citizenship is a Southern concept that construes language as a site of political struggle and frames it as an important tool in the fight for agency, transformation and parity of participation. “Citizenship” in this sense is understood as acts of engagement that make visible/audible subjects and their claims. This should not be understood as only claims to “recognition” (cf. Isin 2008) or for the betterment of lives, but rather demands for the fundamentals of existence to be met, to a “becoming”, and for lives and languages to “count” in ways not previously recognised or imagined possible by states or institutions (Stroud and Kerfoot 2021). Linguistic Citizenship refers to cases when “speakers exercise agency and participation through the use of language (registers, etc.) or other multimodal means in circumstances that may be orthogonal, alongside, embedded in, or outside of institutionalised democratic frameworks for transformative purposes” (Stroud 2018: 4). It is these practices of “otherwise” that underpin the sociolinguistics of potentiality advanced in this issue.
2 Constructing an otherwise

The four authors in this Special Issue provide critical analyses of particular formations of late liberalism in which participants seek to construct an otherwise. Each shows a different articulation of the entangled but “not determinate relations between a mode of governing difference and modes of governing markets” (Povinelli 2013: 237), the late liberal politics and economics which act as “strategic containments of potentially more radical futures” (Povinelli et al. 2014b: para. 2). Lionel Wee offers an illuminating commentary.

Three of the papers, from Palestine, Crimea and Mozambique, represent Southern contexts of past or present colonial occupation and neoliberal expansion. Such contexts are characterised by past and/or continuing violence, extreme inequalities, and the uneven distribution of recognition, rights and resources. The fourth paper from Sweden seeks to provide an account of the South in the North (cf. Santos 2012): of those perceived as “other” navigating northern institutional and social frameworks. Here global mobility gives rise to “discrepant emplacements and conditions, whereby spaces and discourses sit uncannily in their surroundings, unreconciled or in negotiated tension with the sites and subjects with which they interact” (Wesselman et al. 2020: 4). All papers illuminate spaces of potentiality, alternative social projects in a state of “indeterminate oscillation”, that is, located in the virtual space that opens up between their potentiality and actuality (Povinelli 2011a: 7–8). Participants navigate such spaces, negotiating, resisting and laying bare the “legacies of historical acts of material, cultural, and linguistic dispossession and disruption, and the contemporary forms that such acts take” (Volvach this issue).

In his analysis of Palestinian artist Rana Bishara’s (2019) installation “Roadmap to Elimination”, Tommaso Milani engages with the highly charged politics of space in Palestine in which sovereignty means the “capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who not” (Butler 2010; Mbembe 2003: 27). As Mbembe (2003) has long argued, and as demonstrated by the extreme violence of the Israeli response in Gaza in October 2023, the contemporary colonial occupation of Palestine is the “most accomplished form of necropower” achieved through “technologies of occupation, domination, and exploitation that [result] in the creation of ‘deathworlds’” (25–26, 40). Within one such “zone of nonbeing” (Fanon 20051965], 2008[1952]), Milani’s delicate analysis illuminates the ways in which the artist Bishara uses existing semiotic resources otherwise to counter Israeli regimes of representation and engage in political acts of Linguistic Citizenship. Here maps,

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1 This special issue was written before the Israeli-Palestinian war which began in October 2023.
fragments of Arabic, and cactus leaves and fibres index a fragile state of being between the constructing and crumbling of potential worlds.

Natalia Volvach’s study of semiotic landscapes in Crimea similarly engages with “discounted bodies” in zones of necropower (Mbembe 2019). Building on fieldwork carried out after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea but before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, she illuminates the conditions of life for Crimean Tatars: “shadowy legislation, immobility and stagnation”, vulnerable at any time to random, extreme exercises of power. Analysing data from a walking tour with young Crimean Tatar women, she shows how bodies are interactive and generative, they are movements and events (Mbembe 2019), performatively producing alternative social projects hidden beneath the everyday. Spaces of otherwise emerge through interactions between the researcher, participants and landscapes: car tyres, absent street names, covertly displayed flags as sensed, perceived and narrated by participants materialise histories of dispossession, contested erasures and reclamations of space. Such multimodal acts of Linguistic Citizenship reconstitute Crimean Tatar spaces of otherwise, “at odds with dominant, and dominating, modes of being” (Povinelli 2011c: para. 1).

As with Crimea and Palestine, long histories of colonial occupation of Mozambique, produced “boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; … the classification of people [and languages] according to different categories” (Fanon 2005 [1965]; Mbembe 2003: 26) and differential rights. As elucidated by Feliciano Chimbutane, this writing of new spatial relations under colonialism simultaneously created an imaginary of Portuguese as the language of modernity and civilisation, an imaginary carried forward in postcolonial Mozambique to index integration, modernisation and socioeconomic mobility. Despite some changes since the 1990s, African languages have remained mostly static symbols of ethnolinguistic identity, “captive to coloniality” (Stroud and Kerfoot 2021: 27; see also Chimbutane 2024; Stroud 2007) and indexes of continuing economic and social stratification, their potential for agency and creativity invisibilised. Chimbutane’s study of an innovative community-driven bilingual programme in rural Mozambique seeks to understand how spaces of possibility can be created and maintained. This site is one in which the less “dramatic durabilities” of colonial duress (Stoler 2008: 192) continue to shape trajectories of linguistic and material disadvantage. Here, though, the revaluing of informal and marginalised modes of speaking, knowing, and being help to rework hierarchies of value and transform relations of knowing, thus beginning a process of thinking African languages, education and society otherwise.

Such practices of Linguistic Citizenship are also at work in Luke Holmes’ ethnography of a Social Sciences class in a Swedish university. He analyses how ‘other’ bodies and their ways of knowing and languaging disrupt the apparently stable spatial and linguistic logics of the classroom. Grounded in a Levinasian ethics,
he explores the potential of these interruptions through the notion of “ethical events”, interactions involving that which is not known, normative or ordinarily visible, but for which all involved are called upon to take responsibility. He shows how an ethical becoming, generated through such events, opened the way to a diversity of voice, mutuality and reciprocity across difference. Yet this uneven and momentary transcendence of the racialised norms of late liberalism, the brief emergence of spaces of otherwise, depended on “hard-won and intersubjective responsibility towards the ongoing acts of Linguistic Citizenship by discursively marginalised agents” (Holmes this issue). The paper shows how multilingual resources, their diverse accents, registers, discourses and bodies, can be drawn upon to exercise agency inside sectoral, national and institutional frameworks for transformative purposes. In so doing, it responds to the Fanion imperative for institutions to “radiate”, to multiply “the points and occasions of encounters”, to work against “collective monologue”, to “foster [their] members’ responsibility”, and to achieve their “essential duty, which is constant dialogue between [their] members” (Fanon 2018: 335).

As these four papers demonstrate, Linguistic Citizenship is productive in analysing spaces of otherwise, social projects always under construction, spacings rather than spaces (Povinelli et al. 2014b). Interactions in such spacings are constructed through an inextricable linking of language, emotion and body (Maturana 1988): racialised bodies continue to bear the weight of coloniality, they are sites of resistance still caught in a colonial relation (Muni Toke 2017; Oostendorp 2022). Yet these spacings are also multidirectional and dynamic, spaces of risk, endurance, but also of becoming.

In order to anchor our conceptualisation of a sociolinguistics of potentiality, we consider two further logics which Povinelli sees as governing spaces of otherwise. These are social tense and ethical substance. Tense is further related to eventfulness, the ways in which endurance encompasses the living of relentless, everyday crises which nevertheless fall below the “threshold of eventfulness” and thus fall outside the West/North’s construction of crisis or compassion (Povinelli 2011a: 32).

3 Social tense: Legitimising abandonment, shaping intensified potential

For Povinelli, social divisions of tense, tied to imaginaries of national and civilisational tense, help shape the ways in which belonging, abandonment and endurance are articulated and experienced within late liberalism. For her (as for Hountondji 1997; Mignolo 2011; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 2003), a set of time/space distinctions emerged
around the colonial difference. Processes of colonial expansion displaced colonised peoples from the present to a timeless past, locking them outside of time, their presents and futures determined, and their pasts distorted and destroyed. These are Fanon’s zones of non-being (2005, 2008). This representation holds also for those enduring new forms of neoliberal colonialism (Mignolo 2011).

Tied to these distinct temporalities are two modes of social belonging, the “autological subject” able to construct their own destiny (Povinelli 2011b) and “the genealogical society” in which the subject’s place is fixed in a past perfect social order, constrained by an imagined inherited set of institutions, norms and traditions (Povinelli 2006).

What the autological subject says or does is narrated in a range of present or future tenses, indexing ongoing action or actions that almost certainly will have been completed in the future (Povinelli 2011b). This “redemptive future” justifies ongoing harms to those governed in the name of peace, security or other national fictions, retaining indefinitely for the state the sovereign capacity to define “who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Butler 2010; Mbembe 2003: 27). Those who do not matter are assigned to “the genealogical society”, in which a past perfect imaginary “script[s]” and “threaten[s] to control and determine relations” to self and others (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012: 80).

Through such mechanisms, those trapped in this durative present endure the piling up of small, everyday crises, occasionally punctuated by outbursts of spectacular violence, as in the cases of Crimea and Palestine. The fact that these accretional harms occur out of sight means that their ethical and political demand is “dispersed and dissipated” (Nixon 2011; Povinelli 2011a: 30).

However, Povinelli (2011a: 30) is also interested in how alternative social projects are able to “aggregate life diagonal to hegemonic ways of life” despite this dissipation and the uneven distribution of intensified potential for creating an otherwise. Here, then, is the significance of the focus on quasi-events: “those moments, or those conditions in which a social project is neither something nor nothing” (Povinelli 2011a: 8). Papers in this Special Issue investigate how semiotic practices may participate in the construction of “quasi-events”, exploring the material-discursive agencements which shape their potential “to be”, to become starting points for longer transformative processes, or “not to be”, to appear as merely momentary flashes of how an otherwise could be, leaving inequalities and hierarchies of value intact. Wee (this issue) emphasises the significance of sociopolitical response in determining to what extent a quasi-event may achieve the status of eventfulness. He discusses five discursive strategies which may be used to deny this status: denial or erasure, reframing, invalidation, trivialisation and foreclosure through rendering “unthinkable”.
Closely tied to the investigation of quasi-events are ethical challenges for critical theorists (and sociolinguists). If intensified potential is the “ethical substance of immanent critique” and therefore “the material on which ethical work (travail éthique) is carried out” (Povinelli 2011a: 10, 11), and, further, if the distribution of this ethical work is not uniform across various social groups, how can we prevent ourselves from becoming implicated in “shifting accountability away from neoliberalism onto those who suffer in neoliberalism” (Cushman 2023; Povinelli 2011a: 155). The issue as a whole underscores how researchers are caught up in processes of becoming through specific material-discursive reconfigurings of the world, as sensing perceivers, co-producers of knowledge, allies and/or complexly implicated subjects. They interrogate the act of conducting research and the ethics of “resourcing” or capacitating counterpublics as they seek to transform their endurance into alternative futures.

The four papers present specific and located accounts of the present that engage with the complexities and ambiguities of entangled temporalities along with the seeds of vital reconfigurations. Within such understandings of time as multiple, uneven, relational, authors illuminate “how and according to what (spatiotemporal) rationalities and techniques some bodies are let/made to wait, while others hurry; some bodies slowly decay while others’ embodied lives are made to flourish” (Drangsland and Karlsen 2021: §4).

Milani’s analysis of Bishara’s artwork “Roadmap to Elimination” as a “defiant act of Linguistic Citizenship” illustrates how space and time fold into one another. The European colonial past is visually overlaid with the present Israeli occupation. Forms of counter-mapping chart the “spatial hollowing out of Palestine over time” (Milani this issue), rematerialising villages destroyed or abandoned during progressive Israeli territorial encroachments, countering the silences and suppressions of the Israeli state, yet simultaneously re-imagining an utopian future of a borderless Levant. This spatiotemporal overlaying is thickened by the materiality of desiccated cactus fibres and fresh cactus leaves grown from seeds collected from ruined villages and sown together with black thread. Here cacti capture the constant “indeterminate oscillation” between death and life of Palestinian existence; they are ruin seeds, “present but symbolizing absence: they are a memento witnessing of past/present destruction and a utopian attempt at a future otherwise in which fragmentation may be turned into wholeness” (Milani this issue).

Milani further addresses the “intimate pragmatics” (Povinelli 2016) through which the topic of the installation and the dense spatiotemporal layering interpellate the viewer both ideologically and affectively. He highlights the ethical dilemma of the researcher as “implicated subject” (Rothberg 2019) in contexts of present or past injustices, neither victim nor perpetrator nor bystander, but complexly entangled with histories of colonialism, heritage and lived experience. Such questions lie at the
heart of knowledge production for a person who “seeks to be ethically otherwise and acts on and perseveres in this desire” (Povinelli 2012: 455).

Volvach’s study of Crimea, too, takes us to the intimate, visceral “perseverance of existing within the internal limits of biospacings to orient practical political acts” where the endurance of ethical substance is “now and here, not in tomorrow’s horizon” (Valdivia 2013: 235). In participants’ narrations of landscapes, instead of a single, linear forward movement, as in the abstract temporal logic of capitalism and colonialism, multiple times lie in tension in every space (Koselleck 2004 [c1985]). Past waves of Crimean Tatar persecution, expulsion, linguistic, and cultural erasure are articulated with the present Russian occupation, at times receding, at others resurfacing, constructing constantly changing orders of visibility (Kerfoot and Hyltenstam 2017). The past inserts itself continuously into the present through memories, echoes, material traces – “phenomenological remainders” (Kolia 2023) – and the indexicalities of everyday interactions. Memories become not merely acts of recalling the past but “constitutive act[s] directed at the present and the future” (Shepherd 2013: 233). Participants perform acts of Linguistic Citizenship “engaging or disengaging with political institutions of the state; and advancing claims for alternative forms of belonging”, and “actively re-sculpt[ing] their [own] past, present, and future” (Volvach this issue).

In this way, acts of Linguistic Citizenship bring into existence alternative worlds buried beneath the landscape of the everyday. Moreover, through the observers’ sensing capacities, absences have an ability to speak and to affect: “absences pervade the present through the traces outlasting the violent acts. Entangled with materiality of grim histories and individual subjectivities, absences may animate ghosts, discharge positive pressure on human bodies, and speak their own language” (Volvach 2023: 3).

Both Milani and Volvach raise questions of how to study violence “in its aftermath through the absences that it manifests” (Navaro 2020: 166) and the ongoing social and economic ruination of lives (Stoler 2013). Holmes and Chimbutane focus on how “other event-forms – aesthetic and argumentative artifacts – live at the precipice of the figured” where quasi-events could aggregate into something more durable should the right conditions emerge (see further Wee this issue).

Holmes’ exploration of “the virtual space that opens up between the potentiality and actuality of an alternative social project” (Povinelli 2011a: 8) on a university campus illuminates alternative ways of existing and relating within powerful hegemonic arrangements. In the classroom he studies, racialised bodies and their sonic rhythms are “out of time” with the interactional routines of the Swedish

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2 Russian annexation in 1783, deportation to Uzbekistan in 1944 under Stalin, re-annexation in 2014 and, most recently, invasion in 2022.
present. The values they embody are positioned as belonging to an utopian, “genealogical” past where, for example, learning for the sake of knowledge alone, rather than its commodity value, is quaintly prized. These students are gradually shut down and move to the back of the classroom, this movement mirroring the narrowing of the future, the closing of possibilities for creating a multiply resonant world. Yet when conditions for support briefly flash open, they persist in the struggle to create a space of otherwise. Such a space allows for the re-emergence of a Levinasian ethical becoming where the language of others always already comes first. Redefining the norms of interaction, however briefly, can carry the promise of “inaugurality”, of “a future language … entirely other” (Derrida 1988 [1972]: 62, 66) which holds the seeds of a coming “together in solidarity, collaboration, and dialogue – across and in acceptance of social or linguistic difference” (Holmes this issue).

Chimbutane’s account of a bilingual community-school project similarly exemplifies Santos’ (2018) ruin seed in which the shadows of coloniality and enduring hierarchies of linguistic and social value continue to threaten or engulf flickers of the otherwise. Nevertheless, this project shows how the temporal structuring of social worlds can be disrupted and reshaped. This effort to remake language in education and more broadly seeks to disrupt the discourses of pastness which have characterised African languages. It involves not only interrogating or negating colonial and postcolonial logics, contesting the “messianic sense of Portuguese […] stretching back into history and forward into new transnational spaces” (Stroud and Guisesso 2017: 6), but also imagining new spaces where different, often hybrid, ways of speaking, thinking and being can coexist. Where before speakers of African languages were assigned to a genealogical imaginary, one in which the subject’s place is fixed in a past perfect social order (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012), here speakers reshape presents and futures, articulate subaltern knowledges and disrupt “what can be said (and known) in a semiotic imaginary of the one-world of coloniality-modernity” (Stroud and Kerfoot 2021: 29).

In these ways, Chimbutane suggests that efforts towards bi- or multilingual education in African languages and Portuguese can be seen as quasi-events: embryonic states of “the volitionally, active otherwise”, constructed by those who seek to be ethically otherwise and act on and persevere in this desire (Povinelli 2012: 461). Acts of Linguistic Citizenship allows us to attend to language(s) in “the making of entities/constituencies that change the conditions of possibility” (Papadopoulos 2011: 193). As illuminated in the paper, such alternative modes of languaging, thinking and being may emerge, strengthen and endure over time through the gradual aggregation of material resources, counter-discourses and practices of Linguistic Citizenship. As participants, including the researchers, persist in labouring towards “different realities of being and acknowledgments of what constitutes being”
(Kehr 2020: 31), their efforts begin to thicken into what Povinelli (2011a: 132) calls “thisness”, something rather than nothing.

4 Towards a sociolinguistics of potentiality

Together the papers thus address Povinelli’s questions of how “new forms of social life maintain the force of existing in specific social spacings of life” and “how they endure the effort it takes to strive to perseverance” (2011: 109). In exploring how alternative social projects glimmer within or diagonal to hegemonic ways of life, they demonstrate how intricately the differential logics of late liberal abandonments are drawn (Valdivia 2013) and yet how potential worlds “come into existence, ontologically, through practices and enactments”, however fleeting (Demuro and Gurney 2021: 5). A focus on acts of Linguistic Citizenship produces a collective archive of ruin seeds: possibilities of change that flare briefly but, if aggregated, may point the way to a future otherwise.

The quasi-events of spaces of otherwise, although rich with potential, thus speak to the near impossibility of changing subjective circumstances in environments that for centuries have been built on the dehumanising exploitation of labour, extraction of people from affective relations to others, destruction of the commons, and inequitable distribution of resources. Notable in all the papers is how individuals seek repair from these injurious events by (re)claiming worlds of otherwise and a sense of self and intimacy through orchestrated semiotic weavings of new relationalities. In Milani’s paper, the artwork calls forth constituencies of the Palestinian utopian past, a bold fantasy of how things might be otherwise and people live other lives; in Holmes’ paper, we catch a glimmer of decolonial selves in a co-constructed letting appear (Maturana and Verden-Zoller 2009) of potential other ways of engaging knowledge, if only momentarily; in Chimbutane’s context of multilingual schooling, we discern the potential for more inclusive and scaled relational networks to emerge out of the expanding intimacies of local languages. Volvach’s paper excavates forth a lost world of others in relation, brought tangibly to life in the traces and nostalgias left in absence. In all cases, the authors lift forward resuturings of injured attachments to people and structures, in new intimacies of worlding, in semiotic enactments that lure with the promise of living in a more desirable world (Berlant 2011). The intricate enfoldings of temporalities documented in this collection of papers affirm “the potential of plural histories that tend towards irreducible heterochronicity and immiscibility” (Koselleck 2004, 2018: 250), where multiplicities and relationalities of time, moments of rupture and return, may rewrite, re-signify and reframe the present in new futures and unpredictable becomings. They illuminate the past imperfect that infuses the present and shapes
conditional and uncertain futures, the ways in which “spaces of otherwise as spaces of memory, of personal and collective histories, inter-subjectively experienced and spatially co-constructed, are alternative spaces emerging out of opposition, which attempt to turn other-ness into other-wise” (Volvach this issue). A sociolinguistics of potentiality is about the semiotic registers of such becomings, about the articulation of virtualities that exceed the “real”, about difference and self-surpassing divergence carried in the “rich virtualities and resonances of the present” (Grosz 1999: 16).

How, then, to think/talk of selves and worlds that straddle becomings? What might the theoretical implications be of engaging with those who inhabit spaces of otherwise, who may have loose attachments to place and constituency, and doubtless qualitatively different relationalities to others and the (infra)structures they enliven? What does it mean to live in worlds where things never really happen “for real”? And when the real is at hand, it is shoddy and bleak. Clearly, approaching a sociolinguistics of potentiality would mean resisting the centripetal allure of existing narrative orders and theoretical paradigms that have historically comprised the very technologies for foreclosure of alternative worlds (Deumert and Makoni 2023; Heugh et al. 2021). These are the disciplinary figurings of liberal-modernism designed to navigate the colonial conquest of the world through a single story in linear narrative (e.g. Grosfoguel 2013). Disciplines in this sense invariably serve to smooth out any crease in the narrative fabric to a non-event, stitching it into the pre-text of the known so as to predict and manage. They build on the exercise of mastery, an epistemological practice co-terminus with colonial logics of subordination to closed systems of thought where “novelty”, the unpredictable, is conveniently classified as “failure” (cf. Oostendorp 2023). Rather we must seek other genres (Oostendorp 2023), although these cannot – should not – be completely independent of existing knowledge and conceptual frameworks, as “knowledges empower as much as they disempower: they provide the resources for their own undoing in excess of their own conceptual frameworks or requirements” (Grosz 2005: 165). It is, for example, the very limitations of inherited liberal constructs of multilingualism to articulate an inclusive modernity that provide the impetus for Chimbutane’s and Holmes’ reworkings of the notion through Linguistic Citizenship. The task for a sociolinguistics of potentiality is therefore one akin to the epistemological and ontological challenges of Southern and decolonial thought, namely, how to imagine other humanities within the “lived, received genealogy of the human” (Lowe 2015).³

³ For some examples of how critical disciplinary developments become epistemological events, cf. Antia and Makoni (2022), Heugh et al. (2021), Deumert et al. (2021), and Pennycook and Makoni (2019). Hartman (2019: xv), re-read archival documents of the “waywardness” of young black women against the grain to recover “revolutionary ideals that animated ordinary lives … [exploring] the utopian longings and promises of a future world that resided in waywardness and the refusal to be governed”.

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Kerfoot and Stroud
Over and above addressing this more general consideration in approaching spaces of otherwise, the papers suggest some key notions that would merit further exploration in a sociolinguistics of potentiality.

4.1 Community

How are spaces of otherwise semiotically constituted as constituencies? Or how are new relationalities coordinated in quasi-events? The focus of a sociolinguistics of potentiality on moments in which insurgent acts reveal a disturbance in the social, political or economic order and its multiple inequalities and injustices suggest the need for a more expansive set of crucial constructs to capture (in many cases) temporary, evanescent, joint becomings alongside that of the more familiar sociolinguistic notion of “community”. Linguistic Citizenship offers citizenship in the sense of “broad alliance, temporary constituency of love, hope and care” (Stroud 2024); or other constructs such as Harney and Moten’s (2013) “undercommons”, “a space of polyphony and noise, a space that moves towards a collective understanding of subjectivity that is always already predicated on a collective relation”, that is “a radical reimagining of the traditional concept of the commons” (Brooks 2020: 36; cf. Makoni and Severo 2022). An akin “survivalist” notion is Berlant’s “intimate public”, “a porous affective scene of identification and disciplined discussion about how to live as an ‘x’” (Berlant 2008: viii).

4.2 Selfhood, agency and voice

In researching the “otherwise” and seeking to capacitate potential worlds, what does it mean to be/engage a self, to have/be in selfhood? Levon (2017: 282) has suggested a challenge to a sociolinguistic theory of selfhood is to account for “how individuals stich together … disparate moments in the construction of a continuous whole, into a self that perdues over time and across contexts”. However, might not this only cement our captivity to the coloniality of the event and its algorithms? (cf. McKittrick 2021 on the predictive nature of Black identity categories that overdetermine carceral and violent futures for those so classified). Rather, ought we not seek a theory of self that “moves with the times’, a theory that takes as a point of departure that seams of selfhoods are ruptured and re-sutured into new configurations and geometries of self in a continuous process of becoming otherwise with others (Mpendukana and Stroud 2023), i.e. engaging out of “immanent forms of social obligation beyond given articulations of identity” (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2014: para.
17). In the words of Fanon (2008: 179), “in the World in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself”.

The challenge that considerations of selfhood pose to the discursive division of autological self and genealogical society in late liberalism is also actualised in questions of: from “where” do quasi-events emerge? How/why are they authored, scripted and performed? Customary notions of agency and voice are conceived as proprietary of the liberal autonomous Cartesian subject defined over centuries against the colonialised Other, non-subject, as voiceless, unlike-us, incapable of agency. Such a non-subject is only audible if spoken with the “voice” of the “master”, and agentive only if recognised as like-us (Brown 1995; Stroud 2024), and, even then, the odds are slim that they will be recognised as owning agency and genuine voice (Fanon 2008). Furthermore, any such agency and voice will likely foreclose the new. Weheliye (2014) despairs of finding voice and agency adequate to those living in “zones of indistinction” in a conception of the human as “full, self-present, and coherent subjects” (p. 2, our italics) and suggests rather attending to “the manifold occurrences of freedom” (p. 2) that, although not immediately recognisable as such, do occur (cf. Chimbutane, Holmes, Milani, Volvach, this issue). Likewise, the agencies of dispersed and becoming selves are more likely to manifest in what Grosz (2005: 167) calls “a politics of the imperceptible, which has its effects through actions, but which actions can never be clearly identified with an individual or group, or organization”. As such, these are agencies of non-sovereignty, as “being involved with others in a project of world-building demands forms of attachment that are antagonistic to fantasies of control” (Berlant 2016; Marotta 2023: 123). These are relationships that splinter “the irrevocable unity” of the late-liberal discursive distinction between autological subjects and genealogical society (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012: 82).

A sociolinguistics of potentiality is thus an invitation to listen beyond and within that which is conventionally classified as “noise” and attending to those forms of language through which speakers “who do not count”, who find themselves on the margins of society/of the real, find voice and gain agency albeit in forms yet to be accounted for in the specifics (cf. also Brooks 2020 on “fugitive listening”: “a mode of […] listening that allows us to open our ears to the noisy voices and modes of speech that sound outside the locus of politics proper” (p. 25). This would necessitate us to broaden what we take to be language).

4.3 Chronicling the quasi

How then do we as researchers enter into the company of composite selves and disparate, imperceptible agentive forces with methods that have been fine-honed
over centuries of Cartesian tenacity to foreclose and deny their very “existence”? How to rethink “representation” so as not endlessly present a world of “becoming” as stagnant, frozen in a moment of time, an exercise of “back-formation” that creates structure and stasis out of movement and proliferation (Massumi 2002: 150).

The papers in the issue as a whole showcase each author approaching their questions as perceivers and/or complexly implicated subjects caught up in processes of becoming through their specific material-discursive reconfigurings of the world. This manner of worlding is more akin to Bergson’s (1998 [1911]) “intuition” than what he terms “intellect”. Intellect (mind) is a mode of thought for the “mechanical or geometrical explanation of things, favouring stability, permanence, non-continuity and immobilization, [facilitating] the instrumental manipulation of experience and quantitative, spatialized knowledge” (Headley 2019: 86). Intellect spatialises time (becoming), as in sociolinguistic modelling of temporal processes in diffusion models, such as implicational scaling, and wave models that disperse novelties with different quantifiable speeds through populations. On the other hand, “to think intuitively”, according to Bergson (1998), is “to think in duration” which is a mode of “appreciation” analogous to immersion in an aesthetic experience, as when art invites us into a relation of sympathy (Headley 2019). “not simply to learn something or do something but primarily to feel something” (Grosz 2004: 202). To think/work intuitively “is to be receptive to the call of the object, to respond to the invitation of the object, to enter into the raptures of its rhythms” (Headley 2019: 86). Engaging spaces of otherwise must be about “producing different knowledges and producing knowledge differently” (St. Pierre 1997: 175) in an “ethics of worlding” (Barad 2007: 142): cultivating as researchers “a new politics of obligation (obligare) in which we find ourselves within but not determined by” (Povinelli 2013: 239).

4.4 A politics of language for the otherwise

Many of the papers attend to the embodied and emotional character of endurance which forces us to consider the fleshiness of the nexus of time and space, in particular what it means to persevere emotionally in the face of structural inequality (Berlant 2011; Povinelli 2011a). Mbembe (2017) has spoken of the “Becoming Black of the World”, referring to how the Code Noir that allowed black people under slavery to be governed through violence and disenfranchisement is extending under

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4 “Words have a charge for me. I feel myself incapable of escaping the bite of a word, the vertigo of a question mark” (Fanon 2018: 57, in a letter to Francis Jeanson).
5 Cf. a “sociolinguistics of responsibility” (Kulick 2022).
neoliberalism to increasingly more people as though they were black. And indeed, Fanon’s (2008: 22, 84, 86, 87) description of the “carnality” of language in times and spaces of coloniality resonates particularly well with the late-liberal/neoliberal condition: for Fanon, racialised language etches Blackness onto the body as a “racial epidermal schema”, stripping “voice” and agency, and also casting out from community, leaving him alone with nausea, inhabiting the unintelligible and highly vulnerable zone of non-being. Yet Fanon (1994 [1967]) also captures something of the linguistically non-conventional, creative and utopic dimensions of Linguistic Citizenship when extending the visceral, non-conventional registers of meaning to the language code itself (Mpendukana and Stroud 2023), referring to the colonised subject as “reinventing his own language woven with rejected desires” (Lazali 2011: 155).

In focusing on quasi-events “where the struggle to maintain an alternative social world is at its deepest if also its most tenuous and subtle” (Povinelli 2011a: 155), authors here show how acts of Linguistic Citizenship mediate the materialisation of decolonial practices. Through delicate analyses of quasi-events, their equivocal potentiality, and the questions of ethical substance they raise, authors draw our gaze to strategies for enduring, for recovering memory, refiguring the present.

The framing of Linguistic Citizenship in these studies offers an alternative approach to a politics of language where potentialities for otherwise can be attended to (Stroud 2024). The approach is grounded in an ontology of language “not as reflecting the world and its inequalities, but of language as creating new worlds, ad infinitum” (Deumert 2021: 122). Acts of Linguistic Citizenship practise, perform and think with and through language (more broadly semiotic materials) as both target for change and simultaneous medium for transformation of self and others, crafting new subjectivities of (political) speakerhood with the potential to create new constituencies (Kerfoot 2011; Williams and Stroud 2013, 2015). These reconfigurations often take the form of transgressive and non-conventional language and other forms of semiosis that open up possibilities for thought and action beyond the constraints of established genres of power.

5 Future imperfect

Rather than a critical engagement with Povinelli/Linguistic Citizenship from inside our respective silos (cf. Wee this issue), we have wanted to engage a rhythmic reading of Linguistic Citizenship and Povinelli’s concepts, a reading practice that
merge[s] new or different stories together – tracking continuities, seeking out flows, noticing pauses that occur across a range of texts and ideas – and thus challenge[s] disciplinary silos that currently define normative and disciplined ways of knowing (McKittrick et al. 2018: 871).

In this sense, Linguistic Citizenship and Povinelli’s spaces of otherwise, social tense and quasi-events give us a language through which to analyse alternative sociopolitical projects that may appear ambivalent and seemingly incoherent: in their utopian make-up, they envision a spatio-temporal futurity that is well beyond our current horizons of understanding. As Povinelli puts it, “these alternative worlds maintain the otherwise that stares back at us without perhaps being able to speak to us” (2006: 10). Yet, even here, we are called to take responsibility, to persevere in seeking to be ethically otherwise (Holmes this issue; Kulick 2022; Milani this issue; Povinelli 2012). A sociolinguistics of potentiality, then, contributes to an understanding of what enables some emergent forms of life to endure and others not: the specific discursive-material arrangements that provide, however briefly, the conditions for new forms of sociality and more equitable and ethical engagements with others. This understanding further includes the concrete ways in which these emergences do, or do not, thicken into “thisness” and are then taken up and evaluated as “ethical and political demands in specific late liberal markets, publics, and states” (Povinelli 2011a: 13). Crucially, in attending to potentialities for otherwise, a sociolinguistics of potentiality highlights the challenges of research that seeks to be “ethically otherwise”. In its attention to spaces of otherwise, therefore, this Special Issue contributes to an expanded, southern and decolonial sociolinguistics and sociology of language.

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