



Research Article

William A. Geiger*

From the Logic of Elimination to the Logic of the Gift: Towards a Decolonial Theory of Tlingit Language Revitalization

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2017-0011>

Received November 24, 2016; accepted June 26, 2017

Abstract: In this article, Tlingit language revitalization is approached through theories of decolonization, critiques of colonialism, and philosophies of liberation. Instructional programs for the endangered Tlingit language are urgently necessary, but the residual structures of colonialism make the successful implementation and reception of such programs extremely difficult. Patrick Wolfe’s notion of the “logic of elimination” is used to demonstrate the persistent nature of colonialism in the Tlingit context. Through that lens, the dispossession of Tlingit territory, culture, and language by the settler-colonial system can be viewed as ongoing processes rather than concluded past events. Concrete examples are used to demonstrate the empirical effects of colonial elimination campaigns in the Tlingit context. The work of Nelson Maldonado-Torres is also enlisted, as he articulates a notion of decolonization predicated on “the logic of the gift.” I bring together these “logics” of (de)colonization to advance a speculative theory of revitalization as a movement from the logic of elimination to the logic of the gift. This has implications for language revitalization in general and Tlingit language revitalization in particular. I argue that revitalization must begin in an affirmation of the Tlingit language based on critical, militant, and loving acts of listening.

Keywords: Alaska Native languages; Tlingit language; settler colonialism; coloniality; decolonization; language shift; language revitalization; ethics

1 Introduction

*Lingít*¹ is the name of an Indigenous people whose ancestral homeland lies on the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America. In the Tlingit language the name for this region is *Lingít Aaní* ‘Tlingit Land’, and it stretches along the rocky saltwater coast through dense temperate rainforests and glaciated mountain ranges roughly from the Portland Canal in the South to the Copper River Delta in the North, and inland into Canada’s Yukon Territories and British Columbia in the East.² In total, *Lingít Aaní* covers roughly the same physical area as the state of Florida. While the total current population of Tlingit people is around 25,000, the Tlingit language currently has roughly 100 living speakers worldwide, most of which are of the eldest

¹ A phonetic spelling of *Lingít* in the International Phonetic Alphabet: /hɪŋkɪt/.

² A map of “Traditional Tlingit Country” can be found at: <http://tingitlanguage.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Tlingit-Map.pdf> – the map indicates regions of ownership and occupation with respect to Tlingit concepts of social structure and geography: –*kwáan* ‘people of-’ (a relational noun designating an inhabited or occupied place), clan, and house.

Article note: A part of the Special Issue on Perspectives on Language Sustainability: Discourses, Policies and Practices edited by Lucija Šimičić & Klara Bilić Meštrić

*Corresponding author: William A. Geiger, Department of Liberal Studies, Alaska Pacific University, Anchorage, AK 99508 USA, E-mail: wgeiger907@gmail.com

generation (L. Twitchell personal communication). Even with these low numbers, the language continues to be spoken by many of the remaining fluent birth-speakers, and a growing body of enthusiastic young students are acquiring the language through academic courses, private study, and apprenticeship with fluent elders. A rich history of scholarship and fieldwork has resulted in substantial archival collections of Tlingit recordings,³ a wide range of freely-available linguistic publications and instructional materials,⁴ world-class volumes on Tlingit oral literature (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1987, Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1990; Leer & Nyman 1993), and an array of grass-roots and institutional revitalization efforts. However, the population at large continues to shift towards English monolingualism. In an image, at one pole there is a relative positive abundance of language material accumulated in the form of objects, and at the opposite pole a negative lack and scarcity of language in the form of living human subjects. This is largely due to colonial missionary assimilation projects beginning in the 1880s, though Tlingit language shift is by no means limited to those empirical spaces or that historical moment. The result of the missionary work has been – to appropriate the theological vocabulary – the exact opposite of John 1:14, “the Word became flesh” (Brettler et al. 2010: 1882; Dussel 1988: 60). In the Tlingit context, the word has become not-flesh; alienation, rather than material becoming, has characterized the recent historical relation of the word to the living human person. In this sense, one of the essential tasks of language revitalization is to affect a process of disalienation.

It is not my current task to retrace the history of the colonization of Tlingit territory and the expressions and relationship it has had with the language. By far the greatest work in that area is the scholarship of Nora and Richard Dauenhauer (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1994, Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998, Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 2008; Dauenhauer 1997). Neither is it my goal to search out any inner-meaning or deep logical structure of the Tlingit language itself. Rather, the terrain of study lies in precisely what the Tlingit language is not: the attitudes, relationships, logical systems, and modes of production which place the social existence of the Tlingit language at stake – in either the affirmative or the negative.

Lingít yoo x’atángi ‘Tlingit language’ is the empirical focus of this study because the immediate context of my home and my research is Tlingit land. After beginning a study of the language five years ago, through that time I have been fundamentally overtaken by, on the one hand, the richness of the linguistic discourse, the profundity of the Tlingit oral literary tradition, and the hospitality of many Tlingit individuals I have come to know personally; and on the other hand, through the same process, this has revealed to me degrees of ongoing injustice, violence, and abjection that emerged for the same reasons that *Lingít*⁵ is so rarely spoken today, and which are heard and responded to with the same infrequency as the language. In both of these ways, The Tlingit language has begun to awaken me from a colonial slumber. Yet the depths to which colonial attitudes and material structures have cut into Tlingit country remain far from completely understood and even further from effectively dismantled. This study is first and foremost a theoretical praise and affirmation of the ongoing language revitalization efforts, but it is also an attempt to move closer to a rational understanding of colonialism in Tlingit country as well as the hope of an ethical and political liberation from it.

³ Notable audio collections include: the “Dauenhauer Tlingit Oral Literature Collection, 1899-1999” (collected by Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, and held at the Sealaska Heritage Institute Archives; a full description of the material is available at <http://shicollections.org/?p=collections/findingaid&id=2&q=&rootcontentid=575>); the “Frederica de Laguna Tlingit Fieldwork Recordings Collection, 1952-1954,” (collected by anthropologist Frederica de Laguna in Yakutat, Alaska in 1952 and 1954; Sealaska Heritage Institute currently holds a partial quantity of the entire collection <http://shicollections.org/?p=collections/findingaid&id=88&q=>; and The American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia holds the entire collection. A description of the 1952 recordings is available at <http://www.amphilsoc.org/collections/view?docId=ead/Mss.Rec.19-ead.xml> and a description of the 1954 recordings is available at <http://www.amphilsoc.org/collections/view?docId=ead/Mss.Rec.30-ead.xml>); and a massive collection of various Tlingit recordings available through the Alaska Native Language Archive held by the University of Alaska Fairbanks (<https://www.uaf.edu/anla/>).

⁴ By far the best online resource for Tlingit language material is: <http://tingitlanguage.com>; Sealaska Heritage has a good body of resources as well: <http://www.sealaskaheritage.org/institute/language/resources>; and Goldbelt Heritage Foundation has made a user-friendly database on Tlingit verbs based on the work of Eggleston (2013) available at: <http://www.goldbelthe-ritage.org/verbs/verbs/tingit/1>.

⁵ Unless otherwise specified or contextualized, “*Lingít*” will hereafter refer to *Lingít yoo x’atángi* ‘Tlingit language’.

2 Hunger, scarcity, poverty of Lingít

The cause of Tlingit language shift is not natural, but historical; that is, it is a socially produced, as opposed to an inevitable, linguistic scarcity. The scarcity of *Lingít* in living, spoken form results from conditions specific to the past century and a half of U.S. colonial occupation and management of Tlingit territory. That historical transformation is formally marked by the 1867 Treaty of Cession, through which the United States – banking on the doctrine of discovery – purchased the claim to sovereignty over all of Alaska from Russia for 7.2 million dollars. The history of the earlier Russian and subsequent American relations with the Tlingit language and culture has been fairly well studied, especially by Krauss (1980), Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer (1994), Dauenhauer (1997), and Black et al. (2008). When the current situation of *Lingít* appears not arbitrarily or without history, but as the present moment of this concrete historical process, Tlingit language shift takes on a dialectical quality. *Lingít* does not simply *not exist*. It *exists negatively* in relation to the society currently occupying Tlingit territory. Rather than an arbitrary or meaningless absence, the silences of *Lingít* are moments of concrete signification. Such a view of things also throws the prospect of Tlingit language revitalization onto a dialectical plane – but rather than through the logic of dispossession, scarcity, lack, and negation which characterizes language shift, revitalization opens a logic of affirmation, creation, generosity, and hope.

I have not yet found Enrique Dussel cited in the literature on language revitalization, though he offers some fruitful material. Situated in Latin America, and taking the liberation of the poor as his singular aim, hunger – meant literally – is one of the most central and defining categories in all of Dussel’s critical project. While speaking Tlingit is not immediately a matter of either eating or starving to death, many of the same questions are at stake – poverty, despair, oppression, but also hope, creativity, liberation, and resurgence. Dussel writes, “[T]hose with hunger ‘hope’ to eat today. [...] The hungry must escape from their negative situation. In order to do that it is necessary to create a new order” (Dussel 2013: 337). Hunger is a negativity of which food is the positive content. But the negativity of hunger must not be imagined as an empty form which the positive content of food would fill in or supplement. Hunger is material; it must also be grasped as content, though a negative content with ethical and political significance. Social negativities such as hunger, poverty, exclusion, dispossession, and premature death bear material content belonging to a concrete and historically-situated ethical, social, political, and economic totality. This is why the hope of escaping from the “negative situation” of hunger leads to the necessity of not only feeding the hungry, but of transcending or transforming the totality, of creating “a new order” – a new positive social form that would affirm life and produce hunger at less extreme levels. In the Tlingit context, a new order would support Tlingit instructional programs, but also transfigure the material conditions and forms of social interaction that make it nearly impossible to hear, speak, and reproduce the Tlingit language in normal ways.

Extending Dussel’s logic to the situation in *Lingít Aani*, Tlingit language shift does not amount to a void or an empty formal space that revitalization efforts could simply fill in to reconstitute an original, organic wholeness. The negativity of *Lingít* is a material, rather than a formal, negativity; its silences are the content of a particular social form – one dominated politically by settler-colonialism and economically by capitalism. In relation to this, language revitalization is not a matter of putting words and sentences into people’s mouths – analogous to giving food to particular hungry individuals, which, while absolutely necessary, remains insufficient in relation to poverty, starvation, and language loss in their totality. It is a matter of escaping the “negative situation” of continued cultural and territorial elimination, dispossession, and exclusion; and, “In order to do that *it is necessary to create a new order*” (Dussel 2013: 337 emphasis mine). That “new order” will necessarily involve a reaffirmation of pre-existing and repressed Indigenous languages, cultural forms, and modes of production, but it ultimately cannot be predetermined in advance, whether scientifically, intuitively, or any other way. The creative act of producing a social form distinct from the prevailing one will necessarily carry with it many indeterminacies and unintended consequences, but this is the risk that “hope” enlists us to take.

I said earlier that in its living, spoken form there is a “scarcity” of the Tlingit language today; this needs to be qualified. Dussel writes:

Poverty is a dialectical concept, embracing several terms which mutually define each other. Just as there is no father without a child, and the child is defined by its father, so the poor are defined by the rich and vice versa. Poverty is in no way a pure case of someone lacking something. There is no scarcity without someone having taken the something away from the other, oppressed person. (Dussel 2003: 89)

In the same way that poverty and affluence mutually determine one another within global capitalism, the linguistic poverty of Lingít and the abundance of English have been mutually and simultaneously produced in Tlingit territory. Tlingit language shift is in no way a pure case of Tlingit people simply lacking something; it is a dialectical concept, which can only exist on the condition of its relationship with several terms which mutually define one another – most of all, settler-colonialism, modern educational systems, capitalism, and the English language.

There is a reason that today, in Southeast Alaska, education, politics, public and domestic life, press, entertainment, and subjective internal dialogues are conducted almost exclusively in English. Said differently, there are historical, rather than natural, reasons why English has become the mediation of common human discourse in this region, just as money has become the mediation of common human labor. The reasons for this are often mystified into assertions that Lingít lost its relevance as an instrument of communication and meaning-production in the modern world of scientific rationalism and the progress of technology, or that the universal trade-language of English was adopted out of rational self-interest by Tlingit individuals as they freely entered the world-market. However, there is a different and far more rational explanation. It begins with the fact that the U.S. government systematically deployed campaigns to eliminate the Tlingit language and culture in their totality, along with the conditions for their transmission to future generations, with the goal of a singular and complete substitution of the English language, Christianity, Euro-American cultural aesthetics, and a capitalist mode of production in their place. Also – contrary to the popular imagination – these campaigns never effectively ended.

There is a potentially serious issue in this analysis, however. While Dussel avoids this issue by invoking the category of “the poor” rather than the labor-centered category of “the proletariat,” there is a risk in conflating or confusing the logic of class exploitation with the logic of colonial domination. Language and capital are not the same things, and they require logically distinct approaches. Dispossessing an Indigenous person of their language does not have the same objective result as exploiting a worker for the products of their labor. In the latter case, the worker becomes poorer and the owner becomes richer because the worker’s labor is objectified in a commodity and appropriated by the owner. In the former case, the Indigenous person’s language is not objectified in a product, but it is nonetheless taken from them. Unlike the fruits of human labor or the natural resources on the Indigenous person’s land, there is no external product of objectified language that the colonist can appropriate or exploit to accumulate material wealth. The destruction of a language is a pure case of domination, a theft without a stolen object. Perhaps this is why Fanon insisted that “a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue” (Fanon 2004: 40). The alienation of language cuts through a human dimension that strictly commodity or class-based analyses cannot capture. The theft of land is directly linked to the destruction of the signs of an Indigenous presence on that land, such as the language and culture. Nonetheless, the suffering and lived contradictions resulting from the destruction of a language cannot be resolved through a communal re-appropriation of the material products of alienated labor. And while linguistic alienation must be analytically distinguished from the alienation of labor, it is still appropriate to speak of the scarcity of language as a form of poverty, because it is not a neutral lack, but a form of material and ontological oppression. In the colonial context, even though the colonist does not materially benefit from taking away the language, linguistic poverty is still the result of an unnecessary, unjust, an uncompensated act of taking.

The Dauenhauers have noted that the logic of capitalist consumerism seems to have made its way into the aspirations for language and cultural revitalization: “[L]anguage and culture do not exist in the abstract, as alienable ‘products.’ They exist as active processes in the here and now. We find a widespread pattern of people expressing or voting for the concept of the ‘product’ but declining to become involved personally in the process” (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998: 63). There is no externally-available product that will initiate language revitalization through its purchase or material appropriation. The Dauenhauers say that language and culture “*do not exist* [...] as alienable products.” We can state this more directly by

saying that they *exist negatively* when experienced in the alienated modality affected by colonialism and capitalism. Colonialism pushes language and culture increasingly towards what Fanon called a “zone of nonbeing,” which he describes as “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline essentially stripped bare” (revised translation; Fanon 1952: 6, Fanon 2008a: 2, Fanon 2008b: xii). However, Fanon affirms that it is precisely from within a space that which appears unascendable and incapable of producing life that “an authentic upsurge [*un authentique surgissement*] can be born” (revised translation; Fanon 1952: 6). The colonial alienation of language and culture from the living people is meant to make a genuine resurgence impossible. Revitalization aspires to be the empirical non-verification of that colonial hypothesis. The spheres of existence most radically affected by colonial violence – the Tlingit language being exemplary in this case – can become the sources from which the most authentic resurgence is born.

Lingít did not spontaneously evaporate, nor was it freely abandoned. Dussel writes, “There is no scarcity without someone having taken the something away from the other, oppressed person” (Dussel 2003: 89); I use the term “scarcity” here with this precise meaning. There is no scarcity of the Tlingit language without individuals such as Sheldon Jackson having taken that language away from the oppressed Tlingit child in the Protestant missionary boarding school. “There has been no greater single contribution to the loss of Alaska Native languages and cultures than the American Protestant mission and the English-only educational philosophy of Sheldon Jackson and those around him in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1994: 43). While this demonstrates a point, it would be irresponsible to simply make a scapegoat of Jackson. What is needed before all else is sober and responsible action. Concerning arguments against the existence of God because evil exists in the world, Martin Matušík (2008) makes a pertinent comment: “If God is not an object in the world, some theism or Buddha to be proved or disproved, how could evil ever be an evidential (accusatory) argument against God rather than a matter of responsibility left for us” (Matušík 2008: 32). My point is not that Jackson should be treated as a divine paternal figure. The point that both atheists and believers should agree on is the rational irrelevance and the ethical uselessness of responding to the existence of evil in the world with accusatory or evidential claims concerning attributes of the divine. The Jackson legacy has left indelible marks on the history of the Tlingit language and contemporary social and institutional attitudes towards it. There are sound arguments to be made against what the Jackson regime implemented and we ought to have full knowledge of what took place and the full range of its effects. But the more rational and ethical response will be found in collective and well-organized labor that begins in carefully listening to the language and striving to create situations in which it can be more readily spoken and heard.

3 Settler-colonialism: conquest as logical structure, not historical event

Simply put, Alaska is a settler-colonial project. In approaching Tlingit language revitalization, either practically or theoretically, it is crucial to recognize the immediate contemporaneity of colonialization in Alaska. As Patrick Wolfe (2006) has concisely stated, settler-colonialization “is a structure and not an event” (Wolfe 2006: 388). Settler-colonialism is an ongoing and active process, not a singular event fixed in the past. The insight gained from this is that approaching settler colonialism as a synchronic structure – rather than a historical event – ultimately allows it to be viewed as a much more profoundly temporal and diachronic phenomenon with vast historical reach. In the American context, Wolfe pays closest attention to the frontier mass-killings of American Indians by U.S. settlers and military, the mass-relocations involved in the production of the reservation system, and the educational and biometric (blood-quantum) regimes of assimilation. Among these and many other distinct tactics and spatial-historical moments of colonial violence, Wolfe suggests an approach involving a critical genealogical investigation of what he terms “structural genocide” (Wolfe 2006: 403). What appears is the continual reproduction of a colonial relationship that is founded in conquest, but which nonetheless endures across spatially, temporally, and qualitatively different phenomena: “Focusing on structural genocide [...] enables us to appreciate some of the concrete empirical relationships between spatial removal, mass killings and biocultural assimilation”

(Wolfe 2006: 403). Refusing to treat settler-colonization as a one-off event, Wolfe also refuses the notion of a hierarchy of abjection among the victims of colonial violence. He suggests that the term structural genocide “avoids the questions of degree – and, therefore, of hierarchy among victims – that are entailed in qualified genocides, while retaining settler colonialism’s structural induration” (Wolfe 2006: 403). In terms of intellectual production, the structural approach also shifts the formal dimension of the study of colonial history away from one of hierarchy and classification and towards one of historical narrative and genealogy. It assumes the work of “charting the continuities, discontinuities, adjustments, and departures whereby a logic that initially informed frontier killing transmutes into different modalities, discourses and institutional formations as it undergirds the historical development and complexification of settler society. This is not a hierarchical procedure” (Wolfe 2006: 402). The current situation in Tlingit territory is not one of frontier killing, but the conditions of its social, political, economic, and linguistic relations nonetheless remain structurally entangled with a logic in direct kinship with conquest and frontier domination.

Wolfe writes, “When invasion is recognized as a structure rather than an event, its history does not stop – or, more to the point, become relatively trivial – when it moves on from the era of frontier homicide” (Wolfe 2006: 402). In Southeast Alaska today, people are not being categorically murdered in cold blood and large numbers across a White/Indian racial line as they were during the era of frontier homicide. But the absence of that particular expression of colonial power in the present does not banish the production of colonial history to a closed-off distant past – “its history does not stop.” Neither does this trivialize or relativize the deadly character of the present moment of colonial history or the diverse ways the logic of invasion continues to manifest itself – in the classroom for example. While he never cites Wolfe’s work, Maldonado-Torres (2008) has come to a similar conclusion. Viewing the induration of the logic of conquest as a paradigmatic, structuring principle still with us today, Maldonado-Torres has referred to Modernity as a five-hundred year “paradigm of war” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 3), rooted in the colonial conquest of the Americas and the systems of racialization that emerged with it. Within that historical paradigm, Maldonado Torres (2007) makes an important distinction between “colonialism” and “coloniality.” Colonialism, he writes, “denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rest on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243). By this definition, colonialism refers to a very general, or abstract, relation of colonial domination, such as the appropriation of the territory of Alaska by the United States in 1867, and the subsequent military, institutional, industrial, and political occupation of the territory.⁶ Maldonado-Torres continues, “Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243). Coloniality refers to the concrete embodiment of colonial power relations, in which subjectivity, language, the organization of human labor, the meaning of an encounter between myself and another person, and customized codes of normative behavior are fundamentally underscored by the logic and ethics of the colonial system. While colonialism refers the *form* of the colonial relationship, coloniality refers to the *content*, or material, of its lived experience. Coloniality is the existential and ontological result of colonial domination, which extends and endures beyond the spatial, temporal, political, and economic boundaries of imperialism at the level of the nation.

Maldonado-Torres continues, “Coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern existence. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243). Further, Maldonado-Torres locates the genesis of coloniality in a very particular historical and geographic moment; he writes:

Coloniality is not simply the aftermath or the residual form of any given form of colonial relation. Coloniality emerges in a particular socio historical setting, that of the discovery and the conquest of the Americas. For it was in the context of this massive colonial enterprise, the more widespread and ambitious in the history of humankind yet, that capitalism, an

⁶ On military relations between the U.S. and Tlingit people, Jones (2013) offers an authoritative description and analysis of the bombardment of the Tlingit village of Kake in 1869, two years after the Treaty of Cession.

already existing form of economic relation, became tied with forms of domination and subordination that were central to maintaining colonial control first of the Americas, and then elsewhere. (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243)

Maldonado-Torres thus proposes a general “paradigm of war” extending from 1492 to the present: “The result is a colonial order of the world, which is arguably seeing *today its most radical global expression.*” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 7 emphasis mine). This suggests that it is perhaps today more than ever that coloniality imposes itself most forcefully, with effects ranging from the construction of subjectivity to political, economic, and military exchanges which reach across the entire globe.

Maldonado-Torres names the normative ethical system at work in coloniality to be a “naturalization of war,” which, he writes, “refers to the radical suspension or displacement of ethical and political relationships in favor of the propagation of a peculiar death ethic that renders massacre and different forms of genocide as natural” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: xi). Coloniality is thus a non-ethics, a “death-ethics,” in which the projects to enslave black bodies and exterminate Indigenous populations – along with their languages, cultures, systems of justice, and their exercise of political and economic sovereignty – are codified into the substance of everyday social existence. The peculiar character of coloniality lies not only in that it makes a systematic logic out of rendering particular human beings and certain forms of human existence superfluous, disposable, and “*eliminable*” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: xii), but also in that it naturalizes and ontologizes the racial distinction between “those who appear to be naturally selected to survive and flourish and others who appear to be, according to the dominant narratives of modernity, either biologically or culturally decrepit” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: xii). While Maldonado-Torres uses the term “paradigm,” and Wolfe uses the term “structure,” these seem to be tracing the same logical and historical process – one founded in conquest, though not limited to it, and logically driven towards the elimination of particular expressions of human life. Wolfe writes, “[... *E*]limination is an organizing principle of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence” (Wolfe 2006: 388 emphasis mine). In the Tlingit context, colonialism is not merely a historical landmark to be noted in passing. The society currently existing on Tlingit land remains – in its totality – entangled with the noted “organizing principle” of settler colonization. Maldonado Torres calls it “death-ethics,” Wolfe calls it the “logic of elimination” (Wolfe 2006: 387). In Wolfe’s sense, more concretely, it is a logic of elimination which places a colonized or sought-after territory’s Indigenous occupants as its singular target. In this empirical case, the *Lingít* people.

4 From the frontier to the classroom

The eminent Tlingit language scholars Nora Marks Dauenhauer and the late Richard Dauenhauer have noted a similar historical movement of coloniality, which they present as a sort of transmutation of direct frontier warfare into the assimilationist regimes of the American classroom:

The era of military campaigns was followed by an era of educational campaigns in which policies and tactics of replacing Indian language and culture with English and Anglo-American values were strictly enforced. To the extent that it is still not widely known or appreciated by the general public, and to the extent that Native American intellectual content still struggles for a place in the academic canon and curriculum, this history unfortunately continues. [...] All of us now inherit the legacy of this unpleasant and even genocidal history, one component of which is that the Native languages of Southeast Alaska are on the verge of extinction. (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998: 60)

As indicators that colonial history – and therefore, we should add, material colonization – remains operative, the Dauenhauers cite a lack of popular knowledge about the colonial origins of the loss of Native American languages as well as an antagonistic relationship between sites of knowledge production and Indigenous intellectual content. It should be obvious that it is not due to some deficiency on the part of the Indigenous intellectual traditions that they continue to assume the form of “struggle” in relation to the academic canon. The pathology is not in the Indigenous people or the content of their intellectual traditions, but in the colonial system predicated on their elimination. The Dauenhauers are correct in directly juxtaposing the frontier with the classroom, but it is necessary to go deeper into this sense of a “continuation” of settler-colonial history. The educational projects in Alaska have nearly succeeded in

extinguishing *Lingít* as a spoken language, as well as its neighboring Southeast Alaskan languages to the South, *Xaad Kíl*, the language of the Haida, and *Sm'alg̱ax*, the language of the Tsimshian. Of this form of assimilation, Wolfe writes, “Beyond any doubt [...] this is a kind of death” (Wolfe 2006: 397). Wolfe’s structural theory of settler colonialism implies that the discursive framing of colonial history is part-and-parcel with questions of life and death – as the subtitle of his essay, “the Elimination of the Native” (Wolfe 2006), should make palpably clear. Colonialism is not some vestige of a less democratic bygone era, whose only remaining traces are psychological traumatizations and emotional scars. Settler-colonialism as such – and settler-colonialism in Southeast Alaska in this empirical case – is an ongoing project still at work today. The attempted destruction of the Tlingit language was only one of its empirical manifestations. It is sustained by an inner logic of Indigenous extermination and continually realizes new ways of reproducing and naturalizing this relationship.

Speaking from the contemporary Canadian context, in which formal state-sanctioned “recognition” by the Canadian State has replaced assimilation as the dominant and explicitly-stated political relationship between Indigenous First Nations and the Canadian State, Glen Sean Coulthard writes:

[I]n settler-colonial contexts such as Canada – where there is no formal period marking an explicit transition from an authoritarian past to a democratic present – state-sanctioned approaches to recognition tend to ideologically fabricate such a transition by narrowly situating the abuses of settler colonization firmly *in the past*. In these situations, reconciliation itself becomes temporally framed as the process of individually and collectively *overcoming* the harmful “legacy” left in the wake of this past abuse, while leaving the *present* structure of colonial rule largely unscathed. (Coulthard 2014: 22)

Similarly, decolonization and language revitalization in Tlingit country are not simply matters of “healing” from a past traumatic event, although they include that. While there certainly are many past colonial abuses, the symbolic effect of framing colonization as a past event, as opposed to a residual structure, serves the goal of anesthetizing a rational and critical confrontation of settler-colonization’s ongoing activity – the survival of coloniality beyond the classic images of colonialism. In Canada, the colonial apparatus has proven itself capable of appropriating the rhetoric of decolonization towards its own ends; it deploys an ideology of “overcoming” the legacy of colonial abuses as a way of masking, and sustaining, the structural colonization at work in the present. It is a contradiction, in the strongest sense of the word, to suggest that Indigenous people should “reconcile” and “heal” from the legacy of colonization in order that they might live better in a colonial society predicated on their elimination – if not physically, then ontologically, through an obliteration of their capacity to *be* without their existence being overdetermined by the colonial state and extractive capitalism. From direct military conquest, through assimilationist regimes of the classroom, into the present *Lingít* context, “[T]his history unfortunately continues” (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998: 60).

The Dauenhauers identified two sequential “eras,” both categorized as “campaigns”: the first “military,” the second “educational.” The same distinction had been made earlier by the linguist Michael Krauss (1980). He writes:

I view the obliteration of Alaska Native Languages by English as an unnecessary final tragic chapter in the continuing conflict in American history, the “winning of the West.” The physical genocides of the nineteenth century were replaced in the twentieth by cultural genocide in the classroom: “Cowboys and Indians” moved into the schools, and extermination and removal were replaced by assimilation. (Krauss 1980: 54)

It is interesting that Krauss describes the attacks on Alaska Native languages as a “*final* tragic chapter” in the “*continuing* conflict” of American history. If by this Krauss intends to say that the historical production of the U.S. settler-colonial project epitomized by the proverbial “winning of the West” continues for the time being, but will ultimately find its *telos*, its absolute conclusion, the end of conflict in history, when the Alaska Native languages have been effectively obliterated, I have to disagree. But there is an alternative reading. On one hand, the assimilation programs that sought the elimination of Alaska Native languages and cultures are presented as the last stand and final climactic gesture of the conquest of the frontier – after all, in the colonial imaginary, Alaska is the “*last* frontier.” On the other hand, the “winning of the West” somehow – like a figure of the undead – continues, endures, insists after the final, terminating narrative sequence of its

life has been enacted. Krauss gives “the winning of the West” three important determinations: in American history it is *the* (not “a”) continuing conflict; the *continuing* conflict; and the continuing *conflict*. Conquest is posited as the singular, irreducible, undying antagonism that gives form, substance, and continuity to the American settler-colonial project in general and the assimilationist obliteration of Alaska Native languages in particular – though, we should add, the obliteration of Indigenous languages by American forces was by no means limited to Alaska.

Wolfe takes us a bit further. The move to the classroom was not the result of increased humanistic capacities among the colonizers, leading to a tampering down of the genocidal agenda from the elimination of bodies to the elimination of languages and cultures. The decisive change was geopolitical: the frontier had been closed, and the logic of elimination had to find a new empirical mode for realizing itself after running up against a limitation that could not be surpassed through spatial expansion. The drive of settler colonization would force a change in its manifested form, rather than its organizing principles:

[T]here was simply no space left for removal. The frontier had become coterminous with reservation boundaries. At this point, when the crude technique of removal declined in favor of a range of strategies for assimilating Indian people now that they had been contained within Euroamerican society, we can more clearly see the logic of elimination’s positivity as a continuing feature of Euroamerican society. With the demise of the frontier, elimination turned inwards, seeking to penetrate through the tribal surface to the individual Indian below, who was co-opted out of the tribe, which would be depleted accordingly, and into White society. (Wolfe 2006: 399)

Running up against geophysical limitations, the extermination campaigns of the Indians Wars were “turned inwards.” With this, Wolfe’s narration of the dynamic movement of the logic of elimination reflecting inwards on itself broaches the Hegelian sense of a dialectical *Aufhebung* ‘sublation’.

Let us thus consider Wolfe’s “logic of elimination” with Hegel’s (2010) *Science of Logic*. Hegel remarks that “*To sublata [aufheben] and being sublated [...] constitute one of the most important concepts in philosophy*” (Hegel 2010: 81). Developing this further Hegel writes:

What is sublated does not thereby turn into nothing. [...] something sublated is on the contrary something *mediated*; it is something non-existent but as a result that has proceeded from a being; it still *has in itself*, therefore, the *determinateness from which it derives*. The German “*aufheben*” [...] equally means “*to keep*,” “*to ‘preserve’*,” and “*to cause to cease*,” “*to put an end to*.” [...] That which is sublated is thus something at the same time preserved, something that has lost its immediacy but has not come to nothing for that. (Hegel 2010: 81-82)

There appears to be a “logic of elimination” expressed in Hegel’s latter glossings of sublation, as “to cause to cease” and “to put an end to.” But, these eliminatory moments of sublation have to do, rather, with the dispensing with a determinate empirical form in order to preserve the idealized content of its logic through the mediation of an alternative form. Wolfe’s “logic of elimination” is the ideal, immaterial content of settler-colonization that is willing to eliminate its determinate empirical form of frontier homicide and conquest in order to achieve the preservation of its logical principles. Assimilationist education is a sublated continuation of physical genocide because, precisely through the act of dropping the determinate form of “frontier homicide” and reorganizing itself into the regime of assimilation, it managed to retain, “to preserve,” its singular principle: “the Elimination of the Native.” Wolfe’s treatment of assimilation can be directly mapped, without contradiction, onto Hegel’s remark. The immediate form of Indigenous extermination, which took the elimination of the body and the conquest of the territory as its original objective, “did not thereby turn into nothing.” On the contrary, conquest and elimination would become “something *mediated*” by the educational system and its totalizing regimentation of language and culture as assimilation. While the physical genocides were “caused to cease” and “put to an end” in the corporeal immediacy of mass murder, their logical drive was nonetheless “kept” and “preserved,” with the classroom as its supportive mediation. The logic of elimination “is something non-existent” (it is not a “thing,” but a structure), which is different than saying that it does not exist. The logic of elimination still *is*, even if in an immaterial mode. It still has a bearing on material reality because it is “a result that proceeded from a being.” That is, it has an ontological foundation – a being from which it proceeded – which is warfare, genocide, and conquest. Assimilation “still *has in itself*” the murderous core of brute elimination,

or “frontier homicide,” which is precisely “the *determinateness from which* [colonial education] *derives*.” Native extermination “has lost its immediacy but has not come to nothing for that.” While the immediate attack on the Indigenous bodies may have been empirically superseded,⁷ in its function, its aim, and its logical principles, the genocidal drive of eliminating the Indigenous human as such, and of eliminating the Indigenous society (“the tribe”) as such would find other avenues.

The view of things opened by Wolfe’s thesis of the centrality of the logic of elimination to the organization of settler-colonial society makes apparent a certain degree of obscenity inherent in the educational project that made its way to Tlingit country with the U.S.: the distinguishing feature between the physical genocides of the frontier, the forced mass-relocations onto reservations, and the classroom-based assimilation programs was not whether or not murder would occur, but the *method chosen to dispose of the bodies*. This is consistent with Krauss’s thesis that the English-based assimilation programs, and bilingual programs designed to transition Native language-speaking students to English-medium education, effectively constitute “the modern ‘final solution’ to the ‘Indian problem’” (Krauss 1980: 80). Rather than eliminating the empirical body altogether, or removing it from the view of the settled White polis, education would strive to eliminate the languages, social relations, cultures, subjectivities, and relations to place that were constitutive of indigeneity as such, while nonetheless retaining the empirical body alive and subsuming it – along with the Indigenous territory – into the colonial system and its capitalist mode of production. Towards that end, the programs designed to eliminate the Indigenous languages would be deployed with the aim of transforming Indigenous communities and societies into a homogenous series of individuals. Boarding schools would become factories for the quantitative production of anti-tribal individualism: “to penetrate through the tribal surface to the individual Indian below, who was co-opted out of the tribe, which would be depleted accordingly, and into White society” (Wolfe 2006: 399).

The Dauenhauers report that when assimilation was fully deployed in the Tlingit context, the boarding school system, “over the course of generations, drove a very effective wedge into the process of transmission of Native language and culture” (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1994: 52). To make a speculative step, Wolfe’s and the Dauenhauers’ descriptions of the settler-colonial education campaigns suggest the symbolic figure of the phallus – Wolfe’s in assimilationist desire, the Dauenhauers’ in assimilation’s effects. Education in colonial society would combine the death-drive logic of elimination with the phallic-libidinal logic of penetration. The form of desire at work in the organization of settler education appears here to be homologous to rape: the non-consensual penetration of the racialized feminine body – a violent “driving of a wedge” through “the tribal surface.” Maldonado-Torres (2005) submits that Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture “has the character of a penis. It can penetrate all the cultures that find a place in this country, but there is no need for it to be touched in its core, or at least that is what should by all means be avoided or even recognized. Such resistance suggests a grave case of cultural racism and symbolic homophobia” (Maldonado-Torres 2005: 65). Maldonado-Torres (2007) also suggests that the “ego conquire” – the colonial

⁷ However, the infamous murder and disappearance of large numbers of Indigenous women in Canada is a case in point that the direct attack against the physical body remains wholly intact and active. See, for example, Native Women’s Association of Canada (2010, 2012). The Native Women’s association of Canada website <https://nwac.ca/mmiwg/> makes research findings and policy recommendations on this issue available.

ego founded in conquest – “is constitutively a *phallic ego*” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 248).⁸ With all this, we might then suggest that the English language, in its political role as a singularly-piercing and ubiquitous instrument of U.S. assimilation, has become entangled with both the ritualization of murder through the logic of elimination and its instrumentalization in the education system, as well as an obscene libidinal logic of phallic penetration and rape. Territorial conquest brings together murder and rape and both of those in turn operate through a logic of race. The English language in itself is not the cause or origin of these abject and perverse notions, and speaking English is not automatically to commit such heinous acts in a symbolic mode. But, simply put, it cannot so easily cast off the weight accrued through its history. The linguistic conquest carries with it patriarchal and homophobic forms of domination, making an alliance of language revitalization with queer and feminist theories and forms of political action indispensable to a fully-formed decolonial theory of language revitalization. This should be a central aim in future research.

5 From the logic of elimination to the logic of the gift: towards an ethical and decolonial theory of language revitalization

Against the colonial logic of elimination, I approach the concept of “revitalization” with decolonization as one of its central aims. The logic of elimination has thrown the Tlingit language into a process of being alienated from the body and mystified in the minds of people. In this sense, language revitalization can be read through Frantz Fanon’s claim in *Black Skin White Masks*, that “Genuine [*authentique*] disalienation will have been achieved only when things, in the most materialist sense, have resumed their rightful place” (Fanon 2008b: xv, Fanon 1952: 9). In the most materialist sense, the rightful place to which the Tlingit language must be restored is *to the living*. Disalienation of the language is first of all a question of restoring it to the body. Conceived negatively: working against the settler-colonial structure from within, language revitalization must be, in its material results and its essential principles, an anti-eliminatory project. The “logic of elimination” must itself be eliminated, as this has been one of the essential sources of the systematic alienation and removal of the language from its rightful material place. Conceived positively: decolonial language revitalization affirms of a new kind of humanism in the wake of the colonial disaster, in which language becomes a way realizing ethical inter-human interaction predicated on generosity and responsibility. This is announced most concisely by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), when he writes, “This is the precise meaning of decolonization: restoration of the logic of the gift” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 259). Decolonial language revitalization should thus involve the ethical and political practice of both dismantling the “logic of elimination” (the “death ethic” of coloniality) and striving towards the complete substitution of the “logic of the gift” in its place.

Clarifying this sense of the gift, Maldonado-Torres goes on, “decolonization should aspire at the very minimum to restore or create a reality where racialized subjects could give and receive freely in societies founded on the principle of receptive generosity. Receptive generosity involves a break away from racial

⁸ Maldonado-Torres draws this notion of the “ego coquiro” and its constitutively phallic character from the work of Enrique Dussel. Dussel writes, “The modern ego of the conquistador reveals itself as also a *phallic ego*” (Dussel 1995: 46); further, “The *phallic ego* establishes a world totality and defines the woman as a passive object, as non-I, nonphallus, or as the castrated one. The masculine Totality assigns her the lot of someone dominated and reduced to nonbeing” (Dussel 1995: 164 note 46). More specific to the “ego coquiro” as a conquering and colonial ego, Dussel has suggested that that “1492 begins the constitution of this [modern/conquering/colonial] ‘subjectivity,’ as an *ego coquiro* (I conquer), a century before its ontological expression [by Descartes] as an *ego cogito* (in 1636)” (Dussel 1996: 60 note 13). He also writes, “The *ego cogito* (of Descartes from 1636) was not the original philosophical expression of modernity. Before, the *ego coquiro* (‘I conquer,’ in the first place with Hernán Cortés in 1519 in Mexico) had to undergo the practical experience of Europe’s ‘centrality,’ of its superiority, which was also expressed in the philosophical debate of Valladolid in 1550” (Dussel 1996: 217). Peter Sloterdijk (2013), has also assigned the Cartesian formulation of an ontological ego not an epistemological, but a conquering and exterminating predecessor: “Globalized liquidation activity breaks away from all pretext and, as pure extermination, brings about a state beyond war and conquest. The boundlessness of the waters calls up the moral desert of the seafarers – ‘*I exterminate, therefore I am*’ is the message conveyed by every *acte gratuité* of the pirate temper. The colonies and the seas beyond the line were the practice sites for the exterminism that would return to Europeans in the twentieth century as the style of total war” (Sloterdijk 2013: 111 emphasis mine).

dynamics as well as from conceptions of gender and sexuality that inhibit generous interaction among subjects” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 260). In its decolonizing and revitalizing modality, the logic of the gift is not simply a call for the settler-system to “give” things to Tlingit people, languages, or cultures. Historically, such “gifts” in the realm of education have been deployed in order to constitute and preserve – rather than “break away from” – the noted dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality that “inhibit generous interaction among subjects.” Restoring the logic of the gift means materially, subjectively, and politically reorganizing society such that the people, languages, and forms of knowledge that have been marginalized, dispossessed, and subject to the logic of elimination could become subjects of generous inter-human interaction, rather than objects of unidirectional (false) charity.

And, it must be kept in mind, as Aimé Césaire writes in *Discourse on Colonialism*, that “colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken in him buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism” (Césaire 2000: 35). Rather than painting colonizers and perpetrators as victims, Césaire’s point is rather that the human subjects constituted through conquest – through the racial, gendered, and sexual categories that the colonial system privileges – should not be accepted as natural or ontological states of being. Decolonization cannot leave the colonial culture unscathed. To make decolonization a pure focus on recognition of victims, without leaving the perpetrators or the conditions of victim-production unchallenged, is the direct route to preserving, naturalizing, and perpetuating the logic of elimination into the future. This applies to the role of the English language in Tlingit country. Like the economy or the human body, English can be made to inflict horrendous violence and systematic impoverishment, but it is also capable of expressing beauty, love, and truth. Decolonization must restore the ethical dimensions of love and generosity to their proper place, which means to both English and *Lingít*.

Working against elimination and its perpetual drive towards territorial acquisition, language revitalization finds its precondition and logical beginning with the material, ontological, and ethical affirmation of the territory’s Indigenous occupants. This has nothing to do with romantic pseudo-respect for Native culture. As advanced in the subtitle of Coulthard’s (2014) text, *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, the construction of new alliances in a decolonial revitalization does begin in recognition, but affirmation. Rather than advancing displays of formal recognition, it affirms the language by listening and by working to create situations in which the language could be more readily heard. This requires transforming the logical, symbolic, and material structures of society and literally learning to speak and hear new languages. In the Tlingit context, the first gesture of revitalization must not be an act of speech or the granting of recognition, but listening. The language tells us this:

Lingít *á gé x’eyá.áxch?*
Lingít *á-gé ø-x’a-i-ya-v.áx-ch*
Tlingit foc-q 3.o-mouth-2.s-cl[-d, ø,+i]-vhear-rep
‘Do you understand Tlingit?’
(Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 2002: 11)⁹

This is how to ask whether someone can understand and converse in the Tlingit language. Rather than “can you *speak* Tlingit?” as in English parlance, the verb in this phrase employs the root *v.áx* ‘to hear’ and the repetitive suffix *-ch* to construct the concept of “understanding.” Before one can “understanding Tlingit,” they must form a temporal and situational habit of listening. When this takes place in a system predicated on the logic of elimination, a “death ethic” of Indigenous genocide, it may very well need to become a *militant listening*.

We should also take a look at the word “revitalization.” Revitalization has origins in Latin, containing the prefix *re-* and the root *vitalis*, which contains the more basic form *vita*. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* lists *re-* as “denoting movement back or in reverse, [...] withdrawal, [...] reversal of a previous process, [...] restoration, [...] response or opposition, [...] separation, [...] repeated action” (Alford et al. 1968: 1578); and *vitalis*, “Of or

⁹ On segmenting and glossing Tlingit see Crippen (2013).

belonging to life [...], concerning life or death. [...] That sustains life, life-giving. [...] Indispensable to life, [...] Living, alive; able or likely to survive” (Alford et al. 1968: 2078); and *vīta*, “The condition of being alive. [...] the life (of a person) in respect to its duration. [...] Embodied life. [...] A person’s life together with its acts, circumstances, etc. [...] the means of living. [...] Living in the world, human life or experience” (Alford et al. 1968: 2078). Rather than a simple return to pre-colonial linguistic health, “revitalization” involves the work of passing through a vast conceptual spectrum of dialectical metamorphoses. Dussel’s take on hunger makes this clear: “The ‘hunger’ of the victim anticipates the future ‘nourishment’ that will become a reality after the transformation of the ways in which the system produces and distributes ‘foods.’ It must be clear, then, that the positive ‘content’ in question does not have anything to do with a nostalgic return to the past” (Dussel 2013: 353-354). Linguistic poverty, like real human hunger, will never be satiated by the remembrance of an ancient feast. Hunger will never achieve its positive material content by the thought of a past meal. Hunger for language anticipates a future nourishment in the sounds coming from living human voices. If language revitalization truly carries within it a matter “concerning life or death” (*vītālis*), then we must treat it like one. The pervasive notion that Indigenous cultures and languages belong to a pre-historic past bears a striking resemblance to the temporal displacement that masks and sustains structural colonialization in the present by constructing images of singular events in the past. The same ideological function is at work in, on the one hand, displacing structural colonial violence from ongoing history into a singular image of the past, and, on the other, framing Indigenous languages, people, and cultural modes of life as pre- or non-modern phenomena. In both cases, the symbolic and material effect it aims towards is the elimination of Indigenous existence from contemporary material reality. Against that subtle tactic for erasing the Tlingit language and cultural traditions from the present, they ought to be approached as creative and durable structures as opposed to imagining them as pre-historic, nostalgic events. The direct desire for a “nostalgic return to the past” is an internal effect of colonial ideology; but so is the renunciation of Indigenous resurgence and revitalization movements based on the argument that they are simply anti-modern, nostalgic, and romantic endeavors. What is needed is a demystification and disalienation that returns our critical attention to present reality. When that happens, the modernity and contemporaneity of the Tlingit language and cultural traditions will have no trouble following suit.

Fanon suggests that the measure of authentic disalienation is “when things, *in the most materialist sense*, have resumed their rightful place” (Fanon 2008b: xv, emphasis mine). Revitalization should aspire towards, on the one hand, the restoration of *Lingít* to its rightful place in the material corporeality of the living human subject (*vīta* as ‘embodied life’) and, on the other, the dissenting political acts of withdrawing from, opposing, separating from, and reversing the material (social, political, economic, institutional) structures that sustain and preserve the logic of elimination in various ways. We must create new ones that advance the logic of the gift. In terms of theory, revitalization should occasion a critique or philosophical return to the notion of “life” and the overall material and logical framework within which it is implicated. Enrique Dussel has already performed something like this critique of life, especially through his critical re-readings of all of Marx’s writings (2001a, 2001b) – a critique, not in the sense of an attack or attempt to disprove, but as a form of radical, transcendental questioning of the systems within which human life is at work as a concept and existential reality. In Kant’s own words, such a critique would “display the sources and conditions of [life’s] possibility” (Kant 1998: 105). Confronting a system predicated on the elimination of particular expressions of life, a critique of that system becomes necessary in order to achieve revitalization as the affirmation of life and its conditions.

Having invoked Marx, it is worth reaffirming an elementary point about his project: that *Capital* “is a ‘critique’ (*Kritik*) of political economy and not merely a positive ‘political economy’” (Dussel 2001a: 24).¹⁰ Similarly, my present effort is closer to a critique of Tlingit language revitalization than a positive

¹⁰ Incidentally, Marx’s *Capital Volume I* (1990) was published in 1867, the same year that the territory of Alaska was financially appropriated from the Russian Empire by the United States through the Treaty of Cession. Upon the sesquicentennial of them both, it is an appropriate occasion to embark on a revitalization of the critique of both capitalism and colonialism in Alaska. The work of Enrique Dussel will prove indispensable in this. Again, this should be understood in the classical sense of *kritik* – not in the sense of conceptual opposition or refutation, but of a radical investigation into the “sources and conditions of [their] possibility” (Kant 1998: 105).

schematic for a revitalizing process. Fanon writes, “Before embarking on a positive voice, freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation” (Fanon 2008b: 206). The trouble with implementing programs and embarking towards a positive voice is that alienation continues to operate structurally and continues to make the implementation and effective reception of positive programs extremely difficult. The “sources and conditions of [Tlingit language revitalization’s] possibility” (Kant 1998: 105) remain fundamentally entangled with coloniality, capitalism, and the logic of elimination. There is evidence to support this.

While it was written nineteen years ago, the Dauenhauers’ (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998) reflection on a quarter-century of personal experience implementing mostly failed Tlingit language programs remains instructive today: “Instructional programs continue to be designed according to the expressed desires of the community, but are implemented according to [...] unstated anxieties and emotions. The results have been failure, but the reasons for the failure remain difficult to explain” (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998: 62). In a society that remains structurally colonial – that is, predicated on the elimination of Indigenous peoples in one form or another – the continued existence of “unstated anxieties and emotions” in connection to the Tlingit language is beyond justified. Because of these deep undercurrents and anxieties, when the elementary question of revitalization is raised: “Do we *really* want to preserve the Tlingit, Haida, or Tsimshian language or culture?” the Dauenhauers suggest that “While it is generally politically or emotionally correct to proclaim resoundingly, ‘Yes!’ the underlying fears, anxieties, and insecurities over traditional language and culture suggest that the answer may really be, ‘No.’” (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998: 63). Of course, the existence of such anxieties does not suggest a deficiency or pathology on behalf of Alaska Native people; it reflects a systematic political oppression. Maldonado-Torres (2008) offers a pertinent response to the contradiction of affirming culture in an oppressive society:

The content of a culture is important, but before we fall into the warm embrace of any particular tradition we first need to be sure that the subjects can produce and reproduce their culture in an ethically ordinary way, that is, without confronting the pathologies created by systematic conditions of oppression and subordination. Otherwise we fall victim to the fundamentally misanthropic gesture of loving a culture while simultaneously hating or being indifferent to them. (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 53)

The pathologies are in the oppressive structure, not the people it targets. This is why anxieties and emotions appear to figure so centrally and decisively in the struggle over language and cultural revitalization in Southeast Alaska: The society remains misanthropic and hateful, even (perhaps especially) when it claims to love and respect the Indigenous cultures and languages. The rhetoric of love and respect takes on contradictory meanings in a colonial society. One can claim love and respect for Tlingit culture and language *ad infinitum*, but if such loving and respecting fail to be realized as a transformation of the material and ontological hatred propagated by the death ethic of coloniality and the logic of elimination, then these terms become an expression of something much closer to their opposites. Rather than espousing the beauty of a culture, one must demonstrate it in the necessary first work of revitalization: militant and habitual listening.

In a context of political, economic, racial, sexual, gendered, cultural, and linguistic domination, the positive affirmation of life must also, necessarily, involve a negative refusal of life’s systematic, oppressive denial. Dussel outlines something similar in his *Ethics of Liberation*, “[H]uman life is the content of ethics. [...] The project of an ethics of liberation unfolds in its own way from the exercise of an ethical critique [...], where the negated dignity of the life of the victim, oppressed or excluded, is affirmed” (Dussel 2013: 55). Here I follow Dussel’s ethics of human life; and in extending this ethics to the context of Tlingit language revitalization, the first idea to set aside is that the vocation of language revitalization has its origin in the need to “save” or “preserve” the endangered language. If this were so, we could content ourselves with handing the total body of linguistic, literary, and archival material over to an advanced research institution and finding ways to fund the best possible reconstruction of its grammatical and symbolic system based on the data, all the while leaving unquestioned the colonial system of dispossession, exclusion, and prolonged extermination that remains actively in place. The true vocation of revitalization is not in the archives, but in living people – in the most materialist possible affirmation of the lives and the dignity of those rendered eliminable.

Envisioning revitalization as a return of the language to the living, we must grasp the fact that the current material trend is in the exact opposite direction. Documented numbers for fluent speakers of *Lingít* reveal the severity of the blow dealt to the speaking population over the past decades. Roughly forty years ago, Krauss had already classified Tlingit as “moribund” (Krauss 1980: 52), and reported that “The number of Tlingit speakers is at most 2,000, the youngest in their thirties” (Krauss 1980: 43). About two decades later, the Dauenhauers listed a range of 500–900 living speakers (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer 1998: 72). Fifteen years later, in her 2013 doctoral dissertation on Tlingit verbs, Eggleston writes, “A current list of speakers in both the US and Canada, naming individuals, totals 114. Nearly all of these native speakers are over 80” (Eggleston 2013: 1). Twitchell provides the most current estimate in the *Beginning Tlingit Workbook*: “In 2017, there are an estimated 100 speakers of Tlingit at various levels, and that includes all second language speakers at various levels, intermediate or higher. Out of that 100, 40 are highly fluent and perhaps 10 could be considered fully fluent and able to perform highly complex language tasks such as classical oratory, advanced verb modes, and translations” (Twitchell 2017: xi). While the range of data used here has a degree of imprecision, the general trend is starkly apparent. By these figures, from 1980-1998, the speaking population was reduced by approximately 55-75% – a loss of 1,100-1,500 individual speakers. Then, from 1998-2017, the remaining population lost another 400-800 individuals. That is a reduction by 80-89% from numbers already so critically-low and generationally-distributed that the Dauenhauers had classified Tlingit at that time – according to Bauman’s (1980) categories – as falling “solidly within [the] category of ‘obsolescent’ (the category before ‘extinct’)” (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998: 63). The past four decades have been witness to the death of approximately 1,900 fluent speakers – 95% of an already weakened speaking population. The concerns identified by the Dauenhauers and Krauss have profoundly intensified.

In a recent text on Tlingit language study and revitalization, *Haa Wsineix̱ Haa Yoo X̱’atángi: Our Language Saved Us*, Twitchell writes, “There have not been birth speakers of Tlingit in half a century, and if we are going to survive as a language and culture, then we are going to have to figure out how to change that dangerous trend” (Twitchell 2016: 7). The loss to 1,900 out of 2,000 speakers over the past forty years paired with the essential non-production of any new birth-speakers over the last half-century¹¹ is not a neutral case of subtraction. It is the logical result of the settler-colonial system: produced poverty and “the elimination of the Native”. As discussed earlier, “Poverty is in no way a pure case of someone lacking something. There is no scarcity without someone having taken the something away from the other, oppressed person” (Dussel 2003: 89). The trend in the speaking population is an empirical case of systematic elimination across a racial line in order to secure a territory. With the case of *Lingít* on the contemporary Alaskan scene, we have before us “the propagation of a peculiar death ethic that renders massacre and different forms of genocide as natural” (Maldonado-Torres 2008: xi). By grounding our analysis historically, and focusing on the material relationship of the Tlingit language to the living human body, we obtain quantifiable evidence that the logic of elimination and the death ethic of coloniality are actively operating in twenty-first century Tlingit country.

Breaking the cycle of repeated “failure” of which the Dauenhauers speak, and overturning the progression towards linguistic and cultural death that Twitchell poses directly (if that is the implicit opposite of “survive”), cannot be materially achieved through a theoretical critique. Even so, critique nonetheless remains necessary, even if only to affirm the desires, hopes, and material efforts of those who refuse to witness an unjustified and premature death. Aside from occasioning a critique, revitalization also invites a sense of affirmation and repetition, of affirming life (*re-*) ‘again’ and again. Fanon writes in *Black Skin White Masks*, “We said [...] that man was a *yes*. We will not cease repeating it. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But man is also a *no*. No to the contempt of man. No to the indignity of man. To the exploitation of man. To the murder of what is most human in man: freedom” (revised translation; Fanon 1952: 180, Fanon 2008a: 173, Fanon 2008b: 197). It is important to understand what is at stake here when Fanon posits freedom as what is “most human.” A revealing passage appears on last page of *Black Skin White Masks*.

¹¹ Twitchell lists the number of fluent speakers *produced* during the past fifty years as being “fewer than ten” (Twitchell 2016: 10).

Let us listen: “Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*” (Fanon 2008a: 181)? Fanon understands freedom, that which is “most human,” as a gift – *donnée* ‘given’ (Fanon 1952:188). Freedom comes into being through the logic of the gift, and it is received with an immediate invocation of the other. Freedom is not understood as a private accomplishment or project. For Fanon, freedom – that which is “most human” – is not ontological, but ethical; it originates in the relation to the other human, rather than the relation to being in general. He does not write that freedom is given to me in order être ‘to be’, but édifier *le monde du Toi* ‘to edify the world of *You*’ (Fanon 1952: 188, my translation). The self-consciousness of freedom leads not simply to the other, “the *You*,” or an interpersonal interaction with the other, “to touch the other, to feel the other” or to a reflection on the other, “to explain the other to myself,” but to a sort of ethical-political love: “to build the world of the *You*.” This is the core of what Maldonado-Torres termed “the logic of the gift” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 259). Freedom is a gift, but the true vocation of that gift is an ethical affirmation of the other human. The most human thing is *to freely choose* to build up a world in which the other could live out their own free existence of “life [...] love [...] generosity.” This also throws more light on Fanon’s claim, “Before embarking on a positive voice, freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation” (Fanon 2008b: 206). Understanding “freedom” as an edifying, loving, and generous relation to the other, this should mean that the precondition of a human voice is not a disalienation of the gaps in one’s self-identity – the separation of “I” from “I” – but the disalienation of “what is most human”: the relation of the “I” to “the *You*” predicated on the logic of the gift. In short: we must make an effort at demystifying each other.

When Fanon insists that colonialism effectuates “the murder of what is most human in man: freedom,” it is precisely the capacity for this ethical relation to the other person – the freedom to build the world of the *You* – which is put to death. This principle of murder has been the essential work carried out by the colonial logic of elimination in *Lingít Aaní*, and it has placed a great deal of its energies in the domain of language. The restoration of the logic of the gift must assume social, political, and economic proportions as both a “yes” and a “no.” But one of the first and defining affirmations of this human vocation will be found in language. Fanon writes, “We attach a fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language [...], it being understood that *to speak is to exist absolutely for the other*” (Fanon 2008b: 1, emphasis mine). Today we find ourselves in a settler-colonial system with one hundred and fifty years of formal continuity on Tlingit land and a genealogy directly linked to the five hundred and twenty-five-year global development of coloniality since its decisive formation in 1492 (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243). Its current conditions remain colonial in their structure and murderous in their material results, making the realization of truly human relationships difficult, though not impossible. These initial contributions to an ethical and decolonial theory of Tlingit language revitalization affirm the political, rational, and ethical necessity of unmasking and refusing the colonial logic of elimination in all its various forms, and of affirming the restoration of the logic of the gift by beginning in militant, generous, and loving acts of listening.

References

- Alford Margret, Cyril Bailey, Reginal H. Barrow, Charles O. Brink, David C. Browning, Armitage N. Bryan-Brown, John Chadwick, John D. Craig, W. M. Edwards, P. G. W. Glare, C. L. Howard, George M. Lee, E. A. Parker, R. C. Palmer, B. V. Slater, Alexander Souter, Sophie Trenkner, Godfrey E. Turton & James Wyllie (eds.). 1968. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bauman, James J. 1980. *A Guide to Issues in Indian Language Retention*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Black, Lydia T., Nora Marks Dauenhauer, Richard Dauenhauer (eds.). 2008. *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká: Russians in Tlingit America: The Battles of Sitka 1802 and 1804*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Brettler, Marc Z., Carol A. Newsom, PHEME Perkins (eds.). 2010. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, 4th edn. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Césaire, Aimé. 2000. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Joan Pinkham (trans.). New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

- Crippin, James A. 2013. "Segmenting and Glossing Tlingit." Unpublished Manuscript. Paper created as a guide for people working with unanalyzed Tlingit language data. University of British Columbia. <http://tlingitlanguage.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/tlingit-glossing-guide.pdf> (10.15.2016)
- Dauenhauer, Nora Marks, Richard Dauenhauer (eds.). 1987. *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives*. Seattle, WA: Washington University Press.
- Dauenhauer, Nora Marks, Richard Dauenhauer (eds.). 1990. *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory*. Seattle, WA: Washington University Press.
- Dauenhauer, Nora Marks, Richard Dauenhauer (eds.). 1994. *Haa Kusteeyí, Our Culture: Tlingit Life Stories*. Seattle, WA: Washington University Press.
- Dauenhauer, Nora Marks, Richard Dauenhauer. 1998. "Technical, Emotional, and Ideological Issues in Reversing Language Shift: Examples from Southeast Alaska." In *Endangered Languages: Language Loss and Community Response*. Lenore Grenoble, Lindsay Whaley (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dauenhauer, Richard. 1997. *Conflicting Visions in Alaskan Education*. Juneau, AK: Tlingit Readers Inc.
- Dussel, Enrique. 1985. *Philosophy of Liberation*. Aquilina Martinez, Christine Morkovsky (trans.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Dussel, Enrique. 1988. *Ethics and Community*. Ediciones Paulinas (trans.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Dussel, Enrique. 1995. *Invasion of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity*. Michael D. Barber (trans.). New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Dussel, Enrique. 1996. *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeu, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation*. Eduardo Mendieta (trans. and ed.). New Jersey: Humanities Press.
- Dussel, Enrique. 2001a. "The Four Drafts of Capital: Toward a New Interpretation of the Dialectical Thought of Marx." *Rethinking Marxism* 13(1). 10-26.
- Dussel, Enrique. 2001b. *Towards an Unknown Marx: A Commentary on the Manuscripts of 1861-1863*. Fred Moseley (ed.). Yolanda Angulo (trans.). London: Routledge.
- Dussel, Enrique. 2003. *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*. Eduardo Mendieta (ed.). Laham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Dussel, Enrique. 2008. *Twenty Theses on Politics*. George Ciccariello-Maher (trans.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dussel, Enrique. 2013. *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization*. Yolanda Angulo, Péres Bustillo, Eduardo Mendieta, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (trans.). Alejandro A. Vallega (translation ed.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Eggleston, Keri. 2013. "575 Tlingit Verbs: A Study of Tlingit Verb Paradigms." PhD Dissertation: University of Alaska Fairbanks.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Peau noire masques blancs*. Paris: Editions de Seuil.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *Les damnés de la terre*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Richard. Philcox (trans.). New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008a. *Black Skin White Masks*. Charles Lam Markmann (trans.). London, England: Pluto Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008b. *Black Skin White Masks*. Richard Philcox (trans.). New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Science of Logic*. 2010. George Di Giovanni (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Zachary. 2013. "'Search for and Destroy': US Army Relations with Alaska's Tlingit Indians and the Kake War of 1869." *Ethnohistory* 60(1) 1-26.
- Leer, Jeff, Elizabeth Nyman. 1993. *Gágiwduł.ât: Brought Forth to Reconfirm the Legacy of a Taku River Tlingit Clan*. Whitehorse: Yukon Native Language Center.
- Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital Volume I*. Ben Fowkes (trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2005. "Decolonization and the New Identarian Logics After September 11: Eurocentrism and Americanism Against the New Barbarian Threats." *Radical Philosophy Review* 8(1). 35-65.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2007. "On the Coloniality of Being, Contributions to the Development of a Concept." *Cultural Studies* 21(2). 240-270.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2008. *Against War: Views From the Underside of Modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Native Women's Association of Canada. 2010. "What Their Stories Tell Us: Research Findings from the Sisters in Spirit Initiative." Ottawa: Native Women's Association of Canada. <https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/2010-What-Their-Stories-Tell-Us-Research-Findings-SIS-Initiative.pdf> (11.10.2016).
- Native Women's Association of Canada. 2012. "Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls in British Columbia, Canada." Ottawa: Native Women's Association of Canada.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 2013. *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*. Wieland Hoban (trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Twitchell, Lance. 2016. *Haa Wsineix̄ Haa Yoo X'atángi, Our Language Saved Us: A Guidebook for Learning the Tlingit Language*. Juneau, AK: Goldbelt Heritage Foundation and Alaska Native Language Center. <http://tlingitlanguage.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/haa-wsineixh-1.pdf> (11.5.2016).
- Twitchell, Lance. 2017. *Beginning Tlingit Workbook*. Juneau, AK: Sealaska Heritage Institute.