A World That Refuses to End: Reading Yecid Ortega's Pluriversal Applied Linguistics as a Justice Act

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There is a photograph early in this book of the entrance to a school in the southwest of Bogotá. It is 6:00 in the morning. Parents arrive on foot, on bicycles, by car. Teachers stand at the gate shaking hands with children whose homes, beyond those walls, are places where windows must be barred for security and where rooms feel, as students themselves describe, like prisons. The school is a sanctuary. The book itself is an argument — built over 242 pages, across five chapters, through eight months of ethnographic fieldwork, through theory drawn from fishermen and vice-presidents and Bolivian intellectuals and Andean cosmologies — that what happens inside that gate matters not only for Colombia, but for the entire discipline of applied linguistics.

It is an ambitious claim, and arguably one that the book does not fully sustain. But what distinguishes Pluriversal Applied Linguistics from much of the decolonial critique that has proliferated in language education in recent years (see, e.g., Macedo, 2019; López-Gopar, 2016; Guerrero Nieto et al., 2022) is that Ortega does not stop at the diagnosis. He proposes a framework, grounds it in lived research, and builds its conceptual architecture in dialogue with teachers and students whose voices, in most applied linguistics scholarship, tend to appear only as data. Whether that architecture is fully transferable beyond the specific context of Bogotá is a question the book leaves open — perhaps inevitably.

Before the Chapters Begin: Positionality as Method

The book opens with two sections that most academic texts would call "introductory," but that function here as epistemological coordinates. Entrada: El Principio and Ethos: My Global South establish the terms from which everything that follows must be read, and they do so in ways that are both personally courageous and methodologically deliberate.

Ortega grew up in the south of Bogotá — the same zone where his research took place. He sold candy in the streets to support his mother. He was recruited by a local gang and refused. He stayed in school because school was safer than the street, and that decision became, eventually, a doctoral degree at the University of Toronto, a career in the Global North, and this book. He returns to his barrio in 2018 not as a neutral observer but as someone who carries the South with him wherever he goes — what he describes as haber Sures presentes en el norte geográfico y global (there are Souths present in the geographic and global North).

This positionality, which he frames through Mabhena's (2019) concept of el lugar de enunciación (the locus of enunciation), is not biographical decoration. Ortega argues, drawing on Mignolo and Walsh (2018) and Grosfoguel (2007), that where you speak from shapes what you can know, what you can see, and what you are allowed to say in academic knowledge-making. By writing explicitly from the South — from precarity, from racialization, from neurodivergence — he refuses the fiction of the neutral researcher. One could ask, of course, whether such a positionality risks becoming its own form of authority: the authenticity of experience as epistemological trump card. Ortega is aware of this tension. He is both insider — a Colombian from the same streets — and outsider: a researcher with a foreign passport, an institutional affiliation, and the power to represent lives that are not his own. He does not resolve this tension; he names it, interrogates it, and makes it a methodological principle he calls a "methodology of vulnerability." To some extent, that naming is itself the most honest move in the book.

Chapter 1: Building a Framework from the South Up

The theoretical heart of the book is Chapter 1, where Ortega proposes Pluriversal Applied Linguistics (PlurALx). Rather than beginning with the canonical references of mainstream SLA scholarship — and the absence of Krashen, Long, or even Canagarajah from the chapter's theoretical scaffolding is conspicuous — he constructs the framework from Latin American Indigenous and social thought. This is simultaneously one of the book's greatest contributions and one of its most provocative gestures: it asks readers trained in Northern applied linguistics to reorient entirely.

The foundation is Southern Ways of Being, Thinking, and Doing (SWBTD), a collective epistemological category drawn from de Sousa Santos, Mignolo, Walsh, and Segato, among others. SWBTD names what the Global North has historically rendered as non-knowledge: the cosmologies and forms of understanding that colonial modernity dismissed as primitive or simply absent. Against what de Sousa Santos calls the "abyssal thinking" that renders the Global South as epistemologically nonexistent, SWBTD asserts the plurality of valid ways of knowing. The concept is useful, though at times it risks functioning as an umbrella term capacious enough to accommodate almost anything.

Three concepts within this framework deserve particular attention.

El Buen Vivir arrives from the Andean Indigenous world — from Kichwa (Sumak Kawsay), Aymara (Suma Qamaña), and Nasa (wêtwêt fxi'zenxi) traditions, each offering a related articulation of a shared cosmovision (Oviedo Freire, 2017; Gudynas, 2011a, 2011b). It is not "good living" in the neoliberal sense of self-optimization. It is a relational cosmovision: living in harmony with others, with nature, with the non-human world, as a constitutive alternative to the capitalist development model. What Ortega adds — and this is worth noting as an original contribution — is the pedagogical operationalization: what Sol, Hadasa, and Camello do in their English classrooms, insisting on care, community, and human dignity, is Buen Vivir made practice, even when neither they nor their students name it as such.

Vivir Sabroso extends the framework in a specifically Afro-Colombian direction. The concept belongs to communities of the Colombian Pacific — a practice of daily joy and collective celebration in the midst of violence and dispossession (Maihold, 2022) — and was popularized politically by Francia Márquez, whose campaign slogan Vivir Sabroso es hasta que la dignidad se haga costumbre Ortega reads against conservative media distortions that coded it as laziness (Infobae, 2022). The pedagogical implication is less self-evident than Ortega suggests: how exactly does Vivir Sabroso translate into lesson planning, curriculum design, or teacher training? The book gestures at this connection without fully mapping it.

Sentipensar adds a third dimension. Theorized by Fals-Borda (2015) and later by Galeano (1992), the term fuses sentir and pensar — feeling and thinking — refusing the Western philosophical split that has historically been used to disqualify subaltern knowledge. Escobar (2014) extended it theoretically; for Ortega, it becomes the onto-epistemological posture of both educator and researcher. In my reading, this is the most generative of the three concepts, precisely because it dissolves the boundary between knowledge production and ethical commitment in ways that translate more readily across contexts.

These three concepts converge in Un Mundo Bonito — a phrase that came not from theory but from

Sol, one of the teachers, who described the world she wanted to build with her students: free of poverty, hunger, and precarity. Ortega's decision to make this modest, affective utterance the ethical center of a 242-page academic monograph is, to say the least, unusual. It is also, I would argue, the book's most significant political choice: it insists that the knowledge that matters emerges from people rather than from institutions.

The chapter closes by presenting the PlurALx framework as the intersection of pluriversal politics (Escobar, 2020), language politics, and care politics (Gottlieb, 2022), oriented toward Futuridades and grounded in Buenos Vivires and Sentipensar. The framework is ambitious — perhaps overly so. It attempts to be simultaneously a theory of knowledge, a politics of language, an ethics of research, and a pedagogy of life. Whether those four domains can genuinely be held together within a single framework, or whether their combination risks overstretching the conceptual apparatus, is a discussion the field will need to take up.

Chapter 2: Methodology as Ethical Practice

This chapter is, in some respects, the most technically rigorous in the book, and also the one where the gap between ambition and execution is most visible. Ortega introduces Pluriversal Critical Ethnography (PCE) as a synthesis of critical ethnography (Madison, 2012; Masemann, 1982) and pluriversal politics. The move is theoretically coherent: critical ethnography, as Heller (2011) has shown, already interrogates the power structures that shape culture rather than merely describing them, and PCE extends this by refusing to reduce the multiple realities of marginalized communities to a single narrative.

The three concentric spaces Ortega describes — Bogotá as city, El Barrio as neighborhood, and El Barrio Southwest School as institution — are richly contextualized, drawing on urban poverty research (Hernández-García, 2013; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013) to situate the fieldwork within its structural conditions. Here the ethnographic writing is at its best: vivid, precise, and aware of its own partiality. Ortega's choice to keep el barrio untranslated, explaining that it "carries the sentiments of the struggle and resilience of the most marginalized peoples," is one of many moments where the form of the writing enacts the argument.

The methodological tools Ortega proposes are genuinely innovative. Charlas and Comidas — informal conversations and shared meals — emerged not from prior design but from the participants themselves: it was a student, Damian, who renamed the interview as una charla and changed the dynamic entirely (Ortega, 2023b). Rather than seeing this as a methodological inconvenience, Ortega reads it as data. The Charla model horizontalizes the research exchange; the Comida makes hospitality a form of epistemology. One could raise questions about whether these tools, developed in a specific Colombian context, would transfer to settings with different social codes around food, conversation, and researcher-participant relations. The book does not address this.

The proposal of Refractive Pluriangulation (RPL) as an alternative to triangulation is perhaps the most theoretically original contribution of this chapter. Drawing on Fusco (2008) and Ellingson's (2009)

crystallization metaphor, Ortega argues that triangulation's implicit assumption — that multiple data sources converge on a single truth — is itself a colonial epistemological move. RPL takes instead the image of light moving through a crystal: not converging but refracting, producing multiple partial and valid truths simultaneously. The proposal is persuasive conceptually. What it leaves underspecified is the practical question of how a researcher trained in conventional qualitative methods actually applies RPL during analysis — a gap that future methodological work will need to address.

Chapter 3: The Forces Against the Pluriverse

Chapter 3 is the most polemical in the book. It is also, arguably, the most important for readers outside Colombia, because it names the global structural forces that make pluriversal education difficult to sustain anywhere.

The concept Ortega develops — necro-colonial engineering — synthesizes Mbembe's (2019) necropolitics with the literature on neocolonialism (Ritzer, 1993; Sartre, 2001). The term designates the active, deliberate design of systems that prioritize certain lives and knowledge forms over others. In the language education context, its clearest manifestation is the CEFR: a framework developed in European multilingual contexts and adopted by the Colombian government as a universal standard, requiring B1 English proficiency for high school graduation — a threshold calibrated not to local pedagogical realities but to international labor market integration (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 2016; Deygers et al., 2018; Gómez Sará, 2017).

This section raises an interesting tension that the book never fully resolves. Students and teachers in the study simultaneously critique the CEFR's colonial logic and recognize English proficiency as a real survival tool. Laura, one of the students, sees English as something she will "need in the future" — and she is not wrong. Ortega names this contradiction as colonial desire and traces its genealogy through Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power and Tikly's (2004) analysis of Western development discourse. What he does less thoroughly is theorize how teachers and students might navigate that desire in ways that are neither a simple embrace nor a refusal. This is perhaps the central unresolved problem of the book.

The Death Triumviratus — capitalism, globalization, and neoliberalism — is the structural name Ortega gives to the three interlocking forces sustaining necro-colonial engineering (Jones & Ball, 2023; Hastings, 2019). The analysis resonates with a tradition of critical applied linguistics that has long interrogated these dynamics, though what distinguishes Ortega's contribution is the specificity of the Colombian evidence: private English schools advertising CEFR-alignment, subdividing its levels for commercial convenience, selling social mobility as a product. The linguicidio and epistemicidio this produces — concepts Ortega draws from Nicholas (2022) and de Sousa Santos — are not abstractions here. They are documented.

Chapter 4: Praxis, in Detail

If any chapter makes the book's case most convincingly, it is this one. Rather than theorizing what pluriversal praxis could look like, Ortega shows what it does look like — in three specific projects, in one school, in one year.



The three social action projects documented here are modest in scale: awareness campaigns about unemployment, a celebration of Colombian cultural identity through food, a school-wide event on paz, amor y amistad. This section receives more space in my reading than the others precisely because its modesty is the point. Ortega is not describing curriculum reform. He is describing what three overworked teachers in a poor barrio managed to do within their existing constraints — and arguing that this, too, is theory.

What is perhaps most instructive is the case of José: a student who arrived with a history of gang involvement and drug dealing, and who by year's end was dressing in a poncho and presenting about Colombian culture in English with evident pride. Ortega presents this transformation carefully, without over-reading it. José's change is real, but it is also partial, contextual, and dependent on a particular teacher's sustained investment. The book does not claim otherwise. This restraint distinguishes Ortega's praxis-oriented argument from more triumphalist accounts of transformative pedagogy in the Freirean tradition (McLaren, 1988; Giroux, 1994).

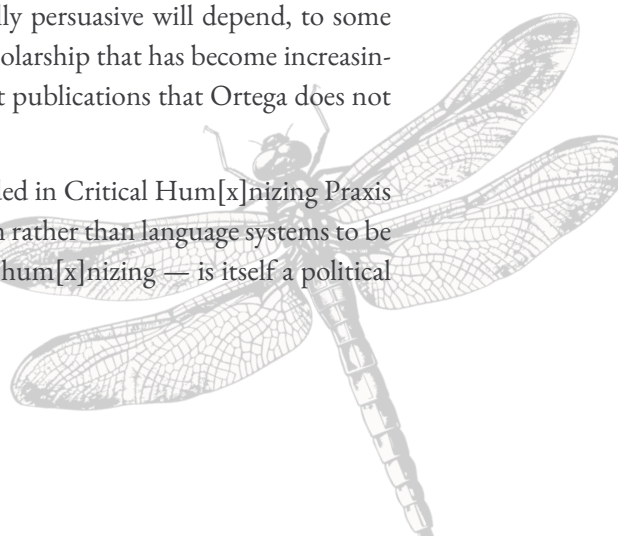
The broader pedagogical insight — that pluriversal language education does not require the rejection of English, but rather a transformation of the learner's relationship to it — is perhaps the most transferable argument in the book. Ortega roots this transformation not in linguistic theory but in cosmological alternatives: Buen Vivir, Vivir Sabroso, Sentipensar. Whether that grounding changes the practical outcomes in the classroom, or whether it primarily changes the conceptual framework within which those outcomes are interpreted, is a question worth pursuing in future research (Ortega, 2021b, 2024).

Chapter 5: Dialogue and Its Limits

The final chapter places PlurALx in dialogue with plurilingualism (Galante, 2018; Marshall & Moore, 2016; Fleming et al., 2024) and translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy & García, 2024), the two frameworks that have most shaped contemporary applied linguistics. The engagement is serious and, to some extent, generous: Ortega acknowledges their role in dismantling monolingual ideologies (Gogolin, 1997) and in creating theoretical space for hybrid linguistic practice.

The critique, however, is pointed. Both frameworks, Ortega argues, remain epistemologically embedded in the Global North: they theorize from contexts of European multilingualism or diaspora, and they tend to center language systems rather than the living people who use them under conditions of poverty and structural violence. This echoes and extends concerns raised by Makoni et al. (2023) and Deumert and Makoni (2023). Whether one finds this critique fully persuasive will depend, to some extent, on one's reading of García and Wei's work — a body of scholarship that has become increasingly attentive to questions of coloniality, particularly in more recent publications that Ortega does not engage.

Pedagogía de Vida — the alternative Ortega proposes — is embedded in Critical Hum[x]nizing Praxis (CHxP), a framework that recenters education on beings in relation rather than language systems to be acquired. The [x] orthography throughout the book — hum[x]n, hum[x]nizing — is itself a political



act, marking resistance to heteropatriarchal encoding and solidarity with marginalized communities (Milian, 2019). Readers will differ on whether this typographical choice succeeds as scholarly intervention or risks functioning primarily as a signal of political affiliation. That ambiguity is perhaps worth acknowledging.

The book ends not with a conclusion but with a Salida — an exit that is explicitly not a closing. Sol, Hadasa, and Camello offer their Palabras Finales, and those words are ones of persistence and refusal. It is, as a formal choice, consistent with the book's spiral logic. Whether it fully satisfies as an intellectual closure is another matter.

Critical Assessment

Pluriversal Applied Linguistics is one of the most ambitious contributions to applied linguistics from the Global South in recent years. It is also, in places, uneven. Some passages accumulate theoretical citations more than they develop the argument; the treatment of plurilingualism in Chapter 5 could engage more substantively with the most current scholarship in that tradition; and the question of how PlurALx might function in institutional contexts — teacher preparation programs, language policy reform, curriculum design — remains largely unanswered.

These are not minor issues. The book's central framework, for all its richness, is built from the experience of three teachers in one school. Whether SWBTD, Futuridades, or the Charla method would look different in an Indigenous rural school, in a private urban bilingual institution, or in a Colombian diaspora community in Spain — to say nothing of non-Colombian contexts — is a question that the book invites but does not address. This is not a criticism of what the book does; it is a recognition of what remains to be done.

What the book does, it does with unusual intellectual honesty and political seriousness. The framework Ortega constructs — however much future work may complicate or extend it — insists that applied linguistics cannot continue to theorize language from the outside in, imposing Northern frameworks on Southern realities, without producing knowledge that actively harms the communities it claims to serve. That is an argument the field needs to hear, and one that this book makes with force and rigor. Un Mundo Bonito may still be far off. But knowing what it is, and why it matters, is where the work begins.

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