Unraveling the EFL Expat: Challenging Privilege through Borderlands and Asia as Method

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Abstract

Each year, multitudes respond to the demand for native English speakers to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Asian countries, particularly China, Japan, and South Korea. These EFL transnationals are often young, new to living abroad, and inexperienced as educators. When they arrive, they often find a community, and an identity waiting for them: that of the expatriate. In this paper, I draw on research on EFL expatriates to produce a figuration, a way of engaging with and highlighting contradiction and disjuncture in the narrative identity of EFL expat taken up by some transnational EFL teachers. This figuration serves as a nexus to which I bring two bodies of theory with which to think. These are the Borderlands Thought of Gloria Anzaldúa and Chen Kwan-Hsing's articulation of Asia as Method. Separately, I bring these into conversation with the figuration of the EFL expat, then consider what emerges when all three are brought together. In doing so, I highlight how the figuration of the EFL expat is outlined by privileged and constrictive colonial, racial, professional, and linguistic dichotomies. The theories of Anzaldúa and Chen help to unravel these binaries, suggesting ways in which transnational English teachers can move on from such constraints to become something more than in-but-not-of their local world. I also consider what it means for Western scholars to work respectfully in theoretical spaces that were not developed by and for them, proposing that such researchers can think of themselves as theoretical expatriates.

Introduction

In East Asian countries, particularly China, Japan, and South Korea, there is a demand for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction that draws Native English Speakers (NES) from the Global North. These NES are often young and new to both living abroad and teaching. Equipped with varying degrees of educational and cross-cultural preparation, they enter a potentially transformative liminal space of transnational and transcultural hybridity and emergence (Bhabha, 2004). Yet even in the face of this transformative potential, they often find a community, and an identity waiting for them: that of the EFL expatriate, or expat. This identity can provide comfort in a destabilizing time. Arguably, it can also prevent growth by providing a buffer from intercultural forces that might spur the emergence of news ways of understanding and being in the world. Occupying this space may only serve to perpetuate harmful dynamics of colonialism and cultural chauvinism (Oh & Oh, 2017). Further, the identity of the EFL expat is not equally open to everyone, but is entangled with tensions of race (Cho, 2012; Stanley, 2012) and nationality (Ahn, 2019) making it more available to some than others.

The EFL expat has been a major figure in English language teaching in recent times, especially in East Asia and specifically in South Korea. In this paper, I seek to problematize the EFL expatriate by articulating and interrogating it as a figuration, or a counter-metaphor that highlights contradiction and disjuncture (Hagood, 2004; St. Pierre, 1997), then bring this into conversation with the theories of Gloria Anzaldúa and Chen Kwan-Hsing.

As a caveat, I want to acknowledge that much of what follows may appear critical, over-generalizing, and rather unflattering. I want to emphasize that the focus of this paper is not people but the figuration. Many come to East Asia from other countries to teach English, with a wide spectrum of behaviors, characteristics, and experiences. When discussing people directly, I

will use the term transnationals. For the most part, I will use the term 'expatriate' to refer to broad applications of the term. When discussing the figuration, of which I am most critical, I will use the term 'expat'. The focus of this paper is not transnational EFL teachers in general, but rather a particular story that arises around, through, and among that group of people. This is the story of the EFL expat.

Why Expatriates?

The term 'expatriate' is difficult to pin down. It shifts over time and context. It takes on different significances across different populations (Fechter & Walsh, 2010). Using the term to refer to people directly (to identify a kind of person) carries the danger of reifying problematic ideas and perpetuating colonial power imbalances. Instead, it may be better to understand how the term is used. As Kunz (2016) notes, rather than study a priori 'expatriates' to learn more about them, we should seek to understand how the term is employed in practice by particular populations, how it "expresses and performs a certain migrant subjectivity and describes certain locations or aspirations to position oneself within various local and global political and economic formations" (p. 98). In other words, expatriate may be better understood not as a category of analysis but rather a category of practice (Kunz, 2016). In this way, we can understand expatriates as an imagined community (Anderson, 2006; Kanno & Norton, 2003). We can understand how 'expatriate' operates as a term used by particular people in particular situations to narrate themselves (Fechter, 2007; Fechter & Walsh, 2010).

As expatriates, English language teachers living abroad are ostensibly transnational, evolving figures of global and cultural hybridity. They "increasingly operate within and across national boundaries, creating new 'liminal spaces'" (Jain et al., 2021, p. 1), or spaces of

transition, betweenness, and becoming. Arguably, narratives of 'expatriates' are, themselves, liminal spaces that EFL expatriates occupy and share. It is important to explore these narratives because narratives can be understood not just as being about identity, but in fact composing identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). EFL teacher identities are crucial to their self-understanding (Tsui, 2007; Varghese et al., 2005), and this teacher identity can connect to pedagogy (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018), professional agency (Haneda & Sherman, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2019), and arcs of professional development (Sherman & Teemant, 2022a; Varghese et al., 2005). While empirical studies of identity are valuable, it is also useful to develop sophisticated theoretical understandings of these dynamics of teacher identity to inform such empirical inquiry (Sherman & Teemant, 2022b).

Thinking Towards Figurations

In this paper, I 'think with theory' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018) to explore and disrupt the narrative of the EFL expat. Thinking with theory entails bringing theories and concepts into encounter to see what emerges. Theories are treated as things that happen rather than things that are, as phenomena rather than objects. As phenomena, like waves, theories can interfere with one another, they can diffract, and we can learn from these diffractions (Barad, 2007) as heterogeneous elements into productive conversation (Murris & Bozalek, 2019).

The result of thinking with theory is not meant to be a representation or universal law, but rather insight into how things interrelate, and different ways of thinking. This is not abstract, academic exercise. It is philosophical in a sense of helping us thrive in the face of radical becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996).

I begin by moving from narratives to figurations, articulating as my focal phenomenon the figuration of the EFL expat. A figuration is, like a narrative, somewhere between metaphor and reality, "an analytic tool used… to move beyond coding and categorizing data in order to redescribe and to represent concepts differently" (Hagood, 2004, p. 145). Metaphors provide coherency and unity to contradiction and disjunction; figurations highlight contradictions (St. Pierre, 1997). Metaphors pin down meaning through representation. Figurations, by challenging meaning, open possibility.

My goal is to produce a figuration of the expatriate EFL teacher to complicate, challenge, and spur on greater ongoing understanding of what it is to become a teacher in an international context. I take material for this from two places. First, I consider research on expatriates in general, and on EFL expatriates in particular, with an emphasis on the South Korean context. I also consider Johnston's (1999) metaphor of expatriate teachers as postmodern paladins. From these sources, I identify the contours, or outlines, of a figuration of the EFL expat.

This figuration serves as a nexus, or conversation piece, to which I bring two bodies of theory. These are the Borderlands Thought of Gloria Anzaldúa (2012; 2013) and Chen Kwan-Hsing's articulation of Asia as Method (2010). I bring these into conversation with the figuration of the EFL expat, then consider what emerges when all three are brought together. I highlight how the figuration of the EFL expat is contoured by constrictive binaries, and how the theories of Anzaldúa and Chen help unravel these binaries, suggesting ways in which transnational English teachers can move on from such constraints.

Theory is not neutral, and not separable from those who think with it. I close with a reflexive discussion on what it means for scholars that have been historically centered (such as me, a Western, White, cis-het, native English speaking male) to work with, and move in,

theoretical spaces developed by and for those who have been historically marginalized, such as Borderlands Thought and Asia as Method.

What is an Expatriate?

Remembering that the goal is articulating a figuration rather than an empirical description, I begin by considering what has already been said about expatriates. Starting with the broadest definition, expatriates are individuals who live outside of the country of their birth or citizenship on extended work assignments (Adams & van de Vijver, 2015). They are distinguished from travelers or tourists by in-country employment and extended residency. While there is a rich body of research on what might be termed the business expatriate (McNulty & Selmer, 2017), such definitions often focus on the professional sphere at the expense of the cultural experiences of such lifestyles. There is a relative paucity of ethnographic and cultural research on expatriates defined more broadly as they exist in transnational spaces and communities (Fechter, 2007). Bracketing out the business expatriate, what remains is a culturally charged term used by some to proudly self-identify and by others in a pejorative sense (Fechter, 2007).

Though the term 'expatriate' is used by communities around the world, it most often refers to those moving from the Global North to the Global South (Kunz, 2016), whether for purposes of travel, non-business employment, or retirement (Bell, 2017). Much of the research on cultural aspects of expatriate life has focused on Westerners in Asian countries (e.g., Arudou, 2015; Bell, 2015; Cohen, 1977; Farrer, 2018; Fechter, 2007; Oh, 2018). Most of the discussion that follows pertains specifically to Asian contexts.

Expatriates can be understood not only in terms of individuals, but also communities, which is to say, shared and distinct 'bubbles' of institutions, geographies (e.g. neighborhoods), and norms or cultures (Cohen, 1977; Farrer, 2018). As Fechter (2007) notes, "The term 'expatriate' is socially contested, politically and morally charged, ambiguous, and is linked to particular notions of ethnicity and class (p. 6)". Expatriates are often distinguished from migrants by their relative higher status and power, particularly when associated with institutions such as businesses or diplomatic organizations (Farrer, 2018). They are migrants of privilege, holding a relatively high social position (Bell, 2015; Oh & Oh, 2007). While expatriates in Asian contexts can experience prejudice and discrimination (Arudou, 2015; Oh, 2018), their experience is hardly comparable to that of other migrants, such as those from Southeast Asia (eg. Jun & Ha, 2015; Seo and Skelton, 2016).

Expatriates have been positioned as existing in culturally distinct spaces, cosmopolitan canopies of interracial and intercultural tolerance (Farrer, 2018). Indeed, transnationals sometimes treat the term expatriate with contempt, holding that it signifies cultural chauvinism and disconnect from local cultures and realities (Fechter, 2007). Regardless of whether they self-identify as expatriates, many of those living abroad benefit from a racialized otherness of superiority, particularly when identified as ethnically White (Hof, 2021; Lan, 2011; Liu & Dervin, 2022; Oh, 2018). Many consider the term expatriate to apply to White Westerners specifically (Farrer, 2018; Fechter, 2007; Koutonin, 2015; Leonard, 2016), with Oh (2018) explicitly identifying expatriate as coded language for Whiteness. Expatriate existence is also entangled with gender, with men sometimes benefitting from exaggerated perceptions of masculinity (Appleby, 2014; Stanley, 2012) and women sometimes experiencing relative marginalization (Chesnut, 2020; Kunz, 2016).

Most of the above research refers to expatriates in general, particularly in East Asia. However, the focus of this paper is one group that often identifies, or is identified, as expatriate: The transnational native English-speaking EFL teacher. Much of the above defining dynamics apply to this group, as well as other related to language and professionalism that make the category worth exploring in detail.

The Expatriate EFL Teacher

Echoing definitions employed by business expatriate literature, Johnston (1999) broadly defined an expatriate teacher as "any teacher who is a citizen of one country but working in another" (p. 256). As above, this definition doesn't capture the cultural nuances of being an expatriate EFL teacher.

If much of the research on expatriate culture is focused on the Asian context, this is even more prevalent in the case of expatriate teachers. As Johnston (1999) notes, EFL expatriates are most often native English teachers teaching in the Middle East and East Asia. With some exceptions (Johnston, 1999, looked at Eastern Europe; Romanowski and Nassar, 2015, looked at Qatar), studies of expatriate teachers tend to be studies of Western EFL teachers in East Asian contexts such as Japan (e.g., Appleby, 2014), China (e.g., Stanley, 2012), and South Korea (e.g. Yim & Hwang, 2019).

If we are to study expatriates as a category of practice (Kunz, 2016), such practice needs to be situated in a specific context. Thus, I invoke a geographically and culturally specific figuration of EFL expat, that of the Westerner teaching EFL in Asia broadly and South Korea specifically. A picture of this expatriate emerges from extant research.

As with broader representations of expatriates, Western EFL teachers in Korea are seen as experiencing greater social status, cultural prestige, and economic livelihood than they would have in their countries of origin (Cho, 2012). They are a sort of honored guest (Oh & Oh, 2016, Yim & Hwang, 2019). Some report travelling abroad for adventure, while others point to lack of opportunity in their home countries (Collins & Shubin, 2015).

The EFL expatriate in the Asian context generally comes from the Global North, and specifically from countries where English is predominantly spoken. In South Korea, visas for English teachers (E-2 visas) have been restricted to citizens of seven countries with English as the official language (KMOFA, 2022; Yim & Hwang, 2018). This has come to be identified as an ideology of 'native-speakerism', the idea that native English speakers are more legitimate EFL teachers (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Kim, 2020). In EFL classrooms, native speakers have been considered more authentic than non-native teaching professionals (Stanley, 2012), though nationality (which doesn't necessarily entail native English-speaking status) sometimes serves as a stand-in (Ahn, 2019). When speakers form the Global South teach abroad, they are more likely to be positioned as migrants than expatriates, even if from the Philippines, where English is an official language (Gu & Canagarajah, 2018; Perez-Amurao, 2019).

The status of the EFL expatriate is entangled with the status of English in the country in which they teach (in this case, South Korea). In a practical sense, demand for English drives demand for English teachers (Park, 2009; Porter & Tanghe, 2016), especially those considered 'authentic' speakers. There is another sense, however, in which the status of English, and the West, extends to the EFL expatriate and accounts for their relatively high status both in and out of the classroom. This status has little to do with the individual (aside, again, from external

markers of authenticity), but is rather a mantle the individual takes on, or steps into. It is the narrative, the figuration, of the expatriate.

The perceived authenticity of expatriate EFL teachers is not only a matter of native-speaker status and citizenship, but also race (Stanley, 2012). In Asian contexts, in the recent past at least, preference for White teachers of English was documented (Lan, 2011; Stanley, 2012). Analysis of EFL recruitment materials found that desired candidates were overwhelmingly represented as White (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). In South Korea, a common perception of expatriate EFL teachers is that they are White, Western, and English speaking (Oh & Oh, 2017), and Whiteness is often equated with English ability (Bizzell, 2017; Cho, 2012).

Native-speaking English teachers in South Korea are not exclusively White. Western, native-English speaking Asian and Pacific Islanders (APIs) and Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) also come to teach, facing their own challenges. Western APIs in Korea, particularly Korean-Americans, report being perceived as being non-native speakers, and thus less legitimate than White Westerners (Cho, 2012; Lee & Kim, 2021). Accounts of BIPOC EFL teachers in Korea also highlight a relative lack of legitimacy (Charles, 2019; Jackson, 2016). Notably, in these specific accounts of BIPOC English teachers in South Korea, the term 'expatriate' does not appear.

What sort of teachers are these expatriates? Many expatriate EFL teachers would not qualify for the title of teacher in their home countries, lacking the necessary academic preparation and credentials (Han, 2005; Stanley, 2012[1]). In South Korea, the requirement for an E-2 English teaching visa is a bachelor's degree in any major (not just education) from a university in which English is the predominant language. Many EFL expatriates with little

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[1] These sources, though perhaps dated, are presented as representing recent historical conditions from which the figuration of the EFL expat arises.

teaching preparation and experience find themselves in classrooms, working alongside professional educators. As discussed above, their qualifications in the Asian EFL context are often less about traditional teacher credentials, and more about a perceived authenticity related to native-speakerism connected to citizenship and ethnicity. This can lead to a disconnect between expatriates, their local colleagues, and their students. Expatriate teachers report being isolated or otherwise distinguished from local English teachers by language differences, organizational structure, and professional status (Yim & Hwang, 2018). This last point highlights a view of expatriate ELTs as temporary and professionally ephemeral, if considered professional at all. Even when they have traditional teacher training and credentials, expatriate EFL teachers may find that cultural differences in assumptions about language and the nature of learning can lead to a gulf between their pedagogy and that which is expected of them from local colleagues and students (Stanley, 2012). Compared to local non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), some South Korean learners have reported perceiving native English teachers as lacking compassion, cultural understanding, qualification, and professionalism (Han, 2003).

The above discussion of expatriate EFL teachers serves as the basis for my articulation of the figuration of the EFL expat. This literature gives me the outlines of the figuration, the basis by which I will engage with the theories that follow. The outlines of the figuration of the EFL expat that I see, particularly as it arises in South Korea, are based in forms of privilege: Cultural privilege (Global North, Global South), linguistic privilege (English and native speakerism), professional privilege (non-credentialed teachers), and racial privilege (Whiteness as authenticity in EFL).

The Postmodern Paladin

This theoretical discussion of the figuration of the EFL expat owes a debt to Johnston's (1999) EFL teacher as postmodern paladin. Studying the life-course narratives of 17 EFL teachers (local and transnational) in Poland, Johnston (1997) found that they did not see themselves as having teacher careers and did not invoke teacher identities in relating their self-understandings. Focusing on the transnational teachers, Johnston (1999) understood these narratives through the metaphor of expatriate EFL teachers as knights errant, restless travelers and adventurers driven by noble goals, sometimes unwittingly serving as agents of hegemony and colonialization. He re-viewed this metaphor through the lens of the postmodern condition, marked by disjuncture, the failure of grand narratives, and surface over depth. He found further resonance with the idea of the EFL expat as exile, nomad, cosmopolitan, and vagabond.

Though Johnston referred to his work as metaphorical, he noted that it was "intended not to constitute a definitive interpretation of expatriate teachers' lives but to find new ways of conceptualizing and con-textualizing these lives by means of exploring a provocative parallel" (p. 260). Recalling the distinction between figurations and metaphors made above, it would seem that Johnston's postmodern paladin is more the former than the latter.

Johnston's EFL paladin is a helpful starting point for us to think about EFL expatriates in the South Korean context, but it is necessary to move beyond it. For one thing, understanding expatriate as a category of practice requires us to take context into account. Johnston's paladins came from the Polish context, with intercultural dynamics were very different than those encountered by EFL expatriates in South Korea. Second, as experienced and certified EFL teachers, the professional status of Johnston's respondents may not be comparable to that of many EFL expatriates in South Korea. They were also included both local and transnational teachers.

Johnston's EFL expat as postmodern paladin is outlined by adventure, transience, disjuncture, and surface. This gives some balance to the rather privilege-focused figuration I articulated above, and I will draw both into the discussion below.

Two Bodies of Theory: Borderlands Thought and Asia as Method

Taking inspiration from Johnston's application of postmodern theory to the expat as paladin, I wish to bring powerful theories to bear in challenging the figuration of the EFL expat. These are Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, and Asia as Method (mainly as articulated by Chen). Below, I will articulate these theories and bring them into conversation (Murris & Bozalek, 2019) with the figuration of the EFL expat to see what emerges. I will then consider these theories in tandem to highlight how a major resonance of each, the undermining of binaries, can help us refine our understanding of the figuration of the EFL expat.

The Borderlands and the Nepantlera

Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) created a body of work blurring boundaries between scholarship, art, and activism. In thinking through her lived experiences in geographically concrete and personally/culturally abstract borderlands, Anzaldúa (2012; 2013) articulated powerful ideas that have had major influence in feminist, queer, and cultural theory. These ideas allow us to think in, and through, hybridity and in-betweenness, embracing contradiction and ambiguity. Anzaldúa proposes understanding this through Mestiza consciousness, a pluralistic mode of being between cultures. One feature of this mode of consciousness is mental Nepantlism. Nepantla comes from the Aztec word for 'being in the middle' or, as Anzaldúa says, being "torn between ways (2012, p. 100)". This liminal state of being torn is one of conflict, confusion, anxiety, and pain, but in

also one of transformation, and potential growth (Keating, 2006). It is also a way of undermining

binaries of self, such as female/male, mind/body, and White/non-White (Anzaldúa, 2013).

In painting a picture of racial tensions and conflicts in academia, Anzaldúa articulated

idea of the nepantlera, the in-betweener, boundary crosser, thresholder. The nepantleras build

connections and forge bonds across lines of race, gender, and other boundaries. They move on

the threshold of multiple worlds, never resting in any, effecting transformation through dis-

identification (Keating, 2006). Anzaldúa recognizes the nepantlera's work as both a creative and

destructive endeavor:

> Though tempted to retreat behind racial lines, and hide behind simplistic walls of
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> identity, las nepantleras know that their work lies in positioning themselves – exposed
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> and raw - in the crack between these worlds, and revealing current categories as
>
> unworkable (p. 567)."

Nepantleras understand that a bridge cannot have walls on either end. To build a bridge, walls

must come down. Anzaldúa highlights the peril of such an endeavor. In living between,

nepantleras risk ostracism, misunderstanding, and rejection (Keating, 2006).

The nepantlera is outlined by hybridity, in-betweenness, connection, and vulnerability. In

bringing nepantlera into conversation with that of the EFL expatriate, interesting resonances and

contrasts emerge.

The Nepantlera and the EFL Expatriate

Keating (2006) notes that, "Nepantleras have a global consciousness" (p. 9), an assertion that

might, on its face, suggest common ground with the international figuration of the EFL expat. In

bringing these narratives into conversation, I am not trying to equate them, or to look at the EFL

expat as nepantlera. Still, we can consider what happens to the figuration of the expat when we understand it through the outlines of the nepantlera: Hybridity, in-betweeness, connection, and vulnerability.

Anzaldúa's nepantlera is outlined by hybridity, of mixes, blends, syntheses. She calls for people to "cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences […] to forge a hybrid consciousness that transcends the 'us' vs. 'them' mentality and will carry us into a nosotras position (Anzaldúa, in Keating, 2006, p. 10)". Related to this, the nepantlera pursues hybridity through connection, the bridging of cultural worlds. What role does hybridity and connection play in the EFL expat figuration?

Arguably, the various privileges of the EFL expat serve to isolate them, preventing connection or hybridity. Recalling the cosmopolitan canopy under which the expat dwells (Farrer, 2018), we can consider how they might be sheltered from the necessity and even possibility of forming certain kinds of connections. Even in cases where expats actively engage with local culture, such as with some expat-made video series, such as those analyzed by Oh and Oh (2017), engagement can privilege Western ways of knowing that preserve an "us vs. them" mentality. What results is less the creation of something new (i.e. hybridity) than the acquisition of cultural knowledge and status by the expat. Such acquisition is more of a surface-level change than a bone-deep transformation. It's more akin to colonizing than hybridity.

The nepantlera is outlined by in-betweenness, of ambiguity, and of the challenge of living in that space. Anzaldúa notes that:

> We perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or
> living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming

together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un*

choque, a cultural collision." P, 100

In some ways, the expat does not face this tension. Being somewhat transitory, they don't

encounter conflict between citizenship or expectations of cultural assimilation. One place where

the EFL expat does dwell in a state of ambiguity is in their professional status. In stepping into a

professional role which they usually could not fill in their home country, there is a question of

whether the EFL expat is really a teacher. There is an evident gulf between them and their local

credentialed colleagues (Yim & Hwang, 2019). The privileged statuses that support local

perceptions of their authenticity as a teacher of English, such as native speaking, citizenship, and

yes, Whiteness (Kim, 2020; Stanley, 2012), are less likely to convince them of their own

legitimacy as educators.

Finally, we can consider the vulnerability of the nepantlera. Anzaldúa's writings are

visceral, not shying away from the fraught personal nature of being in-between. How vulnerable

is the EFL expat? Again, we see the shelter of the cultural canopy or bubble, the safety of

transience (one can always leave) and the surface. This is not to say EFL expats experience no

difficulties. Practically, many find themselves in situations where their legal rights are not

recognized (e.g. Gelken, 2010). Personally, they often experience culture shock (Furnham, 2019)

characterized by anxiety and alienation. Bearing in mind that my focus is narratives of the

personal/cultural, as opposed more concrete matters, it seems strange to compare the personal

vulnerability of the EFL expat to that of the nepantlera. There is a sense in which the figuration

of the EFL expat is (again, invoking the paladin) like an armor a person can step into, to protect

them from cultural vulnerability while precluding the possibilities for transformation and

hybridity. Anzaldúa tells us that growth and pain go hand in hand. Perhaps, for the EFL teacher

living abroad, what this means is they will only be able to grow to the extent they disidentify

with the figuration of the expat, and leave that cultural armor behind.

Turning to Asia as Method

Working towards the goals of de-colonization and de-imperialization, the Taiwanese scholar

Chen Kuan-Hsing noted that "Knowledge production is one of the major sites in which

imperialism operates and exercises its power (2010, p. 211)." Challenging the universalism of

Western ways of knowing, he stated that "Euro-American theory is simply not all that helpful in

our attempts to understand our own conditions and practices (2010, p.226)." Chen drew on

Takeuchi Yoshimi's (2005) concept of Asia as Method, developing it as a foundation for a grand

project of epistemological, activist, and emotional transformation based on regional cooperation

and solidarity (Chen, 2010).

A major focus of Chen's articulation of Asia as Method is the interrogation and

transformation of frames of reference, particularly where Asia is understood through reference to

the West. Chen points to Hall's (2019) characterization of "The West and the rest", a Western

frame that centers Western ways of knowing while glossing over everything else as "other" and

as lesser. Chen finds the West operating as a dominant imaginary (or meaning-making

framework) in Asian societies, as a one-way flow of the West as an epistemological universal

incorporated into the Asian local (Lee, 2019).

Though Chen proposes centering Asian ways of knowing, this does not mean opposing

the West, which simply reproduces problematic binaries with the West now positioned as

"other". Asia as Method is meant to undo such binaries by interrogating and shifting frames of

reference, so that the West is integrated "as bits and fragments that intervene in local social

formations in a systematic, but never totalizing, way […] as one cultural resource among others (Chen, 2010, p. 223)." "Using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference so that the understanding of self can become transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt (Chen, 2010, p. 212)." The point of this project is not to essentialize Asia as a geographical or cultural monolith, but to free it from historical points of reference to transform itself through self- and inter-referential inquiry (Lee, 2019).

Another key idea developed by Chen (2010) is that of Critical Syncretism, which is the transformation of subjectivities by the blending self and other:

The intent is to become others, to actively interiorize elements of others into the subjectivity of the self so as to move beyond the boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed by colonial power relations in the form of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, chauvinism, heterosexism, or nationalistic xenophobia (p. 98).

Chen distinguishes syncretism from hybridity by emphasizing the former as deliberate and self-guided and the latter as a product of colonialism. Through this incorporation of elements of others, groups can cross historical and cultural boundaries to achieve transformation.

In summary, Asia as Method is outlined by shifting points of reference, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, and transformation through critical syncretism.

Asia as Method and the EFL Expatriate

On its face, it would seem that the EFL expat, as a fundamentally Western figuration, is by definition contrary to Asia as Method. The figuration of the EFL expatriate is a frame of reference pointing to the West in the Asian context. The cultural bubble or canopy, cosmopolitan

as it may be, is an othering distinction. What becomes of this Western figuration when the story is told with the outlines of Asia as Method? Several interesting features come into focus.

As noted above, Asia as Method is a theoretical lens concerned with de-colonization. Thus, the most obvious and expected feature of the EFL expat to come into focus is its colonialism. Johnston (2010) acknowledged this tension in articulating his Postmodern Paladin. Lin (2012) notes that curriculum is a key productive site of cultural imaginaries and subjectivities, including those that are colonialist and imperialist (such as the superiority of English). She emphasizes Asia as Method as a way of addressing the emotional conditions of these subjectivities.

This focus on emotional aspects of cultural imaginaries points towards a potential source of the EFL expat's privileged status. For example, the association of Whiteness with native English speakers (Kubota & Lin, 2006), as a part of the figuration of the EFL expat, can be understood as an evolution, if not a continuation, of colonial imaginaries. Further, Motha and Lin (2014) point to elements of desire operating with the teaching and learning of language, desire entangled in complicated ways with history, power, economy, culture, and identity. Seen thus, the expat's privileges may rest on the desires of local language learners: A desire to acquire English for employment, a desire of a student to attain test scores necessary to attend a prestigious university, or a desire of parents for the status of English-speaking children. The privilege of the expat is not based on merit or any intrinsic property, but on the imaginaries of their hosts.

Asia as Method has potential to reframe more than just the status of individual teachers. Lee (2019) argue that East Asian models of education that are referential to Western educational

models are no longer adequate. Considering grassroots educational reform movements in South Korea, she highlights Asia as Method as a guide for developing new models of schooling. It is worth noting that the EFL expat's position in East Asian schooling is itself dependent on Western education and English as points of reference for success in schooling. If these points of reference were to shift, it is likely that the position of EFL expats would also need to change.

Chen's notion of critical syncretism provides a basis for speculation about how this change might unfold. Recalling Chen's description of a reframing of the West as "bits and fragments" of culture that influence locally without totalizing, "as one cultural resource among others (2010, p. 223)," we can reconsider the EFL expatriate's potential place in Asian societies. On one hand, describing the incorporation of non-totalizing "bits and fragments" of culture seems an apt description of the EFL expat's relationship to the culture in which they live, as they selectively adopt bits of language and cultural knowledge with an additive, but not necessarily transformative, impact on their self. In speaking of critical syncretism, Chen (2010) noted that, "To reach a deeper understanding of the other is a precondition of transcending one's self. To reach a different understanding of the self is a step towards the other's understanding of itself (p. 252)". Recalling the nepantlera, here again we see an invitation for transformation, for transcendence. When seen through the lens of Asia as Method, the figuration of the EFL expat again appears to be a limiting narrative, one that, while providing comfortable privilege, constrains and prevents growth and transformation.

Mixing Thought, Unraveling Binaries

The theories of Anzaldúa and Chen offer distinct ways of viewing the world that go beyond historical Western ways of knowing. One resonance between them is the challenging of

dichotomous framings of the world. For Anzaldúa, the nepantlera undermines dichotomies, refusing to allow, for example, the marginalized to be defined against the mainstream. She asserts that, "It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions (p. 100)". Rather than living in counterstance against the other, she highlights other ways to act rather than react: synthesis, disengagement, or a search for other possibilities. Chen, too, emphasizes that simply countering and resisting everything Western still maintains the West as a point of reference, and that the way forward is the forging of new perspectives.

Taking a cue from this resonance, we can question what binaries help form the figuration of the EFL expat. These correspond to the privileges of the EFL expat identified above: Colonial (East/West, North/South), racial (White/non-White), professional (legitimate/illegitimate teachers), and linguistic (native/non-native speaker). In so doing, we can begin to speculate how EFL transnationals might grow by stepping away from the constricting figuration of the EFL expat.

For much of its history, EFL has been a colonial endeavor, shaped by Western ways of knowing and serving as a conduit for Western power (Lin and Luke, 2006). This is also seen in the broad understanding of the expatriate (Fechter & Walsh, 2010; Kunz, 2016). The EFL expat derives status from a West/East dichotomy, along the lines of Hall's (2019) distinction of the West and the rest. This dichotomy is colonial and hierarchical, maintaining not only distance from the other, but also superiority. Some representations of the expatriate have been found to be defined by rejection of hybridity, but rather a colonial and privileged preservation of Western identity played against the exoticized 'other' of the host culture. (Oh & Oh, 2017). In other

words, expatriate isolation can act as a way of turning the 'otherness' of living in a host culture back on the culture itself, so that it is not the expatriate who is the other, but the host culture.

Without a colonial East/West dichotomy, the EFL expat has little basis for this superiority, and less justification for distance. Chen's critical syncretism suggests that, rather than maintaining a position of the Westerner adventuring among the Other (Collins & Shubin, 2015; Johnston, 1997), EFL transnationals may instead begin to see how they themselves are an other, and come to a better understanding of what it means to exist in Asian societies with Asian points of reference. Eschewing the armor of colonial positions, they may find themselves, like nepantleras, striving to build connections rather than occupy safe points.

Related to the colonial privilege of EFL instruction is the dichotomy of the English speaker as native/non-native. In many cases, the EFL expat is a native English speaker first and foremost, and a teacher second. At the same time, in the realm of English, their colleagues and co-teachers may find themselves perceived as non-native speakers first, and teachers second. As discussed above, this is tied to perceptions of authenticity (Stanley, 2012), where native speakers come from the linguistic center of English to teach in the periphery (Kachru et al., 2009). Native English speakers have historically held authority where English is concerned, in some ways owning the language (Norton, 2018; Wang, 2016). Part of this dynamic is the privileging of Western accents and dialects (Fleming, 2020). If a language can be owned, this ownership is contested. The theory of World Englishes (Kachru et al., 2009) argues for the legitimacy of non-Western varieties of English. In local contexts, ownership of English among so-called non-native speakers can vary based on many factors besides nationality (Higgins, 2003). In terms of Asia as Method, there are internal points of reference by which ownership of English can be understood, without relying on a native/non-native distinction. Anzaldúa, too, has much to say about

language, such as "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language" (2012, p. 81). Not only does she hold language to be entwined with identity, she holds it to be a multiplicity.

The figuration of the EFL expat is based on colonial native-speaker ideologies of English. However, English is a multiplicity tied to far more identities than just that of native speaker. Those EFL transnationals, who are open to new experiences, can modify "attitudes towards the culture-language nexus they initially assumed they were representing and embodying" (Neilson, 2011, p. 2). The EFL transnational can choose to live an identity emerging from an anti-colonial view of English , as one linguistic authority among many, no longer a center-person living in the periphery. Rather than relying on their native English as a point of reference against which local Englishes are measured, they may, like linguistic nepantleras, embrace hybridity and support learners in developing and evolving new Englishes.

Moving away from native/non-native dichotomies begins to address the problem of EFL expats as novice/professional teachers as well. No longer relying on native speaker status for authority, the EFL transnational's status may be more tied to their skill as a teacher. Importantly, rather than defining teacher professionalism in terms of Western/Northern points of reference, they should be open to growing as teachers in a way that reflects the culture of their learners and contextual professional standards. This may mean moving away from, or at least adapting, language teaching methods developed in the West, such as the communicative method (Lin, 2012) and reconsidering the very goals of education, such as higher test scores (Lee, 2019). In this way, local professional teachers, rather than the West, become the point of reference for transnational EFL teacher development.

The final dichotomy to consider, closely tied to colonial East/West distinctions, is that of race, specifically White/non-White. As noted above, the figuration of the expatriate in general (Fechter, 2007; Koutonin, 2015; Oh, 2018) and in the world of EFL (Cho, 2012; Lan, 2011; Stanley, 2012) specifically is associated with Whiteness. If the figuration of the EFL expat is, as the above scholars suggest, more easily adopted by transnationals identifying and identified as White, even acting as coded language for Whiteness (Oh, 2018), the very recognition of this should be enough to impel a move away from it.

Crucial to this process is an openness to understanding how Whiteness operates in international contexts. Scholarship on Whiteness has largely focused on the U.S. context (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013), as well as Australia and South Africa (Greene et al., 2007). Scholars have begun to situate studies of Whiteness in global contexts, with some focusing on Asia specifically (e.g. Kim, 2021; Oh, 2018; Stohry et al., 2021). Scholars wishing to study Whiteness and the privileges and challenges of racial imaginaries in Asian contexts may draw on Asia as Method to develop theory Asian cultural points of reference rather than reproduce and contextualize Western/Northern scholarship on the matter. Taking a cue from hooks (1992), those drawing on Asia as Method may articulate representations of Whiteness in the Asian imagination. In the meantime, transnationals recognizing dynamics and privileges of race in their professional and day-to-day existence might learn from Anzaldúa's nepantlera, and allow themselves to move into a space of vulnerability in order to build new ways of being without falling into postracial denial.

If we demand the figuration of the EFL expat be defined in terms other than Western, Native-English speaking, professional, and, yes, White, what is left? Very little, it would seem. What nepantla and Asia as Method help us see is that the figuration of the EFL expat is a trap. It

is a limiting and harmful narrative, one that might offer protection and comfort, but ultimately does little good for the transnational and the country in which they live.

It is worth considering potential implications of the theoretical discussion above. I see potential applications of this discussion for two groups. First, noting the power of these ideas to function as a mirror (Keating, 2000), they provide a valuable framework for individuals stepping into the figuration of the EFL expat in East Asian contexts to reflect on and interrogate their own experience and self-understanding. In this way, they may exist in their cultural space in a way that is more productive, contributive, de-colonializing, and culturally affirming. They may act as nepantleras, building bridges and thriving in uncomfortable cultural ambiguity rather than retreating into isolating cultural bubbles. These ideas are powerful for supporting the reflection of Western EFL expats precisely because they decenter the West and the North.

Second, the scope of this discussion has been delimited (Western EFL teachers, mainly in South Korea), and thus there is room to expand or change the scope, considering figurations of expatriates in other cultural areas (such as South Asia and the Middle East) or applying these theoretical lenses to so-called "business expats" (McNulty & Selmer, 2017) or other groups such as Cohen's (1984) "dropout expatriates" or expat retirees (Bell, 2017).

The Theoretical Expatriate

As a final consideration of the implications of the above discussion and theory, I want to exercise reflexivity and explore what it means for me, a native-English speaking White, male, Western, cis-het scholar who has formerly identified as an EFL expatriate in South Korea. It is no good pretending that the preceding discussion has no connection to my personal experience, despite the efforts I've made to situate it in extant literature. I have endeavored not to use

experience as a warrant for my statements, but it guided me nonetheless. I tried not to center myself and my own experience, even while recognizing its influence. I tried to center the theory.

Doing so raised a problem. Anzaldúa's work (her entwined story and theory) is wracked with pain, conflict, and sacrifice. Her writings are not just about existing between multiple worlds, but being torn between them, and by them, and becoming something new in that visceral process, "a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 100)." This is a way of knowing that is hard-earned. The reality is that the average Western White EFL expatriate in East Asian countries and cultures may experience challenges, but not often at this intensity. It isn't a definitive part of that territory. The same can be said of the experiences of colonialism and imperialism that precede Asia as Method. It's fair to ask if these ideas have been earned to be applied in this way. Is it missing the point of theories born from crucibles of marginalization and colonialization to ask what they can tell us about the (largely Western, White, English speaking) EFL expat experience?

I believe there's insight to be gained in leaning into these questions. In bringing Anzaldúa's thought and theory, as well as Asia as Method, to bear on the relatively privileged and insulated experience of the Western expatriate English teacher in East Asia, it's important for scholars like me to start with humility, to tread respectfully, and to recognize that we're in a theoretical space that was not created for us, and is not to be invoked lightly. We must recognize that these theories represent a deliberate move away from traditional "mainstream" (historically western White cis-het male) perspectives. These ideas are not to be appropriated to create new knowledge, which would be just more theoretical colonization. Rather, they can be invoked, with respect, with gratitude, to put the EFL expat experience under a novel theoretical lens with the

idea helping us gain more insight into how privilege and power operates for this group in these circumstances.

It is tempting to say that non-Western ways of knowing are best left to non-Western scholars. I believe that the work of these theories and frameworks, particularly when they pertain to human flourishing, is everyone's work. With this idea in mind, I posit one further figuration: The theoretical expatriate. First, let's look back to the prior discussion of what defines expatriates. To be an expatriate is to exist in 'foreign' territory, as an other, living and producing in that tension. The theoretical expatriate recognizes that they are operating in a sphere that did not emerge for them, does not belong to them, and does not center them. They work with theories in the sense of working together alongside theories and the scholars that they center. They contribute to the theory, enriching it without claiming it. They avoid operating with a colonizer logic, or in other words working with theory in the sense of using it, by claiming, appropriating, self-insulating, and self-centering. They don't plant flags in theory, reassert colonial frames of reference, or treat theory as a resource to be mined. These attitudes are the sort of thing Asia as Method is meant to address.

Ultimately, I hope this article stands as an example of how Western scholars can respectfully and productively exist in non-Western/Northern epistemological spheres[2] as theoretical expatriates. In other words, if Asia as Method and Borderlands theory represent theoretical territories, I hope Western scholars such as myself can contribute in this sphere in ways that are respectful, supportive, perhaps necessarily self-marginal, while making a valuable contribution to the larger endeavor.

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[2] There is a fair debate to be had as to whether Anzaldúa's work should be considered non-Western/Northern, one that I will not attempt to address here. I believe it's safe to say that her work is not part of the historically Western mainstream, and is situated at least in the border of the global North and South. We do well to mistrust binaries here.

Conclusion

This piece is an invitation. I have explored the figuration of the expat EFL teacher by looking at the work of both Western and Eastern scholars and drawing on my own experiences and perspective. This piece is not about people, but about a story some people take up. If we consider the EFL expat as a figuration of privilege and colonization, we can see individual transnational teachers not necessarily as colonizer individuals, but as individuals stepping into a set of norms, expectations, and worldviews, maintained and transmitted by structures and communities, that are colonizing. The figuration of the EFL expat is constricting to the individual that inhabits it, and out harmony with the local context and culture in which it arises. If individuals can step into it, they can step out of it.

I have stated that a goal of being a theoretical expatriate must be to avoid centering White Western perspectives in these theoretical worlds, and yet, that is essentially what I've done here. I've done so with the hope of starting a conversation. There is, for example, value in exploring Korean American EFL teachers as nepantlera (Lee & Kim, 2021). My hope is that the scholars who are at home in these theories and cultures, who are centered in them, will be willing to offer their perspectives on what it means for people to be expatriates in their physical, cultural, and theoretical spaces. I would argue that those perspectives are more needed than my own. In other words, it should not be up to the guest to decide what it means to be a good guest, but rather the host.

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