

## **A Voiceless Response: Gazing as a Declaration of Being**

*Amanda González-Izquierdo*  
*Rutgers University*

We tend to think of identity as something that is voiced. It is declared perhaps defiantly, perhaps defenselessly, responding to contexts in which such an enunciation is demanded, and this identity which we choose to voice is dependent on and will determine the ways in which we relate to others. But what happens when there is no language for us to enunciate our being? And what happens when there is a will to immanence, when the other seeks to reduce the identity that declares itself as radical alterity? In these moments, identity is not voiced; rather, it is declared in a stare, and this gaze is its own defense against colonial violences. In this paper, I work through theories presented by Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and Édouard Glissant in an attempt to conceive of the ways in which a gaze is a declaration of being that demands a response from the other.

In his essay-turned-book *Identity: Fragments, Frankness*, Jean-Luc Nancy writes: “In the end, it is a gaze incapable of speech that stares at the SS...signifying to them that it is offering them, whole, frank, forever withdrawn—thus inaccessible—the identity that the other sought to reduce” (14). The image Nancy presents is of a voiceless declaration of identity, a resistant utterance that does not speak but nevertheless claims: *I am (though you wish me not to be)*. Nancy’s gaze incapable of speech offers up its identity in defiance of the will to immanence to which he motions when he notes that the other seeks to reduce. This will to immanence presents itself in all kinds of ways, including colonialism and, in Nancy’s example, Nazism. In these cases, the gaze is incapable of speech because it is being subjected to a violence before which it finds itself indefensible. My question is: can a voiceless gaze be a declaration of identity that performs a defense of the self against an other who seeks to reduce? Can a voiceless gaze be an ontological

moment in which the self lays claim to its own opacity, looks at (onto, towards) the other, putting itself in relation through a simple and yet abysmal gaze, recognizing the other, welcoming the other to meet its gaze and recognize it in return, but always without explaining itself, inviting the other into a sharing of a gaze but always at a distance, without any effort to grasp coming from either side? This voiceless gaze as I wish to conceive it occurs beyond the limits of language and linguistic intransigence and offers up an invitation for solidarity: *for you, as completely other to me, to see me as completely other to you, and to extend yourself to me and to reach but not grasp*, where grasping would mean a reduction.

The voicelessness of the gaze becomes especially relevant in the context of colonialism. In the same book, Nancy argues that identity is not “given” (18). In his articulation, identity is in its lineage, in a gesture, and the “I” is always already engaged in a process of identification. Nancy writes: “you are not what you are, for you have to become it...what you are is nowhere but at the end of your becoming. And at that point, you will not be there anymore...a line is stretched from the first absence to the last, a line of existence that is properly yours” (18). It follows, then, that any articulation of identity that a self makes of itself is a temporary identification, a way to place oneself on this line of existence that is a process of becoming *for the time being*. For Nancy, we are always becoming, and any arrival at an ultimate being, at any attempt to say “I am I” is troubling, for it cannot be said that “I” is identical “I”: this, in Nancy’s view, is death. We know that identity cannot be given, that identity must be claimed by the self in its own process of becoming which, following Nancy, is properly theirs.

We can say confidently, however, that colonization is an attempt to *give* someone an identity. It is one of the great ontological violences of colonialism. Colonized people are given the identity of “colonized” and, as Glissant asserts in *Poetics of Relation*, “are thus forced into a long

and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror” (17). Colonization, then, interrupts the process of becoming that identity is. The Manichean allegories that support colonial epistemologies and that were created by power imbalances that enable that “colonizer” and “colonized” be treated as identifiers is a kind of murder/annihilation since, as Nancy asserts, to say that “I” is identical to “I” is death. The great ontological denaturing of colonialism is that it reduces those to whom it attempts to give an identity. The colonizer’s giving of an identity to the colonized is a metaphorical death for the colonized because it places the colonized at the end of the line of their existence. The identity of the colonized as colonized is not an identity that is always realizing itself through movement. Instead of a line, the colonizer demands a final signifier. To make matters more complex, this identity is given in a foreign language. How, then, can it be rejected? Even though the colonized might speak the colonizer’s language, and even though this tongue might be the only one they speak because of a history of linguistic suppression, the colonizer embodies a certain foreignness in that tongue. The language that contains the horror of the will to immanence might not be the language in which marginalized peoples can defend themselves against the very crime.

We can ask if this rejection of the given identity can happen in a pre-colonial language. I feel uncomfortable with the idea, believing that this is too reminiscent to a return to a monolingual root, and this can be a kind of essentialism that can itself be reductive. Another option might be to reject the totalizing identity in a kind of multilingualism. Glissant does say that if the root is monolingual, Relation is multilingual (17), and if ultimately the rejection of the will to immanence is a way to establish a relation whereby the other recognizes you in all your alterity, this might sound like a good option. Yet doing so opens up the space for hierarchies. As Glissant critiques, “a person’s worth is determined by his root” (17) and this root, as he clarifies in a footnote, is

language. Linguistic utterances can be judged and measured against what he calls “the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparison” (Glissant 190). The ways in which languages are spoken and the creolizations that are used can all be judged against a scale measuring respectability determined by the rules of the colonizer. After exploring these options, it seems that the declaration identity whereby the self positions itself along the line of becoming, rejecting any imposed or given identity and the hierarchies of power imbued within them, cannot be voiced. The gaze, then, seems like the only viable option, its voicelessness not a mark of its defenselessness, but rather the self’s defense against these very hierarchies, scales, and impositions. Not using speech to make itself understood, the gaze claims its share of opacity and demands of the other simply to return the gaze. The meeting of the gazes is Relation that is within Language because we are always already and necessarily in Language, but it is not bounded by systems of unequal tongues. The voiceless gaze does not try to make itself understood, nor does it ask the other to understand it. It simply looks toward, and this look asserts difference and declares a selfhood and invites the other not to grasp but to recognize. The voiceless gaze asserts its right to exist without being questioned and, because it looks, it demands the other to look in return, and thus establishes itself—necessarily—in relation.

How and where does the gaze occur? What does this moment look like? Nancy tells us in *Being Singular Plural* that all beings exist as a being-with. That is, “I” is derivative of “we,” which I take to be its own interpretation on the Cartesian cogito (the Nancian *cummunitatem*?), phrased as “we are, therefore I am.”<sup>1</sup> Relation is primordial in Nancy’s thinking: beings exist as a being-

---

<sup>1</sup> “Cummunitatem” is my own neologism, where I attempt to unite the Latin *cum* (“with”) with *communitatem* (“community”). As I posit it, the Nancian *cummunitatem* is “we are, therefore I am” and stands in contrast to the Cartesian cogito, “I think, therefore I am.” Whereas the Cartesian cogito establishes that existence stems from thinking/awareness, I argue for another theory, which I name the Nancian *cummunitatem*, where the existence of a being stems from the existence of the community.

in-common and singularities appear together in the space in-common. Thus being-together in this shared place is ontologically originary. This is the space where gazing takes place. Though I assert that the gaze asks for the other to return the gaze, and though I believe that at the basis of any ontological understanding of alterity is this very sharing of a gaze, the return of the gaze means nothing unless there is the option to not look back. If the other had to look back, if it was impossible for them not to do so, then any ethics would become obsolete. To look back must be a choice for it is in the act of choosing to look back—perhaps more so than in the act of gazing itself—that one destroys hierarchies and opens oneself to recognizing the other as radical alterity and accepts its opacity. However, the space of the in-common is always already a place of mutual sharing. There is, then, a kind of originary, unvoiced, perhaps pre-linguistic, “yes” to the option of looking back. I quote Derrida at length, from the prologue of John Caputo’s *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*:

When I say ‘yes’ to the other, in the form of a promise or an agreement or an oath, the ‘yes’ must be absolutely inaugural...I say ‘yes’ as a starting point. Nothing precedes the ‘yes.’ The ‘yes’ is the moment of institution, of the origin; it is absolutely originary. But when you say ‘yes,’ you imply that in the next moment you will have to confirm the ‘yes’ by a second ‘yes.’ When I say ‘yes,’ I immediately say ‘yes, yes’...I promise to keep the memory of the first ‘yes’...So ‘yes’ has to be repeated and repeated immediately. (27-28)

Being in the space of the in-common is an inaugural yes. Because the space is necessarily one of mutual sharing, there is always a recognition of the Other to a certain extent. *Yes, I share this space with you*, which means *yes, I see you*. I see you and I have two options: to gaze back or to turn away. If I turn away, if I refuse to accept you as someone whose gaze I must meet, then I enter into a situation of “yes, no.” This “no” is the end of our relationality. *Yes (I acknowledge your existence)*, *no (I refuse to accept your singularity)*. But if I gaze back, then I’m in “yes, yes”

territory. *Yes, (I acknowledge you), yes (I accept your singularity and I promise to accept it again and again).*

The “yes, yes” and the “yes, no” are linguistic insofar as our being happens in language, but they are pre-voice. Not only are the “yes, yes” and the “yes, no” not voiced in any ordinary sense, but they also condition any future dialogic relationship. “Yes, no” does not allow me to speak with you; rather, it makes me speak to you or over you. In so doing, I enter into the very context of trying to give you an identity, which is to say that the gazeless declaration of “yes, no” poses a colonial violence. The “yes, yes” is the condition to speak with: it is a commitment to the other, one which not only preconditions voicing but also listening. The “yes, yes,” which is to say, the returned gaze, is a performative welcome and acknowledgement of the other’s existence and right to opacity. It is a way to welcome the other in its otherness, with absolute openness, again and again. This is hospitality. It is genuine hospitality because there is no voiced plea or invitation. There is no moment of asking to be accepted, no moment of explaining oneself to make one’s being less foreign. There is also no invitation. In fact, when I gaze at you, before you have even seen me, before you have even decided to return this gaze, I am already reaching for you, reaching across any kind of threshold. I am already attempting a contact, one that will not be realized until and unless you gaze back, but one which is already approaching your own limit without you ever having welcomed me doing so. The voiceless gaze, then, is test of hospitality, and in this gaze, I declare my being as opaque and as ungraspable to you, and I look to you to see you in your own opacity. In the moment when our gazes are shared, when our eyes touch, we are left agape before each other’s singularities and it is precisely in this voicelessness, *as* this voicelessness, that we declare our identity to each other.

Works Cited

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Identity: Fragments, Frankness*. Translated by François Raffoul. Fordham University Press, 2015.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 2010.