



COLONIALITY, EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE, AND THE IMPERIAL SELF IN TENNYSON'S "ULYSSES": A DECOLONIAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT. "Ulysses" (1842) by Alfred Lord Tennyson, an iconic work of Victorian poetry, explores ambition, identity, and the quest for knowledge, though its engagement with imperial structures has been largely unexamined. This paper provides the first sustained decolonial reading of "Ulysses" grounded explicitly in decolonial theory, filling a significant gap in scholarship that has generally focused on the poem through existential, humanist, and postcolonial analyses without engaging its more complex involvement with the colonial matrix of power. Drawing on decolonial theory and close textual reading, the study reveals that the poem reinforces imperial modernity by idealizing heroic mobility, erasing subaltern subjectivity, and imperializing geography. Rather than embodying universal human striving, the text performs epistemic domination, ontological hierarchy, and spatial reordering. Foregrounding epistemic disobedience and other forms of spatial imagination, this article contributes to the decolonial critique of literature by showing how decolonial reading extends beyond postcolonial critique in unsettling dominant epistemological traditions. It promotes interpretive practices that decenter canonical frameworks and open them to different epistemic and spatial possibilities.

Keywords: Coloniality, Ulysses, epistemic disobedience, decolonial theory, spatiality, imperial subjectivity.

COLONIALIDAD, DESOBEDIENCIA EPISTÉMICA Y EL YO IMPERIAL EN EL “ULISES” DE TENNYSON: UNA INDAGACIÓN DECOLONIAL

RESUMEN. “Ulises” (1842) de Alfred Lord Tennyson, obra icónica de la poesía victoriana, explora la ambición, la identidad y la búsqueda del conocimiento, aunque su vinculación con las estructuras imperiales no ha sido examinada. Este artículo ofrece la primera lectura decolonial sostenida de “Ulises” fundamentada explícitamente en la teoría decolonial, llenando un vacío significativo en la crítica académica que generalmente se ha centrado en el poema a través del análisis existencial, humanista y poscolonial sin abordar su implicación más compleja con la matriz colonial del poder. A partir de la teoría decolonial y una lectura textual minuciosa, el estudio revela que el poema refuerza la modernidad imperial al idealizar la movilidad heroica, borrar la subjetividad subalterna e ‘imperializar’ la geografía. Más que encarnar el esfuerzo humano universal, el texto ejecuta la dominación epistémica, la jerarquía ontológica y el reordenamiento espacial. Al poner en primer plano la desobediencia epistémica y otras formas de imaginación espacial, este artículo contribuye a la crítica decolonial de la literatura al mostrar cómo la lectura decolonial se extiende más allá de la crítica poscolonial en el cuestionamiento de las tradiciones epistemológicas dominantes. Promueve prácticas interpretativas que descentran los marcos canónicos y los abren a diferentes posibilidades epistémicas y espaciales.

Palabras clave: Colonialidad, Ulises, desobediencia epistémica, teoría decolonial, espacialidad, subjetividad imperial.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Alfred Lord Tennyson, one of the key figures in Victorian poetry, influenced cultural life and helped anchor the imperial culture of nineteenth-century Britain. His poem “Ulysses” (1842) has long been a hymn to perseverance and heroic struggle. It has also been part of the ideological work of empire by aestheticizing conquest and naturalizing the expansionist desire. Despite the widespread scholarship, the prevailing readings, existential, humanist, and postcolonial, have mostly failed to take account of how the poem is proving to be an active constituent of the colonial confluence of power. This paper fills this gap by providing a sustained decolonial reading that re-examines the naturalization of Eurocentric epistemology, the erasure of subaltern geographies, and the performance of the colonality of knowledge, being, and space. Jason Rudy’s statement that Victorian poetry was a “political” technology installed in the ideological circuits of imperial modernity explains how a poem like “Ulysses” converts imperial ambition into poetry, making exploration an aesthetic virtue (2). Similarly, Anna Barton’s analysis of the Tennysonian self-fashioning sheds light on the Ulyssean identity performance: the fact that the speaker insists on turning into a name reminds us of Barton’s argument that subjectivity in the Victorian era relied on the constant process of maintaining symbolic identity (2). The issue of

imperial ambition is thus dramatized through Ulysses as well as the nature of the identity structure upon which such an ambition relies.

This paper contends that the best way to comprehend the poem "Ulysses" is neither as a universal reflection on the idea of resiliency nor simply as an imperial monologue, but rather as a poetic act of colonial modernity. Through a decolonial analytic approach, I demonstrate how the poem performs the coloniality of knowledge, being, and space through naturalizing Eurocentric epistemology, aestheticizing domination, and erasing subaltern geographies, which usually go uninvestigated. Postcolonial critics like Rowlinson (1992) and McKinsey (2004) situate "Ulysses" within Victorian imperial ideology, but their arguments are primarily grounded in representation, discourse, and historical context. Postcolonial readings do not abandon Western assumptions such as universal knowledge, linear progress, and heroic subjectivity as they critique the ideology of empire. A decolonial approach moves the emphasis of representation to coloniality as a structural situation. In this perspective, "Ulysses" is not merely a mirror of the empire but a kind of poetic practice that recreates the colonial matrix of power at epistemological, ontological, and spatial levels (Mignolo, *The Darker side* xxvii). Its exalted spirit of adventure is, then, not an anthropomorphic project of humanism but a constitutive part of colonial modernity. The article draws upon a postcolonial perspective and weaves the poem back into a decolonial context, challenging the epistemic and ontological bases of imperial discourse.

Moreover, the poem has been traditionally read as an endowment of the civilizing mission. The process of epistemic hierarchy, racialization, and justifying violence is packed tightly into the locutionary description of Ulysses, who reigns via his "Unequal laws upon the savage race / That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (4-5)¹ as depicted by Tennyson in the poem. Critics observe that such rhetoric presents Ulysses as universal and the others as morally and intellectually inferior. Meanwhile, the existential and humanist interpretations anticipate the subversive statement of the speaker, "I cannot rest from travel; I will drink life to the lees..." (6-7), and therefore, restlessness is a virtue that is associated with metaphysical transcendence. However, these descriptions often remove the poem from its historical and political context, turning expansion into an allegory beneath imperial policy.² A decolonial approach preempts the epistemic grounds on which imperial subjectivity can be intelligible in the first place, unlike a postcolonial one, which tends to question imperial representation, which is foundational to modernity. The interpretation of "Ulysses" in light of coloniality has shifted the imperialistic

¹ Greenblatt, Stephen, and M. H. Abrams, editors. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 2, 8th ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2005. This and all subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition and indicated in the paper only by respective line numbers within brackets.

² To get an even more imperial expression of Victorian expansionist ideology, please see Tennyson's "Locksley Hall". The current essay indicates that "Ulysses" is more subtle and that coloniality is hidden in metaphysics and heroic discourse, and not by the direct use of imperial rhetoric.

theme back to the more profound frameworks of knowledge, ontology, and space hierarchy that have perpetuated the contemporary power of the West. From a decolonial perspective, this abstraction is Eurocentric itself: it is imperial reason under the guise of individual will.

This research does not negate the poem's existential aspects but reinterprets them as ideological expressions of Western hegemony. Though Rowlinson (1992), McKinsey (2004), Babamiri (2017), and Doucette (2021) offer important insights into the ideological and imperial aspects of "Ulysses", their analyses remain, by and large, fixed on the role of representing empire or tracing out its ideological content, without questioning the epistemic, ontological, and spatial frames within which such imperial talk is intelligible. The generative aspects of postcolonial readings often default to the epistemic maps that they are critiquing. Instead, decoloniality demands "confronting and delinking with coloniality, or the colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, *The Darker side* xxvii). Edward Said and his contrapuntal approach, which views the canon and the histories of colonialism as mutually reinforcing, provide a critical point of departure. Although Mignolo, in "Epistemic disobedience and the decolonial option: A manifesto," believes the greater challenge is "epistemic disobedience," the denial of the Eurocentric epistemology is a normative frame (45). The fact that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive makes the poem necessitate being read not simply as a mirror of the empire, but as a realization of coloniality (Quijano, *Coloniality of Power* 547). This move towards "decolonial praxis" is a break with established Western habits of thought and creates space for other forms of knowing and existence to become possible (Mignolo and Walsh 6-7).

This study relies on a clear theoretical distinction: colonialism refers to the historical process of territorial domination, while coloniality describes the ongoing structures of power that shape culture, labor, relationships, and knowledge long after formal empires ended. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) notes, these structures permeate academic practices, cultural norms, shared beliefs, and self-perceptions (243). Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" exposes global hierarchies formed under European domination; the "coloniality of knowledge" critiques Western epistemology's claims to universality and the marginalization of non-Western ways of knowing; and the "coloniality of being" addresses how non-Europeans are rendered less than fully human or ahistorical (*Coloniality of Power* 549). Framing "Ulysses" within these categories clarifies that the poem is not merely an echo of a historical empire, but a poetic enactment of its persistent epistemic and ontological operations.

This argument is further re-enforced in its spatial dimension. The cartographic imaginary that the poem performs through its iconic image of the "untravell'd world whose margin fades" (20) is a space turned blank, familiar, and imperial to be written on. The space, as Lefebvre suggests, is a socially constructed category that cannot exist without relations of power (421), and Radcliffe (2022) finds that geography has been historically complicit in the generation of colonial hierarchies of persons and places (44-46). Steer (2020) also shows that the settler empire's literature was "more closely integrated with imperial politics and economics" and theorized Britishness

through expansion (34, 126). These ideas show how Ulysses makes mobility the hallmark of the imperial subject and exiles other geographies to stagnation and invisibility.

Singh's notion of dehumanism asserts how colonial structures rank some lives as "more human than others" (4). Ulysses' claim, "I am a part of all that I have met" (18), can be seen as less an act of relationality than it is an act of imperial absorption. His longing after a "newer world" (57) is a manifestation of the zero-point epistemology, the Eurocentric illusion that Western knowledge is universal and non-originating (Mignolo, *The Darker side* xxiii). The violence of the civilizing mission is disguised in the metaphysical idiom of exploration, which is turned into a spiritual vocation. The self-representation of the imperial North as unique and universal results in epistemicide in the "death of subordinated knowledges" under modernity (Santos 92). Ulysses is involved in this procedure not as a naive wanderer but as a poetic agent of epistemological dominance.

This paper is divided into three interrelated sections. First, it places "Ulysses" within the set of critical discourses already in existence, demonstrating how existential, humanist, and postcolonial approaches have shed some light on the poem while remaining silent on its structural entanglement with coloniality. Second, it offers a rigorous analysis of the poem through decolonial theory, focusing on how Tennyson has crafted his imagery, metaphors, and narrative to perform the coloniality of knowledge, being, and space. Thirdly, it addresses spatial and temporal aspects in the poem, showing how imperial hierarchies are inscribed on the map and in time, and how these processes create the invisibility of non-European knowledges and subjectivities. Combined, these passages show the need for a decolonial reading that reclaims silenced worlds, challenges epistemological power, and positions Ulysses as an agent within the colonial power structure. To place this study in the context of current scholarship, the next section provides a review of major existential, humanist, and postcolonial readings of "Ulysses", outlining their contributions and defining the theoretical constraints that drive a decolonial re-reading.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism of "Ulysses" has generally taken three broad approaches: existential readings, which have intensified the speaker's unsettled straining; humanist approaches, which have sought to make "Ulysses" universal in its morality; and postcolonial approaches, which have attempted to historicize its civilizing rhetoric and its participation in Victorian imperialist ideology. Some influential works have already situated "Ulysses" within Victorian imperial discourse. Matthew Rowlison (1992) approaches the poem as an ideological statement of liberal humanism in the context of imperial modernity, and Martin McKinsey (2004) as the poem's interaction with imperial knowledge structures and expansionist epistemologies. More explicitly, postcolonial interventions include the study by Navid Salehi Babamiri (2017) of imperial ambition and by Autumn Rose Doucette (2021) of masculinity and empire, both of which presuppose the poem's complicity with Victorian imperial

ideology. Although these readings historicize imperial ideology, they do not seek to challenge coloniality as a structural situation that defines knowledge, being, and space, as discussed above. What has not been fully explored is the poem's role in participating in imperial ideology and in enacting coloniality—the broader framework of power on which modernity itself organizes epistemic authority, subjectivity, and spatial hierarchy.

Victorian scholarship in recent years has increasingly demonstrated that the question of lyric form is bound up with the cultural logics of empire, an understanding necessary to the re-reading of “Ulysses”. Jason Rudy’s argument that the Victorian verse was spread as a political technology within imperial networks shows how the form of poetry itself was incorporated into the mechanism of expansion (2-4). The self-fashioning of Tennyson adds to this perspective, showing how Victorian lyric creates a shared identity that is always at odds with the standards of heroic continuity and national importance (Barton 1-3). Collectively, these descriptions imply that the already pre-existing state of affairs under which “Ulysses” was composed was already influenced by imperial myths of mobility, mastery, and name-making. Developing this, Ankhi Mukherjee (2014) locates the Victorian canon within the long, continuous history of empire, revealing how literary authority is a form of empire's heredity (9). Philip Steer (2020) develops this structural position by taking the process of assimilating literary forms into settler-colonial politics and economics as a way of tracing the aesthetics of the nineteenth century to a global system of expansion (2, 125). These histories of the institution and the material give some understanding of why the restlessness of Ulysses in an epic quest and worldliness seem so naturalized: they are products of a literary culture already congruent with colonial rationalities. Keirstead’s work is especially pertinent to “Ulysses”, as it examines how Tennyson uses the sea to symbolize empire and national identity (75). In contrast to the former works, which dwell on imperial or literary apparatuses in general, Keirstead addresses the imagery and poetic strategy of Tennyson directly. Using this observation on “Ulysses”, it becomes clear that the geography of the poem, its horizons, its margins, and its withdrawing worlds are involved in the space-logic of imperial modernity. Therefore, this mass of scholarly writing confirms that there is nothing about Victorian lyric and empire that is simply contemporaneous or that sets its own terms, but these aesthetics and epistemes are mutually constitutive. However, these studies tend to treat Victorian poetry in general, only indirectly mentioning Tennyson or “Ulysses”; there is space to relate these understandings more specifically to the work itself, and its imperial metaphors, its maritime imagery, and its heroism. Despite their critical acuity, these works do not pursue a decisively decolonial analytic, nor do they interpret empire as the structural ontology of modernity, but rather as a historical situation or representational frame.

In this regard, decolonial thinking, created by Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, provides exactly that framework. Quijano’s theorization of the coloniality of power recognizes modernity as inseparable from the racial, economic, and epistemic hierarchies that result from

colonial conquest (*Coloniality of Power* 547). His formulation reveals that modernity is not only a period of time but a world plan whose divisions of labor, knowledge, and subjectivity will continue to govern modern epistemic life. Mignolo ("Epistemic disobedience") takes this all the way to the coloniality of knowledge, where he claims that Western epistemology is universalized by silencing other knowledges and by naturalizing the zero-point epistemology—the illusion of neutral, originless reason (44-66). Maldonado-Torres (2007) introduces the third layer, the coloniality of being, which downgrades the colonized to ontological nonexistence or nonhumanity (254). The outcome of these processes is called epistemicide, the systematic annihilation of "subordinated knowledges" in the Eurocentric modernity (Santos 118). Taken collectively, these theorists uncover that coloniality is the matrix that intertwines power, knowledge, and ontology. The present paper relies on specific intersections, especially Quijano's ideas about the hierarchies of epistemology and the long-term structuring of global power (549, 552), to demonstrate that "Ulysses" both represents and performs colonial modernity through its metaphors, heroic assertions, and imagery of exploration. All these theorists resituate modernity as conclusively tied to the ongoing practices of colonial domination and reorient decoloniality toward a further postcolonial critique.

This theoretical triad finds additional enrichment in the trends of the spatial humanities and decolonial geography. Sarah Radcliffe's description of pluriversal spatialities shows how the history of geography has periodically reproduced colonial hierarchies (22, 44-46). The social production of space theory by Henri Lefebvre shows that space is never impartial and is a place where ideology is materially inscribed (48). The call to "think otherwise" highlights that interpretive frameworks must go beyond Eurocentric spatial imaginaries (Krishnan 139-141). These spatial understandings clarify the poem's maritime imagery, the description of Ithaca, and the unexplored world, which serve as poetic technologies that constitute a hierarchical classification of space under colonial authority.

Although these frameworks are pertinent, their application to the poem "Ulysses" has never been raised to a systematic and sustained dialogue within decolonial theory, even though it was crucial. Current postcolonial readings align the poem with the empire, yet fail to examine how metaphors, spatial imagination, and epistemic postures are reflected and reproduced by the underlying colonial structures described by Quijano, Mignolo, Maldonado-Torres, and Santos. Although a few postcolonial scholars, such as Rowlinson (1992), McKinsey (2004), Babamiri (2017), and Doucette (2021), have considered the role of imperial ideology in the poem, they have seldom examined how such ideology is made possible by mechanisms of knowledge, space, and being, leaving a gap. This paper aims to address this gap. The study states that "Ulysses" is a discourse of imperial ideology and also a practice of coloniality of knowledge, being, and space. Its metaphors of exploration, cartography, naming, and world-shaping ambition actively perform the work of colonial modernity: universalizing Western epistemology, relegating others to inferior positions, and reorganizing space into a center-periphery binary. Through close reading, this study deciphers how these poetic strategies are not merely

aesthetic but perform the epistemic and ontological hierarchies of empire, situating “Ulysses” as both a literary and colonial agent. Combining decolonial theory with a close reading of the poem, this work shifts the discussion from the empire’s superficial gleams to the poem’s epistemic and ontological operations. In this way, it becomes the first comprehensive decolonial reading of “Ulysses” and refurbishes the poem as a textual location where colonial modernity is imagined and reproduced. Collectively, the current scholarship substantiates the claim that imperial interpretations of “Ulysses” are not recent; this paper expands on this work by anticipating the emergence of coloniality as the structural requirement behind the poem’s epistemic, ontological, and spatial logic.

3. ULYSSES AND THE COLONIALITY OF BEING AND KNOWING

Having established the limits of existing criticism, this section turns to a close decolonial reading of “Ulysses”, focusing first on the coloniality of being and knowing. In “Ulysses”, Tennyson creates a figure at the crossroads of imperial fantasy and epistemic domination, through whom the coloniality of being is enacted poetically. The formulation of European knowledge and cultural representations has been examined by postcolonial authors such as Said (1978) and Bhabha (1994) in terms of discourse, identity, and the ideological processes of colonial power. Although these readings shed light on how empire functions on the level of representation, they do not thoroughly challenge the structural processes of knowledge, being, and space that decolonial theorists refer to as the coloniality of power. The speaker’s famous refusal to “rest from travel” (6) and his need to seek “knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought” (30-31) is not a signal of personal unease: Ulysses repeats what decolonial theorists have singled out as the epistemic drive of the modern/colonial subject: the drive to “strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (70). The poem thereby conceptualizes exploration as an epistemic endeavor rather than disinterested curiosity. The uncharted world is already programmed to be known, mastered, and included in an imperial map. This rationale can be linked to the “model of power based on coloniality,” which imprints a cognitive scheme that views non-Europeans as objects consigned to temporal and civilizational backwardness and as “inferior, if not always primitive” (Quijano 552). In such a framework, Eurocentric knowledge is homogenized, while non-European knowledges are marginalized, devalued, and epistemically erased.

In this colonial grid, the inclination of Ulysses to find a “newer world” (57) is not an inconsequential desire to explore the world or leave behind any legacies but a representation of the hubris of the zero point, the fantasy of a “universal epistemic code” and in which European epistemic forms appear neutral, placeless, and universally valid (Mignolo, *The Darker side* xvii). His statement that “I am a part of all that I have met” (18) does not claim reciprocity or relationality, but rather expresses the logic of imperial absorption and seizure, in which individuals and territories are digested into the text of the imperial self. This is symptomatic of the coloniality of being: the colonized are not allowed to be subjects of their own

existence but are remoulded as reflections of the colonizer's self-knowledge. According to Maldonado-Torres, coloniality of being downgrades the specific identities to general, undervalued ones. It infringes upon "human alterity", turning the alter-ego into a "sub-alter", a being deprived of complete subjectivity (257). Consider Julietta Singh's concept of dehumanism, a form of critical practice that shows how colonial and neocolonial regimes make certain kinds of life "more human than others" (4), and Ulysses appears as the poetic agent of the ontological violence embedded in it.

The poem's metaphysical rhetoric also obscures the violence of the civilizing mission by casting conquest in spiritual terms. Tennyson writes:

Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use! (20-23)

These lines render the untrodden world a stage of imperial subjectivity and aestheticize space deprivation and inferiority of epistemology as poetic sublimity. The untraveled world is not, therefore, merely a metaphor of a puzzled or exploratory world, but a discursive process that naturalizes superior knowledge and legitimizes the expansionist desires of the European subject. According to Steer, settler empire literature was "more closely integrated with imperial politics and economics" and was distributed through metropolitan cultural channels that strengthened British expansionist ideology (34). Settler colonies, in this way, served as some of the most "key sites for theorizing the progressive evolution of Britishness and British society," transforming conquest into a discourse of moral and civilizational advancement (Steer 126). The ideological formation itself, then, in Ulysses' troubling search for the new world, is his wish to transcend the familiar world, and this wish is poeticized into a Western being and Western knowledge that transform exploration into a sentimental and eroticized form of domination. Since "imperial North," conceiving itself as both "unique and universal," renders the South "unable to represent itself" except within Northern categories, which is an operation of epistemicide—the systematic murder of subordinated knowledges (Santos 92, 223). In this regard, Ulysses shares the same epistemic destruction that constitutes the foundations of colonial modernity.

Coloniality of being in "Ulysses" is staged with explicit human hierarchy, the most obvious being the derogatory heaps of the speaker on the Ithacans as "a savage race, / That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (4-5), which integrates racialization, ontological hierarchy, and erasure of the epistemics in one sentence. Ironically, Ithaca is Ulysses' homeland, and by calling his people "savage" and "rugged," he reinscribes colonial discourse in the metropole, making Ithaca appear backward and stagnant. This act of self-colonization demonstrates that coloniality re-arranges the imperial center and colonies and creates knowledge and value

hierarchies. In contrast to Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, whose power is based on returning and reintegrating, Ulysses in Tennyson's poem is a Victorian selfhood characterized by aspiration, movement, and futurity (Tucker 1988). The human value is therefore gauged on how close he is to the rationality of the Europeans, a classificatory logic of coloniality (Mignolo, "Epistemic disobedience" 17). The Ithacans are made savage and mindless, justifying the rule of Ulysses and uncovering how coloniality enters the frameworks on which modern subjects assign value to others and themselves.

The epistemic power which Ulysses asserts over nameless territories and peoples echoes previous accounts of empire in the English canon. His jealous ownership of the world is reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe's statement in Defoe's novel that he is the "king and lord of all this country"; he is entitled to territory, as Defoe's novel presents it. Likewise, that nationalistic praise of England in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, "this scepter'd isle," "this blessed plot" imagines the nation as blessed by God, making conquest and reign as a will granted by God (Dawson and Yachnin 169-170). These discourses make imperial sovereignty appear to be natural and divine. The fact that "no one colonizes innocently" (Cesaire 39), therefore, directly relates to the poem by Tennyson: regardless of how lovely the lyrics sound, the logic by which domination is established is still cold-blooded and utilitarian.

Combinations of these dynamics affirm that, in this reading, "Ulysses" serves as a metonym of the colonial situation: a poetic act of epistemic violence that solidifies the imperial self at the expense of the other by annihilating it. The poem creates a realm in which Europeans are the knowing subjects and the rest of the world the passive object of exploration, in which the expansion of the empire is normalized as a preferable and unavoidable state of nature. In this way, it institutionalizes the coloniality of death, a system in which death, disposability, or the redefinition of the Other becomes the precondition for the self-actualization of European identity (Maldonado-Torres 246). The imperial self that develops out of the lines of Tennyson is not merely a heroic or adventurous one but an epistemologically absolute, ontologically central, and ethically unaccountable one. This is precisely what colonial modernity means, and this is where the decolonial critique has to step in: revealing the poem's aesthetic power's dependence on the same structures of coloniality, which are simultaneously repressed and reproduced. The claim of imperial knowledge in "Ulysses" is not limited to the ethical and epistemic but also to the spatial: the poem not only creates the European self as absolute but also makes the entire world readable only through the eyes of the voyager. Through this, space is transformed into a site of colonial power, a territory whose blank spaces await inscription by imperial power.

4. IMPERIAL GEOGRAPHY AND COLONIALITY OF SPACE IN "ULYSSES"

"Ulysses" by Tennyson builds not merely an imperial subject but an imperial geography, one that lies within the logic of colonial modernity's space. The iconic scene of the poem, the "untravell'd world whose margin fades" (20), is an illustration

of the cartographic imagination that imperial expansion is all about: a world that is blank, unfinished, and waiting to be incorporated by the voyager. These visuals are analogous to what critical cartography has characterized as the spatial rhetoric of European power: "The hierarchies of class and power are constructed, reified and naturalized within the map... 'the stronger, the higher the profile'" (Harley 280-281). These conventions make hierarchy natural, and space becomes a field where domination is represented as objective knowledge. Ulysses is engaged in this logic because he thinks of space not as a plural, inhabited space but as a blank horizon whose meaning only becomes visible when it is brought into view by the imperial subject like him.

This spatial rhetoric aligns well with Aníbal Quijano's account of coloniality, in which space is organized to promote Eurocentric hegemony. This imperial geography of the poem is therefore a poetic expression which can be called the coloniality of space. It is a global system that favors the mobility, agency, and epistemic power of the center, banishing the periphery to stasis and insignificance. It is in this context that Ithaca is the established and tamed center. Ulysses has to leave Ithaca, and the "newer world" (57) is a frontier to be discovered and changed. This middle-margins schema is reminiscent of the abyssal line, as proposed by Santos, a geographical boundary between zones of being and non-being. Peripheral spaces in the poem only exist in relation to the journey of Ulysses; they only become meaningful when they are borne through by imperial motion. The Ithacans, "That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (5), are therefore demoted to the dead side of this space imagination, and the immobility is their witness of marginality.

This representational form reflects a worldview of nineteenth-century British imperialism, where exploration, navigation, and cartography became tools of generating knowledge, or, put differently, the erasure of the other spatial ontologies. As Tally (2013) claims, mapping became "a form of knowledge and power", which transformed the territorial conquest into intellectual mastery (25). In the same vein, Keirstead (2019) also points out that the sea was turned into a "threshold and imaginative vehicle" of empire because Britain had made the control of the waves their "national project" and made maritime mobility an icon of national identity (75). The metaphors in "Ulysses" are "margin", "horizon", and "sunset", which are cartographies of poetry, comparable to imperial maps that transformed Indigenous land into uninhabitable, familiar, and depletable. The sea serves as the boundary where the known meet the unknown, reinforcing a colonial hierarchy of space and justifying the imperial presumption that the undefined spaces outside Europe must be incorporated into an order based in Europe.

In this spatial economy, mobility is made into a virtue that creates moral and civilizational value. Tennyson portrays the will of Ulysses as:

One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield (68-70).

These lines are a good example of how the poem turns heroic struggle into a space and epistemic structure that legitimizes imperial mobility and renders people and places standing still lesser beings, underscoring the colonial logic of the Victorian heroic ideal. The agitating desire of Ulysses, expressed in these lines, is glorified as the mark of a heroic and dynamic character, in opposition to the Ithacan domestic immobility. In this spatial economy, mobility is made into a virtue that creates moral and civilizational value. This dichotomy recreates one of the key principles of the colonial discourse, the depiction of Indigenous cultures as backward, stagnant, or lagging in terms of time, which had to be conquered by the civilizing mission. The poem's geography is addressed directly through Walter Mignolo's characterization of the so-called territories of tradition, which are seen as backward until they are rearranged around modernity. Such a decolonial reading must therefore involve counter-mapping these spatial hierarchies, which would accomplish a reading of the poem not in terms of imperial cartography but in terms of what Sarah Radcliffe calls the decolonization of geography: the deconstruction of the Western spatial imaginaries that make the very terms of center and periphery. This view redefines Ithaca as not a dead place but as a place with ontologies of space, and conceptualizes the margin as what Radcliffe calls a pluriversal (later) locus of experience and knowledge (22, 58).

This work aligns with the epistemic disobedience Mignolo encourages and extends to spatial epistemologies. It is a decolonial cartography of "Ulysses" that would recuperate the geographies of the oppressed, as perpetuated in traditional readings, to see Ithaca as the habitable space of other knowledges and the so-called margins as the worlds fully lived. The analogous counter-mapping acts of the Indigenous communities, such as renaming places, defining local cosmology, and disrupting colonial spatial categories, will provide a helpful parallel to the literary interpretation. The recent scholarship supports such reorientation. In his article on planetarity and global spatialities, Madhu Krishnan advocates de-Eurocentricizing hierarchies and adopting a pluriversal imagination (139). Radcliffe also promotes multi-centered spatialities which do not rely on an imperial center. In sum, these views indicate that the imperial geography of "Ulysses" continues the colonial logics that shape its epistemological and ontological aspects. After analyzing how imperial space is produced through cartographic images and spatial hierarchy, the focus now shifts to how temporality reinforces the same colonial logics of domination.

This space arrangement is further complicated by time. The spatial vision in the poem combines with the linear, expansionist time, which resembles imperial historiography. Not only does conquest play out in space, but it is also set in time, with non-European cultures mocked as "primitive" in an earlier phase of history. Johannes Fabian calls this the denial of coevalness: the West places colonized people in a time past to legitimize intervention (31). Fabian's argument against rejecting coevalness is grounded in a broader critique of Enlightenment philosophy and Hegelian teleology, which viewed history as a linear process of development towards the realization of civilization. These teleological conceptions of time played a vital role in the discourse of colonialism, as other cultures were placed at a lower

stage of development, which justified conquest and intervention. Steer understands these logics as generating imperial systems that are structured around "competing principles of spatial homogeneity and temporal difference" (125). This colonial fusion of unequal time and space is reflected in the contrast between a static, cyclical Ithaca and the ever-receding horizon in the poem "Ulysses".

Therefore, the poem's spatial construction is performative: Ulysses does not simply describe the location; his words create it as imperial space. The geographic representation becomes a form of cultural annexation, as Henri Lefebvre argues that space is a "social production" (48). With this sort of poetic production, other geographies are rewritten, and natural Eurocentric spatial relations are produced. In this sense, the comprehension of "Ulysses" shows how Victorian poetry is involved in the imaginative construction of empire. The growth of Victorian literature, as Steer observes, was "part and parcel of the history of settler colonialism" (2), and "Ulysses" is a good example of how poetic forms could support imperial sovereignty even when presented as manifestations of individual heroism.

5. APPEARANCE VS. REALITY AND THE CIVILIZING MISSION: COLONIAL ONTOLOGY IN DISGUISE

Ulysses seems to reflect on the legacy of a dying king and his discontent with his home life; however, a decolonial approach shows that this rhetorical stance is an ontological act of colonial modernity. Instead of existential struggling, the poem transforms imperial ambition into a moralized desire, aestheticizing conquest into the character who decides "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (70). This glorified perseverance is presented as a poetic performance of epistemological rights and ontological rightness, naturalized as a commonplace virtue rather than identified as the ideological essence of the civilizing mission. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, following de Sousa Santos, the colonial discourse creates an "abyssal line" that places non-European people in the zone of non-being (3); the same line is reproduced by Tennyson when Ulysses describes the Ithacans as a "race, / That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (4-5). The allegation that colonialism shapes the native as the "absence" or the "negation" of values (Fanon 6) helps explain why ontological hierarchy is encoded in the poem, where Ulysses is cast as the bearer of culture and humanity. The Ithacans are made morally and intellectually empty to make his desire to subdue and impose imperial rule look justified.

This ontological imbalance is hidden within the poem's romanticized maritime imagery. The "untravell'd world whose margin fades / Forever and forever when I move" (20-21) is not a sign of mystery but is based on the imperial belief that space only becomes significant when familiarized, or named, or consumed by the Western subject. Keirstead notes that the sea was used in Victorian culture as a boundary where poetic imagination met Britain's national project of "ruling the waves," creating maritime space as a symbol of cultural identity (74-75). Tennyson turns to this geographical imaginary to make expansion natural, but, as Keirstead observes, his "imperial will starts to founder," exposing struggles that cannot be solved by

poetic abstraction (92). The quest for knowledge on the part of Ulysses, “like a sinking star” (31), is an epitome of Mignolo’s hubris of the zero point: the assertion that Western epistemology is universal and unmarked (*The Darker side* xvii). Such a knowledge stance is parallel to what Santos (2016) refers to as “epistemicide,” the destruction of subordinated knowledge in the name of Eurocentric modernity (92). Ulysses declares, “I am become a name” (11), and he performs what Barton calls the “name-centred” culture of Victorian Britain, where symbolic power overshadows lived reality (3). In this way, Ulysses is abstracted from historical personhood, a colonial sign whose identity swallows up the worlds he engages with, and the colonality of being is achieved through the erasure of other ways of being.

These hierarchies are also strengthened in the poem by the way Telemachus is characterized. His innocent nature, “center’d in the sphere / Of common duties” (39-40), makes him not a heroic heir but an agent of domestic policy who must “make mild / A rugged people” (36-37). This division resembles colonial administrative structures in which native elites governed local people, with epistemic and moral power reserved for the colonizer. It also enacts the colonality of time: Ulysses lives in a linear, progressive time that leads to “some work of noble note” (52), but Telemachus is systematized into a cyclical, repetitive time, the sort of time Western modernity sets itself against non-Western cultures. In this opposition, the poem identifies movement with modernity and stasis with backwardness, placing hierarchy in both time and space. If colonial hierarchy is established through ontology and morality, it is sustained aesthetically through metaphor, abstraction, and poetic form.

The metaphors of the abstracted sea that Tennyson uses enhance this ideological construction by rendering domination aesthetic. The lines like “gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge” (30-31), “the deep / Moans round with many voices” (55-56), and “the desire to sail beyond the sunset” (60) make the imperfection of the civilizing mission a metaphysical longing to soften violence. According to Steer, Victorian literature had emerged as “part and parcel” of settler colonialism (2), and “Ulysses” exemplifies how the poetic form might transform imperial ambition into a moral calling. Singh (2018) recognizes this order as the colonizer’s belief in the supremacy of his worldview (9), and Cesaire reminds us that no one colonizes without intent (39). These are some of the insights a reader encounters; the poem is not just conquest — it is the cultural production of imperial power, and poetic sublimity is the ideological production of empire (Said 112).

In a decolonial perspective, the beauty of the poem serves not to reduce, but to reveal, the extent to which the aestheticization process is part of the colonial grid of power. The poem raises Ulysses’ voice to the universal and eliminates the subjectivity of the Ithacans; therefore, it engages in what Santos (2016) terms the reproduction of the abyssal line that makes some people epistemically invisible (71). “Ulysses” is therefore not merely an apolitical reflection on old age and heroism but a text of being that legitimizes the colonial structures of knowing and being in the interest of ethical excellence. These operations can be seen through a decolonial reading showing how Victorian lyric is involved in the imaginative architecture of empire, even in the most introspective and apparently personal lyric utterances.

6. EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE AND THE NECESSITY FOR A DECOLONIAL READING

In its epistemic, ontological, and temporal forms, Tennyson's "Ulysses" reveals that it is much more than a poetic celebration of Victorian ambition; it is a literary expression of the colonial matrix of power. Its aesthetic beauty covers an epistemology and subjectivity that authorizes the empire by making the conquest a destiny and domination a revelation. The key to unraveling this hidden logic is what Mignolo calls the epistemic disobedience, that is, a conscious disconnection of Eurocentric regimes of knowledge that have historically enabled the neo-imperial expansion process to be concealed under the banner of civilizational advancement ("Epistemic disobedience" 45). A decolonial reading of "Ulysses" is, therefore, not a denial of the form of poetry but an interrogative challenge to the epistemological authority of the poem, its assertion of universal and absolute truth, its promotion of the worldview of its hero, and its naturalization of imperial subjectivity.

According to decolonial theorists like Aníbal Quijano and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, coloniality continues to shape ways of being and knowing even after the imperial period. Since Quijano affirms that modernity itself developed as a colonial process that established racialized divisions of labor and knowledge, it follows that modernity itself was developed as a colonial process that established racialized divisions of labor and knowledge (539). In this epistemic order, the European is the subject who knows, explores, and narrates, whereas the colonized becomes the object of knowledge. This organization pervades Ulysses. His wish to seek "knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (30-31) places the hero as an unlimited epistemic subject. The individuals that he encounters are either abstracted as "a savage race" (4) or caught up in his own ego in the assertion, "I am a part of all that I have met" (18). These constructions perform what Mignolo (*The Darker side*) describes as the so-called "colonial difference": an epistemological logic that universalizes the worldview of the conqueror and renders the conquered epistemically silent (xi). This means that Western epistemology is abyssal, not universal, and generates the other face of the line as nonexistent by destroying non-European knowledges (Santos 118). This abyssal line is squarely drawn in Ulysses between the civilized traveler and the silent, paralyzed other.

Although Edward Said's contrapuntal approach helped demonstrate how imperial logic was encoded within canonical texts, its reliance on the archive of empire limits its ability to undermine the epistemic regimes that legitimize the archives' existence. Even Said himself was aware of this limitation when he said the greater problem is not just whether literature reflects imperial interests but how literary form contributes to cementing imperial power (12). Epistemic disobedience pushes this criticism further by doubting not only the things literature purports to know but also the ways it secures intelligibility, values, and its canonicity. Drawing on Fanon, Maldonado-Torres situates epistemic disobedience as opposition to ontological colonialism, the regime that dictates who is fully human and who belongs to the zone of non-being (253). The heroic subjectivity of Ulysses, as he articulates it through metaphors of action, danger, vision, and myth, is given

meaning by the evacuation of others' subjectivity. The conception of his trip to the "Happy Isles" and his encounter with the "great Achilles" (63-64) also makes the voyage transcendent. It conceptually obliterates the lives of people whose lives were touched by such expeditions. The description of the colonized as ideally an "absence of values," beings reduced to "blank faces," vegetating beings, makes it clear that the poem's ontology is based on the systematic negation of the Other (Fanon 6-7).

In this light, "Ulysses" is a colonial epistemic formation, a text that conditions readers to appreciate the same violence that eliminates other worlds. Its linear temporality, its heroic teleology, recreates the reasoning of the civilizing mission: that productivity, movement, and expansion are the moral imperatives in the world. The age-related lines like "Old age hath yet his honor and his toil" (50) could be considered an example of coloniality of time, in which labor and movement are the main characteristics of human existence, and non-Western time is viewed as nonexistent or backward. Shehla Burney (2012) goes further, calling this out and showing how postcolonial scholarship fails to recognize that canonical literature does not merely consign non-Western epistemologies to the margins but actively erases them. Reading contrapuntally, she writes, is "to read with suspicion," but reading decolonially is to inquire, "what must be erased for this narrative to be possible?" (128). This inquiry is the basis of decolonial praxis as described by Mignolo and Walsh, who describe it as a project of "re-existence", the recovery of lives, knowledges, and worlds that coloniality has attempted to destroy (21).

To read "Ulysses" decolonially, one must therefore not only take into account what the poem reveals but also the epistemic and ontological spaces it represses. The world of Ulysses can only be logical by making other people incoherent; his motion is a heroic action only because other people are seen as immobile; his wisdom is the universal one only because other knowledge is not allowed to be legitimate. The song of a "newer world" (57) is no mere innocent dream, but a call of the imperial rationality that makes colonial conquest a discovery. Modernity is "the agenda of coloniality" in which nothing would be a modern subject without the colonial subaltern, nothing would be epistemic heroism without epistemic suppression (Mignolo, *The Darker side* xxi). The transcendence of Ulysses is based on the disavowal of difference; his motion presupposes the enforced stillness of other people.

The poem's aesthetic force also ensures this ideological operation. The rhythmic enjoyment and high diction invite the reader to identify with the speaker, making it hard to question his authority. The process of making the Victorian canon, as Mufti notes, was created alongside colonization, and it produced a metropolitan culture that believed it could exist without "any knowledge of those far-off places" (407, 413). In this project, "Ulysses" participates in placing the empire's hierarchies within the texture of the poetic language. In this regard, the poem performs what Santos terms epistemicide, the murdering of alternative modes of knowing by aesthetic subjugation (92). A decolonial reading is therefore not only a methodological choice but also an imperative to do something ethical. It tries to reclaim the forgotten, the muted, and the marginalized. Decoloniality cannot be confined to criticism, as

Catherine Walsh insists, but is a horizon of imagining new ways to live in the aftermath of the erasure of history (17). This view aligns with Santos's vision of an "ecology of knowledges," which questions the universal hierarchies of Western epistemology by reinstating suppressed knowledges (190). Such pluralistic epistemic setups are contrasted with the monologic voice of "Ulysses", its metaphysical abstraction, and its systematic effacement of others.

Lastly, the ideological mechanism working in "Ulysses" is part of a wider Victorian tradition. Similar logics of civilizational mastery and racialized ontology can be seen in texts such as Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Whereas Kipling makes empire a moral obligation and Conrad challenges its moral inconsistency, both reproduce coloniality by positioning the colonized as lesser or unknown. An even more explicit expression of this imperial logic is already apparent in Tennyson's other poem, "Locksley Hall" (1842), where the expansionist aspiration, racial hegemony, and civilizational futurity are more explicitly imperial. By its turn, "Ulysses" is much less direct as its rhetoric of empire is hidden behind the metaphysics of motion, transcendence, and heroic struggle. Still, the result remains the same: European subjectivity is affirmed by being able to leave the rest of the world behind. "Ulysses" is thus less a canonical poem of Victorian heroism and more of a text in the entanglement of the colonial organization of knowledge, subjectivity, and time. The required response is epistemic disobedience, in which readers can uncover the poem's ideological constructions and reclaim the voices it suppresses. The psychic annihilation of imperialism is the most pernicious of its violence, as Fanon notes, it leaves the colonized a kind of "corrosive element," depersonalized, identity teetering on the defensive edge in defensive hysteria (xxv). Decolonially to read "Ulysses" is to resist that kind of violence, to reject its ontologies, and to imagine otherwise.

7. DECOLONIAL RE-READING OF "ULYSSES" FOR RECLAIMING MEANING

The decolonial re-reading of "Ulysses" is not just a critical act of revealing the poem's ideological tangle with empire but also a liberatory and creative effort. According to Catherine Walsh, decoloniality does not merely mean delinking from Eurocentric knowledge but also "re-existence," which involves the continuous creation of knowledge through an alternative mode of being and knowing (19). This necessitates the re-existence of such literature, which needs to be recovered to serve the imperial archive once more. This is a reinterpretation of its metaphors, rhythms, and formal gestures, not as the manifestations of the universal human struggle, but as manifestations of an epistemic order that suppresses multiplicity, controls meaning, and supports one worldview against many.

The last line of the poem "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (70), which had for centuries been read with great success as an affirmation of the human spirit, overcomes a quite different tone when viewed through a decolonial prism. Instead of heroic will, the line is an expression of the poetization of logic of unstoppable expansion of the imperial power: an agitated, self-legislative movement that

conquers, assimilates, and obliterates in the name of transcendence. A decolonial reading disrupts such triumphalism, and we see how “systems of knowledge” and “systems of representation” are involved in the creation of colonial difference (Walsh 21). Similarly, Krishnan refers to the decolonial project as an attempt to “decenter the hegemonic force of coloniality” and to envision a world comprised by “a confluence of knowledges, ways of being and modes of understanding” (139). In these terms, the adventures of Ulysses do not seem like inspirational journeys anymore but like textual acts of epistemic usurping.

The critical questions we ask also change when we re-read the poem through a decolonial lens. We do not inquire what the determination of the hero is, but what knowledge is denied, what is ignored, and what is overwritten. Who is even permitted to talk, and who is reduced to the position of the one talked about? These questions are linked to the “sociology of absences” that attempts to make visible what has been made invisible by the abyssal line separating dominant and subaltern knowledges (Santos 172). In “Ulysses”, the Ithacans have no epistemic presence; they are a “savage race” (4) with no intellectual companionship and narrative interiority. One of the primary functions of decolonial reading is to recover their lost knowledge, in the poem or even in literary criticism generally.

A decolonial re-reading of “Ulysses” also situates the text within the work of Aníbal Quijano, who defines coloniality of power as a global arrangement of meaning and personal authority established since the sixteenth century. In this type of reading, literary canons, instead of being disinterested stores of aesthetics, propagate racialized and gendered practices of meaning. In this perspective, Ulysses is no longer a figure of heroism but of imperial dominance, a subject that exists solely through the negation of others' subjectivities. Reclaiming meaning, therefore, is a question of seeing the poem as a fact of an epistemic hierarchy, as opposed to timeless truth. However, this reclamation can be made without compromising Tennyson's aesthetic success. Instead, it puts it into context and reinvents it. According to Shehla Burney, decolonial reading “reclaims the silenced” and turns the literary gaze into an investigation rather than a celebration (137). This is in the spirit that “Ulysses” is not thrown away but converted into a plural space of meaning. Its metaphors and cadences, which were once assumed to be universal, can now be read alongside the voices they oppressed to open up alternative epistemic and ontological scenarios. “Ulysses” is transformed through such re-reading as a place where repressed knowledges can be reintroduced into the interpretative sphere, allowing a literary praxis based on plurality rather than hierarchy.

8. CONCLUSION

The decolonial reading of Tennyson's poem “Ulysses” shows that the lyrical heroism of the poem is entirely inseparable from the coloniality structures that it performs and makes natural. Quite the contrary, “Ulysses” undertakes the epistemic, ontological, and spatial work of imperial modernity: it claims Eurocentric knowledge as universal, relegates subaltern voices to silence, and orders space and time through

colonial hierarchies. Metaphysical imagery and rhythmic sublimity of the poem, usually interpreted as manifestations of personal transcendence, in fact serve as aesthetic tools that justify conquest and annul other ways of being and knowing. Victorian lyric is a place where epistemicide, ontological subjugation, and cartographic domination are not simply represented but performed through the imperial self of Ulysses. Placing "Ulysses" into the context of coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, this paper shows why epistemic disobedience: the intentional non-acceptance of the Eurocentric epistemology of the poem as normative and universal, is needed. Decolonial interaction, as coined by Mignolo, Walsh, and Santos, enables us to reclaim silenced voices, repressed knowledges, and different spatialities that the poem's imperial gaze has locked out. This way, "Ulysses" becomes a canonical read rather than a celebration of heroic ambition; it becomes a textual archive of colonial modernity in which the aesthetic cannot be separated from the ideological.

Ultimately, this decolonial re-reading confirms the fact that literary criticism can be both critical and creative: it not only reveals the colonial order within canonical literature but also creates interpretative space in which to re-exist, think plurally, and be epistemically just. One way in which "Ulysses" is revisited as an object to be interrogated, reimagined, and resisted is by making it read as a victory of the human spirit. The spatial-epistemic critique of this future scholarship could be applied to other Victorian and modernist writings that were framed by aesthetic terminologies of adventure, progress, and transcendence that mask the practices of coloniality, which defined the literary canon.

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