

Troubling sociolinguistics practice and the coloniality of universalism

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The quite contemporary epistemological postures that are critical of the dominance of Euro-modernist knowledge traditions are sometimes guilty of inadvertently perpetuating the very same hegemonies they seek to unsettle. For this reason, the intervention by Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa is timely and relevant. In re-assessing the “common sense” assumptions that belie the concept of “raciolinguistics,” Flores and Rosa remind us of the need to pitch our conversations with boldness, conceptual clarity, and conviction to avoid essentialisms that tend to hide and reveal—in equal measure—the co-naturalization of language and race and the concomitant discourses they invoke. This short commentary engages their reflections.

More than two decades ago, Latin American decolonial theorist, philosopher, and semiotician Walter D. Mignolo (2002) published an article on “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference.” In the article, Mignolo introduced several concepts that are foundational to the arguments that Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa advance. Included among the concepts introduced by Mignolo is “colonial difference,” “repetition without difference,” “the double bind,” “border thinking,” “relocation of thinking,” “critical awareness of the geopolitics of knowledge,” “Eurocentrism from the left,” and “Eurocentric critique of modernity,” among others. Together, and individually, these concepts point to the conundrum that contemporary social science and allied scholarly communities face in trying to transcend meta-narratives of Euro-modernist coloniality—in ways that do not reproduce the same. When Mignolo introduced these concepts, he was drawing attention to the fact that while the post-modern criticism of Euro-modernity is important and necessary, it is not enough. His call was for the development of alternative grammars and vocabularies that are fit for purpose—ones that would enable

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us to side step the language of colonial dichotomies and fallacies of superiority, linearity, completeness, and universal relevance.

In re-engaging and troubling the concept of “raciolinguistics,” Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa follow the path of reflexive praxis charted by Walter Dignolo and other decolonial theorists. They are inviting us to enter dialogic conversation on the imperative to think otherwise, to think anew, those rarely challenged “commonsense” assumptions that underpin the work we do in sociolinguistics and allied fields of study. It is an invitation to change not only the conversation but also the contents of our conversations. Flores and Rosa urge us to embark on delinking—a project that confronts the dangers of global coloniality and hierarchies of humanity, race, languages, and knowledges. They are inviting us to undertake a broader global review of our practices to ascertain how we got to be where we are as well as the steps we might take to pick ourselves up and continue walking. Or, as postcolonial literary critic, Chinua Achebe, might have suggested in *Things Fall Apart*: this is about finding out where the rain began to beat us and how we can build a sturdier and roomier shelter (Achebe, 1959). This is because the methodologies and theories developed to serve the ends of colonization and the exercising of imperial power “are no longer fit for the job because they are both historically and conceptually out of date” (Chabal, 2012, p. viii). We need to think from a non-Euro-modernist and decolonial standpoint to enable us to question several assumptions that we normally take for granted.

Flores and Rosa raise numerable critical points. I will engage and elaborate on three that stand out for me. The first is about providing conceptual clarity and setting the record straight on the distinction between “raciolinguistics” and a “raciolinguistic perspective.” On this point, they consider the unhelpfulness of the nominalization of “raciolinguistics” insofar as it reproduces problematic essentializations in analyses of intersections between race and language. The preference for presenting the argument in terms of a “raciolinguistic perspective” is important because this conveys an action logic that emphasizes the ongoing rootedness, possibilities of existing otherwise, and thinking and acting with/across territories that should frame our struggle for new futures. For this reason, I find Flores and Rosa’s reflection persuasive because “a raciolinguistic perspective” suggests a conceptual framing that “captures the kind of posture, attitude, and action we need in pushing forward the agenda of resistance, refusal, resurgence, and a re-existence otherwise” (Ndhlovu, 2022, p. 3). Unlike the nominal term “raciolinguistics,” which betrays the Euro-modernist colonial obsession with naming things, peoples, ideas and so on, for purposes of classifying, hierarchizing, and controlling, “a raciolinguistic perspective” speaks to the ongoing creation of ways of thinking, ways of knowing, ways of sensing, being, and living now and into the future (Ndhlovu, 2022; The New Polis, 2022). Flores and Rosa make it abundantly clear that due to its rootedness in an ongoing living reality of struggle, “a raciolinguistic perspective” holds the promise for new and alternative pathways.

This leads me to the second point, which is about troubling the tendency to institutionalize our practice. The late Nobel Prize Laureate and anti-racism scholar, Toni Morrison (2019), once asked in relation to African American Studies: What is the true purpose of the discourse? In their article, Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa are, in a sense, restating Toni Morrison’s question. They suggest that when a discourse or an idea becomes commonplace, it runs the risk of losing its salience as it turns into a slogan (Ndhlovu, 2022). When introducing the concept of sloganization in the context of language education research, David Gramling (2018) advised that slogans benefit from enjoying extraordinary space and visibility through suppressing and subsuming counterevidence in given discursive terrains. An unintended consequence is the promotion of a partial and distorted epistemology that is historically and culturally blind. In reflecting on the study of race and language, Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa are following hard on the heels of this previous body of work that calls attention to the pitfalls of discourses that have been canonized to the extent of losing their salience. Flores and Rosa’s article

initiates a conversation on how we might redeem the study of language and race from the slogonization implicated in the uncritical uptake of the concept of “raciolinguistics.”

The argument is that analyses of race and language lose their liberatory power when they are appropriated in services of equilibrium (status quo), what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012, p. 1) have characterized as “metaphorization of decolonization [that] makes possible a set of evasions, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity.” The consequence is the dilution of the hard and unsettling work of decolonization. Tuck and Yang discuss several things that are unsettling about such appropriation, one being the superficial adoption of the language of decolonization in a manner that supplants prior ways of talking about social justice, and other social scientific approaches that seek to disrupt colonial legacies. A key imperative here is the importance of “a heightened reflexivity amongst those of us who are advocates of decolonisation in much the same way that we expect other scholars to become more introspective about their intellectual outputs” (Moosavi (2020, p. 333). This is the call that Flores and Rosa are answering in their reflections.

The third critical point that Flores and Rosa raise is one about challenging the colonial discourse of universalism. On this point, they are pushing back against “global networks and hierarchies of knowledge production [and] critically reflecting on and resisting the universalization of US racial logics” (Flores & Rosa, this issue). This proposition echoes lines of argument advanced by other scholars particularly those speaking from Indigenous and Southern perspectives (e.g., Connell, 2007; Makoni, 2012; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021; Ndhlovu, 2021; Ndhlovu & Kelly, 2020; Nabudere, 2011; Ramadan, 2011; Yunkaporta, 2019). Like Flores and Rosa, these Southern and Indigenous scholars trouble the fallacies of universal relevance, grand narratives, grand erasures and reading from the center that characterize the mainstream Western/Euro-modernist scientific enterprise.

The concerns that Flores and Rosa raise around the discourse of universalism implicate the concept of “coloniality of universalism”, a term I introduce here to describe how Euro-modernist imperial forces colonized the idea of the “universal” and used it to conquer the knowledges, cultures, and languages of everyone else around the world. Through colonialism, the very essence of what it means to be human and to know was reduced to a parochial construct of Euro-modernity. It is this colonized idea of universalism, which frames the concept of “raciolinguistics” that Flores and Rosa are challenging. They suggest that when faced with the racialization that is endemic in language and language education, our responses must assume a planetary posture. A redeemed universalism must be the rallying point from which diverse networks of local academic and nonacademic communities fighting for social, educational, and cognitive justice converge to exchange ideas, experiences, and strategies for charting common global futures.

To conclude, the reflection by Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa is significant in that their critique of discourses and praxes that have inadvertently produced essentialisms are not unique or limited to the field of sociolinguistics. Rather, the arguments they posit speak directly to what is happening in the academy in general because nearly all our disciplines constitute the intellectual apparatus that sustains the ongoing project of global coloniality. This invitation to engage in critical reflection on our disciplines and our practices is, therefore, a welcome addition to the burgeoning voices calling for the same, especially those speaking from Southern, Indigenous, and decolonial perspectives. To advance this commendable agenda, we must adopt a methodological posture that brings together diverse cultures and traditions of knowing to mediate pathways for producing interconnected forms of knowledge. The goal must be that of transcending the limits of mono-epistemes that have institutionalized some of our work on language and race.

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