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DIALOGUE: COMMENTARY

A raciolinguistic perspective from the United Kingdom

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1 | SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANXIETIES

In 2023, I was invited to give a talk on the resurgence of deficit thinking in England's schools, and how contemporary education policies reproduce raciolinguistic ideologies which frame the language practices of working-class and racialised children as suffering from debilitating absences. After my talk, a White male professor commented that this was more about class than race, and that sociolinguistic scholarship focusing on race risked downplaying the struggles of the White working class. I have witnessed the same anxieties unfold in the peer review system, where UK sociolinguists seem uneasy about scholarship which centres race and colonialism, despite the colonial logics which lie at the core of the discipline (Heller & McElhinny, 2022). This is especially concerning given that sociolinguistics emerged simultaneously with the anti-colonial organising of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s, representing community activism which included exposing systemic anti-Black language policing in schools.

In their leading piece, Flores and Rosa articulate how a raciolinguistic perspective invites us to interrogate the colonial roots of sociolinguistics and how issues of race, colonialism and White supremacy have been pushed to its disciplinary margins. A raciolinguistic perspective seeks to undo taken-for-granted assumptions about language, race and class to interrogate how British colonial logics continue to shape modern society. This intersectional approach has been fundamental to the emergence of a raciolinguistic perspective from the United Kingdom which has examined the mutually constitutive nature of race, class and language in different contexts including schools (Cushing, 2022; Cushing & Snell, 2023; Li Wei & García, 2022), the UK citizenship process (Khan, 2021), speech and language pathology (Farah, f.c.), and urban areas with high South Asian populations (Sharma, 2016; see also

Harris, 2006). This builds on a long history of work produced by racially marginalised scholars who exposed how colonial and White supremacist logics delegitimised the language practices of racialised communities in mid-20th-century England (e.g. Coard, 1971; Singh, 1988). Yet, these names are typically erased out of historical accounts of UK sociolinguistics (see Gilmour, 2020 for one exception) in much the same ways that colonialism and anti-Blackness are often overlooked in projects on so-called Multicultural London English. The need for UK sociolinguists to pay attention to coloniality is ever more urgent given energised attempts by the state to deny the existence of institutional racism, censor anti-colonial efforts in schools and universities and project images of White, working-class children as victims of ethnic diversity (Shafi & Nagdee, 2022). As Flores and Rosa argue, sociolinguists have an important role to play in uncovering how perceptions of language are central to the specific articulations of racism in the modern-day United Kingdom, urging us all to de-universalise ways of being and knowing which are rooted in notions of idealised Whiteness and have long shaped sociolinguistic scholarship.

2 | UNDOING SOCIOLINGUISTICS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: THE COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE DISCIPLINE

I write this commentary from Britain, whose colonialism, Christian missions and enslavement of Black African populations shaped the modern world and continues to produce distinctions between Whiteness and non-Whiteness. Understanding the global White supremacy that Britons designed is key to understanding how raciolinguistic ideologies were central to the dehumanising efforts of British imperialism, in which African and Indigenous populations were represented as incapable of producing legitimate language (Smith, 2009). These colonially situated language ideologies continue to define which communities get perceived as more legitimate than others, yet have been dismissed or ignored in canonical UK sociolinguistic scholarship. Taking our lead from Flores and Rosa, sociolinguists can assume a raciolinguistic perspective to undo and de-universalise these assumptions through 'critically interrogat[ing] modes of being and knowing that emerged in conjunction with the globalisation of European colonialism' (this issue).

Flores and Rosa's leading piece articulates how a raciolinguistic perspective provides a framework for interrogating how racism and colonialism formed the intellectual base of sociolinguistics. The foundations of UK sociolinguistics were built by able-bodied White men whose work relied on universalising claims about language, bodies and personhood. The rise of European dialectology in the mid-19th century produced descriptions of linguistic variation which essentialised race and language though border-making activities, from isoglosses on maps through to the maintenance of national boundaries. Dialectologist projects of the mid-20th century, such as the Survey of English Dialects between 1951 and 1961, based their documentations of linguistic normativity on biological normativity, actively seeking out informants who were White, able-bodied, native, elderly, male and living in rural areas and who had 'good mouths, teeth and hearing' (Orton et al., 1978, p. 3). The emergence of Labovian inspired UK sociolinguistics in the second half of the 20th-century shifted attention to urban areas whilst also subscribing to a liberal progress narrative which claimed to be in solidarity with stigmatised communities and motivated by the under-achievement of working-class children in schools. As Flores and Rosa argue in this issue, sociolinguistics continues to be shaped by these helping hand logics which suggest that modest, language-based reforms are the panacea for social injustices. These guises of benevolence were first rehearsed and refined during British colonialism (Chapman & Withers, 2019).

Sociolinguists in England have often positioned their work as advocating for the home language practices of working-class children in ways which pay scant attention to the broader structures of White supremacy and the colonial histories of named languages and varieties (Halliday, 1978; Le Page, 1968; Trudgill, 1975). Such efforts suggested that stigmatised communities are best supported by affirming what linguists deemed to be an empirical set of non-standardised, non-academic language practices and then using these as a bridge to acquire standardised and academic forms in the belief this would provide them social justice. These attempts continue to inform compensatory education programmes in ways which convert ideologies of linguistic deficit into economic profit (see Cushing, 2022, 2023). Such efforts are in stark contrast to those of Black activist-linguists such as Ansel Wong and Roxy Harris, both affiliated with the Black Education Movement and the Brixton Black Panthers and who in the 1970s worked closely with the Inner London Educational Authority to design anti-racist language materials for schools which were rooted in the broader sociopolitical struggles that racialised communities were confronted with. Their efforts inspire similar work today (e.g. Thompson, 2022), especially those which, as Flores and Rosa call for, pay careful attention to the colonial histories and hierarchies which structure contemporary society as a means to upend racial injustices.

Raciolinguistic ideologies were integral to the writings of British colonisers in their representations of Black African and Indigenous communities, used to justify genocide, exploitation, occupation and the complete eradication of Indigenous life worlds. There is a long history of the British White working class being analogised and constituted with Black enslaved and colonised populations, with perceptions about the purported idle language practices of the White working class used to position them at the boundaries of Whiteness itself (Shilliam, 2018). Flores and Rosa demonstrate how paying attention to the dynamicity of Whiteness and racial borders is key to a raciolinguistic perspective which seeks to denaturalise essentialised assumptions about language. British sociolinguistic advocates of code-switching and its various derivatives—even those which briefly allude to the denaturalising of the co-construction of race and language (e.g. Rampton, 1995)—have left intact the broader colonial histories and statuses of named languages and language varieties. These purportedly progressive approaches are also found in the sociolinguistic concept of superdiversity, which pays little attention to the long histories of European colonialism and how this continues to shape modern society. Whilst generally claiming to reject appropriate-based models of language education as critiqued by Flores and Rosa, even UK proponents of critical language awareness have paid little, if any, attention to race (e.g. Fairclough, 1992).

A raciolinguistic perspective is less concerned with the documentation of empirical language practices in ways which naturalise form–identity relations and is more concerned with showing how even when racialised speakers might be perceived as 'switching' or 'crossing' to a language variety enregistered with idealised Whiteness they will still face stigmatisation because of how perceptions about language are shaped by colonial, political and economically situated ideologies. In dialogue with translanguaging, itself a decolonising project which emerged from the Welsh context (Lewis et al., 2012; see Li Wei & García, 2022), a raciolinguistic perspective seeks to problematise the borders and border crossings which rely on the empirical status of named languages/varieties that British linguists have been central to producing. This commits to a theory of change which is focused on the abolition of interlocking systems of domination including racial capitalism, anti-Blackness and White supremacy. Such an approach is less concerned with documenting at what points borders are crossed but in how those borders were first designed as part of the British colonial project and how they continue to be policed. As Flores and Rosa stress, this analytical shift away from individualised speaking subjects and towards sociopolitically situated perceiving subjects is crucial if sociolinguists are to avoid 'reproducing stereotypical representations of linguistic Otherness [which] focus narrowly on linguistic structures rather than political and economic structures' (this issue).

3 | FUTURES

Sociolinguists in Britain have been fighting language-based prejudice for decades. Some of these efforts may appear liberatory, but are so often rooted in deficit thinking which maintains a burden on individuals to modify themselves (see Snell, 2018 for a discussion). A raciolinguistic perspective pushes us to interrogate how the working class in Britain was constitutionalised through colonialism and how in later years, the racialisation and criminalisation of stigmatised communities structured welfare reform and austerity politics. By paying attention to how these issues of slow, state violence are connected to racialised linguistic violence, sociolinguists in Britain can centre their efforts on transforming oppressive structures rather than oppressed individuals, and, as Flores and Rosa argue, 'challenge theories of change focused on modifying the linguistic behaviors of racialised subjects' (this issue). As illustrations of what this might look like beyond the confines of academia, Black lawyers and activists (e.g. No More Exclusions, 2022; Thompson, 2022) are engaging in abolitionist efforts for transformative linguistic justice in combination with broader efforts targeting structural changes concerning anti-Blackness in schools and institutional police racism. On similar lines, Black speech and language therapists have forged community partnerships which reject methodologies of language pathologisation built on White supremacist logics (Farah, f.c.). We can all take inspiration from this work in seeking a materialist, anti-racist theory of change in sociolinguistics. As Flores and Rosa have demonstrated, our joint efforts should not lie in seeking to modify individual attitudes but in interrogating the colonial foundations and legacies which have shaped the normative narratives, methodologies and theoretical assumptions on which UK-based sociolinguistics is designed on. At the same time, they caution against this work being carried out in disciplinary silos by scholars considered to be 'raciolinguists' and urge us all to consider the colonial logics that lie at the very core of sociolinguistic scholarship in the United Kingdom.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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