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Introduction: Language and White Supremacy

The introduction to this special issue frames White supremacy as a central concern within linguistic anthropology, both as a focus of analysis and as a power structure that has profoundly shaped the field's logics and demographics. We emphasize how carefully attending to language, discourse, and signs can productively illuminate White supremacy's slippery logics, organizing principles, dynamic infrastructures, and diverse practices. Centering the role of White supremacy in constituting modern sign relations can contribute significantly to linguistic anthropologists' efforts toward understanding historical and contemporary power structures that organize the dynamic yet systematic interplay between language and context. We hope that this special issue builds constructively on longstanding and more recent linguistic anthropological work that has led us to reconsider the fundamental relationship between language, race, and culture while also pushing our field in important new directions by reconsidering the fundamental relationship between language and racism as a strategy for understanding and contributing to efforts toward combating White supremacy. [anti-Blackness, language, racism, White supremacy]

As co-editors of a special issue dedicated to language and White supremacy, we are tasked with trying to adequately emphasize the ways in which much of the world has been steeped in White supremacist racism and with noting how language has been integral to such processes. Collectively, the contributions to this special issue posit and illustrate a central organizing logic of White supremacy as "White supremacy/anti-Blackness," which stakes out two poles and frames, if you will, the complex and undertheorized "middle" of various peoples of color (Spears, this issue). That is to say, the iconography and materiality of White supremacy systematically positions anti-Blackness as its antithesis while maintaining the capacity to shift in its targeting of various populations. And, despite its primacy, this particular polemic and hierarchical logic may be one among many manifestations of White supremacy. Insofar as White supremacist racism functions as a justification for modern colonialism-imperialism, it produces myriad patterns of dispossession, disposability, and differentiation, even as it reifies European modernity's primary taxonomies of humankind. Therefore, one cannot apprehend how the United States and much of the modern world operate without understanding the intricate workings and overlapping consequences of White supremacy.

(For simplicity's sake, we use uppercase for ethnoracial terms, though we are aware of diverse positions on how capitalization ought to be used and have allowed contributors to follow their preferences.)

Remaining silent or epistemically whitewashing the torture, violence, murder, inequality, alienation, health crises, and environmental destruction unleashed by White supremacy should no longer be options for linguistic anthropologists and others, in the United States and globally, who claim to be invested in anti-racist or decolonial projects and activism. We must also contend with the ways in which White supremacy harms and brutalizes not just people of color but also, to a lesser extent, White-identified people (particularly, the working class and poor) and serves as the foundation for the divide-and-conquer tactics that have been used throughout U.S. history to push Whites toward identifying upward to the owners of capital rather than with their fellow workers who are economically oppressed.

Furthermore, a fundamental strategy and structuration of White supremacy is the magnification and invention of grouphoods that often function to stir up jealousies and rivalries among subordinated populations, for example, "these Black people are better than those" and "this minority is the model one" while those other Others epitomize "un-model-minorityness." Many strategies help cloak the multiple extensions of racial slavery and settler colonialism: massacres and genocide, bound labor, racial segregation, medical experimentation, displacement, torture, rape, miseducation for internal oppression, colorism, and forced economic underdevelopment (e.g., the lynching of Black entrepreneurs and destruction of Black business districts, like Greenwood, along with the communities they served). Simultaneously, an inadequately regulated capitalism has set us on a forced march toward mass extinction resulting from environmental destruction. We have witnessed a renovation of women's subordination and legal femicide; religious persecution; the demonization and murder of transgender people (namely, trans women of color); the degradation and abuse of immigrant children, the mentally ill, and persons experiencing homelessness. All of us must react to these profound downgradings of human life and our planet.

From some perspectives, the present moment has torn off many covers, revealing hateful messages and actions from centers of government in concert with their media and grassroots accomplices. These include the cover of White supremacy festering in branches of the military and police departments across the country, as well as the cover of genteel, and apparently concerned, yet still racist discourses about Black and/or Indigenous people and people of color in high and supposedly liberal and progressive places. For example, there has been wonderment caused by the "brightness," "cleanness," and "articulateness" of a Black U.S. president (Alim and Smitherman 2012). Such linguistic racisms are not attached to brutality and exploitation directly; but, they raise significant questions about the significance of the ostensible goodwill emanating from smiling faces (Kroskrity, this issue).

The return to normalcy promised throughout Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign evoked a collective memory of a calmer, more civil pre-Trump U.S. and certainly seemed to kindle a lukewarm hope among many weary U.S. citizens. Some may have simply longed for a reprieve from the unpredictability, the quotidian chaos, of an administration that regularly articulated anti-Black, anti-Native, anti-Mexican/anti-Latinx, anti-Asian, anti-immigrant, anti-woman, anti-Muslim, anti-trans, and ableist rhetoric and policy as it changed personnel weekly. However, some pundits' and politicians' appeals for a return to imagined civility via a Biden-Harris administration were not only in response to Trump's malevolence but also tacitly implicated the scores of protestors who began taking to the streets in the summer of 2020 and stoked a transnational rebellion against anti-Black police violence. The righteous rage expressed by multitudes after witnessing George Floyd's slow and deliberate murder, unsettled those who wanted to manipulate the meaning of peaceful *protest*. In the United States, many of the protests that helped articulate the rebellion, along with the organizing work that precedes and follows the unrest,

centered abolitionist transformation and sought to defund and/or fully disband police departments around the country, as they have been shown to reliably generate more violence than they have mitigated (Kaba 2021; Vitale 2017). And, in this new digital era, the police's tendency to terrorize low-income neighborhoods of color while they regularly exhibit appropriate behavior in upper-income areas (Spears, this issue) has been well documented and widely circulated.

For the protestors, community organizers, and supporters that animate the Movement for Black Lives—and for Black, Brown, Asian, and Native people in general—a return to *normalcy* and *civility* means a return to normal and polite Black/Native/Asian/Brown death at the hands of White supremacy. For us, this return has meant resuming the careful obfuscation of everyday Whiteness and White normativity's instrumentality in White supremacy. For us, a nostalgia for normalcy and civility, in the context of the extant structures of settler colonialism, racial slavery, and (im)migrant exploitation/disposability is in many ways compatible with Trump et al.'s longing for a pre-Civil Rights/Black Power epoch of US empire characterized by "enmity, hostility, and civil butchery" (Moten 2013, 740). We are keenly, indeed painfully, aware that the extrajudicial and adjudicated killing of Black, Native, Asian, and Latinx people is a convention within US civil society. Additionally, some of us are also aware of the ways in which this necropolitical foundation of the settler slave state predicates domestic and global imperial structures, histories, and legacies (Lowe 2015) characterized by an *a fortiori* right to kill (or let die or threaten with death) (Mbembe 2019), and also an *a fortiori* right to surveil and police certain others as constitutive of White US liberal subjecthood (Hartman 2007).

When we revised the original call for this special issue, we explained that we intended to curate an issue of the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* that squarely addressed White supremacy, following our cultural anthropological counterpart *American Anthropologist* and its 2019 special section on the anthropology of White supremacy, for which Jonathan was a contributor (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020). We hoped, however, that the offerings featured here would powerfully demonstrate how carefully attending to language, discourse, and signs provides particular ways of grabbing hold of White supremacy's slippery logics, organizing principles, dynamic infrastructures, and diverse practices. And, as we see in several pieces, one way of getting us closer to apprehending these principles, infrastructures, and practices is by observing everyday actions that actively disavow, disrupt, or simply disregard specific tenets of White supremacy (Leonard, Alim et al., this issue).

The articles in this special issue span analyses of language and White supremacy in the interplay between lived experience and contexts of global, transhistorical, political and economic power structures (Spears); the reproduction of these structures through deceptive articulations and enactments of covert racism (Kroskrity); efforts to challenge anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity through projects of linguistic resistance that draw on the language of hip hop to articulate anticolonial perspectives in South Africa (Alim et al.) and language reclamation as Indigenous praxis (Leonard); and the pitfalls and promises of White allyship, accompaniment, and co-conspiracy as communicative projects (Delfino). In addition to these articles, this special issue also features a forum on language and anti-Blackness that looks closely at the particularities of anti-Black racism and challenges to it.

As we consciously and unapologetically privileged contributions of Black, Native American, and other people-of-color scholars in this particular volume on the violences of White supremacy (minisculely offsetting several decades of the unconscious privileging of White scholars by the journal, subfield, and discipline), we found that many scholars deemed it necessary to implicate linguistic anthropology itself (and also anthropology and linguistics) in the reproduction of such violences and to speak to the ways they experience these violences (Leonard, this issue). This kind of "calling out" is, in many ways, good and necessary work for the called and the caller (despite the political right's ongoing demonization of "call-out culture" via semantic inversion [McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020]) in an effort to

preemptively discredit charges of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on. Calling out of this nature not only zooms in on the smirking and sneering faces of “good everyday people” gathered under the lynched bodies of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith and on the dehumanizing ideologies that helped animate racial segregation (see the cover art of this issue by David Flores), but also threads it to the complicity and complacency of good everyday spectators of Black death and subjugation, as well as to the grotesqueness of White supremacy in all of its targeted, capacious manifestations—interpersonal and institutional, mundane and spectacular, insidious and obvious, ritualized and emergent, local, and global.

Such work can also be understood as a rather loving and generous “calling in” of those whose voices, experiences, and intellectual contributions are regularly erased, misapprehended, or dispossessed by academic structures and the people who maintain them (even by the most woke and well-intended as examined in Delfino’s analysis of White allyship in this issue). The co-editors’ training outside of anthropology and linguistics, via family and personal histories as well as through our careful engagement with Black Studies and Ethnic Studies, gender studies, and other fields and disciplines has contributed significantly to our own linguistic anthropological scholarship and commitments.

In particular, Black Studies and related work in Ethnic Studies and postcolonial studies have served as theoretical wellsprings that continually challenge us to reconsider the relationship between historical and contemporary structures of power and sociality. Endemic colonial and imperial structures—indeed, White supremacist structures—can pose significant challenges to pragmatist approaches in linguistic anthropology, which are often rooted in liberal humanist theories of the sign that fail to apprehend or attend to liberal humanism’s White supremacist moorings. As a result, we are often left with tepid linguistic anthropological analyses of racism as primarily indirect, implicit, or covert that decenter the experiences and perspectives of people for whom racism is very much direct, explicit, and overt. In contrast, a focus on White supremacy within linguistic anthropology can reposition racism not as exceptional but rather as constitutive of modern power, being, and expressivity (Rosa 2019; Rosa and Díaz 2020).

Centering the role of White supremacy in constituting modern sign relations can contribute significantly to linguistic anthropologists’ efforts toward understanding historical and contemporary power structures that organize the dynamic yet systematic interplay between language, the body, and context (Smalls 2020). We hope that this special issue builds constructively on longstanding and more recent linguistic anthropological work that has led us to reconsider the fundamental relationship between language, race, and culture (Boas 1940; Hill 2008; Spears 1999) while also pushing our field in important new directions by reconsidering the fundamental relationship between language and racism as a strategy for understanding and contributing to efforts toward combating White supremacy.

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