

A CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN ROSA



As a sociocultural and linguistic anthropologist, Jonathan Rosa's research theorizes the co-naturalization of language and race as a key feature of modern governance. Specifically, he analyzes the interplay between youth socialization, raciolinguistic formations, and structural inequity in urban contexts. Dr. Rosa collaborates with local communities to track these phenomena and develop tools for understanding and eradicating the forms of disparity to which they correspond. This community-based approach to research, teaching, and service reflects a vision of scholarship as a platform for imagining and enacting more just societies. Dr. Rosa's research has been published in scholarly journals such as Harvard Educational Review, American Ethnologist, American Anthropologist, Language in Society, and the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology. In addition to his formal scholarly research, Dr. Rosa is an ongoing participant in public intellectual projects focused on race, education, language, (im)migration, and U.S. Latinxs, and his work has been featured in media outlets such as MSNBC, NPR, CNN, and Univision.

JL: Tell me a little about your academic background.

JR: My goal as an undergraduate was to be a K-12 teacher. I was a first-generation college student, and that was my sense of what you did with a college degree; most of the people I knew who had degrees were my K-12 teachers. I studied education, and I had to combine that track with a “traditional” academic discipline. I ended up studying linguistics and education because of my interest in questions about language, identity, and power.

I grew up in a context where the varieties of English and Spanish my parents used were framed as different in the context of mainstream schools, which presented me with questions about the role of institutions in standardizing language and reproducing particular kinds of language ideology and broader structures of political and economic power. My questions about language and education were really broader questions about how societies are organized and how power is structured. I found that neither education—which led me to focus on specific kinds of institutions—nor linguistics—which led me to focus on specific kinds of structural patterns—were fully satisfying to me. That’s what led me to linguistic anthropology.

I discovered that linguistic anthropology—a field in which language, history, and power were at the center of conversations—presented me with an intellectual and political approach that was the best fit for me. I was able to ask questions informed by how societies are organized historically in relation to ideas about language and race,

and how what we understand as a whole range of contemporary social problems is a reflection of longstanding colonial entanglements that demand to be reckoned with. I’m interested in the work involved in recognizing the historical productions of these dilemmas, as well as the ways that people throughout history have lived beyond the borders that separate languages, geopolitical territories, and identities.

JL: What concepts in linguistic anthropology first interested you as an undergraduate?

JR: The first thing you often learn in a linguistics course is that there’s no such thing as correctness. Ideas about linguistic correctness are a reflection of prevailing power structures—they’re not fundamental facts about language. Learning that messed me up; it ruined my entire investment in linguistic perfection. I had understood language as a deeply mathematical phenomenon, and I had been trying to refine my writing and spoken language practices the way that I would refine my understanding of mathematical formulae. Once I started to take the notion that linguistic correctness is a situated fact of history, power, and institutionality seriously, it demanded a fundamental reorientation to these issues that were so important to me. I revisited all of these ideas I had internalized about correctness—ideas I brought home with me and used to monitor and surveil my family and their language practices. I thought I was learning these practices in schools to help fix my family, and that the goal of school was to fix deficient people like myself and my family. I thought that if I could fully engage in this kind of project,

then my family would access upward socioeconomic mobility, societal inclusion, and escape from various forms of marginalization. Studying these issues forms a different perspective, and I needed to rethink which patterns to pay attention to.

JL: How have you continued pursuing those questions you began confronting as an undergraduate in the academic projects you've undertaken since?

JR: As an undergraduate, I engaged in some ethnographic work with Puerto Rican and Dominican high schools in Philadelphia, looking at the institutionalization of their bilingual education program and their approach to providing support to students designated as English Learners. That initial ethnographic project was an important precursor to my dissertation work, which was a community-based study to understand the coproduction of linguistic and ethnoracial categories in the context of historical dilemmas around colonialism. I wanted to understand how it is that certain modes of migration and institutionalization organize everyday life in ways that provide people with access to very particular kinds of opportunities while cutting them off from others. That ethnographic work led to my book, *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race*, which was a study of a Chicago high school and its surrounding communities—predominantly Mexican and Puerto Rican. Growing up, my sensibility around Hispanic and Latinx identities was oriented in relation to Puerto Ricanness, Dominicaness, and to some extent, Cubaness. Chicago was a very different Latinx context. Mexican and Puerto Rican interrelations are

central to experiences of Latinx identity in Chicago. In that context, I was confronted with a situation that demanded of me a reconsideration of the production of these categories and experiences, and that's what inspired my book. I wanted to understand how categories of language, race, and ethnicity co-articulate, and how that co-articulation is part of a much broader history of power relations. I wanted to understand how those histories could open up different possibilities for re-narrating how we got to where we are and where we can be.

Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race was published a couple of years ago. My next project builds out from the Chicago high school itself to look at how the boundaries and borders institutionalized within this particular context were also negotiated across distinctive institutional contexts. This links struggles over education to housing, employment, healthcare, criminalization, accessibility, political representation, environmental disparities, and cultural and spiritual expression. I'm going to build out from the school to look at projects that people engage in creatively to reexamine the challenges that they face—not as reflections of their fundamental pathologies or deficiencies but as historical and colonial inheritances. Once you narrate a disparate educational achievement as a problem of individual pathology or ability, you address it by remediating it on an individual level: for instance, a person needs tutoring and assistance to be more successful within the particular institution. However, if your orientation to the alleged problem considers how the city of Chicago, the state of Illinois, and schools throughout the United States are

designed to reproduce a political economy in which only a very small portion of students have access to a so-called knowledge economy, and the vast majority are slated for participation in the service economy, and a smaller percentage of students are excluded from the formal economy altogether, then they're actually doing that very well. The notion that achievement is a problem accepts that schools are designed to produce achievement.

This mode of thinking raises fundamental questions about what education is and should be, and how schools are organized as institutions. I'm looking at what happens when communities collectively engage in analysis which refuses the notion that they are pathological, instead locating the problem in historical power structures and their contemporary re-articulation. How does re-narrating the problem in that way inspire collective action to create alternative sites of music and cultural expression, housing, kinships, and economies? That's what I'm tracking now: the creation of alternate systems, the kind of historical analysis which inspires that, and how that analysis hinges on a particular mode of interpretation. That's where the language and semiotic component comes in. I understand the re-analysis of history as a semiotic process where you're analyzing what looks like contemporary problems as a sign of history in particular ways, or signs of colonialism. That's a communicative, interpretive practice that I'm really interested in.

JL: Have you begun fieldwork for this current project?

JR: I was already conducting some of the fieldwork while I was writing the first book, and I'm back in Chicago relatively regularly. For the past several years prior to the pandemic, I was the faculty sponsor for an alternative spring break trip to Chicago. We've had relatively large groups of Latinx students from the Chicago area at Stanford who are interested in exploring issues of education and activism, so I go back to the city with students to introduce them to some of these political projects. There's still much more that I want to do in terms of fieldwork. I see myself as a relatively slow ethnographer. I'm looking forward to returning to Chicago this summer to continue this work.

JL: Can you introduce the department to the courses that you teach, the initiatives you're involved with at Stanford, and anything else that you're looking forward to doing in the future?

JR: I teach in the Graduate School of Education and the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. Those are my primary homes. But I have courtesy appointments in Anthropology, Linguistics, and now Comparative Literature, which allows me to teach courses that speak to issues across a range of intellectual fields. That's part of what I love most about the work I get to do pedagogically at Stanford: There's a breadth of different student populations who take my courses, which are typically cross-listed across many of these fields.

I teach theory and ethnography courses at the doctoral level. That's a reflection of the needs of the Graduate School of Education

I like to teach on theories of race, ethnicity, and language. At the graduate level, in ethnographic field methods, I want students to think about strategies for collecting data in ethical ways, in collaboration with particular kinds of communities, and to write about ethnographic data without reproducing the categories that they're trying to examine.

At the undergraduate level, I'm inviting students to understand themselves as scholars and enter into intergenerational intellectual dialogues. I'm currently the Director of Chicanx/Latinx studies, so I teach the intro course there, which I've taught every year since coming to Stanford. I've designed it as a community-based learning project, where we collaborate with Sequoia High School in Redwood City. Just yesterday, we finished our final day of intro, which was with 25 Stanford students, 35 Sequoia High School students, and five Sequoia High School teachers and administrators. The teachers, administrators, and I co-facilitated the course. This is my attempt to enact a vision of ethnic studies that doesn't just let it live on an elite campus like Stanford, but lives up to the spirit of moving off-campus and politically committing not just to thinking critically about this world, but also to engaging in efforts to change it. The point isn't that undergrads are teaching high school students, because in many cases, undergrads are critically thinking through these issues for the first time. We're examining citizenship and migration; race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and labor politics; and sites of political struggle.

Over the last several years, I've also collaborated with fellow semiotic anthropologists Miyako Inoue and Kabir Tambar on a range

of projects. Semiotics analyzes the significance of signs and symbols in society. When you really start to think with a framework like that, you begin to recognize the role that it plays in organizing so much of our everyday lives. Ideas about language, symbols, and signs are central to organizing power in mainstream institutions. A couple of years ago, we got a grant from the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education to create a workshop to teach and train students in semiotic approaches. The three of us are now directing the Center for Global Ethnography. Part of what Miyako, Kabir, and I want to do is to make the argument for the power of linguistic anthropological and semiotic anthropological approaches to students and colleagues.

JL: One final question. What is a non-academic project you've been working on lately or excited about?

JR: I'm actually interested in the distinction between what constitutes academic and non-academic work—that, by itself, is interesting to me!

I'm the president of the Association of Latinx Anthropologists. One of the projects we've worked on is creating a mentoring program. We've been doing virtual mentoring events monthly, and over 200 people have participated in the first several events. I'm interviewing colleagues about their experiences and sharing them with current students who are seeking insight and encouragement. That project has been really exciting—I have been working on with Cecilia Vasquez, a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. It's a really cool space, especially in the context

pandemic, to bring some energy and life to our organization, and to build and sustain community in a more ongoing way.

I'm also an obsessive walker here where I live in San Francisco, so that's part of my daily practice: to engage with urban landscapes, soundscapes, and culturecapes.
