

Undoing raciolinguistics, unsettling (socio)linguistics

Jonathan Rosa¹ | Nelson Flores²

¹Graduate School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA

²Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Correspondence

Jonathan Rosa, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA.

Email: jdrosa@stanford.edu

KEYWORDS

coloniality, intersectionality, racialization, raciolinguistic perspective

Since we began formally collaborating with one another as undergraduates, our respective experiences and scholarly perspectives have often served as crucial sites of inspiration and accountability for each other. This attention to collaboration and accountability informs our appreciation of the tremendously thoughtful and generative responses to our proposed efforts toward undoing raciolinguistics, which identify a number of important areas for potential reconsideration and further examination. In this brief commentary, we focus specifically on three interrelated themes that emerge across the responses: (1) positionality and situatedness; (2) multidimensionality and intersectionality; and (3) alternative framings of (socio)linguistics.

The siloing of research on race and language that we seek to resist through the project of undoing raciolinguistics is connected to broader efforts toward challenging purportedly universal approaches to studying language that, as Leonard reminds us, are in fact deeply WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic). As Sito, Feliciano-Santos, and Ndhlovu point out, we follow in a long line of decolonial theorists who have sought to challenge the hegemony of Euromodernist sciences masquerading as universalism as well as the political and economic power formations that these knowledge projects have rationalized and reproduced. In addition, as Vigouroux notes, we also follow in a long line of (socio)linguists who have examined how this universalism has worked to obscure the role of race and racialization in shaping foundational concepts in the field. We are sensitive to the elevation of US-based notions of race and language in these conversations and we agree with Vigouroux's insistence on the importance of "questioning the Western epistemological hegemony that has defined our analytical categories" as a way of challenging what Ndhlovu conceptualizes as the "coloniality of universalism."

Indeed, it was precisely these concerns that inspired our desire to undo raciolinguistics. In particular, we hope to highlight the danger of presuming that race and language coarticulate continuously across societal contexts in relation to the same populations, forms, and practices. Such presumptions contribute to essentializing orientations to race and language that obscure the specific historical and contemporary dynamics that structure hierarchies and vulnerabilities. In contrast to essentializing approaches, Feliciano-Santos advocates consideration of historical and contemporary specificity through "a grounded analysis of how race and its relationship to linguistic phenomena may be

constructed, how it may be experienced, how it may be reproduced, and how it may be challenged.” In the context of Feliciano-Santos’ research focused on Caribbean experiences that challenge assumptions about what constitute racialized populations and language practices, she asks, “how does the hypervisibility, the invisibility, or the audibility of racial categories relate to the complicated ways in which racial orders have attempted to contain different groups in service of imperial political and economic projects that have rendered some people as labor, others as obstacles to land appropriation, and yet others as the embodied borders of the nation?” The questions Feliciano-Santos poses resist essentializing accounts in which racial and linguistic identities and experiences are framed as self-evident phenomena that exist in isolation from one another or apart from linked axes of difference and power. To pursue such an analysis, we must attune to the situated and multidimensional ways in which racial and linguistic categories and practices are rendered recognizable.

Attunement to situatedness and multidimensionality provides a useful point of entry for addressing Vigouroux’s suggestion that “a raciolinguistic perspective has limited relevance to modern day social and language dynamics of millions of sub-Saharan Africans.” What informs distinctions between Northern and sub-Saharan Africa, from whose perspectives do these categories become meaningful in what ways, and whose political interests do they serve? While on its surface the distinction might appear as an objective geographical designation demarcating preexisting territories and demographics, it is in fact rooted in the very universalizing Western epistemological framework that Vigouroux is working to challenge while overlooking scholarship that examines its function as a highly racializing classification with profound political and economic consequences. Pierre (2013a, 2013b) has powerfully framed the avoidance of race in analyses of the African continent beyond Southern Africa as central to the reproduction of anti-blackness and white supremacy. This avoidance often takes the form of approaches that purportedly focus on ethnicity or indigeneity rather than race, which obscure how colonial power structures imbricate and entangle these phenomena. For Pierre, “the anthropologizing around a ‘cultural’ and ‘ethnic’ Africa belies the continent’s relation to global racialized hierarchies against and through which such ethnic and cultural relations develop” (2013b, p. 548). The exception-alization of raciolinguistic dynamics in settler colonial contexts, such as the Americas, South Africa, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand, leads to fundamentally incomplete understandings. As Pierre notes, “[w]ithout analyses that also cover racial processes, scholars lose the ability to fully grasp the broader social and political relations of an enduring global hierarchy of races, nations, and cultures” (2013b, p. 548). This approach necessitates careful attention to co-articulating power structures within and across geopolitical contexts.

Sito emphasizes that efforts to develop new conceptual tools for analyzing the complex global and local processes that shape the emergence of particular racial categories require intersectional approaches that locate race and language within mutually constitutive matrices of power (Babcock & Ke-Schutte, 2023; Ke-Schutte & Babcock, 2023). King frames these co-constitutive hierarchies in terms of biopolitics, crucially noting that we must resist not only the siloing of raciolinguistics from sociolinguistics, but also the siloing of a consideration of race from gender and sexuality. King draws particular attention to the regulation of racial and gender normativity, underscoring that “the historical development of racism and the historical development of the pathologization of trans and intersex bodies cannot be separated, each one propping up the other.” A biopolitical analysis can bring into clearer focus the joint production and governance of phenomena such as race, language, gender, sexuality, labor, and ability as modes of population management that reflect the mutually constitutive nature of capitalism and colonialism. This important insight can help move beyond liberal humanist orientations to identities as discrete demographic categories that are individually embodied and practiced.

The biopolitical governance of race and language as part of broader multidimensional population management projects can also become a lens through which to examine emergent sites of

contradiction, contestation, and transformation. Locating these dynamics in the UK context, Cushing suggests that “[b]y 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.” However, such efforts are undermined by the trenchant denial of racist structures that continually reconfigure and reproduce historically anchored colonial hierarchies in the present. Cushing persuasively asserts that “[t]he 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.”

Bringing attention to questions of coloniality can more effectively situate (socio)linguistics within broader efforts toward challenging the marginalization of subjugated positionalities and knowledges through what Leonard calls pluriversal linguistics. This creates new possibilities for redefining language as a fundamentally relational phenomenon. For Leonard, “[w]hile the full undoing of Raci-olinguistics might remain as a project ... the promotion of relationality can provide a tool to move it forward.” Ndhlovu is similarly concerned with “transcending the limits of mono-epistemes that have institutionalized some of our work on language and race” by attending to “the ongoing rootedness, possibilities of existing otherwise, and thinking and acting with/across territories that should frame our struggle for new futures.” This struggle for new futures is not an exclusively scholarly exercise, but rather, as Sito suggests, “a fruitful dialogue between academic production and knowledge production carried out by social movements.” Cushing joins Sito in emphasizing histories of intertwined struggles in which sociolinguistics emerged alongside community activism challenging racism in mainstream institutions. Learning with and from social movements requires careful engagement not only with the situated nature of racial and linguistic experiences but also the multidimensional shapes they take in context.

We are grateful for these provocations and the questions they raise for future research focused on race and language across societal contexts and scholarly fields. We look forward to ongoing dialogues that seek to undo raciolinguistics as part of broader efforts toward understanding and unsettling the co-naturalization of racial and linguistic hierarchies.

REFERENCES

- Babcock, J., & Ke-Schutte, J. (2023). Toward a “both-and” semiotics of intersectionality: Raciolinguistics beyond white settler colonial situations. *Signs & Society*, 11(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1086/722775>
- Ke-Schutte, J., & Babcock, J. (2023). Toward a Non-binary Semiotics of Intersectionality: Linguistic Anthropology in the Wake of Coloniality. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12397>
- Pierre, J. (2013a). *The predicament of blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the politics of race*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Pierre, J. (2013b). Race in Africa today: A commentary. *Cultural Anthropology*, 28(3), 547–551. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cuan.12023>

How to cite this article: Rosa, J., & Flores, N. (2023). Undoing raciolinguistics, unsettling (socio)linguistics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12646>