

*Annual Review of Anthropology*

# Language and Race: Settler Colonial Consequences and Epistemic Disruptions

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Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 2023. 52:381–97

First published as a Review in Advance on  
July 26, 2023

The *Annual Review of Anthropology* is online at  
anthro.annualreviews.org

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-010220-074541>

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## Keywords

decolonization, diversity, linguistic anthropology, race, settler colonialism, United States

## Abstract

This article reviews anthropological paradigms that link language and race with a focus on the United States and other settler colonial nations that continue to use language as a tool of racialization to bolster White supremacy. Enduring colonial ideologies, along with Boas’s “salvage anthropology,” which separated race and language, have enshrined White racism in anthropological studies of language as well as in the field of linguistic anthropology. Contemporary studies frame linguistic racialization through markedness theory and use paradigms of language ideology, language materiality, and semiotics to forward discursive and ontological analyses that span communities and institutional spaces. I offer “disruption” as a way to consider the impact of epistemologies that inform academic research agendas as well as institutional power dynamics between BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) scholars and White practitioners in linguistic anthropology and discuss how these disruptions could form the basis from which to decolonize aspects of linguistic anthropology.

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## INTRODUCTION

Linguistic anthropology cannot be decolonized. Or can it? While ways of seeing, hearing, recording, analyzing, writing, publishing, reading, and citing have undoubtedly transformed since Franz Boas (1911) established the anthropological study of language, the field of linguistic anthropology remains bound by the consequences of empire and White supremacy that initially enabled it. Enduring colonial ideologies and institutions, along with Boas's "salvage anthropology," which separated race and language, have enshrined White racism in anthropological studies of language as well as among linguistic anthropologists.

This article reviews major anthropological paradigms that link the study of language and race. It focuses on the United States as an exemplar of a settler colonial nation that continues to use language as a tool of racialization to bolster White supremacy. Furthering Boas's concept of linguistic relativity, decades of studies analyzed power and inequality with attention to gender, class, and ethnicity, but not race. Ethnographic research on the consequences of settler colonial linguistic racialization was first conducted by Latinx (Zentella 1997) and White women (Hill 1998, Urciuoli 1996). The gender imbalance of this epistemological labor is hardly coincidental; rather, it mirrors the White patriarchal structures of academia, those of colonialism itself.

Contemporary studies frame linguistic racialization through markedness theory, a structuralist framework initially used to denote grammatical oppositions (Jakobson 1972) that has been adapted to signal contrastive sociolinguistic values. To be unmarked is hegemonically normative and therefore unremarkable; it exists in opposition to that which is marked and requires explanation and justification, i.e., is remarkable. Complicating this simple binary, works discussed here utilize paradigms of language ideology, language materiality, and semiotics to frame discursive and ontological analyses that span communities and institutional spaces (see **Supplemental Definitions** for a list of terms and definitions).

By no means exhaustive, studies included here represent a range of approaches that draw attention to how language has been weaponized as a tool of dominance, segregation, and xenophobia throughout North America's settler colonial history (Heller & McElhinny 2017, Rosa & Flores 2020, Veronelli 2015). Anthropological studies of linguistic racialization in Latin America (Arispe-Bazán 2023, Makihara & Rodríguez 2024), the Caribbean (Wirtz 2014), South America (Roth-Gordon 2017), and Europe (Pagliai 2011), among other locations, offer critical insights. My geographic focus is not intended to reinforce the global dominance of English-language scholarship or privilege social scientific research about the United States, but, rather, illustrate how the aftermaths of slavery, Indigenous genocide, and global imperialism continue to fuel overt and covert linguistic racisms (Hill 2008).

Inoue (2006) offers the illustrative term "listening subject" to draw attention to the listener's power to evaluate and judge speakers' social meanings. The "White listening subject" (Flores & Rosa 2015, Reyes 2017) acts as an arbiter of legitimacy and belonging and exposes the colonial hegemony of academia. I offer "disruption" as a way to consider the consequences of colonial epistemologies of language and race that inform academic research agendas as well as institutional power dynamics between BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and White practitioners in linguistic anthropology. Zentella (2018) calls this work "anthropolitical" due to the vulnerable positionality of BIPOC scholars who undertake it.

Beginning with colonial ideologies of scientific racism that link language and race through evolutionary theory, the first section demonstrates the influence of these ideas on Boas's scholarship and anti-racist agenda. It contrasts Boas's approach of decoupling language and race with the work of his student Zora Neal Hurston (2018), whose posthumously published work demonstrates the deeply intertwined and coproduced nature of linguistic and racial meanings. Subsequent sections demonstrate how racializing ideologies and ontologies are furthered by

institutions such as schools, workplaces, and courts and how they are objectified and circulated in media (see **Supplemental Literature Cited** for an annotated bibliography of language and race books). I conclude by considering the potential for these works to disrupt the hegemony of White listening subjects and form a basis from which to begin decolonizing linguistic anthropology.

## COLONIAL AND SETTLER COLONIAL CONSEQUENCES

The importance of colonial regimes in establishing certain languages globally cannot be overestimated (Phillipson 1992). The violent, centuries-long imposition of colonial languages through such institutions as schools, churches, and bureaucracies devalued Indigenous languages and degraded its speakers (Errington 2008). Being modern was reserved for White speakers of English, French, Dutch, and other European languages (Bauman & Briggs 2003, Makoni & Pennycook 2007). This brutality is beautifully rendered in Kuang's (2022) fictional account *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*, in which nineteenth-century colonial subjects are indentured as translators and trained to perform linguistic alchemy that harnesses their native proficiency in both Indigenous and colonial tongues.

Such dehumanization was a key part of Enlightenment thinking, which simultaneously posited the equality and freedom of all humans while it also rendered slaves and Indigenous people to be either less developed humans or nonhumans (Hesse 2016, Lowe 2015, Mills 1997). European colonizers described Indigenous languages as underdeveloped and animal-like in their sound and simplicity (Veronelli 2015). McElhinny & Heller (2020, p. 132) assert that in colonial contexts, "ideologies of language, communication, and bodies are co-constructed, linking strategies of interaction, and modes of bodily discipline, hygiene, and moral codes of conduct." In most colonies, Indigenous languages were not considered sufficiently complex to deliver Christian teachings, thereby necessitating a European language (Greenblatt 2007). Missionaries degraded colonial subjects such that the only way forward was to adopt Christianity, usually through a European language or, occasionally, through missionary translations of the Bible into Indigenous languages (Schieffelin 2021).

Comparative philology carried out by colonial linguists underwrote these processes of racial oppression. Said's (1978) *Orientalism* contends that "Oriental" languages such as Sanskrit were evidence of the decline of a once advanced society: "It was assumed that if languages were as distinct from each other as the linguists said they were, then too the language users—their minds, cultures, potentials, and even their bodies—were different in similar ways" (Said 1978, p. 233). McElhinny & Heller (2020) extend Said's investigation of colonial philology to consider the importance of language trees created by nineteenth-century scholars. These diagrams organized languages hierarchically and forwarded theories of human descent from multiple ancestors rather than a single ancestor (Heller & McElhinny 2017). Languages were thus regarded as existing in different evolutionary stages and were arranged teleologically according to race, with Indo-European languages on top (Hutton 1999).

With language trees as a foundation, evolutionary linguistics gained credibility by recruiting biology to claim that racial superiority could be proven through languages (Alter 1999). This self-other technology was bolstered by Darwin's (1871) *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, in which he argued that language emerged from the codification of communicative animal sounds (Alter 1999). This scientific racism formed the basis for the dehumanization of African slaves and Indigenous North American populations (Byrd 2011). Evolutionary linguistics not only provided justification for colonial rule but also reconciled apparent contradictions; for instance, they allowed the British in the mid-eighteenth century to rationalize the paradox of how some South Asian subjects such as those in Bengal could, despite being brown-skinned, be civilized due to being speakers of an Indo-European language.

Boas was a vociferous critic of this evolutionary theory, having been the object of its hate as a Jew living through the rise of Nazi ideology in Germany. After migrating to the United States, in 1896 he founded one of the first American anthropology departments at Columbia University. Boas was credited with the impetus to study language anthropologically rather than through comparative philology or evolution. His theory of “linguistic relativity” argued that languages should be studied in their own right rather than compared or arranged on a continuum of less evolved to more evolved (Ball 2012). Boas (1911) broadly rejected racial classification by disaggregating physical human features from language. With his theory of “alternating sounds,” Boas [1982 (1940)] offered a counterpoint to philological descriptions of Indigenous languages, arguing that Europeans’ unfamiliarity with Indigenous phonetic systems led to their characterization as animalistic (Ball 2012, p. 204). Moreover, in *Race, Language, and Culture*, Boas [1982 (1940)] countered eugenics-based claims that races should be hierarchically ordered according to mental and physical superiority (Herskovits 1953).

Boas thus created an anthropological paradigm that separated language from race to counter the racism of his day, work that was carried forward by many of his mentees. His student Margaret Mead underscored the importance he placed on Indigenous language in the discipline’s flagship journal *American Anthropologist* titled “Native Languages as Field-Work Tools” (Mead 1939). Boas’s student Edward Sapir (1927) and Sapir’s student Benjamin Whorf (1952) authored influential writings on language and worldview that inspired decades of work on Indigenous taxonomies intended to counter characterizations of linguistic primitivity (see Bulmer 1967).

One outcome of disaggregating language from race was that Indigenous language speakers became ideal subjects for “salvage anthropology,” in which anthropological documentation of language and culture could save them from disappearing permanently (Perley 2011). Boas considered Indigenous people to be incompatible with modernity and therefore fated to eventually disappear (McElhinny & Heller 2020). Fabian (2002) named this “allochronism,” an epistemology premised on the incommensurability of White European and American anthropologists and their non-European others because the latter existed in a static, timeless past compared with European modernity (Deloria 1997; see also Biolsi & Zimmerman 1997, Jones 2017). Davis (2017) counters the rhetoric of endangerment by drawing attention to how the anthropological study of Indigenous languages is disconnected from speakers and contexts of use. Despite attempts to challenge allochronism (see F.D. Rosa 2019), salvage anthropology widened the distance between European moderns and the “primitive” people they studied (Mignolo 2011).

Another outcome of Boas’s efforts to challenge scientific racism was that he reinscribed aspects of the very racism he sought to challenge (Bauman & Briggs 2003). Self-identifying as an “assimilated German Jew” who migrated to the United States in 1887, Boas drew positive conclusions from Jews who could not be identified as such and were therefore no longer experiencing antisemitism (Baker 2021, p. 132). In a 1910 lecture titled “The Real Race Problem” given to the NAACP at the invitation of W.E.B. Du Bois, Boas asserted that Black people could be modernized through education and an agenda of assimilation. Over time, mixing with Whites could result in “racial uplift” (Baker 2010, Vernon 1996), what Baker (2021, p. 132) calls “assimilation as discrimination.”

Rather than using social science to eradicate racism, Boas aimed to use it to eradicate race. The Boasian approach of separating language from race inadvertently bolstered anti-Blackness that devalued African American Englishes as well as those who studied them. Boas’s student Hurston, the preeminent Black anthropologist and novelist, first submitted her manuscript for *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo,”* in 1931 (Hurston 2018). In it, she ethnographically chronicles the racial violence of slavery and segregation experienced by one of the last living former slaves. Hurston’s insistence on including lengthy excerpts of her primary interview subject

Oluale Kossola's vernacular speech was a deliberate strategy to preserve his sovereignty over his own story, which was denied to him by the slave trade. Hurston's insistence on retaining Kossola's utterances augers contemporary assertions that language varieties can code for race and color dynamics in their grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and lexicon, especially among those speakers who have endured violence and oppression (Spears 2020, pp. 61–62).

Hurston's treatment of language and race together led to the manuscript's rejection by publishers who demanded that she revise Kossola's utterances to Standard English (Kennon 2021, p. 77). *Barracoon* was posthumously edited by Hurston scholar Deborah Plant and finally published in 2018, with a foreword by esteemed Black novelist Alice Walker. The ordeal is prescient of how Boas's "racist antiracism" (Baker 2021, p. 140) unwittingly augmented White racism in academic circles. Hurston's marginalization is hardly exceptional; in fact, it foretold the consequences of a linguistic anthropology that heralded Boas as antiracist without acknowledging how his work also perpetuated racism. Like Hurston, BIPOC scholars who challenge dominant ideologies of language and race have had to do so in their scholarship as well as in the academy.

For much of the twentieth century, ethnicity, rather than race, remained the dominant linguistic anthropological paradigm in the study of colonial and Indigenous languages, the formation of creoles, and the phenomena of language shift and death. Eventually, BIPOC anthropologists disrupted the emphasis on ethnicity and centered race and racialization, drawing on theory from outside of anthropology. For instance, studies of settler colonial language politics in Australia analyze how Aboriginals are assessed for their productivity through neocolonial rhetoric in neoliberal economies and assigned racist tropes, with the same dehumanizing narratives appearing in reconciliation and apologies to the Stolen Generations (Augoustinos et al. 2002). In their analysis of Canadian discourses of "Truth and Reconciliation," Shulist & Pedri-Spade (2022) argue that Indigenous language revitalization movements can become targets of settler colonial violence and theft. They demonstrate how non-Indigenous citizens engage in "race shifting" to claim resources meant for reconciliation and reparation in ways that undermine Indigenous sovereignty. Boarding schools for Indigenous children likewise furthered violent cultural and linguistic suppression (McElhinny 2016, Veracini 2011). Meek (2019) thoughtfully tackles "Language Endangerment in Childhood"—a view that accounts for the power of the "monoglot standard" (Silverstein 1998) of Standard American English (SAE) to devalue other languages in the United States.

Indigenous linguistic anthropologists have pivoted from salvage anthropology to language revitalization and reclamation efforts that foreground racist policies against Indigenous languages and efforts that speakers make to keep their languages alive (Kroskrity & Meek 2017, Perley 2011, Snyder-Frey 2013). Perley (2020) argues for further reconceptualization of Indigenous language politics, as does Davis (2017), who counters the notion of vanishing Indigenous populations and argues instead for a focus on community and activist efforts at language reclamation (see also Alexander 2022). Leonard (2021) identifies Indigenous language reclamation as a step toward decolonization. Palmer (2017) illustrates how Indigenous knowledge can get lost along with languages, offering an important justification to keep them alive.

In colonial and settler colonial contexts, traditional classifications of creoles as hybrid imbue them with the dispreferred attributes of being mixed, analogous to racial miscegenation, which threatens White supremacy; linguistically, they are seen as simplistic and inferior compared with "pure" languages (Mufwene 2000). Linguistic mixedness is not an inherent feature of people or practices but, rather, a classification assigned by the White listening subject. Language revitalization in Creole Louisiana involves complex negotiations of identity making and resistance among Afro-Indigenous speakers (Mayeux 2022). After the United States annexed Hawai'i, Hawaiian language was marginalized and banned as a teaching language in school and, within a generation, became creolized (Saft et al. 2018). In postcolonial contexts in which hybridity indexes diminutive

status (Bhabha 1994), challenging these hierarches requires an ethnographic reorientation of value regarding hybrid forms (Reyes 2017).

Demarginalizing a creole language even without assigning it an official role can be deeply meaningful to its speakers, as Marlow & Giles (2008) illustrate in the case of Hawai'ian Creole. They show that although this language variety has no official purpose, it is used among Indigenous residents who regard Standard English as the marked variety (see also Higgins et al. 2012). Such an inversion illustrates Bhabha's (1994) contention that hybridity indexes the incomplete hegemonies of colonial regimes that create options for multivalent signs. Attention to academic and institutional registers about what is marked and unmarked is integral to beginning to decolonize linguistic anthropology.

## DISRUPTING UNMARKED WHITENESS

As listening subjects, White linguistic anthropologists are empowered to assign value to topics and those who study them, making them marked or unmarked. Urcioli (2020, p. 108) argues that marked language can stand out as even more exceptional compared with the unmarked standard: "White settler societies, complex postcolonial nation-states, those in late capitalism, are especially invested in this scheme of markedness." Studying linguistic racialization remains marked because White linguistic anthropology characterized the Boasian project as antiracist and let it remain unchallenged for most of the twentieth century. Unlike ethnicity, which is unmarked, race remains marked in the twenty-first century because its study challenges White supremacy and its articulation through diversity discourse. Elaborating on this difference, Urcioli (2020, p. 108; see also Urcioli 1996) asserts, "Race is about having no legitimate place as a citizen in a larger order while ethnicity and diversity are about citizens and workers having provisional places. All are opposed to the unconditional belonging of the unmarked White middle class." Although linkages between language and race may appear to be arbitrarily defined at a societal level, racialization occurs through everyday and institutional signifying practices that become hegemonic and unmarked.

Community-based ethnographic studies of language and race expand paradigms of language ideology (Schieffelin et al. 1998, Woolard & Schieffelin 1994), semiotic meaning through indexicality (Silverstein 2003), and language materiality (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2014, 2017; Shankar & Cavanaugh 2012), demonstrating the vitality of language use among bilingual speakers as well as the potential for racialization. In her pathbreaking ethnography *Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class*, Urcioli (1996) metapragmatically analyzes Spanish-English code-switching to demonstrate that "ethnicizing" discourses index positive social values while "racializing" ideologies stereotype and stigmatize. Through the "semiotics of exclusion" (Urcioli 1996, p. 1), she documents the detrimental ways in which speakers become targets of "linguistic profiling" (see Baugh 2003) and become linked to negative attributes associated with Spanish in the United States. Zentella's (1997) hallmark study *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York* paved the way for generations of BIPOC scholars by linking racism to language use. She likewise aims to understand the phenomenon of Spanish-English bilingualism as a process of both maintaining intergenerational connection and becoming increasingly vulnerable to public prejudice.

Based on several decades of extensive analysis, *The Everyday Language of White Racism* (Hill 2008) is singular for pinpointing racializing discourses that shape public perceptions of languages and their speakers. Hill (1998) names the register of "Mock Spanish" as evidentiary of White racism. Her contrast between "folk ideologies" and "critical ideologies" illustrates how stereotypes are believed to be facts and how speakers invoke "personalist ideologies" to distance themselves from their racist remarks.

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Hill's work engendered a moment of florescence in the study of language and race. A special issue introduced by Roth-Gordon & Mendoza-Denton (2011) features numerous applications of Hill's theoretical insights on Mock Spanish, race, and language. Offering a broader perspective in their introduction to a *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* special issue, "Racializing Discourses," Dick & Wirtz (2011, p. E2) assert that language can "racialize without being denotationally explicit about race." In their *Discourse & Society* special issue "Complicating Race: Articulating Race Across Multiple Social Dimensions," Alim & Reyes (2011) emphasize the importance of "complicating race" in light of "the postracial" and trace the relationship between ideology and power across a range of settings. Theorizing the relationship of language and race as raciolinguistic, Rosa & Flores (2020, p. 90; Flores & Rosa 2015) define a raciolinguistic perspective as one that "interrogates the historical and contemporary co-naturalization of language and race across differing and nation-state and colonial contexts." Alim et al. (2016) identify "raciolinguistics" as an emergent field of interdisciplinary scholarship that is committed to addressing racism and oppression. The edited volume *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas about Race* (Alim et al. 2016) presents theoretical and ethnographic exemplification of the different applications of this concept.

Ontology, the study of ways of being in the world, links racializing discourses back to their colonial pasts. Considering ontology's role in discursive analysis underscores how the very nature of being human is categorized through language. For Said (1978), the purported distinctions between languages that formed the basis for racialization "had the force of *ontological, empirical truth* behind them, together with the convincing demonstration of such truth in studies of origins, development, character, and destiny" (p. 233, emphasis added). In the United States, that logic resulted in Blacks and Native Americans being marked as foundationally different humans than the White middle-class anthropologists (Mignolo 2015) and is but one example of how ontology has been integral to understanding linguistic racialization.

"Racial ontologies" (Shankar 2019b) is an analytic that exposes the inner workings of White supremacy and language in capitalism and advertising, wherein speakers racialized through language are lesser humans compared to White people. "Raciontologies" (Rosa & Díaz 2019) likewise investigates the relationship between Whiteness and its others through language. Furthering an ontological approach in their introduction to an edited journal issue on "Language and White Supremacy," Smalls et al. (2021, p. 155; see also Beliso-DeJesús et al. 2023, this volume) emphasize the value of "centering the role of White supremacy in constituting modern sign relations." *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Race* (Alim et al. 2020) features several essays on historical and present-day racializing ontologies.

These paradigms have been instrumental in studies of African American Englishes [AAE; also called African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Ebonics, or Black English]. Varieties of AAE are centuries old and tied to West African languages as well as new-world African diaspora cultures (Smitherman 2000). Sociolinguists identified connections between race and African American speech varieties in the 1960s and 1970s (Labov 1972), with Black sociolinguists documenting the racializing effects of AAE in schools and in society (Baugh 2003, Smitherman 2000, Spears 1999). Despite its rich history, AAE continues to be of interest primarily to Black linguistic anthropologists (see Goodwin & Alim 2010, Jacobs-Huey 2006, Morgan 1994, Smalls 2018, Spears 2021). In *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.*, Alim & Smitherman (2012) analyze President Barack Obama's use of marked communicative registers and gestures. Linguistic racism has reified the notion of being "A.W.B.: articulate while Black," marking SAE as exceptional when used by Black speakers. Bailey (2002) shows that being African American and speaking Spanish complicates "totalizing phenotype-racial categories" by thwarting listener expectations.

Scholars have also attended to how language and race are integral to the construction of Whiteness. In her book *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity*, Bucholtz (2011) draws on research with San Francisco Bay Area high school youth to show how Whiteness becomes marked when speakers “cross” and appropriate racialized language varieties and styles (Rampton 1995), especially AAE (Cutler 2014). This strategy takes on different politics when minoritized youth of other races use AAE, as Chun (2011) and Reyes (2011) respectively demonstrate.

Immigrant communities continue to be a point of focus to illustrate racialization through everyday talk. Style, both linguistic and sartorial, is a central analytic through which youth classify one another and attempt to transcend social categories while they also aim to avoid furthering racism. In *Desi Land: Teen Culture, Class, and Success in Silicon Valley*, Shankar (2008a,b) links youth styles prevalent among South Asian American teenagers with linguistic racialization according to model minority stereotypes. Reyes (2007, 2011) demonstrates how stereotypes are central to how Southeast Asian youth in Philadelphia negotiate racial categories and transgressions (Reyes 2011). Mendoza-Denton (2008) links style to Latina gang girl racialization in *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice Among Latina Youth Gangs*, identifying sociolinguistic variation that distinguishes *Norteñas* from *Sureñas*. In *Words of Passage: National Longing and the Imagined Lives of Mexican Migrants*, Dick (2018) demonstrates how Mexican Americans are racialized in their attempts to find a space in the linguistic order of the United States. In her study of Chinese American communities and commerce in California, Lo (2016) documents racist narratives of Yellow Peril used by White residents to derogate immigrants. J. Rosa (2019) identifies the lack of belonging that some Spanish bilingual speakers experience as “languagelessness” in his book *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* and documents how student linguistic performance is critiqued by communities and state institutions. Indeed, institutions, especially schools, play an outsized role in racializing speakers.

## INSTITUTIONAL SITES OF LINGUISTIC RACISM

Linguistic racism permeates all of society’s institutions (Fanon 1968), with schools, workplaces, and state-controlled spaces upholding SAE that benefits elite social classes. In her thoughtfully updated second edition of *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*, Lippi-Green (2012) documents the ongoing project of American English language standardization by analyzing the institutional idealization of SAE. Although no speaker can consistently perform this idealized variety, it nonetheless remains the bar against which all other English varieties are assessed. When White speakers use prestige English varieties such as British Received Pronunciation or French English, it can increase their status, yet BIPOC speakers are not similarly elevated. Lippi-Green (2012) offers numerous case studies in which non-White speakers who produce intelligible utterances with non-SAE accents are subject to linguistic discrimination.

Schools uphold SAE in ways that delegitimize other languages through such metrics as standardized tests, literacy levels, orthography, and diction (Smitherman 2000). bell hooks (1994) has not only challenged the idea of standard language but welcomed the use of vernacular in her college classrooms to counter antiblackness. Racialized languages and non-SAE varieties of English are targets of “English Only” movements that aim to make SAE the only legitimate US language variety (Crawford 1992, Silverstein 1998), what Bonfiglio (2002) has documented as the rise of “Standard American.” Ironically, SAE is used to express xenophobia against immigrants while it is also celebrated in the Scripps National Spelling Bee, which has been dominated by children of South Asian immigrants for decades (Shankar 2019a).

In higher-education institutions, the “language of diversity” can mask both the violence of racial capitalism and the ongoing oppression of racism (Ahmed 2012, Berrey 2015). Urcioli (2020,

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p. 108) characterizes diversity as neoliberal markedness that encompasses demography, gender, and ability. The enregisterment of linguistic forms exculpates institutions from their role in perpetuating racism. In her study of diversity and race in higher education, Ahmed (2012) identifies “institutional speech acts” and analyzes the implications of proclamations that universities make, such as “we are diverse” (Ahmed 2012, p. 54; see also Berrey 2015). Those who critique the ambiguity of diversity register can become marked as anti-institutional targets of hostility: “We could thus describe diversity as an avoidance technique: a way of avoiding being avoided” (Ahmed 2012, p. 64). Speakers who are aware of the pitfalls of engaging in “race talk” may thus choose to be “colormute” in their avoidance of racial terms that may index inaccurate or negative social meanings (Pollock 2004).

SAE acquisition affects all students who arrive in schools without English proficiency, but not all students are racialized. Earlier immigrant generations containing White speakers of German, French, Dutch, and other Western European languages were not targets of racist hostility in American schools as were non-White speakers of Spanish or Chinese. In the 1974 landmark case *Lau v. Nichols*, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Chinese Americans who sued the San Francisco Unified School District for providing instruction only in English and offering no supplemental English curriculum for qualifying students (Huebner & Uyechi 2004). Although the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Chinese students and declared the school district to be in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the politics and implementation of bilingual education have been extremely polarizing at the state and local levels.

Institutionalized linguistic racism that pervaded segregated schools continued well into the desegregated era, both through high-profile court cases and public outcry about the “Ebonics controversy” (Baugh 2003, Labov 1972, Spears 1999) and via everyday antiblackness against AAE speakers. Smalls (2018) demonstrates how schools can perpetuate violent discourses that reinforce the banality of black-on-black violence in ways that further antiblackness and White supremacy. Racialized traits such as “excessive violence” are discursively produced and entextualized in news media in ways that not only result in excessive disciplining and criminalization of Black youth but also may lead to actual violence (Smalls 2018).

Schools also remain inhospitable sites for speaking one’s heritage language—an act that stands in marked opposition to sanctioned celebrations of multiculturalism (Shankar 2008a). Flores & Rosa (2015) critique uses of “language diversity” in education on the basis of “appropriateness” and argue that White supremacist values racialize long-term English language learners as unable to master SAE: “[T]he White listening subject often continues to hear linguistic markedness and deviancy regardless of how well language-minoritized students model themselves after the White speaking subject” (Flores & Rosa 2015, p. 151; see also Mena & García 2021). Flores (2013) characterizes the language ideology of English monolingualism as “colonial,” arguing that the language of bilingual education used by advocates has been subsumed into dominant discourse in ways that silence language-minoritized populations. J. Rosa (2019) considers the performance of Latinx student identities as youth acts of resistance, especially “sounding like” themselves in the face of racializing language ideologies perpetuated by their public high school. Delfino’s (2021) study of African American preadolescent schoolchildren advocates for educational institutions to accommodate the language learning styles of marginalized students rather than using these styles as a basis for further racialization.

The framework of “translanguaging” (García 2014, Mena & García 2021) has been especially useful for rethinking the inherent biases of English language teaching. Premised on the notion that the boundaries between “named languages” are fluid, translanguaging challenges deficit models that privilege the mastery of standard language: “The focus moves from how many languages an individual may have at their disposal to how they use all their language resources to achieve their

purposes” (Conteh 2018, p. 446; see also Wei 2018). While critics of translanguaging question how foundationally different this paradigm is from code-switching or code-mixing and fault its proponents for conflating monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual speakers (see Creese & Blackledge 2015), the concept offers a much-needed way to reimagine how multilingual speakers engage with texts and do literacy (García & Kleifgen 2019).

Like schools, workplaces also overtly or covertly reinforce SAE. Workplace discrimination, initially approached as “crosstalk” documenting interethnic misunderstandings (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 2012; see also Bailey 1997), has been updated to understand workplace racism on intersectional bases (Lippi-Green 2012). Such White racism, Hill (2008) contends, has dominated for centuries in part through its adaptable and ubiquitous “everyday language.” For example, college instructors who are nonnative English speakers are subject to negative student evaluations (Subtirelu 2015) as well as racist comments about the perceived unintelligibility of their accent (Lippi-Green 2012).

State institutions reinforce the language of White supremacy through surveillance. Antiblackness can be perpetuated through law enforcement agents as well as by self-appointed “Karen” figures who use state discourse to regulate BIPOC public activities (Feliciano-Santos 2021). Valles (2021) analyzes court narratives produced during childcare license revocation hearings to understand how children interpret racist talk about them and considers the racializing implications of their depiction as “future threats.” Nasir (2022) identifies Islamophobic narratives circulated by US counterterrorism efforts to denigrate the “Islamist Caliphate” and, notably, how Muslim youth of color in Los Angeles counter these negative characterizations through a “caliphate of care.”

Hill (2008) illustrates that even language regarded as antiracist contains covert racist discourses. Critical discourse analysis challenges the public denial of racism in mediated communication and has spawned a robust program of research on media literacy and awareness (van Dijk 1993). Racializing discourses are especially difficult to regulate in broadcast and social media. Bonilla & Rosa (2015) illustrate how Twitter threads about #Ferguson are sites for activism as well as racism, while Hodges (2015) shows how social media provided spaces to refute the racism of broadcast media in covering Trayvon Martin’s death. Durrani (2021) delves into #BlackOutEid to show how community members use social media to counter Islamophobia in ways that can perpetuate antiblackness.

Mock language varieties routinely appear in television, film, and advertising, circulating pernicious images of BIPOC individuals and their languages (Meek 2006; Ronkin & Karn 1999; Santa Ana 2009; Shankar 2013, 2015, 2019b). “Mock Spanish” (Hill 1998, 2008) reinscribes racist tropes about Mexican Americans even though speakers claim their humor is harmless (see also Santa Ana 2009). Mock Spanish, Yellow English (Reyes & Lo 2009), Hollywood Injun English (Meek 2006), and other mediated language varieties are intended for White audiences and bear little resemblance to the minoritized languages they mock (Chun 2016). Racist jokes may be justified as simply funny, regardless of how overtly they reaffirm White supremacist values (Billig 2005, Pérez 2022). Comedians can build on these racialized stereotypes to index specific social personae (Britt 2016), but negative characterizations can be interpreted differently by White and BIPOC listeners. Slurs, a form of racializing discourse (Hill 2008), can be casually uttered and circulate via broadcast and social media, such as the anti-Asian rhetoric of “Linsanity” surrounding NBA player Jeremy Lin’s rise to prominence (Magat 2015).

As these works demonstrate, White public space (Hill 2008) is an ideal environment for linguistic racialization. Disrupting this domain has required concerted academic and personal effort, suggesting the monumental work required to decolonize it.

## TOWARD DECOLONIZING LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

I conclude by considering the generative impact of disruption on decolonizing linguistic anthropological theory, method, and institutional spaces. The extant literature on racializing discourses and ontologies, which well exceeds the space limitations of this article, along with social movements and activist attention to White supremacist ideologies have made language and race far less marginal in academia. Yet the compatibility of linguistic anthropological studies of ethnicity with diversity discourse upholds the unmarkedness of Whiteness and reinforces the markedness of work on race. The logics of White supremacy allow White linguistic anthropologists the unmarked option of claiming ethnicity while BIPOC scholars have no choice but to inhabit a marked subject position.

Colonial ideologies that initially marked Blacks and Native Americans as foundationally different humans than White middle-class anthropologists continue to reinscribe racial markedness (Davis & Smalls 2021, Mignolo 2015). Noting colonial and postcolonial racial hierarchies still prevalent in the anthropological study of “primitive” magic, Jones (2017, p. 162) contends, “Euro-Americans came to construe intellectual aptitudes for rationality and reflexivity as their own distinctive historical achievements.” White linguistic anthropologists who identify as Africanists, Latin Americanists, Caribbeanists, Asianists, Europeanists, and Native Americanists are afforded a far higher level of prestige than are minoritized scholars whose work on language and race among Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native North Americans can be dismissed as scholarly navel-gazing or “mesearch” (see Shankar 2018). Indeed, even the methodology of linguistic transcription is governed by exclusionary forces of Whiteness (Cavanaugh 2021).

These institutional practices of diversity, along with the authority of the White listening subject, suggest that these disruptions will not automatically lead to decolonization. *Decolonizing the Mind*, as wa Thiong’o [1986 (1981)] frames it, is intimately linked to power and one’s positionality in the world (Fanon 1968). Engrained hierarchies are not easily identified, let alone remade. Especially with diversity discourse enshrined as an institutional register, those who call out racism in academia can be seen as oppositional and unprofessional: “The shift from the language of equality to the language of diversity becomes linked to a shift from a confrontational to a collaborative working model” (Ahmed 2012, p. 64). Likewise, when minoritized people draw attention to the conditions of their domination, such a stance can be interpreted as a breach of “civility” (Spears 2020, p. 56). Indeed, decolonization would require the surrender of institutional power by some to BIPOC scholars. These engrained interactional dynamics are further evidence of the impossibility of decolonizing linguistic anthropology.

Unless. Decolonizing linguistic anthropology is impossible unless a large enough contingent of linguistic anthropologists is committed to rethinking institutional structures such as tenure and practices of evaluation that underpin them; unless we value scholarship on a broader range of topics and center the intellectual work of BIPOC scholars (Hudley et al. 2020); unless linguistic anthropologists take seriously the calls by BIPOC scholars to remake the academic politics of epistemology (Palmer 2017), citationality (Leonard 2021), and methodology (Zentella 2018; see also Tuck & Yang 2012, Tuhiwai Smith 1999); unless the very habitus of scholarship is revised by calling into question research university conventional wisdom about focusing on publications while minimizing teaching and service. Indigenous linguistic anthropologist Leonard (2021) argues that hiring and citing more BIPOC scholars without also reexamining what counts as academic labor is not enough. Disrupting diversity discourse, acting against racism in the academy, centering marginal BIPOC scholars, and recognizing multimodal forms of scholarship is the work that lies ahead to decolonize linguistic anthropology.

During talks that I have attended at universities and at the 2022 American Anthropological Association meetings, I have recently observed the stirrings of an ontological shift in linguistic

anthropology, in which Whiteness is transitioning from being an unmarked to a marked category. Evidence has come in several forms, including through metapragmatic challenges to pronomial choice (“Why are you using the pronoun ‘we’ to refer to White people, when not all of us are White like you?”) and in the unexpected public concession of power (“As a White man, I do not believe I am the right person to be writing about and researching this population. What I am seeing now makes me wonder if I have ever been the right person”). Such public surrender of epistemological control is an important step toward disrupting the power of the White listening subject, as it is incumbent upon those in power to elevate BIPOC scholars alongside, if not in place of, their own prominence.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is dedicated to Bambi Schieffelin, who encouraged me toward and entrusted me with this subject. I am deeply grateful to Graham Jones for his astute reviewer comments, to Mark Hauser and Adrienne Lo for their insightful manuscript feedback, to Jonathan Rosa and Angie Reyes for their thoughtful input, and to Jillian Cavanaugh for multiple, meticulous readings. I am fortunate to have had excellent bibliographic assistance from undergraduate students Haku Blaisedell, Sanjana Rajesh, and Chloe Wong. This article was completed thanks to the abiding patience of Jennifer Mann and the unflagging support of Kurt, Roshan, Anisha, and Fozzie. All errors are my own.

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