Journal of Education, Language, and Ideology
volume 3 | issue 2 | 2025
pp. 343–359

Interview

Multiplicities of Languaging and Knowledging: In Conversation with Suhanthie Motha

Lisa Lackner *
University of Toronto

Suhanthie Motha
University of Washington

Received: June 20, 2025
Accepted: September 11, 2025
Published: October 7, 2025
doi: 10.5281/zenodo.17285060

Lisa Lackner and Dr. Suhanthie Motha co-constructed the following interview using a blended approach, with Motha responding in writing as well as elaborating on these responses during an online meeting on May 16, 2025. Our conversation begins with Motha's reflections on how language and race interweave her lived experiences, shaping her language ideologies and pedagogies as a teacher educator. Motha further discusses how understanding the term language as a placeholder for various forms of languaging allows her to continuously challenge a narrower idea of language conforming to neatly bounded entities. As teacher educator, Motha highlights the importance of fostering community and collaboration within cohorts that allow teacher candidates to explore their own language ideologies and as well as critically reflect on how colonialism and racism are intertwined in their language teaching. Finally, our conversation concludes with a discussion on whether translanguaging should be theorized as an object of desire.

Keywords: language ideologies; languaging; race; teacher education; translanguaging; translingualism

1. INTERVIEW

Lisa: I would like to begin this interview with a quote from your recent article which states: "who one is is in fact inseparable from what one teaches" (Lynch & Motha, 2023, p. 2). Based on this quote, could you reflect on "who you are" by sharing how your lived

* Lisa Lackner, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor St. West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6, Canada, lisa.lackner@mail.utoronto.ca

experiences as a Sri Lankan woman, growing up in New Caledonia and Australia and now working in teacher education in the United States, have shaped your own identities and language ideologies? How have these, perhaps, shifted over time and how do they shape "what you teach"?

Suhanthie: First of all, Lisa, let me thank you for your thorough and careful engagement with my words and the thoughtful way you have constructed these lovely prompts. I'm enjoying the chance to pause and reflect on these questions and put them into conversation with life experiences.

As you can imagine, it's impossible to answer this first question succinctly in the context of one messy, transnational, translingual life, but I can offer a couple of concrete examples and a couple of the most significant themes that jump to mind as I look back over my lived experiences.

First, a few examples, offered too quickly (but such is life!): I can see countless ways that "who I am" has shaped my pedagogies and ideologies over the years. As a Sri Lankan-born woman and a brown woman practicing within a profession that is predicated on an interweaving of English and whiteness, I have spent time and energy (in my early days, often unconsciously) seeking to establish legitimacy as a speaker and teacher. These life experiences have likely anchored my history of antiracist and anticolonial commitments, which have stretched pretty unswervingly over my entire career to date. During my years in New Caledonia, my family and I were part of racially and linguistically diverse communities and I witnessed and recognized, although without an adequate analytical lens nor the language to question it, some complicated workings of racial inequality. At this same time, I was also witnessing New Caledonia's struggle for independence from France and its intertwined indigenous rights resistance to settler colonialism.

I grew up in and out of Sri Lanka, but it was a number of years before I began to turn an interrogative eye onto the unquestioned acceptance of the perceived superiority of the United Kingdom and the United States. that I observed in the discourses around me, including of language varieties associated with these two countries, and I still squirm as an adult as I wonder at my early uncritical self. As a member of the Tamil ethnic minority, I was shaped by the country's protracted civil war, much of which had to do with (from my perspective, informed by stories from my elders) language rights. I felt my eyes opened and my heart torn further with every visit. I fell in love with someone from the opposite side of the civil war and grappled with complex questions about the interlacing of language learning and family loyalty, questions which wove through our lives as we married and raised our two daughters, and which remain even today. All of this has intensified for me the connections between emotionality and language, an awareness that I believe is ever-present in my classrooms, and which I hope to approach as a gift. In Canberra, Australia, where I spent my early primary school years and then later my teens, I learned about racial silences in ways that are now incomprehensible to my adult self, and I suspect that those are the years most responsible for translating me into a race scholar.

And then let me name some themes that might help us to think about how identities and ideologies shift over time. The first that comes to mind is indoctrination, the realization of just how much we've all been indoctrinated. I say this as I speculate that my most significant shift over time is probably my transformation from growing up with an undisputed acceptance of the notion of languages as absolute, static, and fairly separate, despite personal observations to the contrary. Through my childhood and even into my undergraduate years in Canada, I remember specific instances of feeling a little sheepish when mixing languages. It was around the time that I started my tenure track that I read Makoni and Pennycook's (2007) *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*, and it blew my mind open! I myself knew 'languages' that shared blurry boundaries, yet I had somehow internalized the idea that languages fit into tidy, permanently locked boxes. Makoni and Pennycook helped me understand that this brainwashing was the product of colonial and nationalist ideologies, which I myself was beginning to understand as part of a racist and capitalist project (Motha, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Nonetheless, as I look back, it's difficult to believe that colonization has persuaded almost an entire planet to ignore what they intuitively know to be true.

A related theme that comes to mind is invisibility. As I analyzed the data from the ethnographic study that became my 2014 book (Motha, 2014), I coded data for a year before I realized that what I was coding under a range of euphemisms ('culture,' 'world language') was actually racism. This might be difficult to imagine in the current context but remember how little we were truly talking about race in language teaching before the mid-2000s. And in particular while in the mid-2000s, we started to hear beginning conversations in the TESOL profession about the fact that most English language learners are people of color (Kubota & Lin, 2006, 2009), that teachers of color experience disproportionate discrimination (Amin, 1997; Curtis & Romney, 2006), and that linguicism is inflicted more violently on postcolonial subjects (Lin & Luke, 2006), less attention was being paid to the conceptual embeddeness–and in fact intractability–of racism and empire (Motha, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Wong & Motha, 2007) within the profession. This is where I was focusing my scholarly attention at the time and, really, since then: less on discrimination and more on the entrenched nature of the shrouded brutality of the profession, at every level, from the complicity of our institutions to the power of language teacher identity to our constructions of English, pedagogy, and teacher education.

In retrospect, it is much easier to see how the practices of the profession and the industry invent, as Makoni and Pennycook (2007) say, languages—and in particular English, and how the idea of English becomes solidified and then cannot be disentangled from images associated with idealized English teachers in the social imaginary, so that the English language—situated as it is within a complex racialized and colonized history—becomes, in itself, an identity, embodied in its teachers. It was particularly visible to me as a racially minoritized English teacher speaking forms of English commonly associated with whiteness, practicing at a university in the United States, in a transnationally complicated way. So, these experiences and ruminations

about racism are where my early thoughts about translanguaging and translingualism, particularly as they connected to language teacher identity and language teacher education, emerged from (Motha, Jain, & Tecle, 2011).

Today in the contemporary context, these questions, along with conversations with my students and allies in the field, for instance the sophisticated thinker, my comrade Cristina Sánchez-Martín and my long-time collaborator Ryuko Kubota, supported my thinking about approaching translingualism from a Global South perspective (Kubota, 2020; Sánchez-Martín, 2026). It's important for me to remember that translanguaging isn't some newfangled way of languaging—or even thinking about languaging—which is going to liberate us, but rather that translanguaging ideologies are lessons from our pre-contact ancestors and are widespread outside formal classroom environments and particularly in Global South spaces. And furthermore, that the boundaries around and between languages are products of colonization and intertwined with racism, oppression, and violence. Often, those of us who are conscious that our ideas about who we are and what we teach are racialized and steeped within limited knowledge and ideologies cultivated within the Global North struggle with questions about how, as teachers and teacher educators, we might reach beyond these epistemological, ontological, and pedagogical boundaries. It's comforting to remember that we can allow ourselves to be guided by pre-contact wisdom (Aparecido da Silva, Viana, & Flannery, 2024). I like this clear example from Makalela (2019), which I learned about through dear Renee Lynch, whose doctoral committee I chaired (Lynch & Motha, 2023). Renee studied collaboration with long-time collaborators who were English teachers in Tanzania. She is deeply concerned with epistemological ethics, and she led me to Makalela's (2019) work. Makalela proposes Ubuntu translanguaging, acknowledging the African Ubuntu ontology often described as "interconnectedness" or as "I am because you are; you are because I am." I like the way he theorizes this version of translanguaging that surpasses mere overlaps between two languages to something more complex, value-laden, and grounded in pre-colonial logic and relations of dependency.

Another notable shift in my understandings is that as time has passed we've taken to using the word 'language' much more expansively. I'm using the word *language* so broadly that it functions almost as a mere placeholder, describing more than categories of language in the traditional sense and including a wide-ranging breadth of communicative and semiotic practices. Some examples that have surfaced in my conversations in recent days include: storytelling conventions, spiritual connections with land, gestures (specifically, the different ways of counting on fingers, shaped by geography), inherited songs of lament (thank you to Julia Kihi-Coates, Ngāti-Awa tribe), and mapping practices. And thinking back to my earlier comments about indoctrination, I notice that although I do firmly believe in 'languaging' in this broader sense, I nonetheless find myself having to work to keep my mind embracing this more capacious set of meanings. I will often catch my word choices betraying a narrower conceptualization, like a hard-to-break habit.

And I should apologize for using the terms “Global South” and “Global North” throughout this interview as though they are based in reality, these terms are inadequate shorthand for very complicated ideas.

Lisa: I love the way you understand language as a really broad term, like almost nothing more than a placeholder. What prompted this thinking or, perhaps, your shift in understanding language as a broader term as opposed to the more prevalent idea of language as neatly separate and bounded entities?

Suhanthie: I think that this notion has been coming to me primarily through conversations with others and also from the literature. I’m blessed to be able to tease out my thinking in the company of a fabulous community of teacher candidates. So some of the examples I mentioned a moment ago come from discussions with our graduate community, in and out of class. For instance, Ariana Munoz, Zoe Yige Zou, Suravi Roy, and Hong Ge were the ones who helped me to understand the different affordances and ways of constructing knowledge that accompany hand gestures in counting. We use our hands to indicate numerals differently across communities, and Zoe was describing an exchange that occurred during her father’s visit from China as she observed her own ancestral knowledge circulating in an unfamiliar context. Her father’s request for six items, communicated with a hand gesture, was not understood by a shopkeeper. In another example, Maribeth Haglof, who has taught fiber arts in India and Indonesia, helped me to think about mixed media pieces as languaging, specifically in relation to the Jacob Lawrence Art Gallery on our campus. I’ve been thinking about another example inspired by two doctoral students I am grateful to be in conversation with, Taiko Aoki-Marcial and Natalie Wynn-Vaughan (Fort Peck Assiniboine Sioux). Together they talk about “non-textual language,” referring in particular to the ability to connect with the land they live on, to care for it and take their food from it in a caring, attentive, and respectful manner. I chair Taiko’s doctoral committee, learning alongside her from her work which engages deeply with the concept of relationship, and Taiko works artfully and movingly with the metaphor of gardening throughout her work. And Natalie, who studies food sovereignty, taps the big leaf maple trees on her land to make syrup.

Beyond arriving at these understandings through conversation and relationship with others, what we’re describing seems to me to be somewhat of a logical progression from the idea that language is not a bounded category. Maintaining the idea of language being limited to words keeps us privileging in some ways the written word, and that narrower understanding has a way of sidelining the authority of languaging practices such as storytelling and dancing and music and art and growing food, all of these embodied practices that depart from the textual for mediating our rich and complex worlds, selves, pasts, and modes of interacting. That narrower conceptualization of language scaffolds the creation of categories such as, for instance, academic and non-academic.

When I think about the topic of this special issue, "The Role of Teachers' Language Ideologies and Identities in Shaping Translanguaging Practices in Multilingual Classrooms," I think about how these multiplicities of languaging and knowledging practices shape and are shaped by connections among race, language, teachers' individual biographies and ancestral inheritance, land, and community.

This isn't just a fun musing. Hamza Ahmad and Jennie Baker's (2025) recent arguments about multiplicity supported my thinking about how important it is that we be open-eyed, especially at this political moment, about recognizing that the impetus to place limits around and compress categories and identities–usually with a neoliberal purpose–is part of an effort to erase complexity and difference. As teachers and teacher educators, one way to resist this flattening is to work towards awareness of the provisional nature of truth. Ahmad and Baker warn us:

> "Even as this happens, all of these versions are true at once … Does [multiplicity] reside in the eyes of the border control agent, the police officer or the drone pilot? How does the multiplicity of human-animal, us-them, allow for some lives to be mournable and some not? How do we discuss multiplicity when tens of thousands of Palestinian children have been denied the possibility of multiplicity beyond the genocidal rhetorics of the 'human-shield,' the 'human-animal,' and the "terrorist"?" (n.p.).

Ahmad and Baker make visible the stakes of teachers nurturing a consistently rich reading of the meaning of language, of a student's self, of a community's humanity.

Lisa: Connected to how you have described your own understanding of language: how do you understand translanguaging as a theoretical stance, as a pedagogical practice for multilingual learners and, more specifically, its role in the TESOL classroom?

Suhanthie: I would say that my early formal ideas about translanguaging as a theoretical stance, other than the dabbling I did within my own community (Motha, Jain, & Tecle, 2011), came from García and Wei (2014). I remember being particularly struck by a sense of clarity when they described multilinguals drawing from a single, flexible linguistic system to make meaning rather than from separate languages. I also appreciated that this was a sociopolitical argument as well as an academic one, and that it was about power and oppression. And around the same time, I encountered the work on translingualism, especially work by Suresh Canagarajah (2013a, b), which helped me in a parallel way to think about speakers' agency in meaning making and about how to center speakers rather than language. Suresh helped me to see that we can't ever think about translanguaging as a pedagogical practice apart from its political stance. So, I think that I was supported by the literature of the period to come to a conscious awareness that in any language classroom, translanguaging could implicitly (by refusing to conform to colonial practices) and through explicit teaching, challenge colonial and neoliberal structures. I suppose that back then we must have all known this subconsciously on some level, but the explicit theorization of these ideas made them functional for us, and that was such an important and generous intellectual offering.

Lisa: Based on your experience as teacher educator, have you observed teacher candidates (partially) resisting a translanguaging stance or in their practice? If so, how are you, as teacher educator, approaching such (partial) resistance?

Suhanthie: I would say that I have not experienced resistance to translanguaging among teacher candidates in my current context, where I have been teaching for 17 years. Within teacher education contexts, I think we all have questions about the distance between the language practices we inhabit in our everyday lives and the pedagogies that make sense within institutional contexts, the degree to which it makes sense to try to reproduce the conditions of our actual lives within classroom walls, and the extent to which our formal assessment practices will adapt to what we believe constitutes good pedagogy. Our teacher candidates often have questions about how translanguaging practices can be compatible with contexts they're familiar with, but these are not questions I'd frame as resistance. Much of the absence of resistance in my context is structural and has to do with the framing of our program, our admissions procedures, our geographical location, and our community-building as our cohorts begin. The start-up of classes is about getting to know each other, investigating our linguistic and pedagogical histories, and thinking critically about where our beliefs came from. And teacher candidates are reading some of the literature, but more importantly, they are all teaching. They are all funded, so they are able to put what we're discussing and what we're reading into conversation with what they're doing in the classroom. So, we have a space to think in community about our goals and how we can learn together. An important part of assembling a caring and invested community, I think, is creating space to think about how to craft revolution. It's not enough to know how to identify problems and offer critique, we need to be able to think creatively and to imagine what resistance to, for instance, monolingual stances, practices, or policies might look like.

Lisa: Your scholarship centers on teaching English, TESOL specifically, teacher education, identity and desire and you approach your work from a perspective that understands race as entangled within English teaching. What has led you to adopt this theoretical perspective in your work?

Suhanthie: I should clarify here that I came to the profession as an English teacher, and I thought of myself as an English teacher for many years. But this shift in how I conceptualize language has led to a professional identity shift. The idea of English as an invention, as a construction, interferes with my ability to perceive myself as an "English" teacher. I think of myself as a language teacher educator now, and the program I direct is going through a name change from MA TESOL Program to Critical Language Teacher Education Program in recognition that we prepare teachers of not only English but a range of languages. And yes, I do think that race is entangled with language teacher education, and connecting back to my earlier response, I think that we're all always thinking with our histories and our lives. So, I would say it's my life that led to this theoretical perspective in my work.

Lisa: In your book "Race, Empire and English Language Teaching", you advocate for "Provincializing English" (Motha, 2014) as an approach to English language teaching. Can you elaborate on this and explain if and how you see translanguaging fitting into this approach?

Suhanthie: Yes! I loved my notion of provincializing English, and it has remained exceedingly helpful for me as a teacher and teacher educator, although I'm sorry to say that there wasn't a great deal of uptake by teachers. I think it required too convoluted of an explanation, or perhaps the language 'provincializing' wasn't adequately descriptive. Let me define 'provincializing English' briefly and then explain how I would extend it now, a dozen years after I first published that notion, because it can help us to think about translanguaging in fruitful ways.

"Provincializing English" draws from postcolonial theorist Chakrabarty's notion of 'provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty, 2008) which advocates for a more specific understanding of the ways in which European thought is woven throughout everyday life. "Provincializing English" (Motha, 2014, 2016) argued for making more visible the epistemological footprint of colonialism in our everyday languaging and teaching practices. It is an effort against the naturalization and invisibility of colonial thought and includes in language teacher education a critical analysis of how the language is racialized and colonized, of how learning English changes us, and of how participating in the teaching of English changes the world. Now that I am teaching language more broadly and not only "English," I would extend this argument to "provincializing language," that is to say, promoting visibility of vexed histories of language ideologies and hierarchies in the context of white settler, colonial, and capitalist histories.

A further step that I have been trying to pay better attention to lately, supported by my work with another insightful doctoral student, TJ Walker (Walker et al., 2024), is revolution. It became clear to me after I published my 2014 book that it wasn't enough to ensure that the colonial shadow of language ideologies is glaringly visible (provincialized). A necessary further step for teacher educators is to provide explicit and situated preparation for the various obstacles they may encounter as they seek to embrace decolonial and translanguaging pedagogies in their professional work. These might include role-playing, demonstrations of challenges teachers often face in institutional contexts, and support in articulating dissent from those in power. When I'm teaching, in my head I code these separately as "provincializing" and "preparing for the revolution" to remind myself of the importance of attending to the latter.

Lisa: In your work you highlight the importance of voicing "racial silences" (Motha, 2014, p. 80) particularly in English language teaching to understand and critically reflect how teaching English is not just teaching English but entangled within a web of

colonialism and Empire. How do you see the theoretical perspective of raciolinguistics play into this?

Suhanthie: Yes, absolutely. For many years, like others in the field, I was seeking to analyze and better understand how language and race mutually involve, create, invalidate, erase, authenticate each other, aware that racial silences allow hate and discrimination to remain unacknowledged and undetected. I often observed languaging practices that evaded or drew attention away from the idea of ethnicity or race or from racial categories. I found the work on raciolinguistics (Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016) to offer such helpful scaffolding for understanding the baked-in nature of racism. I remember reading the word 'co-naturalize' (Rosa & Flores, 2017), which captured this relationship in such theoretically supportive ways. Another significant shift for me was reading about Rosa and Flores' (2017) notion of the white listening subject, which had such strong revelatory power for me, as someone who had been raised with an idealized white-identified monolingual listener squatting in the corner of my consciousness monitoring my language and by extension shaping the lives of my students, all unbeknownst to me. The work on raciolinguistics is so very exciting and helpful, even just having that catchy word which encapsulates how race and language are co-constructed into racial ideologies that uphold white supremacy gives it legs and permanence in our minds. Additionally, Samy Alim, Nelson Flores, Jonathan Rosa, and many others have been skilled in sharing their ideas in a manner that is meaningful and real so that they were sure to find their way into our language classrooms.

Lisa: When working with in-service teachers or teacher candidates, how do you prompt critical reflection of racial and linguistic hierarchies within their own identities and ideologies? How do you see this sustaining beyond coursework in their everyday teaching?

Suhanthie: I love the way these questions are supporting my reflection on my rationale for my own pedagogical moves!

I'm fortunate to be able to embed my pedagogy in the context of a department that is supportive of our curricular decisions. So it's not about an individual teacher educator's practice, but about the entire ecosystem. I am the director of our Critical Language Teacher Education (it's currently called a Master's in TESOL, but we are applying for a name change in acknowledgement that we're teaching language teachers, not English teachers). In the current climate, it's a blessing to be a part of an institution that values our disciplinary expertise. My colleagues, Cristina Sánchez-Martín and Priti Sandhu, and I share a vision of our program as explicitly antiracist, anticolonial, and community-engaged. While our program is situated in the United States, we engage students from around the world to work together to unravel the colonial and monolingual legacies of English in relation to local and transnational communities, and we think hard about how to avoid exporting US-based models to the rest of the world. Collaboratively, we

encourage each other as we work towards our program commitments: for instance, seeking to engage with land-based and indigenous epistemologies in ethical, non-exploitative ways, learning from historically marginalized communities keeping their language practices alive, centering relationality and community, wellness, and trauma-informed teaching. Throughout, we try to engage with the recognition that the language teaching discipline causes harm, and that an important part of language teaching is acknowledging that harm and knowing how to judge the effects of our practice.

The structure of a program matters, and in the past few years, we have added some supplemental questions to our admissions application that allow us a glimpse into applicants' language histories and ideologies, which has been helpful. And we fund all of our admitted students, so our teacher candidates have a practical stand-alone teaching experience connected to their coursework and are able to continually interweave their teaching and other program experiences. I am a fan of identity caucusing, but this strategy has been impractical in our program for a range of reasons.

I teach our introductory class. When we start talking about translanguaging, I think it's important to be unequivocal from the very outset about the relationship between translanguaging and decoloniality. In fact, before students even apply to our program, and certainly in our orientation and at the beginning of the first day of our first class, we believe that we need to be explicit about the inseparability of racism, coloniality, and language teaching. This isn't a topic to be eased into gently. Therefore, in our conversations about translanguaging, a core concept is that translanguaging isn't some pioneering, inventive way of languaging—or even thinking about languaging—which is going to liberate us, but rather that translanguaging ideologies are lessons from our pre-contact ancestors and are widespread outside formal classroom environments and particularly in Global South spaces. And furthermore, that the boundaries around and between languages are products of colonization and intertwined with racism, capitalism, oppression, and violence.

Another piece of this is relational, which I have come to understand more deeply through my years with the brilliant Taiko Aoki-Marcial (2023), whose doctoral committee I chair. In our first and second class sessions together, in all classes but particularly the intro class, a fair amount of joint meaning-making is happening in the context of community agreements. As we are talking about listening and turntaking, we are also reaching consensus on our ideas about how power should be shared and distributed and how these connect to language hierarchies and crisscross with race, gender, ability, religion, etc. So, for instance, while we're making agreements about how we should consider our language identities in decisions about whether to take up space in a classroom or how to connect with colleagues, we're thinking about the historical role that our heritage languages and our other languages have played in relation to other languages globally. In this way, we're connecting our relationships in our local, immediate classroom community to the global flows of migration, power, and engagement.

I have a couple of assignments that begin with us getting to know each other. With the assumption that the point of departure for any learning is the self, I ask teacher candidates to bring a collage to the first day of class, and I send them a photo of my own collage ahead of time, which considerably lowers the artistic stakes! Through our collages, we get to know each other's literacy sources and language histories and thus begin a conversation about our beliefs about and experiences with languages, and we interrogate the origins of our beliefs. And teacher candidates do some scholarly readings and submit a more analytical raciolinguistic autoethnography before the second day of class, which we discuss during class. So the interconnection of the readings and their own autoethnographies creates space for reflection and discussion. For my incoming Fall class, I intend to assign as examples some essays from two forthcoming books: *Untold Autoethnographic Stories of (In)Justice, Teaching and Scholarship*, edited by Ari Sherris and Joy Kreeft Peyton and *Autoethnographic Explorations of Lived Raciolinguistic Experiences Among Multilingual Scholars: Looking Inward to Move Forward*, by Qianqian Zhang-Wu and Briget Goodman And I always assign Stephanie Vandrick's essay *ESL and the Colonial Legacy: A Teacher Faces Her 'Missionary Kid' Past* which is an oldie but seems to do work that I don't seem to be able to do without it. In my classrooms, it's been helpful to listen to teacher candidates, understand where they're coming from, and take time to develop relationships with them. As teachers, we do what makes sense in our contexts, so I enjoy conversations about language ideologies that have been present around us and sharing of strategies that have been either helpful or unconstructive (or both!) for negotiating policies and contexts. Teacher candidates know what my own commitments are, since I've published them, and I try to remain transparent.

Lisa: Thank you for sharing these glimpses into your classroom! I really like that piece about the collage!

Suhanthie: Yeah, it tends to bring out different sides of folks. It's another language, right? It works against the flattening we so often see happening institutionally.

Lisa: Is that something that you incorporate also in your courses?

Suhanthie: Maybe not consciously. But now that you mention it, I do try to access various ways of knowledging. For instance, in that same class, we put together what I called the Raciolinguistic Walking Tour, which is a digital humanities project (inspired by a few other projects), in which students choose a site in the local community to explore which connects with their ancestral history and their biography, and they do an analysis of related racism and linguicism, and then we put them all together on StoryMaps. It's pretty fascinating and allows a range of ways of languaging.

And in my research methods class last year, I had a glorious class session inspired by a AAAL panel I was on with Jenna Cushing-Leubner, Johanna Ennser-Kananen, and Mel Engman, all of whom I greatly admire. They came up with this idea of terrain mapping

(Engman, Ennser-Kananen, & Cushing-Leubner, 2023), which I borrowed with Jenna's permission. I asked students to think about topographical features (e.g., islands, mountains, valleys, lakes, swamps) and consider what these represented to them in the context of research traditions, and I brought in huge rolls of poster paper, brightly colored paints, markers, glitter glue, colored paper, glue sticks and creating terrain maps representing our thoughts and theorizing, and we ended up enjoying the most allegorical and fertile conversations as teacher candidates created. I remembered in particular Jenna musing about the idea of taking these drawings that we call maps, this serious tool used for territorializing and empire expansion and repurposing them as playthings for imagination and make believe.

Lisa: I would like to end our conversation with a little thought experiment. In your article with Dr. Lin you write: "It is our contention that at the center of every English language learning moment lies desire: desire for the language; for the identities represented by the particular accents and varieties of English, for capital, power, and images that are associated with English; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that English unlocks." (Motha & Lin, 2014, p. 332). I have taken the liberty to alter this quote in the following way: "It is our contention that at the center of every ~~English language learning moment~~ *translanguaging moment* lies desire: desire for the languages; for the identities represented by the particular accents and varieties ~~of English~~, for capital, power, and images that are associated with ~~English~~ *them*; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that ~~English~~ *translanguaging* unlocks." My questions here are: Do you think this altered quote holds truth? Is there a place in applied linguistics to theorize translanguaging and desire? Should there be?

Suhanthie: This is such an interesting heuristic, Lisa, and you make such a good point! No, your reorganized sentence doesn't make sense to me because we don't really think of translanguaging as an object of desire. That's fascinating! But it also makes me ask myself: do we really want it to be? Translanguaging practices and identities are not marketed to us with the same ferocity that English language identities are. For many years, we were somehow sold the story that English could open golden doors and cure all ailments. To some extent, we still are sold that narrative. And really, I think that those cravings and yearnings that we're encouraged to develop for English are primarily capitalist desires, at their roots, even if they are sometimes cloaked as other desires. Do we really want the same frames to be applied to translingual identities and for translanguaging to become viewed through a neoliberal lens, as a tool or a marketable skill?

Ryuko Kubota (2016) has cautioned us not to be too blindly enthusiastic about translanguaging, and she remains consistently measured and circumspect when we are writing together (Ryuko and I have been in a collective together for almost a quarter of a century with five other women: Rachel Grant, Angel Lin, Gertrude Tinker-Sachs, Stephanie Vandrick, and Shelley Wong. We are the Sister Scholars (Lin, Grant, Kubota,

Motha, Tinker-Sachs, Vandrick, & Wong, 2004; Sister Scholars, 2022; 2023). Ryuko's careful reminders keep me aware of the thin line between optimism about and commodification of translanguaging, particularly as we frame it in teacher education contexts. Nelson Flores (2013), too, has warned us that these discourses that promote translanguaging can often create the appearance of power-neutrality and place responsibility on workers to develop flexible skills without any critique being applied to existing language hierarchies or the origins of these hierarchies.

Maybe one way to work against the neoliberalism of translanguaging is to find ways to remain true to the Global South roots of translanguaging practices, to make sure we don't fall into the trap of holding up translanguaging practices as though they were the latest futuristic sensation. The thing about translanguaging practices is that they are closer to Global South or pre-contact epistemologies than "English" as we conceptualize it, which itself is an invention (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Our ancestors continue to communicate with us over time. When I go home to my mother, she makes me the same curries that my grandmother and great-grandmother made us, the same curries I make my daughters when they come home from college. This is a form of languaging across the years and generations.

Image 1. Suhanthie's reluctant කරවිල (karavila) in her Seattle garden

My father taught me to tend to the unruly vines and rutted, bumpy fruit of the කරවිල (karavila) plant and to coax it into a mouth-watering sambol. My කරවිල (karavila) plant is not impressed with the Seattle climate, but I persist in cultivating it, aware that it grew in his parents' and grandparents' kitchen-gardens when he was a boy, and that his teaching me these customs was a form of languaging. My partner often tells the story of the first sacred bo (bodhi) sapling, taken from the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, being brought from Bodh Gaya in India to Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. The story has been passed down for twenty-three centuries. This multigenerational storytelling is yet another form of languaging. So, too, our language practices are love letters from our forebears.

Back to your question. Perhaps positioning ourselves to exploit translanguaging solely as a skill that can increase our means of production and ability to generate income or profit is not a desirable position. On the other hand, I would perceive movement towards an undoing of the erasure of Global South wisdom about translanguaging practices as a desirable outcome. And perhaps a challenge for us to consider is how we will navigate the murky space between these two positions.

THE AUTHORS

Lisa Lackner (she/her) is a PhD Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her research interests include language policy, second language learning/teaching and multilingualism. In particular, she is interested in understanding how English as a second language policy finds ways to uphold and perpetuate linguistic and racial hierarchies within different K-12 school settings. Her academic work is guided by her practical experiences as a former public middle school teacher in Vienna Austria and her current work with undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Toronto.

Suhanthie Motha (she/her), born in Sri Lanka and raised largely in Australia and New Caledonia, asks about the complicated workings of race and empire in her life and her teacher education practice. An associate professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, located on Coast Salish homelands, she wonders about possibilities for antiracism and decoloniality in the context of language teaching. She is the author of *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching* and co-editor with Ryuko Kubota of *Race, Racism, and Antiracism in Language Education*. Her work has been published in numerous journals and as chapters in various books.

REFERENCES

Ahmad, H., & Baker, J. (2025, May 31). *Welcome remarks* [Paper presentation]. 2025 Praxis Conference, Seattle, WA, the United States.

Alim, H. S., Rickford, J. R., & Ball, A. F. (Eds.). (2016). *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*. Oxford University Press.

Amin, N. (1997). Race and the Identity of the nonnative ESL teacher. *TESOL Quarterly*, *31*(3), 580–583. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587841

Aoki-Marcial, T. (2023). Research and practice in using traditional stories as a translingual approach to culturally sustaining language instruction. In A. Hunter (Ed.), *Learner diversity and inclusion in English language education* (pp. 60–79). Routledge.

Aparecido da Silva, K., Viana Júnior, O., & Regina Santana Flannery, M. (2024). Perspectives on translanguaging in education in the global south. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *21*(4), 383–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2024.2381502

Canagarajah, A. S. (2013a). *Literacy as translingual practice: between communities and classrooms*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203120293

Canagarajah, A. S. (2013b). *Translingual practice: global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203073889

Chakrabarty, D. (2008). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828654

Curtis, A., & Romney, M. (2006). *Color, race, and English language teaching: Shades of meaning*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203763971

Engman, M., Ennser-Kananen, J., & Cushing-Leubner, J. (2023). Mapping (metaphorical) journeys in and against the academy. In P. Jandrić, A. MacKenzie, & J. Knox (Eds.), *Constructing postdigital research: Method and emancipation* (pp. 39–61). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-35411-3_3

Flores, N. (2013). The unexamined relationship between neoliberalism and plurilingualism: A cautionary tale. *TESOL Quarterly*, *47*(3), 500–520. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.114

García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kubota, R. (2016). The multi/plural turn, postcolonial theory, and neoliberal multiculturalism: Complicities and implications for applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, *37*(4), 474–494. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu045

Kubota, R. (2020). Confronting epistemological racism, decolonizing scholarly knowledge: Race and gender in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, *41*(5), 712–732. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz033

Kubota, R., & Lin, A. (2006). Race and TESOL: Introduction to concepts and theories. *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*(3), 471–493. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264540

Kubota, R., & Lin, A. M. Y. (2009). *Race, culture, and identities in second language education: Exploring critically engaged practice*. Routledge.

Lin, A., & Luke, A. (2006). Coloniality, Postcoloniality, and TESOL. . . Can a spider weave its way out of the web that it is being woven into just as it weaves? *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *3*(2–3), 65–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2006.9650840

Lin, A., Grant, R., Kubota, R., Motha, S., Tinker Sachs, G., Vandrick, S., & Wong, S. (2004). Women faculty of color in TESOL: Theorizing our lived experiences. *TESOL Quarterly*, *38*(3), 487–504. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588350

Lynch, R., & Motha, S. (2023). Epistemological entanglements: Decolonizing understandings of identity and knowledge in English language teaching. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *118*, Article 102118. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102118

Makalela, L. (2019). Uncovering the universals of ubuntu translanguaging in classroom discourses. *Classroom Discourse*, *10*(3–4), 237–251. https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2019.1631198

Makoni, S., & Pennycook, A. (Eds.). (2007). *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Multilingual Matters.

Motha, S. (2006a). Racializing ESOL teacher identities in U.S. K-12 public schools. *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*(3), 495–518. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264541

Motha, S. (2006b). Decolonizing ESOL: Negotiating linguistic power in U.S. public school classrooms. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *3*(2–3), 75–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2006.9650841

Motha, S. (2006c). Out of the safety zone. In M. Romney & A. Curtis (Eds.), *Color, race, and English language teaching* (pp. 161–172). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203763971-13

Motha, S. (2014). *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. Teachers College Press.

Motha, S. (2016). Provincializing English: Race, social justice, and language. In L. Jacob & C. Hastings (Eds.), *Social justice in English language teaching* (pp. 107–116). TESOL Press.

Motha, S., & Lin, A. (2014). "Non-coercive rearrangements": Theorizing desire in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, *48*(2), 331–359. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.126

Motha, S., Jain, R., & Tecle, T. (2011). Translinguistic identity-as-pedagogy: Implications for teacher education. *International Journal of Innovation in English Language Teaching & Research*, *1*(1), 13–28.

Rosa J., & Flores N. (2017). Unsettling race and language: Toward a raciolinguistic perspective. *Language in Society*, *46*(5), 621–647. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404517000562

Sánchez-Martín, C. (2026). *Bodies, matter and language in transnational English teachers' storying: Tejiendo vida*. Multilingual Matters.

Scholars, S. (2023). Strategies for sisterhood in the language education academy. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, *22*(2), 105–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2020.1833725

Sister Scholars. (Grant, R., Kubota, R., Lin, A., Motha, S., Tinker-Sacks, G., Vandrick, S., & Wong, S.). (2022). In the name of diversity—A sisters' conversation. In G. J. Wilson, J. B. Acuff, & A. M. Kraehe (Eds.), *A love letter to this bridge called my back* (pp. 187–190). The University of Arizona Press.

Walker, T., Motha, S., & Sandhu, P. (2024). "Misinformation about white men killing Native Americans": Impeding decolonial pedagogies in an intensive English program. In N. Limerick, J. Schissel, M. López-Gopar, & V. Huerta Cordova (Eds.), *Multilingual nations, monolingual schools: Confronting colonial language policies across the Americas* (pp. 169–188). Teachers College Press.

Wong, S., & Motha, S. (2007). Multilingualism in post 9/11 schools: Implications for engaging empire. *Peace and Change: A Journal of Peace Research*, *32*(1), 62–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2007.00409.x