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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Black immigrants in the United States: Transraciolinguistic justice for imagined futures in a global metaverse

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Abstract

As the world continues to experience the recent wave of racial reckoning and its associated backlash, the field of applied linguistics has been called upon to renew efforts through which language functions as an avenue for redemption and restoration of humanity and of the world. Acknowledging the role of racialization in the language-related challenges faced nationally and globally has spurred on a wave of examinations that extend beyond a focus on the intellect and that increasingly allow for a simultaneous grappling with what it means to advance language solutions that equally center human sensitivity and the body. Among such acknowledgments have been the effects of racism on language use by immigrants, including immigrants of color, many of whom are often introduced into the U.S. as "languageless." We operate now on the verge of an imminent global metaverse within which the world will soon largely exist, provoking questions about the degree to which language, and racialized language, will continue to function as the primary mechanism for operating in a future world order. Given this impetus, I draw from the Black immigrant experience in the United States in this brief essay to demonstrate why the future of applied linguistics in a global metaverse must be concerned with "transraciolinguistic justice" that: (1) creates opportunities beyond racialized [language] as a function of the imminent global metaverse; (2) disrupts the racialization of [language] for relegating citizenship based on national norms as a function of civic engagement; and (3) dismantles racialized [language] and borders that hold up the exclusion of "foreignness" to transform the relational experience. The impending reality of a global metaverse that lays flat distinctions among migrants while also introducing a plethora of spaces where racialized language further functions as subtext in a nonmaterial world calls for a (re)thinking of what it will mean to instruct, assess, plan for, and preserve [languages] in a soon to be, predominantly, virtual global existence. Civic and legal engagement in a global metaverse that can potentially transcend racialized language allows for the disruption of perceptions that advocate a lack of connectivity of diverse human publics across national and global borders. Relational healing through a focus on transraciolinguistic justice in a global metaverse represents an opportunity to restore the brokenness of the oppressed and cultivate opportunities for building bridges across diverse realities, critical to the abandonment of centuries of, and the introduction of, an era of peace. To the degree that the field of applied linguistics is prepared to engage transraciolinguistic justice, will determine, in large part, the extent to which it adjusts to a largely virtual world.

Keywords: transraciolinguistics; transraciolinguistic justice; migration; immigration; race; language; Black; civics; relational; metaverse

As the U.S., and the world, continue to experience the recent wave of racial reckoning and its associated backlash (see Smith & Warrican, 2022), the field of applied linguistics has been called upon to renew efforts through which language functions as an avenue for redemption and restoration of humanity. Acknowledging the role of racism in language-related challenges faced nationally and globally has spurred on a wave of examinations that extend beyond a focus on the intellect and that increasingly allow us to simultaneously grapple with what it means to advance language solutions that equally center emotions emanating from human sensitivity and the body (see Smith, 2013). Among such acknowledgments have been the effects of racism on language use by immigrants, including immigrants of color, many of whom are often introduced into the U.S. as "languageless" (see Rosa, 2016; Smith & Warrican, 2022; see also Alim, 2016 on the "transracial subject")[1]. This, despite bringing languages from countries of origin where racialization of language often functions covertly through (non)educational practices and policy based on global and hegemonic linguistic systems of instruction and assessment (Smith, 2020a).

Over the years, there have been repeated requests by applied linguists for acknowledging raciolinguistic oversight by the international Organization for Economic Development (OECD). Commensurate with this call have been invitations from organizations that draw attention to the role of racialized language in interpretations of results from tests such as the OECD-based Program for International Student Assessment (PISA; Smith et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2022). Recently, the international association Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), published public statements condemning racism and attacks on immigration, with endorsements from organizations such as the American Association for Applied Linguistics (n.d.). Similarly, the U.S.-based Literacy Research Association (LRA), among other organizations, has acknowledged the ways in which racism and xenophobia affect the study of language. And just this past year, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2021) made an open apology, acknowledging longstanding contributions of the organization to systemic racism.

Such attempts to acknowledge harm by linguistic and nonlinguistic organizations alike, through which linguistic hegemony steeped in an exclusion of "foreignness" (e.g., see use of the term "foreign" in American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages; ACTFL) has long since flourished, represent a key basis through which applied linguists continue to seek restitution, restoration, and reconciliation. They symbolize an opportunity for harmony among Black people, other people of color, and for whites, all of whom continue to experience unrest due to the persisting adverse effects of racism. These efforts remain critical to increasing calls for considering the role of linguistic racism in organizations such as the U.S.-based Educational Testing Service, National Association for Educational Progress, International Literacy Association, International Dyslexia Association, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), to name a few.

They emerge, admittedly, in tandem with a feigned effort by many to address the effects of racism on diverse publics—an attempt intended to detract from the national and global backlash of white supremacy spurred on by the murder of George Floyd and numerous other Black people, visible in historic incidents such as the storming

of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Yet, even with the intention by so many organizations and individuals to seemingly address racism and thus racialized language and its intersection with "foreignness," while arguably admirable, there appears to have emerged an underbelly of hatred and a commensurate subversion and commercialization of legal, civic, and moral efforts, currently visible across the U.S. (and global) landscape. The result: a superficiality of raciolinguistic justice that persists in potentially obscuring opportunities for addressing institutional harm and bridging gaps among all peoples.

Linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988), linguistic racism (Baker-Bell, 2020; Dovchin, 2020), raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores, 2017) and "racio[linguistic] injustice" are *not* new. The increasing focus, by applied linguists, on how language use has been intentionally designed to reinforce the injustices of racism is but an extension of decades of research by scholars of Critical Race Theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2017) and scholars of race, culture, and language (e.g., Alim & Smitherman, 2020; Smitherman, 1999). Amidst a new wave of raciolinguistic reckoning, the previously seeming silence of covert [linguistic] racism now rearing its ugly head and demanding to be fed, threatens to upend the legal wellbeing of those who do not heed its sway. The ensuing resistance to this backlash will require those who remain oppressed to maintain peace even while engaging in overt responses, largely steeped in a sense of civic, moral, and spiritual responsibility. And the universe, as it has increasingly and adamantly shown, with the commensurate global COVID-19 pandemic and its impetus for racial reckoning, will seemingly acquiesce (reluctantly or enthusiastically), as it moves toward reclaiming a just balance, lost through centuries of Eurocentric dominance.

We operate now on the verge of an imminent global metaverse within which the world will soon largely exist, provoking questions about the degree to which [language], and racialized [language], will continue to function as the primary mechanism for operating in a future world order. By the "global metaverse," I refer to a highly immersive and global virtual world in which people engage socially, play, and work (Merriam Webster, 2021). In such an evolving metaverse, I imagine a space where:

- the real world merges into a virtual reality;
- virtual worlds converge;
- social/professional/learning spaces transcend physical borders;
- avatars exist making use of multiple languages;
- language translation tools are utilized;
- characteristics such as race, ethnicity, nationality, cultural, and linguistic background potentially lose or gain power as they are eliminated, blended, forged, or masked;
- communication is further unrestricted to varying languages and is even more possible through universal signs, symbols, and pictures for meaning-making, across and within language groups.

In this metaverse, key questions arise for applied linguists such as:

- What is the role of [language] and [languaging] for the racialized "foreigner" in a global metaverse?
- What will learning a [language] look like for the racialized "foreigner" in a global metaverse?

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- What possibilities exist to address racio[linguistic] harm and its interaction with the exclusion of "foreignness" as we move toward a global metaverse?

To demonstrate how we might think concretely about a global metaverse that addresses raciolinguistics and its relation to "foreignness" for such futures, in this essay I draw from the Black immigrant experience in the United States to demonstrate why the future of applied linguistics in a global metaverse must be concerned with what I refer to as "transraciolinguistic justice" that: (1) creates opportunities beyond racialized [language] as a function of the imminent global metaverse; (2) disrupts the racialization of [language] for relegating citizenship based on national norms as a function of civic engagement; and (3) dismantles racialized [language] and borders that hold up the exclusion of "foreignness" to transform the relational experience of the soul (see Alim, 2016 on the "transracial subject"; see Kates, 2010 on the "soul").

Within a global metaverse are opportunities (or not) to disrupt racialization and its intersection with language as well as, for example, other semiotic and spatial tools that undergird a current world, where "foreignness" predicated on centuries of exclusion based on (im)migration, remains the norm and not an exception. An impending global metaverse signals opportunity for (re)imagining longstanding efforts to undo racio[linguistic] harm exacerbated by a fear of "foreignness" in the current world. It beckons applied linguists whose efforts remain assailed by systemic raciolinguistic harm to consider the new place of language in a nonmaterial world and the decreasing role of [language] as we know it in its varied forms, in favor of semiotics across a virtual world at large. Centering raciolinguistics (Alim, 2016) in relation to being "foreign" (Smith, 2020b) when creating solutions for languaging in a global metaverse can both help to address the approaches we use in applied linguistics to undo harm as well as allow us to eradicate our use of the very same Eurocentric application of linguistic tools that we attempt to use daily, in a material world, to undo this harm. Such a focus on raciolinguistics in relation to "foreignness," by necessity, I argue, must undergird how we reimagine creating solutions to real-life problems involving languaging in the context of three impending and major futures: *futures in the global metaverse, civic and legal futures,* and *relational futures.*

Beyond applied linguistics as a field of education, we have focused for so long on racial justice, yet the language largely used to argue for this justice, at its best, remains the language of white supremacy—a global abstraction of Englishes (see Smith, 2016). By its very nature, our primary languaging efforts for critiquing the challenges with applied linguistics—Englishes with all their abstractions—naturally attempt to exclude all that is "foreign," even when this foreignness occurs within themselves (e.g., Englishes used by "foreigners") (Smith, 2020c). Similarly, it can be argued that our current attempts to seek raciolinguistic justice in applied linguistics fall significantly short due to this challenge. Through the impending global metaverse, applied linguists are positioned to find opportunity in creating virtual solutions surrounding linguistic and other modalities (i.e., audio, tactile, gestural, video) that center race, address racism, and address a widespread rejection of "foreignness" as well as develop mechanisms through which interactions in a virtual world operate through transracialization (see Alim, 2016). An absence of this focus would be to inadvertently perpetuate, in the global metaverse, the very mechanisms we claim to challenge across corpus linguistics, forensic linguistics, language testing, language policy and planning, lexicography, second language acquisition, second language writing, and translation and interpretation in the current material world.

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Migrating while Multilingual and Racialized: The Black Immigrant Experience in the United States

Black immigrants in the United States are often described as first-, second-, or third-generation immigrants who identify as Black, and who migrate to the United States from Africa, the Caribbean, or elsewhere (Smith, 2020b). The number of Black immigrants to the U.S. has almost doubled since the year 2000 and "almost nine-in-ten (88%) were born in African [42%] or Caribbean countries [46%]" (Pew Research Center, 2021, para. 25). The remaining 12% of Black immigrants come from other world regions. Most Black immigrants identify as single-race Black (87%) with 10% identifying as Black and Hispanic and 3% identifying as multiracial (Pew Research Center, 2021, paras. 25–26). Overall, Black immigrants to the U.S. tend to come from multilingual and "multidialectal" (see Smith & Warrican, 2022) countries where the official language spoken is English (Zong & Batalova, 2016), yet certain Black immigrant students have been described as having faced challenges with English language proficiency, language structure, pronunciation, vocabulary, and with overall academic performance and achievement (de Kleine, 2006; Pratt-Johnson, 2006; Ukpokodu, 2018).

Prior to their migration, Black people from the English-speaking Caribbean may overlook the co-naturalization of language and race (see Rosa & Flores, 2017) and may lack explicit references to racialized disparities that significantly affect education in the region (Smith, 2020a). Recent observations show that raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores, 2017) leveraged against Black immigrants in the U.S. appear to resemble raciolinguistic ideologies steeped in the post-colonial educational systems of the English-speaking Caribbean, occurring where the "white gaze" is deployed by Black subjects to delegitimize Black English-speaking peers and their dialects despite the efforts of these peers to approximate white (and often British) standardized English-speaking language norms (Smith, 2020a).

Being transracialized as Black (Alim, 2016; Nero, 2006; Smith, 2019) means that Black immigrants grapple with the co-naturalization of race and language in conjunction with their "foreignness" given their new status in the U.S. as "immigrant" (Smith, 2020b). As illustrated in the framework for "Black immigrant literacies," they are led to grapple with how they will lay claim to the struggle for justice long since borne by their African American peers (Smith, 2020b). Many are also led to acknowledge the myth of the model minority and thus relinquish their prestige or privilege as a Black subgroup and recognize the presence of the hegemonic whiteness in the "postcolonial" structures of their local countries of origin along with its connection of their systemic racism as a global reality in the U.S. (Smith, 2020b). In turn, they are invited to utilize their languaging holistically beyond a preference for "academic" ways of being in the world (Smith, 2020b). As bi/multilingual users of Englishes Black immigrants must also come to terms with translanguaging while Black through a transraciolinguistic approach (see Smith & Warrican, 2022 for a detailed discussion) as they navigate instructional systems with abstract standardized language norms that oppose the languages they present.

Through a transraciolinguistic approach, Black immigrants are afforded opportunities for simultaneously thinking about how they think about race (i.e., metaracial understanding), how they think about culture (i.e., metacultural understanding) and how they think about language (i.e., metalinguistic understanding) in engaging civically across borders. Similarly, moving beyond immigrants racialized as Black who are often on the receiving end of marginalization, it is possible to leverage a transraciolinguistic

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approach to address organizations (i.e., Rosa & Flores, 2017) such as schools and their varied stakeholders that often continue to use legality as a primary mechanism that inadvertently perpetuates raciolinguistic ideologies for immigrants and for all people of color. Engaging the "meta" (i.e., Greek for "beyond") in transraciolinguistics as that which exists simultaneously between, across, and beyond various representations of raciolinguistics (Smith, 2021) at both the individual and the societal level, there is the capacity for undoing harm caused to racialized, "foreign," and other marginalized populations. In turn, it is possible to restore relationships between white populations and those of color and, transcending reality, open up the soul to continuous knowledge and revelation that exists *beyond* what we can discern physically in the objective world given the manifestations of these to the soul (see Smith, 2013 on "transdisciplinarity, continuous knowing" and multiple levels of reality).

Transraciolinguistics in a Global Metaverse: Co-designing [Languaging] in the Global Metaverse for Civic and Relational Futures

Given the above, it is possible to imagine the future of a global metaverse undergirded by "transraciolinguistic justice"—justice where what exists simultaneously between, across, and beyond various representations of raciolinguistics influences how the field of applied linguistics engages largely with the nonmaterial conditions surrounding languaging and its interlocutors. It is possible also to envision the connections of racialization to modalities extending beyond language (i.e., tactile, visual, gestural, audio, etc.)—what I call "transracio[linguistic] justice"—in order to consider futuristic approaches to applied linguistics (see Smalls, 2020 on "raciosemiotics"). As one example of people of color whose foreignness also represents the potential for harm in a global metaverse, Black immigrants have been regarded in part as a model minority and thus often experience a social disconnect with other Black peoples, while also being racialized in the context of the United States.

Creating Opportunities Beyond Racialized [Language] in a Global Metaverse

Looking through the lens of the Black immigrant allows for envisioning opportunities beyond racialized [language] in a global metaverse, thereby transforming the role of [language] and [languaging] for the previously perceived racialized "foreigner." The ability to make meaning beyond language can potentially eliminate how such racialized individuals initially position themselves based on power and race relationships steeped in language mastery, language approximations guided by Eurocentric norms, and thus perceived privileging of any one language. This ability to choose how they reveal their identities through language does not erase their race in a global metaverse. Rather, it allows them to choose when and how they introduce their race while also transforming how racialization was previously used in power relations that often positioned them as superior in relation to other Black peers and peers or color, and superior in relation to white peers (Smith et al., 2022).

Disrupting the Racialization of [Language] in Legal and Civic Engagement

The current wave of civic unrest and a reinvigorated backlash against Critical Race Theory continue to dictate how (il)legality of "foreignness" (i.e., immigration) precludes civic capacity and duty (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021). For instance, a recent

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decision by the U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals saw a Black Cameroonian who "only spoke Pidgin English" encounter a violation to his due process rights in the Third Circuit on September 1, 2021. This occurred because the Board "surprising[ly]" "failed to realize how different standard English and Pidgin English were from each other" (paras. 1 & 2). The Black immigrant, whose brother was shot and killed, was "put into removal proceedings almost immediately upon arriving to the U.S." despite fleeing persecution in his home country against so-called Anglophones (i.e., speaker of Pidgin English as opposed to French) as well as discrimination against him as a member of a pro-Anglophone group (para. 8).

Such a breakdown came because of false assumptions, many of which can be potentially eradicated through transracio[linguistic] justice in the legal system of a global metaverse where languages are equalized through the potential use of efficient and equitable language translation tools (Smith & Warrican, 2022). Incidents, persistent in our current material world through a legal system that co-naturalizes race and language (Rosa & Flores, 2017) even as these constructs interact with "foreignness," can potentially be averted. Moreover, a global metaverse challenges the future usefulness of agencies such as the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), through which Black immigrant Haitians constitute almost half of the families detained and where Black immigrants on a whole are six times more likely to be sent into solitary confinement (Kiros, 2020). This high detention rate, a result of (mis)communication, is likely linked to a (mis)perception of language and of race that can be significantly lessened within an equitable global metaverse and that loses significance given the potential redefinition, autonomy, and acceptance surrounding "foreignness" and *virtual migration* in a metaverse.

Dismantling Racialized [Language] and Borders that Exclude "Foreignness" to Transform the Relational Experience

The current racial climate in the U.S. and across the globe continues to reflect a pandemic of the soul where mental, physical, and *emotional* wellbeing is daily compromised on the basis or through the avenues of racialized [language] and its relation to "foreignness" (i.e., thus immigrants). Our increasing focus on affect in applied linguistics (e.g., see Johnson et al., 2021) to address psychological harm, though critical and useful thus far, will prove insufficient for the ultimate survival of the soul given the relational impasse at which we now find ourselves. We must extend beyond.

Institutional mechanisms in a global metaverse, based on the discussions presented thus far, can allow the soul, through dismantling interactions premised on racialized [language] and borders, to be brought into a direct encounter with itself via a recognition of its spirituality and thus with the soul and spirituality of the projected identities of "Others." This in turn, represents a chance for global healing and reconciliation (see Smith, 2018). Transracio[linguistic] justice in a global metaverse signals potential opportunities for allowing individuals to determine if, how, when, and why they will transcend linguistic, power, racial, and other distinctions that dictate difference in the current world and to thus recognize our interdependence as a human species. The future of applied linguistics in a global metaverse, as outlined in the preceding discussion, has the potential to address current and future conditions surrounding language and its transracialization that emerge through relational experiences among privileged (e.g., Black immigrants, Asian immigrants) and nonprivileged (e.g., African-American, Mexican) populations of color as well as those between white

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populations and Black populations (and other populations of color). Through transracio[linguistic] justice in a global metaverse, the [languaging] of Black immigrants and other racialized populations can be positioned by schools, teachers, and other institutions in ways that enhance relational interactions with white and nonwhite peers. A global metaverse presents opportunities for relational healing through transracio [linguistic] justice as virtual worlds create mechanisms for Black immigrants and other people of color to reclaim equal footing and thus assert agency with [languaging].

Conclusion

In this essay, I drew from the Black immigrant experience in the United States, inviting the field of applied linguistics to consider how we might potentially utilize transracio [linguistic] justice to disrupt and dismantle racialized language in relation to "foreignness" while imagining and co-designing just futures for people of color through transformed interactions for all peoples in a global metaverse. The question remains: *What is the role of applied linguistics in undoing transracio*[*linguistic*] *harm as we co-create, co-imagine, and co-invent a global metaverse?*

Just as a global metaverse can represent opportunity, it can too signal further calamity (Buni, 2021). To the degree that the field of applied linguistics is prepared to engage transracio[linguistic] justice in the co-invention, co-definition, and co-creation of the impending global metaverse, so too will it determine, in large part, the extent to which the field adjusts to a rapidly increasing semiotic and spatial world, potentially enhancing relational futures for all. I invite the field of applied linguistics to assert itself as the metaverse emerges and to influence the development of this global virtual world in a way that helps to eradicate, and not further exacerbate, prejudice.

Note

1 In this essay, I use "[language]," "[linguistics]," "[languaging]" or any variation thereof in such parentheses to denote the connection between race and modalities that extend *beyond* language such as audio, visual, tactile, gestural (see Smalls, 2020 on "raciosemiotics"). The term "transraciolinguistics" reflects the prefix "trans-" which refers to that which is simultaneously "between," "across," and "beyond" (see Nicolescu, 2010 and Smith, 2013 on transdisciplinarity for multicultural education) and the term "raciolinguistics," which suggests that race and language work together such that race influences the construction of ideas about language and language influences the construction of ideas about race (Alim, 2016). "Transraciolinguistic justice," taken in the context of the above discussion therefore represents justice sought for and accomplished through transraciolinguistics. "Transracialization" refers to "simultaneous/alternating strategies of transracialization (a transgressive resistance toward racial categorization) with moments of strategic racialization (Alim, 2016, p. 15). By soul, I extend beyond religiosity to refer to "that aspect of the whole self that unites our human and divine nature" (Kates, 2010, p. 1).

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