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Transnational Raciosemiolingual Normalization and the Schizophrenic Exoticism of Literacies

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On January 1, 2009, the Spirit Airlines flight that had carried my daughter and me from Trinidad to the United States with just two large suitcases—the only belongings that we then possessed in the ‘new world’—landed at the Tampa International Airport. Classified upon arrival to Florida as ‘immigrants’ and as “aliens” (Internal Revenue Service, 2024) in the US, we would soon learn that being racialized as Black in a country steeped in a Black-White binary would come to largely dictate perceptions about our capacity for what is often viewed as ‘non-native’ English languaging (Smith et al., 2018) and for our overall command of Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Smith, 2020) as a legitimate literate repertoire, or not. But it would take almost a decade to fully grasp the brutal realization of how race, language, broader semiotics, and immigration intersect (Smith, 2024) to undergird the literacies of millions of transnational and immigrant peoples daily crossing symbolic and geographic US borders.

A Normalization Conundrum

For me, a human of phenotypically visible African heritage who had then lived, parented, taught, and functioned in the Caribbean context of the Americas for almost three decades, the sheer confusion of this novel reality was a genuine one. After all, I had been quite aware while living in my homeland Saint Lucia, and in the nearby country of Trinidad and Tobago—

the land of my daughter’s birth—that millions of tourists head to the Caribbean every year, the number for which today is a whopping 32.2 million people (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2024).

I had seen the visiting humans often upon their arrival to the airports in Saint Lucia, being treated by natives with gestures that reflected the utmost care even while returning Saint Lucian nationals often fought for a right to be treated with dignity. I had seen the visiting humans walking the streets of the capital city of Saint Lucia, Castries, as they were received with greetings, smiles, and acceptance—almost with a sense of reverence, even while the Caribbean natives who often benefited from their spending could themselves barely afford many of the basic necessities of life. And I had seen them also across hotels in Caribbean countries such as Barbados, the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, St. Croix, and Trinidad and Tobago, where they were served graciously by Caribbean nationals whose daily wages were often significantly lower than the cost of just one night of their hotel stay.

With a broad range of multimodal literacies leveraged daily and often sacrificially by Caribbean nationals in service to United States citizens, it was therefore a shock to meet many of these same visitors—‘tourists’ as they are often called—upon my arrival

to their home country of the US, as they often proclaimed to me just how great it was to visit the Caribbean and to luxuriously spend their hard-earned money to enjoy the beaches that graced its shores. I was intrigued that despite such a gracious reception from most nationals in the Caribbean, there persisted an almost deafening capacity in the US for engaging literacies steeped in languaging and semiotics of anti-immigrant sentiment even when this immigration happened to be legal. This discourse, determined to drown in a sea of forgetfulness, the largely receptive and authentic receptivity that many US nationals are often bestowed during their luxurious visits to the Caribbean, in effect, raised questions in my mind about how the mobility of transnational literacies whether framed as immigration (i.e., Caribbean nationals in the US) or as visitation (i.e., US tourists in the Caribbean), appears to remain subject to ‘raciosemiolingual normalization.’¹

Such a dynamic, I posit, juxtaposed against raciolinguistic exceptionalism (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Alim & Smitherman, 2020) which positions people racialized as Black as “perpetually trapped between being perceived as ... an exception to ... and an exemplar of the described group” (Alim & Smitherman, 2020, p. 480), can potentially describe how United States nationals, many of whom, along with their languaging and broader semiotics, are often racialized as white or as superior in humanity based on their perceived proximity to US whiteness, and thus often appear to denote what is considered the globally acceptable norm for travel and for migration. Here, the racialization of the US national, when perceived as white, or in proximity to such whiteness by association (i.e., US Black and brown counterparts – myself included), seems potentially intertwined with languaging and broader semiotizing such that all perceived as US nationals in the transnational dynamic appear to be deemed superior even while nationals from other territories are relegated as inferior. I saw this dynamic daily as a

Caribbean living in the region, and I see it daily now as I reside in the US.

By positioning many personhoods, whether racialized as white, or as Black, brown, or otherwise, from the US context, based on the legitimization of certain linguistic and broader semiotic norms aligned with the White listening subject (Rosa & Flores, 2017), there appears to be a raciosemiolingual normalization of the US national in the transnational dynamic at large.

Literacies of Schizophrenic Caribbean Exoticism

Despite this seeming raciosemiolingual positioning and subsequent normalization of the US national across boundaries, many if not most will acknowledge that for decades, millions of legal Caribbean immigrants, working alongside humans in the US often described as native ‘Indigenous,’ descendants of enslaved ‘African Americans,’ and others characterized as ‘immigrant’ with numerous origins—e.g., Hispanic, Asian, European—have served diligently as a function of their rich transnational languaging and broader semiotics, in large part to contribute to the divided states that we have inherited today. The U.S. Department of Justice states that in 1970, West Indians accounted for approximately 1 million of the approximately 45 million “aliens” who migrated to the US (U.S. Department of Justice, 1970). And the American Immigration Council points out that:

The United States was built, in part, by immigrants—and the nation has long been the beneficiary of the energy and ingenuity that immigrants bring. Today, 13.6 percent of the nation’s residents are foreign-born, more than half of whom are naturalized citizens. Immigrants support the U.S. economy in many ways, accounting for 22.2 percent of entrepreneurs, 22.8 percent of STEM workers, and 15.2 percent of nurses. As workers, business owners, taxpayers, and neighbors,

immigrants are an integral part of the country's diverse and thriving communities and make extensive contributions that benefit all. (Semotiuk, 2023)

The Council also notes that 1 in 8 U.S. residents is an immigrant; immigrants paid over \$500 billion in taxes in 2021; and 22% of all U.S. entrepreneurs are immigrants (Semotiuk, 2023).

Yet, a transnational raciosemiolingual normalization that positions US visitation to the Caribbean and other locales as legitimate while denigrating legal immigration from the Americas and immigration at large, as well as the intellectual strides made possible due to this lineage, persists. Such a mechanism conveniently exoticizes Caribbeanness and other nativisms as an escape on the one hand while delegitimizing their requisite transformative contributions to intellectual and broader US discourse on the other—a dynamic which I aptly purport can be labeled “schizophrenic (Caribbean) exoticism.”²

Perplexed by this phenomenon as I researched, deeply and broadly, the transnational and immigrant literacies of Black immigrant teachers, educators, and youth (Smith, 2023b) for over a decade, I asked the question, “What is happening here to cause Caribbeans and other ‘natives’ to be so revered by US nationals who visit their locales and receive their service linguistically and more broadly, semiotically, yet positioned so invisibly when they assert their Caribbeanness and are positioned to receive such service in the United States?”

In thinking of the Caribbean-US dynamic as a lens for making sense of this conundrum, it eventually became vividly clear: Caribbeans operating in their countries of origin can be touted as exoticized when they provide a service in the Caribbean but their value obscured when they are given such service in the US. For instance:

- (a) It appears that in the Caribbean, Caribbeans serve; in the US, they often occupy inferior positioning and yet at the same time, must be served (e.g., paid linguistic and broader semiotic service given by Caribbeans in hotels vs. such paid service required to be given to Caribbeans no matter their status in the US);
- (b) It appears that in the Caribbean, Caribbeans give; in the US, they are relegated to a periphery of society of sorts often as “aliens,” and yet they must receive (e.g., unpaid linguistic and broader semiotic service given by Caribbeans vs. such unpaid service often withheld from Caribbeans largely dependent on their status in the US);
- (d) It appears that in many Majority Black nation states of the Caribbean, Caribbeans are largely engaged with as humans by US visitors due to the need to rely on their service; in the US, they are often overtly or covertly demoted to a logic of inferiority or invisibility (Smith, 2023a) premised on a sub-humanness steeped in racialization as Black based on a Black-White binary and White listening subject norms, even while some appear to flourish and dare to require the same service given to peers racialized as white or categorized as “American.”

Like the raciosemiolingual normalization described earlier, I have seen the dynamic described above daily as a Caribbean living in the region, and also experience it frequently as a Caribbean in the US. Based on these observations, operating largely as a transnational world native, I argue, it seems to be the case that the languaging and broader semiotization (Lau et al., 2021), as well as the personhoods of the Caribbean national racialized as Black are positioned as less than normal when a service is being provided by them as this is in keeping with their perceived and historical role as slaves as part of what continues to be the heartbeat of a vibrant colonial present. Their literacies emerging from this dynamic, in turn, form the basis for their exoticism even as their intellectual

capacity, contribution, consideration remain drastically understated, overlooked, and invisibilized. Specifically, it appears that when they arrive as ‘immigrants’ and as ‘aliens’ to the US or to other countries of the Minority World (e.g., Canada, Australia), the imposed invisibility upon the language and broader semiotics of this population even as their intellectual acumen is covertly positioned as less than normalized and their assimilation accepted as evidence of their model minoritization, presents a stark contrast to the exoticism that they experience when functioning within their various locales.

Locating the Intersectionalities Undergirding Transnational Literacies and Schizophrenic Caribbean Exoticism in their Raciosemiolingual Roots

The schizophrenic Caribbean exoticism that seems to occur and which appears to position the languaging, broader semiotizing, and personhoods of Caribbeans as highly desirable for service in their locales of origin while at the same time subverting as less than central, the foundational role of their epistemologies and personhoods at large to intellectual and holistic advancement of a US driven by “literacies of migration” (Capstick, 2016; Smith, 2024), I argue, is steeped in raciolinguistic ideologies (Alim et al., 2016) that are in turn premised on the structural forms through which racism remains perpetuated colonially, across geographical borders (see also Ramjattan, 2022). By no means unique to the Caribbean-US dynamic, which is in fact just one lens through which to view the normalcy of colonial presents as outlined in a raciolinguistic perspective (Rosa & Flores, 2017), this mechanism, when considered as a basis for conceptualizing “transnational literacies” (Smith et al., 2023) explains in part, how race, language, and migration (whether temporary as ‘visitation’ or permanent as ‘immigration’), intersect to create a transnational raciosemiolingual normalization that emerges between the US and Caribbean nationals and within

and across their systems as individuals traverse the spaces that both uphold and flatten national boundaries.

Whether in whole or in part, numerous scholars such as Lakeya Afolalu, H. Samy Alim (e.g., Alim & Pennycook, 2008), Monisha Bajaj, Lesley Bartlett, Eurydice Bauer, Eliza Braden, Kisha Bryan, Gerald Campano, Suresh Canagarajah (e.g., Canagarajah, 2017), Cathy Compton-Lilly, Ayanna Cooper, Peter De Costa, Matt Deroo, Sender Dovchin, Ofelia García, Maria Paula Ghiso, Wenyu Guo, Kris Gutiérrez, Mellissa Gyimah, Nancy Hornberger, Awad Ibrahim, Robert T. Jiménez, Amanda Kibler, Lydiah Kiramba, Michelle Knight-Manuel, Jungmin Kwon, Wan Shun Eva Lam, Crystal Chen Lee, Emily Machado, Ramón Antonio Martínez, Cheryl McLean, Esther Milu, Shondel Nero, Alistair Pennycook (e.g., Alim & Pennycook, 2008), Kongji Qin, Aria Razfar, Jonathan Rosa, Lenny Sánchez, Allison Skerrett, Amy Stornaiuolo, Kate Vieira, Doris Warriner, Vaughn Watson, Dianne Wellington, Rahat Zaidi, and so many others continue to make clear the ways in which literacies undergirding migration narratives are designed largely by the linguistic and broader semiotic repertoires of peoples, all of which, we are now beginning to more clearly acknowledge, are largely informed by the racial structuring of symbolic as well as literal bordered personhoods and systems.

I argue that to address the schizophrenic exoticism and transnational raciosemiolingual normalization currently operating across the US and the Caribbean as well as other exoticized contexts, there is a need for literacy and language scholars to respond to the inequitable ways in which personhoods traversing such nation states are positioned with regards to migration and visitation (Sealy, 2018; Wilkes, 2016). Lingering questions beckon the consciousness such as:

- What elements of languaging and broader semiotizing operate as part of national systems across these countries in ways that

leverage transnational literacies (Smith et al., 2023) as a function of raciolinguistic ideologies?

- What linguistic and broader semiotic deconstructions of border policies become necessary to undertake a review of the structural premises on which such raciosemiolingual normalization and schizophrenic exoticism are premised?
- In what ways can the fields of language and literacy further open up opportunities for examining the ways in which transnational literacies and normalization are premised on raciolinguistic inequality?
- How does the ever-evolving student, and by extension, human, operating across virtual worlds now operating largely as a 'transnational native' in the current virtual dispensation of the earth as we know it (Smith, 2022) hold opportunities for harnessing the schizophrenic structuring of assets inherent in languaging and in the broader semiotizing literate repertoires of humans across physical and symbolic borders?

- And what steps can be taken to address these elements as the world revolutionarily shifts paradigms to welcome artificial intelligence and its varied representations as a key basis for communicative capacities in an already transnational world?

As my daughter—now a young adult—and I, along with millions of 'immigrants' across the US and the world, remain assailed by anti-immigrant, anti-Black, and anti-multilingual sentiment in the US, there is every reason to believe that challenging representations of transnational raciosemiolingual normalization amidst transnational schizophrenic exoticism in the United States and a global world will require more robust intentionality in emerging scholarly research agendas concerning how transnational literacies operate as a function of intersectionalities of race, language, and migration/visitation across superiorly and inferiorly positioned borders.

Notes

¹ **Raciosemiolingual Normalization:** I propose this term here by revisiting the notion of the “semiolingual” (see “semiolingual innocence”: Smith, 2024) to describe how certain individuals who engage in transnational exchange across boundaries benefit from the assumption that there is a normalization attached to their temporary or permanent migration based on racialization of their language and broader semiotics as a function of the White listening subject, or by perceived proximity to it, and that this normalization cannot be afforded to other individuals who are often regarded as inferior in the transnational dynamic. My focus on racialization here with an emphasis on how this is encapsulated within broader semiotics extends in part the research of Smalls (2020) on raciosemiotics. It also reflects, in part, how transracialization functions in the process of migration such that the “transracial subject” “transgresses” the way in which border crossing is steeped in ways of being that define what it means to “race” personhood, suggesting the need for guarding against a call to discard race, and simultaneously requiring a subversion of racial categorization while also maintaining it (Alim, 2016).

² **Schizophrenic Exoticism:** This construct is proposed in keeping with the notion of “schizophrenic institutional norms” described in Smith et al. (2022) to describe how Black immigrant youth are rewarded with literacy success on the one hand while at the same time expected of them to adhere to raciolinguistic ideologies for maintenance of model minority status on the other. With schizophrenic exoticism, I am arguing that raciosemiolingual normalization premised on Whiteness largely allows the US national to function as *the* acceptable norm in transnational exchange while denying even legal immigrants to the US the sanctity of functioning as such with the same credence, but at the same time, lauds the exotic nature of nationals and their locales during temporary visits by US nationals to their home countries.

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