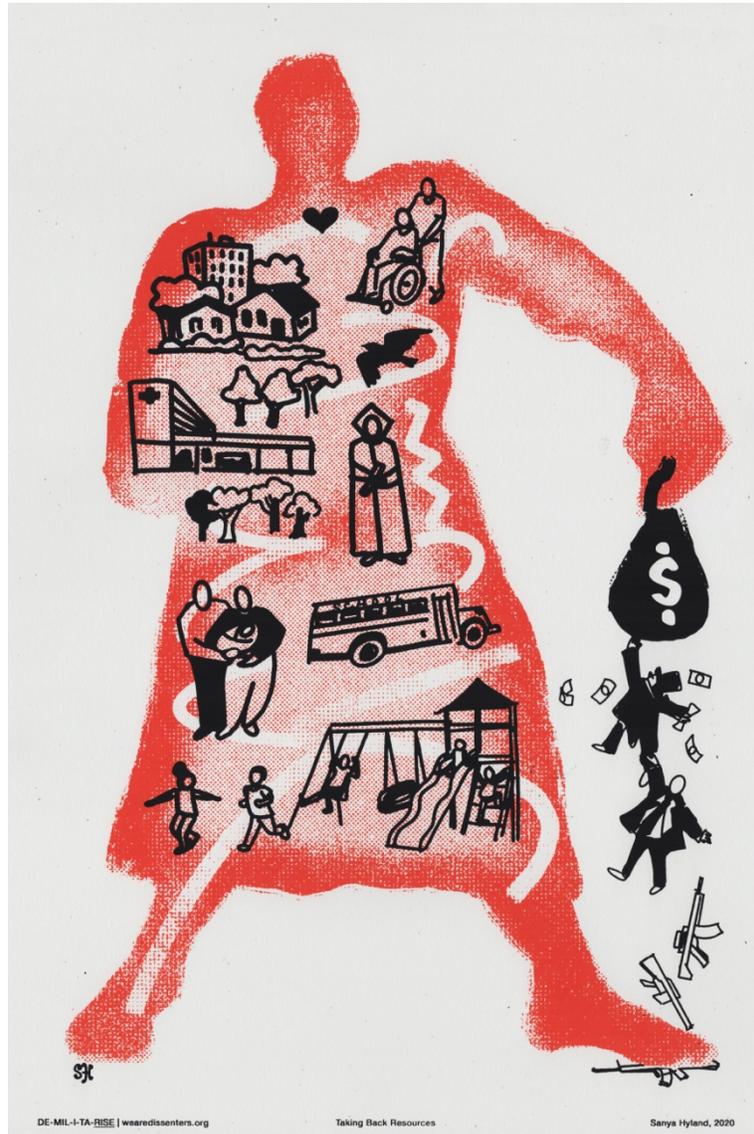


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Red Ed: Teaching Toward a New Internationalism

by Stephen Paur



TAKING BACK RESOURCES BY SANYA HYLANDBY VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

## 1. Trolling the Teacher

“Why do you have to teach *communism* in your *English* class?”

It was a loaded question. I could tell from the tone that its motive was something other than genuine curiosity. It was, rather, the kind of antagonistic question most commonly encountered on Twitter threads and Reddit forums: the kind of question preferred by so-called “trolls” and usually posed to strangers, the goal of which is to provoke irritation or anger, not to initiate a polite exchange of ideas.

Often, the best way to respond to such questions is to laugh them off. So, I kept erasing the whiteboard, my back still turned, as it was when the student asked his question — not my own student, I should say, but a student in the class after mine who’d arrived as I was packing up — and chuckled in response, as if the student was making a joke, parodying a troll. It probably sounded a little forced, but I did my best.

It wasn’t that I was unwilling to engage this student in a lively debate about radical pedagogy or critical language awareness, some principles of which I had been trying to explain and explore that morning with my international students in our second-language college composition course — principles which do, in fact, have more than a few roots in critical social theories like Marxism. I just figured that, since he wasn’t my own student, and since his own class would be starting soon, the best option was, in this particular case, to retreat as swiftly and gracefully as possible.

As I walked out (muttering something to myself under my breath about “picking my battles”), I heard one of this student’s classmates turn to him and say, “Huh? What are you talking about?” Now that was a fair question. Indeed, my whiteboard scribbles (which I’ll describe in more detail below) had included neither the words “communism” nor “Marx.” I only caught the beginning of the student’s response before I was out the door: “Oh, you know, universities these days...”

## 2. Gagging the Teacher

It’s not hard to guess at probable endings to that sentence. Especially given the recent hand-wringing over so-called “critical race theory” in K-12 schools, or charges of ideological stridency on college campuses, it’s easy to imagine this student rehearsing some version of the tired complaint that education has become “too politicized” or “too woke,” and that teachers are no longer neutral, objective dispensers of apolitical knowledge — as if we ever were (see Berlin; Graff) — as much as socialist (or worse: commie!) ideologues who weaponize teaching by spewing propaganda to captive audiences and punishing dissidents with Ds and Fs.

As the Idaho Freedom Foundation, a conservative think tank, recently put it: “Instead of creating a more educated populace, social justice universities are producing a group of degree-holding elitists who blindly believe in a radical

Marxist worldview because the system never nurtured their minds enough to foster critical thinking. This transformative agenda at Idaho universities must be stopped” (Yenor).

How are radical teachers to respond to such charges?

We might point out that a *genuinely* radical Marxist worldview is actually quite hostile to the whole idea of having “elitists” in the first place.

We might simply shrug off the charges and proceed with our work, buoyed by the thought that, if the powers that be really do feel as threatened as they claim to, we must be doing something right.

Or we might point out that America’s classrooms are, in fact, subject to censorship and the stifling of critical analysis of the status quo, but not quite in the way the Right would have us believe. Indeed, an August 2022 press release from PEN America titled “Educational Gag Order Proposals Spike by 250% in 2022” draws attention to the fact that, “consistent with last year’s trends, this year’s educational gag order bills have been driven overwhelmingly by Republican legislators. One bill out of the 137 introduced this year had a Democratic legislative sponsor.”

One such gag order, in particular, merits further discussion here, as it echoes the sentiment voiced by the student above. In June 2022, the Arizona House of Representatives posted this press release: “New Law Sponsored by Representative Quang Nguyen Creates Anti-Communist Civics Education for Arizona High School Students.”

The self-congratulatory title (Nguyen is a Republican) turns out to be a bit misleading, since the new law doesn’t promote “anti-communist” education in any explicit way. The actual text of Arizona House Bill 2008 only mandates “a comparative discussion of the political ideologies, such as communism and totalitarianism, that conflict with the principles of freedom and democracy that are essential to the founding principles of the United States.” (Don’t ask me what to make of the tautology there: principles that are essential to principles?)

Still, the language is clearly asking us (1) to automatically equate communism and totalitarianism, implying that communism couldn’t possibly be anything else, and (2) to automatically consider anything different from the US system to be bad — a perversion of freedom, democracy, etc. — simply by virtue of that difference. It’s your run-of-the-mill American exceptionalism, in other words.

Read against the grain, however, there’s nothing about the language in this law that actually prohibits high school teachers from advocating socialist, communist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist principles, such as worker control over production, the self-emancipation of oppressed groups, organized resistance to exploitation and appropriation, the precedence of people over profit, and the defense of human flourishing and creativity. Such values do, after all, conflict with many of the US political economic system’s founding (and reigning) principles. And this law creates new openings — new motives, even — to foreground those discrepancies (possibly with the help of something like

the Pew Research report on American attitudes toward socialism and capitalism; see "In Their Own Words").

### 3. Goadng the Teacher

At least, it did for me. As a college teacher in the state, Arizona's new law isn't aimed at me. But the student's criticism was, and if his intention was to provoke a response, he succeeded. After a little soul-searching, I decided that I *should*, in fact, be teaching communism in a more explicit, direct way, if by "communists" we mean "those who attempt to use their resources for their own purposes, thus interfering with the right to rob and to exploit, the central doctrine of [US] foreign policy" (Chomsky 10).

So, I decided to tweak my syllabus in a way that leaned into the commie charge: I added an in-class screening of the 2005 film *Good Night, and Good Luck*, a dramatization of CBS newscaster Edward R. Murrow's journalistic fight against Senator Joseph McCarthy during the 1950s "Red Scare." (My students were in the middle of writing, recording, and editing their own podcasts, and I figured some historical context for this new media technology would be helpful.)

In the movie, Murrow and his producers refuse to kowtow either to military pressures or to their corporate sponsors, opting instead to call out McCarthy and his enablers for their anti-communist paranoia, whatever the risk to reputation or ratings.

There was one scene, in particular, after which I pressed the pause button so my students and I could unpack what transpired. It's a tense exchange between Murrow and his boss, news director Sig Mickelson. In the scene, they debate the merits of airing a segment on Milo Radulovich, an Air Force officer who was discharged after finding himself in McCarthy's crosshairs. The exchange went like this:

Mickelson: "I don't think you can call *this* a neutral piece."

Murrow: "Well, the other side's been represented rather well for the last couple of years..."

Mickelson: "You want to forego the standards you've stuck to for fifteen years? Both sides, no commentary?"

Murrow: "We *all* editorialize [ . . . ] I've searched my conscience, and I can't for the life of me find *any* justification for this. And I simply cannot accept that there are, on every story, two equal and logical sides to an argument. Call it editorializing if you like."

Mickelson: "Well, it *is* editorializing, Ed..."

Murrow: "They're going to have equal time to defend themselves."

The exchange allowed my students and me to discuss just what is meant by things like "bias," "objectivity," and "false equivalence," and whether it's true what Murrow says in this scene: "We all editorialize." Many of them agreed that complete neutrality just isn't possible — every utterance, every text, is motivated by certain needs and interests, which gives everything a certain slant. (Which doesn't, of course, mean that a given point of view, however limited, can't be legitimate or credible.)

In a well-known essay called "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," media critic James W. Carey suggested that monopoly capitalism was partially responsible for creating the semblance of apolitical news. News-as-commodity has to be readily exportable to wildly different markets, he argued, and thus emptied of any overtly political content that might inhibit rapid uptake by politically diverse audiences (162).

It's a truism for rhetoric and writing teachers that all discourse is situated, motivated, contingent, and therefore partial (in both senses: biased, and incomplete). Too often, however, such insights are themselves presented as politically neutral. The next logical step — one too rarely taken — would be to say that the modern conception of "objectivity" is itself a capitalist invention.

### 4. Language and Power

What, then, might alternative, anti-capitalist, and/or socialist conceptions of knowledge look like? One thing is clear: they wouldn't all be expressed in English.

Indeed, any vaguely socialist teaching must embrace a radical, dialectical internationalism, and this means rejecting a stubbornly parochial monolingualism in favor of a radically internationalist multilingualism (see Horner).

Socialism has always been internationalist, as Terry Eagleton points out: "If a socialist nation failed to win international support in a world where production was too specialized and divided among different nations, it would be unable to draw upon the global resources needed to abolish scarcity. The productive wealth of a single nation was unlikely to be enough" (16-17). But if socialism's internationalist aspirations have never been fully realized in practice, its multilingual aspirations have been even less so (Cameron). Indeed, multilingualism has too often been co-opted by private interests whose goal is global domination, not global equality or global justice.

To help my L2 writing students identify, understand, and critically analyze monolingual ideology, I screened a Coca-Cola commercial that aired during the 2014 Super Bowl in which a group of young American bilingual women sing "America the Beautiful," alternating between seven different languages. I followed it up with an ABC News segment about the racist backlash on Twitter to this Coke commercial by adherents of English-only ideology.

My students, of course, were quick to align themselves with the messaging of the Coke commercial, understandably rolling their eyes at the outraged Twitterers. Nor did they need my help to identify the exclusionary interests<sup>1</sup> served by the English-only attitudes evident in tweets like "Never buying coke again... America The Beautiful in a language other than English is just wrong" [sic], which included the hashtag "#boycottcoke." One student, from Nigeria, even drew a parallel between English-only attitudes and the F1 visa restrictions that prevent international students from working off-campus, rules which are "just about preventing American workers from facing competition from non-Americans," he said, and which make international students

more vulnerable to workplace mistreatment since they have fewer employment alternatives.

That was indeed a good example of one of the points I'd hoped to make: that linguistic prejudice and discrimination, whether interpersonal or institutional, are not just about being mean for the sake of being mean. Often, they're part of an ideological strategy that — like racism, sexism, and other forms of domination — is part of the global class struggle, in which ruling elites rely on the coding of out-groups as somehow "deficient," "sub-standard," or "inferior" — labels sometimes used to describe the language practices of my international students — and thus less valuable, more exploitable.

But I wanted to push them further, to read against the grain, to identify some of the hidden contradictions in these media texts — the mismatches, that is, between explicit and latent messaging, intended and unintended meanings.

For instance, obnoxious and intolerant as the featured tweets might be, I said, do two whole tweets really count as a "national firestorm," as the newscasters had characterized the backlash? And, if not, why might the newscasters go out of their way to exaggerate the backlash? Whose interests were served by doing so?

"Sensationalism," one student suggested. "They're a news outlet, but also a business. To sell ads, they have to get your attention. They have to exaggerate."

Maybe they think they're following in Edward R. Murrow's footsteps, another student offered: "You know, taking on the forces of prejudice, standing up for what's right. Something like that."

"Ah, interesting," I said. "Wait a minute, though, aren't they a news outlet? Aren't they supposed to be objective? But it sounds like you're saying they have a point of view that comes across..."

"Oh, they're definitely on Coke's side." And indeed, the students marshaled plenty of evidence to support this reading, such as ABC's inclusion of behind-the-scenes interviews with some of the young singers — sympathetic portrayals that contrasted sharply with the impersonal belligerence of the tweets. "We just have different backgrounds, and that's okay. We're all Americans, and we can come together," one of the singers says.

Our discussion took an unexpected swerve, however, when a student wondered if the tweets were even authentic.

"That '#boycottcoke' part got me thinking," she said, "what if the whole Twitter backlash thing was a conspiracy by Pepsi? You know, criticizing the commercial's message just to get people to stop drinking Coke, their main competitor?"

"I mean, I guess that's not impossible," I said, stroking my chin a bit too elaborately. "But, if that's the case, are you saying these undercover Pepsi users on Twitter are only spouting this xenophobic, English-only stuff because it might help them financially? Not because they actually believe it?"

"Exactly," she said.

"Hm, okay," I said. "Let's flip that back onto Coke, then. What about the original commercial? Are you saying Coke might not necessarily believe its own messaging, either? That it might not actually be as inclusive and multicultural as it's claiming to be with this commercial?" She nodded.

Once the class started thinking in this vein, other dimensions of the commercial began to trouble them. For instance, the commercial's subtle suggestion that the only real barrier to US citizenship is a person's beverage preference. Or the idyllic melting-pot aesthetic that seems to ignore, or at least minimize, the real and persistent hurdles to full and equal participation that non-English-speakers in the US face. Or the idea that "Coke doesn't discriminate: it's for everyone, regardless of age, language, or nationality," when the truth is that soda, in general, is only really "for everyone" in the sense of being "bad for everyone" (see: sugar content, etc.). Or the fact that Coke is only really "internationalist" in the sense of being a *multinational conglomerate* whose profits depend, in large part, on the exploitation of workers around the world. (The last one was my own contribution.)

My students were lively, engaged, perceptive. They didn't need much prompting at all to surface some of the relevant contradictions lurking in these media texts, tensions indicative of the kinds of ideological strategies — some more subtle than others — often employed by powerful, moneyed interests. With minimal nudging from me, they proved quite adept at this style of dialectical thinking, a style that requires a sensitivity to the contradictory, back-and-forth, give-and-take, advance-and-retreat rhythms of historical change, social struggle, and meaning-making.

The major takeaway here — for me as much as for them — was that to think dialectically about multilingualism and internationalism is to attend equally to their dark and light sides. The dark side is a bourgeois multiculturalism (a.k.a. neoliberal multiculturalism, or melting-pot pluralism) that celebrates essentialized differences because those differences are something capital can make use of, sorting people into categories, and ascribing different levels of value to those categories (Kubota).

But there's a dialectical multiculturalism, too, that can serve the interests of the planetary underclass if it "draws struggles across many axes of difference into relation with one another, and unites ourselves, our students, and our society in the examination of a shared and contested history," a history that is the source of our differences, and which can help us learn to more gracefully, humanely navigate them (Mahala and Swilky 187; see also Trimbur 248). In the process, we might discover strategic openings where torque and leverage can be applied, domination resisted, norms subverted, solidarities forged, flourishing approximated. As Suresh Canagarajah writes: "There is evidence that learners understand the norms better when they deviate from them."<sup>2</sup>

## 5. Benefit of the Doubt

This dialectically internationalist value system — in contrast to an anti-universalist apartheid, on one hand, or

some “vague and amorphous global society,” on the other hand — is another thing I was trying to get at with my whiteboard scribbles (Foster). So, let’s return to the specter of communism supposedly haunting that whiteboard.

I had introduced the major unit project, a Language Event Analysis, a few days earlier. The project asks students to analyze a recent language-related international news story, which they select from the up-to-date archive of such stories on [GlobalVoices.org/-/topics/language/](http://GlobalVoices.org/-/topics/language/).

They ended up stumbling on topics as varied as a story about the death of the last living speaker of the indigenous Chilean language Yaghan; a story about how terms like “witchcraft” are often used to denigrate ancestral medicinal knowledge, such as that of Ecuador’s Montubio people; a story about the risks faced by Russian social media posters who express support for Ukraine; and a story about African animators’ efforts to use cartoons not only to boost representation, but to preserve endangered African languages. From that last article, they learned that “the African continent hosts roughly one-third of the world’s approximately 7,000 living languages,” but “the relentless dominance of international languages such as English and French” means that “native languages are increasingly coming under threat” (Wangari).

After students choose a story to serve as the fulcrum for their analysis, they start to think about what their news story reveals about the links between language, society, and power. I ask them to use evidence from personal experience, as well as lens concepts from course readings and other scholarly texts, to support and illustrate their thesis. Along with the film, commercial, and news segments already mentioned, some of our course texts included:

- the transcript of an 1878 debate in the California assembly over a proposed revision to the state constitution that would restrict the rights of Spanish-speaking residents (this was the beginning of the English-only movement, led by anti-immigrant nativists, which eventually spread to other parts of the country);
- a 2019 news article titled “‘English-Only’ Laws in Education on Verge of Extinction,” which summarizes research documenting the harm done by anti-bilingual education policies (Arizona remains the only US state where such legislation is still in effect; some students ended up making connections between the Spanish/English asymmetries in the US we discussed in class, and some of the linguistic hierarchies and tensions in their home countries — between Igbo and Yoruba speakers in Nigeria, for example, or between Uzbek and Russian speakers in Uzbekistan);
- an article by Adrian Holliday about *native-speakerism*, a racist ideology that uses race and ethnicity to judge communicative competence, insisting on a false hierarchy (between “native” and “non-native” speakers) that serves the

interests of a lucrative US- and British-based English Language Teaching (ELT) industry;

- articles about *linguistic imperialism* (whereby users of local, non-standard language varieties are forcibly assimilated into the linguistic norms and cultural values of an imperial power), and its flipside, *linguistic apartheid* (whereby users of stigmatized languages and dialects are systematically denied access to prestige dialects and the discourse practices associated with dominant groups) by Robert Phillipson and Augustin Simo Bobda, respectively;
- a TEDx talk called “Embracing Multilingualism and Eradicating Linguistic Bias” delivered by Karen Leung, a bilingual US college student who speaks Cantonese and English;
- the well-known TED talk by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called “The Danger of a Single Story”;
- a clip from South African comedian Trevor Noah’s standup routine called “Trevor Noah Orders His First Taco”;
- an episode of NPR’s Code Switch podcast called “Talk American” detailing the origins of the “standard American accent” and following a Baltimore resident’s attempts to master the speaking style prized in TV news settings.

I had used the whiteboard to tease out some of the unifying themes and recurring motifs from the course materials so far. One of the common threads, I suggested, was that questions about what it means to use standardized English, other varieties of English, or languages other than English “effectively” and “successfully” are questions that are often answered in advance in a way that serves the interests of a few at the expense of the many.

I presented it as a kind of hypothesis, one that the first part of the Language Event Analysis assignment was designed to test by eliciting student experiences that could capture the everyday stakes of language choice and language difference. Taking a cue from I. A. Richards’s definition of rhetoric as “the study of misunderstanding and its remedies,” this first part of the project asked students to narrate a personal experience they had with misunderstanding or misinterpretation, reflecting on why it happened the way it did, including whether or not there was any imbalance in who was expected to accommodate whom — who was blamed for what went wrong, and why.

I hoped students would feel authorized to consider personal experience a valid source of evidence and scholarly knowledge (if not the only valid kind, of course). But I wasn’t quite prepared for what they ended up sharing. Some of the stories involved the kinds of innocent trip-ups any language-learner expects to have. But others had a more sinister cast.

One student, from Saudi Arabia, wrote about being extorted by her landlord, made to pay an extra security deposit because she couldn’t furnish a social security number. Another, from Kuwait, described being detained

and interrogated for several hours in Heathrow Airport on his way to the States.

One student, also from Saudi Arabia, wrote about the shame and embarrassment he'd felt when he was mocked by his roommate after mistakenly asking for a "hooker" for his clothes, when what he wanted was a hanger. Another student, from India, described a similar misunderstanding when he asked a classmate to borrow a "rubber," by which he meant an eraser.

One student, from China, wrote about being accused by an eavesdropping neighbor of casually peppering his speech with the n-word while speaking Mandarin, and had to explain that a common Chinese word (那个, meaning "that one") has a similar sound. Another Chinese student included an anecdote about accidentally offending his female Uber driver when he pronounced the address of his destination, 444 Beach Road, in a way that the woman misheard as "bitch."

What many of these stories of misunderstanding seemed to have in common was an English-speaking interlocutor who was either unable or unwilling to give any of these students the benefit of the doubt. It was as if they were assumed to be guilty until proven otherwise, as if people were actively looking for excuses to accuse them of something. In each case, language was a lever of othering, the pretext for an indictment.

I hoped the act of sharing these anecdotes, at least, was cathartic. It seemed to be. And many of those who shared their experiences in class had clearly learned to appreciate the humor or the absurdity in some of the situations. I considered it a small victory, too, that, in their essays, many of them were confident and agile enough to shuttle deftly between two languages, and, in one case, three (English, Spanish, Arabic), so as to more vividly evoke their attempts to traverse the minefield of misconstrued meanings, argue their case, and awake intact at the start of the next day.

## 6. Schooling the Teacher

These stories were a lesson for me. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so surprised — maybe I was too naive. But they were a humbling reminder that theoretical firepower and elaborate conceptual maneuvers of the sort offered by, say, the assigned reading on "linguistic imperialism" can only get you so far, and that any truly radical teaching must get not only "to the root" of social ills, but must also be *rooted* in the everyday needs, fears, desires, and experiences of the real people — student or otherwise — whose daily struggles and unnoticed triumphs are, after all, the foundations on which genuinely transformative learning happens. Radical teaching, in other words, means teaching *from below* (inductively, as much as deductively; see Seitz), just as the kind of multilingualism and internationalism it advocates must also be *from below* (dialectical, rather than bourgeois).

Instead of guiding them in the mechanistic, point-and-shoot application of pre-fab theories,<sup>3</sup> then, we can enlist students in the messier, never-finished process of actively constructing new knowledge — and retrofitting old knowledge — to suit new problems and new circumstances.

This sort of *bottom-up* teaching praxis will be, by definition, radical, because it will be *rooted*.

One goal with this unit on language and power was to give my students some new tools — new conceptual vocabularies, new rhetorical sensitivities, new sources of curiosity and communicative confidence — and to explore with them some new ways of looking, doing, and being. What they end up building with those tools or seeing with those lenses — which are never the only lenses, or always the best lenses — is, finally, up to them. My job, as I see it, is only to direct their attention, gently, to questions, problems, and other phenomena they might not have noticed or quite been able to name yet.

In return, of course — and this is what I should have been more prepared for — they draw my attention to questions, problems, and phenomena I hadn't noticed or had words for.

Meanwhile, the fact that talking about social inequality, linguistic discrimination, or capitalist exploitation could be mistaken for communist agitprop just shows how far the goal posts continue to be moved — shows, that is, the persistence of "communist" as a catch-all smear, like I said before, for anyone critical of the status quo, anyone intent on working toward something less separate and unequal, more radically internationalist — while still trying to remain open to the full range of unforeseeable hues, shapes, and textures a more humane, livable, postcapitalist future might take.

My students' stories keep me pointed in that direction.

## Notes

1. As Cameron observes: "the conviction that multilingualism is only a temporary disruption caused by the uncooperative attitudes of *these particular* migrants (the claim is commonly heard that in the past, other groups of migrants 'made the effort' to assimilate) serves ideological purposes" and ignores the structural factors influencing migration patterns (76, emphasis in original).

2. It's worth keeping in mind that, as Mary Louise Pratt points out, "the case for multilingualism includes access to a lingua franca, as a path to civic power, connection, and political alliance" (27). The thornier question of *which* languages should play such a mediating, coordinating role is beyond the scope of this essay. (For a historical argument in favor of Esperanto as "the weapon of an auxiliary language in the class struggle," see Starr; for a brief history of Esperanto, see Benton.)

3. For instance: "linguistic imperialism." Some students found the term useful. Others, not so much. In retrospect, I didn't present this concept very clearly. I had wanted to show how language can be wielded both as a tool of oppression and of self-empowerment. But the assigned reading was dense and alienating, and at least one student thought I was saying he should feel ashamed for wanting to learn English. (I hadn't meant to say that, but that's what he'd heard.)

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