

# Accent Reduction as Raciolinguistic Pedagogy

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## INTRODUCTION: FROM ACCENT-AS-DOING TO ACCENT REDUCTION

Under neoliberal capitalism, notions of personhood are defined in accordance with the market. Indeed, people may see themselves as an amalgam of skills that can be readily deployed and commodified as labor.<sup>1</sup> One specific instance of this point concerns language. Rather than simply being an aspect of one's identity, language is also treated as a skill needed to perform work in an increasing range of knowledge- and service-based industries, which consider communication a central component of working life.<sup>2</sup> What is important to emphasize here is that all features of language can be converted into skills, including something as minute as a speech accent.<sup>3</sup> For example, in transnational call centers, where agents either receive calls from international customers looking for help with tasks such as banking transactions or make calls for telemarketing purposes, these workers are required to "neutralize" components of their accents reflecting their national/ethnoracial/class backgrounds in an alleged attempt to effectively communicate with interlocutors from around the world.<sup>4</sup> Such sites as call center work highlight that accent is not simply something one has, but also something one does. An accent can be a site of workplace training and the means through which to engage in professional communication. However, it is worthwhile to recognize that this idea of accent-as-doing is not divorced from accent-as-identity.

In other words, speaking with an accent, as a type of doing, *accents* a person. This is not only in the sense of an accent highlighting broad social information about individuals, whether it be their place of birth, first language, or ethnoracial background. It is also about an accent drawing attention to character traits stereotypically tied to a person's social identity.<sup>5</sup> Depending on how one sounds, one might be stereotyped as sexually attractive or unappealing, intelligent or unintelligent, trustworthy or suspicious, and so on. In the context of late capitalism, where

language is a skill, accent can even accent one's employability or professional competence. The obvious problem with this connection is that if one has the "wrong type of accent," it can lead to reduced employment prospects. This scenario is a reality for skilled migrants who seek to establish or further their careers in "native-English-speaking" nations like Canada and the United States, the specific geopolitical context of this chapter.

These migrants are positioned as skilled by the immigration policies of these nations, which perceive their advanced degrees and/or work experience in high-status fields like science, business, or medicine as indicators of their ability to bolster economic growth.<sup>6</sup> While skilled migrants may be highly proficient in the English language, which allows them to work in their host nations, the "foreignness" of their accents is deemed a professional liability. Because their accents are perceived as lacking intelligibility, skilled migrants are typically deemed unable to complete work tasks that require extensive oral communication.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as these migrants become skilled through their credentials, they are simultaneously deskilled through the sound of their voices. This issue has spurred the creation of the so-called accent reduction industry, a type of "reskilling" industry.

Indeed, privatized accent reduction programs, taking the form of either face-to-face or online classes, are essentially employment programs. They operate on the premise that if skilled migrants' accents make them unemployable or underemployed, then "reducing" their accents will rectify the situation. That is, a reduced accent will reskill migrants by allowing them to verbally display their existing knowledge and experience to prospective employers in the Canadian or U.S. job market.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as will be detailed in the next section, this reskilling can even be understood as a medical procedure given how an accent can be framed as a personal affliction to overcome. Returning to the notion of an accent being able to accent, speaking with a reduced accent accents one's employability. Here, the use of *accent* as a verb refers to setting oneself apart from the crowd. Within groups of migrant job seekers who have similar credentials and work experience, professionals with reduced accents gain an additional skill to highlight during a job interview, for example. While accent reduction allegedly allows skilled migrants to accent their worth in the labor market, it is important to ask who or what else is being accented, or even "de-accented," in this practice. If the mandate of the accent reduction industry is to convince clients that a reduced accent increases intelligibility, what linguistic qualities of particular groups must it (de-)emphasize to make its case? Also, if the industry propagates the narrative that a reduced accent is the means to professional success, what ideologies and power structures must it rely on or underplay to present a convincing story?

Acknowledging the fact that racism and its supporting structure of white supremacy (along with other interlocking structures such as capitalism and [settler] colonialism) pervade society, this chapter aims to grapple with the above questions by arguing that accent reduction is not simply about teaching migrants how to speak, but also about teaching them how to speak in accordance with the

racial ordering of society, thereby accenting or reinforcing its power. Thus, accent reduction can be considered a type of raciolinguistic pedagogy, a pedagogy that uses language as a means to normalize racism in its various manifestations. However, accent reduction as raciolinguistic pedagogy does not necessarily happen within the actual learning of how to reduce an accent. Instead, I explore how this pedagogy manifests in accent reduction advertising. Mainly through their websites, accent reduction programs teach prospective clients about what constitutes (ab)normal speech as well as how to vocally exist in relation to racist structures and ideologies.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. After providing further background information on accent reduction by noting some of its pedagogical flaws, I then offer a brief theorization of raciolinguistic pedagogy. This theorizing leads to a discussion of three raciolinguistic lessons that the online advertising of U.S. and Canadian accent reduction programs teach prospective customers. To conclude, I consider what a counterpedagogy to accent reduction might look like.

#### AN INITIAL PROBLEMATIZATION OF ACCENT REDUCTION AS PEDAGOGY

Accent reduction is actually a misnomer. Likely because of the common understanding that there is a “thinginess” to language, accent is often conceived as having “physical properties.”<sup>9</sup> For example, one may have a *thick* or *heavy* accent, which might create a desire to *lose it* altogether. When thinking about accent reduction, then, this practice is akin to getting a haircut: just as people need to trim their hair to make it more manageable to style, they may also “trim” their speech to better manage communication. However, given that accents are (re)created through the interaction of speaker and interlocutor and may change over time, the entire notion of accent reduction is misleading as there is no such thing as a static accent to reduce.<sup>10</sup>

This conceptual problem of accent reduction also makes it pedagogically suspect. If providers of accent reduction services label them as such, then this already highlights that they lack an understanding of how accent works. The fact that *accent reduction* persists as a term speaks to how almost anyone can be an accent reduction provider. Indeed, the accent reduction industry continues to be unregulated and rarely scrutinized, meaning that providers are under no obligation to acquire “necessary” qualifications to teach accent.<sup>11</sup> An expected outcome of this lack of regulation is that there are ample examples of the outrageousness of accent reduction. For instance, programs may claim that they can reduce an accent in a brief period of time while providing no empirical proof, offer pronunciation advice that contradicts research in (applied) linguistics, or be invested in changing an accent simply for the sake of change.<sup>12</sup>

While accent reduction programs are typically characterized by a lack of formal standards regarding pedagogical goals and procedures, the large influx of speech

language pathologists (SLPs) that have entered the industry would suggest that there are also some attempts at professionalization. On the surface, this point is evidenced by SLPs' advanced knowledge of articulatory phonetics, which could prove useful in identifying pronunciation issues, and the tendency of many SLPs to label their services as accent *modification* rather than reduction, demonstrating a recognition of the conceptual inaccuracy of the latter term.<sup>13</sup> Yet there are also problems with SLPs being accent reduction providers. To begin, although they may be able to *diagnose* problems with pronunciation, SLPs generally do not have language teaching credentials and thus may not know how to rectify these problems.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the premise that SLPs can diagnose the alleged deficiencies of an accent in the first place speaks to how they may frame accent as an abnormality.<sup>15</sup> In fact, if SLPs are responsible for treating speech disorders and include accent reduction as one of their specialties, then it becomes difficult not to perceive accent as some sort of pathology.

One reason SLPs have entered the accent reduction industry is money. Due to government funding cuts in healthcare and the increased migration of "foreign-accented" workers to the Global North, SLPs have discovered that accent reduction is an effective means to generate income.<sup>16</sup> This leads to yet another problem with accent reduction as pedagogy: its elitist nature. Accent reduction is not cheap. Depending on the program, clients may have to spend hundreds to thousands of dollars to have their accents reduced.<sup>17</sup> These steep prices reflect the target clientele of accent reduction. This service is not directed toward low-paid care and service workers, but rather migrants situated in elite professions such as business and engineering, or those who "truly" enhance the U.S. and Canadian economies.<sup>18</sup> For these migrants, accent reduction is a means to further enhance their professional worth in the globalized marketplace.

At this point, it is tempting to end the discussion on the pedagogical problems of accent reduction with a simple acknowledgment that it sustains class hierarchies among migrants. But this is not the end of the story. Returning to the earlier point about the pervasiveness of racism and white supremacy in society, accent reduction is not an exception. According to Ibram X. Kendi, when it comes to any idea, action, or policy there is no such thing as being race-neutral; it is either racist or antiracist.<sup>19</sup> Racist ideas, actions, and policies promote the superiority or inferiority of ethnoracial groups and/or sustain material inequities between these groups, while antiracist ideas, actions, and policies do the opposite.<sup>20</sup> What needs to be emphasized here is that when something is labeled as racist, it is not always about intent but rather, inaction or a failure to recognize. The tendency of accent reduction programs to treat accent as a disorder is useful to explain this point. Given that there is ample evidence highlighting how accent discrimination acts as a proxy for racism, the framing of accent as needing "treatment" reinforces the idea that those who experience racism on account of their accents should expect such oppression since they are "unwell" linguistically.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, at least in this

sense, accent reduction programs are racist enterprises because they fail to consider how their medicalization of accent can be used to justify racism. How or if accent reduction can become antiracist will be addressed later in the chapter. For now, its racist nature is further explored with a description of it being a type of raciolinguistic pedagogy.

### THEORIZING RACIOLINGUISTIC PEDAGOGY

Raciolinguistic pedagogy uses language as a means to normalize racism. To appreciate this point, it is first necessary to recognize how language has been interconnected with race and racism, which entails looking at colonial and nationalist histories and presents.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in the settler colonial context of Canada, for instance, the racial hierarchies in the nation, with the British and French at the top and Indigenous and racially minoritized people at the bottom, was and is sustained through the hierarchization of language: English and French have been the dominant languages of Canadian public life, while those of Indigenous and racially minoritized people have been relegated to the private realm.<sup>23</sup> With regard to the construction of the “Standard American accent” in the United States as another example, this accent was and is believed to reside within the voices of people in the mostly white Midwest rather than those living in the ethnoracially heterogeneous parts of the country.<sup>24</sup>

What makes this intertwining of language and race possible are raciolinguistic ideologies. A term coined by Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa, raciolinguistic ideologies represent the language practices of racially minoritized groups as forever deviant based on their racialization in society instead of according to any sort of objective assessment of these practices.<sup>25</sup> These ideologies are products of European colonialism, which deemed the “inferiority” of colonized peoples’ language practices proof of their racial inferiority, and, moreover, are typically embodied in a white listening subject.<sup>26</sup> Being part of a larger white perceiving subject that frames the different modalities of racially minoritized people’s language practices as deficient, the white listening subject, as Flores and Rosa argue, “should be understood not as a biographical individual but as an ideological position and mode of perception that shapes our racialized society.”<sup>27</sup> This means that it can reside within the cognition of racially minoritized individuals as well as manifest on the meso/macro level with such things as institutional policies and practices.<sup>28</sup> For instance, as numerous studies on accent discrimination in the workplace would suggest, hiring practices can adopt a white-listening-subject position by “hearing” the accents of white applicants as better sounding or more employable than those of their nonwhite peers.<sup>29</sup> Such an example highlights how raciolinguistic ideologies have material consequences.

To connect the above discussion to raciolinguistic pedagogy, some refinements must be made with regard to defining this pedagogy. First, raciolinguistic

pedagogy teaches raciolinguistic ideologies. Specifically, it transforms people into white listening subjects who hear the speech of the racial Other, which might include themselves, as automatically flawed. Second, given that there are real costs when racially minoritized people do not “sound right,” this pedagogy reinforces the notion that the alleged linguistic deficiencies of these people are the main factor determining the material inequalities that they face. Thus, returning to employment once again, unemployment is not attributed to racist hiring practices, for example, but rather to speech that sounds “unprofessional.” As can be gleaned, the purpose of raciolinguistic pedagogy is to maintain the status quo. It is about normalizing racist, white supremacist structures and practices by focusing on the “faults” of those who experience oppression from these forces. Another important point to note here is that raciolinguistic pedagogy operates in tandem with other systems of oppression. For instance, the idea that racially minoritized people need to correct their language practices to find work relates to neoliberal ideologies of self-improvement in which job seekers must continually “upgrade” themselves to satisfy the demands of capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

While raciolinguistic pedagogy certainly happens in formal schooling, where racially minoritized youth come to learn that their language practices are seemingly inadequate for academic study, it occurs outside the classroom as well.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, raciolinguistic pedagogy is a type of public pedagogy. Manifesting in a range of sites, including popular culture, trips to museums, and witnessing or participating in social movements, public pedagogy acknowledges how we all engage in daily informal learning through which we come to understand ourselves and the world around us.<sup>32</sup> Recognizing public pedagogy as being raciolinguistic in nature means that our informal learning can further normalize hegemonic understandings of language as it relates to race and racism. In the classic book *English with an Accent*, for example, Rosina Lippi-Green details how the accent portrayals of animated characters in Disney movies particularly reinforce stereotypes of African Americans by associating “Black accents” with aggression and danger.<sup>33</sup> When one is repeatedly exposed to such sonic representations without developing any sort of critical media literacy, it becomes very difficult not to engage in racial stereotyping on the basis of speech.

Understanding accent reduction as a particular site of public raciolinguistic pedagogy entails examining the specific hegemonic power of advertising. Looking at the U.S. context, Shalini Shankar notes that advertising has always served as a medium for white supremacy as exemplified by multinational corporations’ most recent promotion of “diversity,” which converts race and ethnicity into apolitical differences and upholds middle-class whiteness as a universal norm and consumer goal.<sup>34</sup> What makes advertising a particularly useful vehicle for perpetuating white supremacy or any other oppressive system is its creation of desire. The purpose of advertising is to make consumers feel inadequate without possessing a certain product, which creates a need to purchase it. This longing for a product then creates the opportunity for consumers to *buy into* certain ideologies of

oppression associated with the product. Regarding accent reduction advertising, then, the appeal of having a reduced accent involves an identification with the various language ideologies tied to the service, some of which are raciolinguistic. For example, racially minoritized migrants who experience accent discrimination at work may perceive stock images of ethnoracially similar customers on accent reduction websites as evidence that 1) their particular type of accent is inherently flawed for work, and (2) it is possible for them to achieve the accent that they have always wanted.<sup>35</sup>

The remainder of this chapter details how accent reduction programs in Canada and the United States teach prospective clients to buy into raciolinguistic ideologies while promoting their services. Such teaching is largely a result of how these programs advertise themselves on their websites, which can range from generic descriptions of services or owner biographies to detailed blog posts providing pronunciation advice or justifications for accent reduction. In these advertisements, raciolinguistic pedagogy takes the form of three interrelated lessons for prospective clients as well as readers seeking to understand the racism of accent reduction: there are racialized contradictions when it comes to accent advice; accent justifies and obscures racism; and, finally, professional success depends on accent. Because I draw on examples from select accent reduction companies to explain these lessons, an argument could be made that this essay does not represent the views or practices of the entire accent reduction industry. However, if one remembers that there is no such thing as being race-neutral, it becomes clear that the programs' inaction in combatting raciolinguistic pedagogy makes them complicit in perpetuating racism, even if they do not explicitly teach these lessons. Indeed, although speaking of language teaching in general, Suhanthie Motha, drawing on the insights of Ibram X. Kendi, outlines the problem when an accent reduction company states that its services have nothing to do with race and racism: "The words [they] are speaking are (1) not anti-racist, because they do not confront racial inequality; (2) not racially neutral, because racial neutrality does not exist; which leaves only the last option: (3) racist, that is through their denial they perpetuate racial inequality."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the accent reduction industry cannot disidentify with the arguments of this essay unless it can explicitly prove that it has countered each of the raciolinguistic lessons that are described below.

## LESSON ONE: THE RACIALIZED CONTRADICTIONS OF ACCENT ADVICE

To stay in business, accent reduction programs need to create insecurities among their potential clients. This means convincing them that their seemingly normal manner of speech is deficient. This can occur in blog posts, which allow companies to target specific clientele by providing extended descriptions of their pronunciation problems. From a raciolinguistic perspective, a byproduct of these blog posts



is that the accents of racially minoritized people can be deemed deviant in spite of evidence showing otherwise. Consider this blog post by Packard Communications, which gives advice for Chinese speakers of English regarding their problem with pronouncing multisyllabic words: “Monosyllabic words, or words consisting of only one syllable, are the norm for Chinese speakers. However, in English, there are longer words with more syllables. Because of this difference, Chinese speakers of English might ‘reduce’ English words with multiple syllables.”<sup>37</sup>

Beyond the irony of an accent reduction company being concerned about people *reducing* their pronunciation of certain words, which is actually about the deletion of syllables in multisyllabic English words, the primary issue with Packard Communications’ linguistic assessment of Chinese speakers is that this deletion is not unique to these speakers. All speakers of English, including those whom we might call “native speakers,” delete syllables in longer words on a daily basis. For example, in U.S. English, which Packard Communications teaches, a word like “comfortable” is often heard without the “-or” or, at the very least, with a weak-sounding “-or.” The point to emphasize here is that if Chinese speakers of English engage in an identical phonological practice as white native speakers of U.S. English, then it is necessary to question the very need to change such a practice in the first place.

First, it is worth considering how the specific raciolinguistic pedagogy that Packard Communications is teaching its prospective Chinese customers relates to the perception of Chinese people in the U.S. context. Specifically, due to the stereotypical understanding of Chinese and other Asian people being “perpetual foreigners” in the United States, even if they were born and raised in the country, they are simultaneously seen as “foreign” to the ostensible national language, English.<sup>38</sup> If Chinese speakers are always thought to be “nonnative” to English, which then carries assumptions about their “deficiency” in the language, it is likely that the white listening subject, as located in Packard Communications’ advice, will never acknowledge the existing phonological competence of these speakers. What is further noteworthy about this advice is how it refutes the notion of English nativeness as being a neutral skill to master. By being able to delete syllables in longer words, for example, Chinese migrants can accent their employability, that is, that they are already skilled because they display an element of “native-like” speech. Yet Packard Communications’ advice highlights that nativeness is racially determined. Depending on one’s racial categorization, “sounding native” is not something that can be easily attained.

Aside from ignoring how racially minoritized English speakers might already sound the same as their privileged white counterparts (as seen with Packard Communications), another instance of the racialized contradictions of accent advice concerns the erasure of different varieties of English around the world. This is notably seen in the frequent highlighting of the English *th* sounds as being a pronunciation issue for those needing accent reduction. The /θ/ phoneme, as in the



word *think*, and /ð/, as in the word *there*, are typically deemed problematic for clients who do not have these sounds in their first languages. Regarding the first *th* phoneme, the owner of Accent Reduction Now provides an example of this point in a blog post giving advice on pronouncing the phoneme: “The last way that I find people mispronouncing this sound would be pronouncing it as a ‘T’ so we would have ‘tink’ instead of ‘think’ and ‘tum’ instead of ‘thumb.’”<sup>39</sup>

Even though many who read this observation will perceive it as benign, the framing of *tink* as a *mispronunciation* of *think*, for instance, becomes a way to delegitimize varieties of English that do use the former pronunciation. Because Accent Reduction Now is based in the United States, where many may believe that /θ/ is the expected phoneme to use when pronouncing *think*, it uses its geographical location to dismiss the English pronunciation of areas such as the Caribbean. Indeed, a range of Caribbean Englishes are known to not use either /θ/ or /ð/ in everyday speech, and communication does not suffer as a result. This erasure of pronunciation variation found in Caribbean Englishes has to be understood in relation to race and colonialism.

Caribbean Englishes did not emerge out of nowhere. They are products of British colonialism in which Black and brown people were forced to use English and view it as superior to their own languages in the context of formal schooling. Yet since these Englishes were and are believed to be “corrupted” versions of British English, their speakers are often seen as illegitimate users of English and, furthermore, are not even recognized as native speakers.<sup>40</sup> Due to this historical and contemporary dismissal of the English language competence of people from the Caribbean, it should not be surprising that companies like Accent Reduction Now fail to consider them when giving advice about *th* sounds.

## LESSON TWO: ACCENT JUSTIFIES AND OBSCURES RACISM

While the raciolinguistic pedagogy of accent reduction naturalizes racialized notions of right and wrong pronunciation, it also naturalizes racism itself by understanding accent as the sole problem of un(der)employment. In other words, while this raciolinguistic lesson accents or gives prominence to accent as the prime issue of employment, it simultaneously de-accent the role of racism, which means underplaying its role in employment discrimination. What is particularly brazen about the lesson concerns how accent reduction programs will openly acknowledge the existence of accent discrimination while teaching the lesson. For instance, in the following blog post offering commentary on a study showing employer bias against certain accents, which is likely geared toward potential clients who may have reservations about accent reduction, Canadian company Change Your Accent underplays this bias by focusing on the allegedly dire professional consequences of having an unintelligible accent:

Recent research indicates that an ethnic or foreign accent might work against people, and that an unconscious bias against accents may exist when companies hire. . . . In this day and age, it should be a given that HR professionals should be aware that unconscious bias—including bias against accents—exists and is a real problem. But what happens if a brilliant doctor can't be understood because of an accent? Should a hospital hire the doctor if their communication skills are not strong enough to convey critical information?<sup>41</sup>

How can Change Your Accent decry accent bias and dismiss it at the same time? One way to understand this contradiction is to consider that the company views "bias" and "miscommunication" as separate from one another. In other words, if a doctor's accent prevents them from being understood or from conveying vital information to a patient, this is the result of genuine misunderstandings rather than biased perceptions of the doctor. Yet there is ample evidence supporting the idea that when an interlocutor knows the ethnoracial identity of a speaker, this knowledge will inform the former's perception of the latter's speech.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Change Your Accent never acknowledges the possibility that failures in professional communication are not due to the acoustic qualities of an accent but are rather a result of the racist perceptions of its speaker.

Moreover, the company's mention of bias quickly returning to fearmongering about having an "ethnic" or "foreign" accent at work once again speaks of the need to create linguistic insecurity among its prospective customers. The juxtaposition of the concern about bias with a series of rhetorical questions about the potentially devastating effects of not reducing one's accent tells clients that even if their experiences of professional miscommunication are due to bias, it is nevertheless up to them to resolve the situation through accent reduction. In the end, then, Change Your Accent justifies perceptual, interpersonal racism by entangling it within the seemingly practical need to communicate clearly in the workplace.

Of course, racism does not operate solely on the micro level in terms of perceptions and interactions. It additionally forms the foundation of institutional and structural processes that materially disadvantage racially minoritized people. Accent reduction programs are culpable in obscuring this fact through linking migrants' employment prospects to their accents. In fact, this is exemplified by the central premise of accent reduction as noted by Accent Clear, which prominently describes its clientele for those landing on the home page of its website: "Foreign-born Professionals needing to improve their pronunciation so they can work successfully in Canada or advance in their careers."<sup>43</sup>

The fundamental problem with this statement lies in what is unsaid: that securing or advancing a career in Canada is not guaranteed through a simple change in accent. Instead, migrant professionals also have to navigate a series of structural barriers to find work. For example, they might have to deal with their employers' dismissal of their prior work experience because it was not based in Canada, or

they might need to fight a series of regulatory bodies to have their credentials recognized in the country. Furthermore, these employment barriers are clearly racialized since they tend to specifically disadvantage racially minoritized professionals coming from the Global South.<sup>44</sup> By framing (a lack of) employability as located in the accented voice, companies like Accent Clear help to mask and ultimately uphold the institutional and structural racism that truly hinders many migrants in their employment journeys.

This example from Accent Clear also reflects the influence of neoliberalism in preserving racism at the structural level. Specifically, it reinforces the neoliberal notion that professional obstacles can be overcome with active measures to improve oneself, whether that means improving one's accent or some other individual trait, rather than questioning the racist structures that create these obstacles in the first place.<sup>45</sup> In its seemingly apolitical statement about its target customers, then, Accent Clear retells the familiar narrative of hard work becoming the means to make racism structurally irrelevant in the realm of work and beyond. But this narrative is not only neoliberal in nature; it is also a manifestation of the ideology of meritocracy, which further cements the power of racism and white supremacy and is the subject of the following section.

### LESSON THREE: PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS DEPENDS ON ACCENT

The final raciolinguistic lesson that accent reduction advertising teaches the potential client echoes the previous lesson but takes on a more positive tone. It is not simply about stating how an accent may negatively affect employment, but rather how it may act as a tool for achieving success in one's professional life. This is exemplified in the personal story of Yao, the Chinese owner of Accent Ready, who credits his accent for the global opportunities he has had and whose biography on the company website seems to be meant as a source of inspiration for potential customers looking to investigate Yao's "credentials" as an accent reduction provider:

Yao was frustrated at being singled-out [at school] just because of the way he spoke, and began to carefully study the accents of his tormentors. . . . News anchors were particularly inspiring, and after hours of practice Yao found himself able to replicate an educated Chinese accent. This skill paid off handsomely, and Yao was hired as a newscaster on a local radio station. . . . After obtaining a degree in English literature, Yao was hired by the Canadian Consulate as a linguistics specialist. This led to a stint in France, where he achieved accent-free fluency in the language in just ten months. . . . Yao now attended Parisian parties and smiled as his native hosts asked which part of the city he'd grown up in. . . . The human voice box is an instrument unlike any other, and one that can unlock an entire world of opportunities for those who wish to master it.<sup>46</sup>

While Yao should certainly feel proud of his achievements, the final statement that the voice box can be mastered is problematic. Even if we accept the assertion that accent is a trainable instrument, this does not escape the fact that manipulating an accent is constrained by an audience. For example, Yao's careful observation of his bullies' accents highlights that there are limits to mastering an accent, that is, it has to conform to what an audience considers acceptable speech, which might be its own. Therefore, one does not have as much agency in manipulating an accent as Accent Ready would like their potential customers to believe.

The social constraints of mastering the voice box are further highlighted when one examines the notion that accent is the key to opportunity, especially in a white supremacist world. Indeed, from a critical race perspective, the notion that opportunity is simply created vocally upholds the myth of meritocracy. As the notion that one's success or failure in life is dependent on the amount of effort that one is willing to exert rather than the power of societal institutions and structures, meritocracy is yet another means to uphold white supremacy since it promulgates the narrative that race is irrelevant in forging paths in either the personal or professional realm.<sup>47</sup> As someone who is racialized as Chinese yet has managed to work internationally and even open his own accent reduction business, Yao serves as an example of the reality of meritocracy.

However, upon thinking more carefully about Yao's biography, one cannot ignore how his success involved emulating whiteness. As whiteness is not simply about white bodies but also about language and culture, it is important to note that Yao's professional success entailed him learning English and French, two languages that have come to dominate the world through the political influence of white people.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, as seen in his reference to his time in France, where his "accent-free" French allowed him to attend Parisian parties, which connote sophistication and opulence, Yao's access to such elite spaces seemingly relied on him "sounding native," thereby highlighting how he needed to aurally match the other native/white speakers of the metropole. Therefore, if Yao's social mobility is tied to his accent, this accent is supposed to align with a cultural whiteness that permeates professional and other social spaces.

The mention of Yao's ability to be in elite spaces also speaks to the dismissal of social class in a meritocracy. Although Yao's agency in advancing his own career cannot be denied, it is hard not to speculate about whether his socioeconomic background helped him along the way. For instance, did Yao's parents have the money to give him an elite education, and thus ample opportunities to practice the English language? Also, while working as a newscaster or linguistics specialist, did Yao network with prominent people who might have opened up additional opportunities for him to further his career? These questions are meant to point out that it becomes easier to believe the irrelevance of race and racism in a meritocracy when one has the socioeconomic means to do so. Given that the potential clients of Accent Ready would be those who have a background similar to Yao's and also

just need a phonological boost to jump-start their careers in a new country, they are a likely audience to buy into this argument.

### CONCLUSION: ARTICULATING A COUNTERPEDAGOGY

As this chapter has detailed, accent reduction as raciolinguistic pedagogy teaches skilled migrants that in accenting their employability through a reduced accent, they also have to accept how accent remains an auditory means to uphold racism in its various forms. This requires understanding that the accents of racially minoritized people are perpetually deficient sounding, interpersonal and structural racism are permitted and disappear through accent, and accent is a means to socioeconomic success. While there are likely additional raciolinguistic lessons to explore, an articulation of a counterpedagogy to accent reduction is needed. Imagining a counterpedagogy does not mean envisioning how accent reduction providers can reform their industry. Rather, it involves all other actors who interact with migrant job seekers, ranging from migrant-serving organizations to employers, working together to expose how accent sustains racism. Finally, while speculative and by no means exhaustive, the following ideas for a counterpedagogy are meant to open up thinking about the different forms this pedagogy should take in order to combat the raciolinguistic messaging of accent reduction.

One such form of a counterpedagogy is antiracist activism. This activism is not about changing hearts and minds, but rather about changing policies and power at the meso and macro level.<sup>49</sup> This means that a counterpedagogy to accent reduction is less interested in changing individual perceptions of accents and more interested in changing institutionally mediated perceptions that materially disadvantage particular types of accented workers. This counterpedagogy is not for skilled migrants struggling to find employment, but instead it is for places of employment that must be taught new ways of institutional listening. Whether it is through community organizing and protests started by migrant-serving organizations or members of these organizations providing antiracist workplace training, places of employment must come to recognize how individual listening practices are determined through institutional processes. For instance, regarding racist hiring practices on the basis of accent, it is necessary to go beyond the personal prejudice of interviewers by considering that their decisions are shaped by the nature of the work for which they are assessing applicants. In other words, a position requiring “excellent communication skills” is an invitation to draw on ideological criteria because the conceptualization of “excellence” is inherently subjective. What is needed, then, is for employers to engage in a critical imaginative listening in which they consider how different types of accented voices can be either privileged or disadvantaged in their conceptions of how work is defined, who should be able to do it, and so forth. Additionally, this listening, as a type of antiracist

practice, is always a work in progress. Because being racist and antiracist are not fixed but rather fluctuating positions, employers must remain constantly vigilant when it comes to the development of hiring and other policies, which can signal a return to racism.<sup>50</sup>

While a counterpedagogy can be concerned with reform, as noted above with regard to changing institutional practices, it must also be committed to dismantling. As this chapter has shown, accent is utilized to obscure the structural racism that can truly hinder the job prospects of skilled migrants. Even when accent is understood in relation to the formation of racial hierarchies of speakers, it can become an audible distraction from other racialized barriers such as professional associations not recognizing one's credentials. Through public awareness campaigns delinking accent from employability combined with lobbying government officials to do away with certain regulations pertaining to skilled migration, which can be led by migrant-serving organizations once again or even professional associations themselves, a counterpedagogy has to identify and eliminate institutional barriers that actually obstruct migrant employment.

Finally, a counterpedagogy to accent reduction must directly challenge accent reduction itself. Because accent reduction might be considered a type of language teaching, language teachers in other sectors, such as migrant settlement programs, need to warn migrants about the inherent problems of this predatory industry. This means actively questioning the tenets of accent reduction. For instance, if a migrant is swayed by the message that a reduced accent enhances intelligibility, their language teacher might highlight that such a message does not account for how one's racialization can affect perceptions of intelligibility. Rather than attempting to reform accent reduction programs, however, a counterpedagogy will question the need for their existence. Given that accent reduction is a product of and reproduces neoliberal understandings of workers needing to "improve" themselves and (settler) colonial white supremacy that requires all to conform to white cultural and political power, is it truly worthwhile to reimagine the industry, especially if it still commits to treating accent, with its intimate ties to race and racism, as a problem? Perhaps abolishing accent reduction is the best way to work toward an antiracist, anticolonial, and anticapitalist agenda with regard to accent. This is a point that should be accented.

## NOTES

1. Urciuoli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," 211.
2. Heller, "The Commodification of Language," 106–7.
3. Although the focus of this chapter concerns speech accents, this is not to say that all accents are produced through speech.
4. See, for example, Aneesh, *Neutral Accent*.
5. Agha, "The Social Life of Cultural Value," 232–33.
6. Boucher, "How 'Skill' Definition Affects the Diversity of Skilled Immigration Policies," 2538–42.

7. Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business," 528.
8. While this chapter is situated in the U.S./Canadian context, accent reduction programs also exist in other English-speaking and migrant-receiving countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia.
9. Silverstein, "Monoglot 'Standard' in America," 290–91.
10. Bhatia, "Accent, Intelligibility, Mental Health, and Trauma," 425.
11. Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business," 535 ; Thomson, "Myth 6," 175.
12. Derwing and Munro, *Pronunciation Fundamentals*, 154–58.
13. Thomson, "Myth 6," 178.
14. Thomson, "Myth 6," 176.
15. Derwing and Munro, *Pronunciation Fundamentals*, 161–64.
16. Newman, "Accent," 61.
17. Thomson, "Myth 6," 171–72.
18. Blommaert, "A Market of Accents," 252.
19. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 18–20.
20. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 18–20.
21. See Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*.
22. Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language," 623–27.
23. See Haque, *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework*.
24. See Bonfiglio, *Race and the Rise of Standard American*.
25. Flores and Rosa, "Undoing Appropriateness," 150; Rosa and Flores, "Raciolinguistic Perspective," 623.
26. Rosa and Flores, "Raciolinguistic Perspective," 623–28.
27. Flores and Rosa, "Undoing Appropriateness," 151. The white listening subject is similar to the "listening ear" in Stoevers, *The Sonic Color Line*, which describes how sonic information is interpreted through aural perceptions shaped by ideologies of whiteness (13).
28. Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language," 630.
29. See Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business."
30. Urciuoli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," 212.
31. See Flores and Rosa, "Undoing Appropriateness," for examples of how raciolinguistic ideologies permeate the (language) classroom.
32. Sandlin, Redmon Wright, and Clark, "Reexamining Theories of Adult Learning and Adult Development through the Lenses of Public Pedagogy," 4–7.
33. Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 122.
34. See Shankar, "Nothing Sells Like Whiteness."
35. See Blommaert, "A Market of Accents."
36. Motha, "Is an Antiracist and Decolonizing Applied Linguistics Possible?," 130.
37. Packard Communications, "Most Common Pronunciation Errors for Chinese Speakers Learning English."
38. Reyes, "The Voicing of Asian American Figures," 311.
39. Accent Reduction Now, "How to Pronounce 'TH' Sounds."
40. Nero, "The Changing Faces of English," 486.
41. Change Your Accent, "Foreign Accents, Bias and Jobs."
42. See Rubin, "Nonlanguage Factors Affecting Undergraduates' Judgments of Nonnative English-Speaking Teaching Assistants," for a well-cited example of how when an Asian person speaks with the same "native English accent" as a white person, the former is perceived as "foreign sounding" and hard to understand.
43. Accent Clear, "Effective Accent Reduction Training in Toronto and Across Ontario."
44. See Ku et al., "'Canadian Experience' Discourse and Anti-racialism in a 'Post-racial' Society"; Ramjattan, "Racializing the Problem of and Solution to Foreign Accent in Business."



45. Ku et al., "'Canadian Experience' Discourse and Anti-racialism in a 'Post-racial' Society," 304.
46. Accent Clear, "About Me."
47. Miller, "Meritocracy and the Maintenance of Order," 78.
48. See, for example, Haque, *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework*.
49. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 209.
50. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 10.

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