

Languages Perform Us: Decolonizing Options for Multilingual Identities

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hari stephen kumar¹

Abstract

What are the stakes for colonized bodies in an allegedly postcolonial world where institutions still use the term *non-native* to classify those who speak a “first language” other than English? In this autoethnographic performance, I connect critical cultural theories with embodied linguistic negotiations of identity as a “multilingual” person teaching students at a public university in a predominately White region called “New England” in the United States. By tracing my visceral encounters with the power relations between my five languages (English, Arabic, Tamil, Malayalam, and Hindi), I seek to decolonize ideologies that enforce a stable origin for language itineraries.

Keywords

performance autoethnography, performative cultural politics, decolonizing the academy

I’m a graduate student in a restaurant.

I’m having lunch with my graduate program director. She’s a friend and an ally; we’ve also worked together on several interdepartmental projects. She’s a very respected and established scholar, and she likes my work on transnational identities. We’re having lunch partly to catch up, but also to have a conversation on strategizing my path through doctoral program requirements.

She asks: “So how’s it going with the requirements? You’re almost done with coursework right?”

Me: “I’m just about there. My next step is to start the area exams, but I think I need to complete the language requirement first.”

Her: “What? Why would you do that?!”

Me: “Well, the grad bulletin says native speakers must demonstrate fluency in a language other than English so I thought—”

Her: “But that doesn’t apply to non-native speakers right?”

Me: “Yes, but part of my research is about how I claim English as my first language, so I figured—”

Her: “Oh but you know other languages though, right?”

Me: “Hmm? Sure, I know, like, five languages, I grew up with Arabic and Tamil and—”

Her: “So just go with one of those as your first language!”

Me: “What?! But, look, I’m really fluent in English and I’m making an argument that—”

Her: “Well are you fluent in any of those other ones?”

Me: “Uhm, sure, I think I can read and write in Tamil, not very well but with a dictionary I could read a Tamil newspaper.”

Her: “That’s all you need! Don’t bother with the language requirement. Just pick Tamil and you’ll be all set.”

Me: “But, what abo—”

Her: “Look, doing the language requirement will set you back a full 6 months and then you’ll have to schedule an exam with someone from one of the language departments. Trust me, you can do better things with that time. You have a kid now, and a second on the way! Don’t make it harder on yourself than it needs to be.”

Me: “But don’t I still have to take an exam in Tamil?”

¹University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA

Corresponding Author:

hari stephen kumar, PhD Student, Department of English, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 22 Mountain Laurel Path, Florence, MA 01062, USA
Email: hari@kineticnow.com

Her: “No no no, since you’re a non-native speaker you just have to go to the Grad Program secretary and tell her what your native language is. She’ll put it in your file and send it to the Grad School, and you’ll be done with the requirement.”

What are the stakes for colonized bodies in an allegedly postcolonial world where institutions still use the term *non-native* to classify those who speak a “first language” other than English? How do hegemonic ideologies of colonialism become viscerally embodied when a “multilingual” person teaches English to students at a large public university in a predominately White region called “New England” in the United States? In this study, I connect critical cultural theories with performance-based autoethnographies of embodied linguistic negotiations of identity. I draw from Stuart Hall’s frameworks of representation and his extension of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. However, following Kuan-Hsing Chen’s (1991/1996) critique of the modernist focus in cultural studies on an exclusive “textually constructed context” (p. 315) for subject positions, I draw from Dwight Conquergood’s performance theories to move kinetically “beyond the text” (Conquergood, 1998/2013) to decolonize my lived experiences of navigating between and against sociocultural structures. By tracing my embodied encounters with the power relations connecting my five languages (English, Arabic, Tamil, Malayalam, and Hindi), I seek to decolonize the ideological structures that enforce a stable “origin” narrative for language itineraries.

I’m about 10 years old.

It’s night time.

I’m in a small town in Yemen.

I’m walking down a dusty street filled with shops on either side.

I’m walking with my parents and my little sister.

We live here.

My dad works in a factory on the outskirts of town.

I go to a private Yemeni school.

I’m one of a handful of foreign students there—Did I mention it’s a small town?

There’s nothing to do in the evenings. So we often go for a walk in the local souk—the marketplace.

So it’s night time.

So I’m walking with my family, down a busy shopping street.

From my right, I hear a shout:

“Ya sadiq! Ya sadiq! Tha’al hina ya sadiq!”

I turn to look—I see a shopkeeper, smiling and waving to me.

He yells at me: “Hindi wulla Bakistani?”

I grin back—“Hindi!”

His bearded face breaks into a huge grin. He yells: “INDIA!! Amitabh Bacchan!! SHOLAY!!!”

I smile and nod. We walk along.

Many years pass.

In school, I am being bullied for being Indian. For being Hindu.

I’m shorter and younger and scrawnier and nerdier than any of my classmates.

I get kicked a lot.

I’m not the only foreigner though—there’s a Pakistani kid in my class. But he doesn’t get kicked.

I begin to figure out that when I’m walking down the street, I don’t look that different from my Pakistani classmate.

So.

“Hindi wulla Bakistani?”

Who are you?

Where are you from?

“Hindi wulla Bakistani??!!”

Are you a Muslim?

“HINDI WULLA BAKISTANI??!!”

Can we kick you?

I don't turn to look.
I don't answer.

I bow my head.
And I keep walking.

Many more years pass.

I use performance autoethnography as my preferred framework for researching the complex articulations between languages, identities, and ideologies. Performance autoethnography brings together a web of theoretical and methodological connections between the fields of autoethnography and performance studies.

Performance studies involve a wide range of research into the nature and role of "performance" in our lives. As a term, "performance" is often used to mean many different things. One use refers to theatrical practice in the staged performance of dramatic texts—including cases where the "stage" is improvised out of everyday public spaces. Another use refers to evaluating particular tasks, such as the performance level of an athlete or an employee. The term can include the enactment of crafted public rituals, such as jokes and greetings. A performance can be marked and identified as such, for example a "half-time show," or it can be an unmarked everyday activity, for example, the performance of walking down a street. And performance can also be deeply enfolded and infused into our identities, such as the complex and subtle ways that we each perform our race or gender or class or many other dimensions and the multiple intersections in between.

My use of the term draws primarily from Dwight Conquergood's research, in which performance is a way of knowing and experiencing culture through embodied everyday encounters, particularly in liminal spaces of marginalization and silences. Conquergood emphasized a performative cultural politics centered in the experiences of oppressed and nomadic transients in global societies of continual disruption, displacement, and diaspora. This particular branch of performance studies also draws significantly from critical cultural theories to understand the term *culture* as politically charged and always ideologically contested, not as a collection of artifacts or static beliefs. Norman Denzin (2003) describes how Conquergood's conceptualization of performance shifts the term *culture* to be "a verb, a process, an ongoing performance, not a noun, a product or a static thing" (p. 12). Drawing from such a dynamic view of culture, D. Soyini Madison's work turns performance into "a site where memory, emotion, fantasy, and desire interact with one another" (Denzin, 2003, p. 12), where "every performance is political, a site where the performance of possibilities occurs" (Madison, 1998, p. 277).

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method where the researcher is continually and critically implicated in the research project. Indeed, for autoethnography, the research field involves the myriad connections between the researcher's constructed selves and the ideologically structured societal frameworks that the researcher navigates. Autoethnography is related to ethnography, which involves researching collective experiences (ethno-) for written analysis (-graphy), but autoethnography is primarily concerned with the critical reflexivity of the researcher as writer, of the researcher as researched. In autoethnography, the focus therefore shifts to examining how the self engages and grapples with culture in everyday life. In her 1991 book on *Autobiographical Voices*, François Lionnet describes how autoethnography uncovers and problematizes the resistances between the self (auto-) and the collective (-ethno-) in the act of writing (-graphy).

Those who have traditionally opposed the use of the word "I" in academic writing might react strongly against what seems like an exclusive focus on the self in autoethnographic writing. While there are many ways of doing autoethnographic research, performance autoethnography brings together critical approaches from performance studies and from radical qualitative research to sharply focus on the self as engaged within and against broader sociopolitical structures. Norman Denzin (2003) describes autoethnography as "writing [that] asks only that we all conduct our ground-level criticism aimed at the repressive structures in our everyday lives" (p. 142). Bryant Keith Alexander (2005) remarks that,

The evidenced act of showing in autoethnography is less about reflecting on the self in a public space than about using the public space and performance as an act of critically reflecting culture, an act of *seeing the self see the self through and as the other*. Thus [. . .] it is designed to engage a locus of embodied reflexivity using lived experience as a specific cultural site that offers social commentary and cultural critique . . . (p. 423)

Similarly, for those who see autoethnography as "merely" memoir or autobiographical writing, Alexander also provides a critical distinction between autoethnography and autobiography.

Autobiography, like theory, is a process of recreating, re-viewing and making sense of the biographic past. [. . .] The critical move of making sense of the *autobiographic past* is the project of autoethnography. (Alexander, 1999, p. 309)

In this project, I use performance autoethnography to stage and share stories from my lived experience as critical performances that invite multiple reflexive interpretations and unflinching personal critiques. My performances are specific cultural sites featuring collisions between languages, identities, ideologies, and hegemonic cultural processes. Through reenacting them, recreating them, reimagining

them, our primary goal is to enter evoked worlds where we critically experience these complex encounters. As we do so, Yvonna Lincoln and Norman Denzin remind us to be “always mindful of the structural processes that make race, gender, and class potentially repressive presences in daily life” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1084).

I’m a graduate student on campus.

I’m walking with Claudio Moreira, my mentor and my master’s thesis advisor.

As we often do during our walks, we are vigorously discussing performance studies, identities and subjectivities, race, class, gender, culture, colonization and decolonization, and many other things.

Today we’re arguing about Claudio’s theorization of betweeners and betweenness as an intersectionally charged decolonizing framework that he conceptualized with Marcelo Diversi. I’ve just gotten done vehemently arguing to Claudio that I want to theorize “here” as a space of betweenness, as a space of belonging and being “home” while still on the move. I want to say that I’m from here, wherever “here” happens to be. Claudio disagrees strongly, pointing out the tendency for a certain kind of postcolonial cosmopolitan privilege to romanticize such a nomadism. Claudio wants to use betweenness to decolonize the ways that “home” has become a privileged White middle-class location that is often oppressive.

We stop at a small coffee shop in one of the department buildings.

The attendant behind the counter is a longtime university employee. She knows us by sight now, since we often stop to get a coffee there before continuing our walks.

This time around, we linger a little bit, so she strikes up a conversation with Claudio.

Her: “So where are you from?”

Claudio: “Oh me? I’m from Brazil!”

Her: “Oh nice! They do the samba there right?”

Claudio <pretends to dance>: “Oh yes, and we play football, what these Americans call soccer.” <points to me, in mock disgust>

She turns to me. And she asks: “And where are you from?”

I say: “Oh I’m from here!”

Her: “Here? In Amherst?”

Me: “Yep!”

Her: “No, I mean, where are you originally from?”

Me: “I’m from here!”

Her: “Originally?”

Me: “Yes!”

Her: “Hm. Well what about your ancestry? Where are your parents from?”

Me: “I don’t know.”

Her: “You don’t know where your parents are from?”

Me: “Well, I don’t know where they’d say they’re from!”

Her: “Wow you’re being so evasive!”

Me: “I’m not evasive, I answered you—I’m from here! Where are YOU from?”

Her: “Me, I’m from Amherst, baby, born and raised.”

At this point, Claudio comes alongside me and drapes his arm around my shoulder.

I realize that I’m flustered, my face is flushed, and my shoulders are shivering.

Claudio hands me my coffee and gently shepherds me out of the cafe.

The cafe attendant was African American.

And I had been about to ask her a very sarcastic question.

Outside, we pause while Claudio lights a cigarette.

We don’t say anything—We don’t have to. We both know what I had been about to say.

We both know I had been about to perpetuate a colonial injury, just to make a theoretical point.

We walk away in silence.

Moments like these remind me of the limits of poststructural theorizing on identity, and the limits of theorizing the agencies of postmodern *flâneurs* in their collisions with powerful ideological structures. Moments like these ground me instead in Stuart Hall's cultural theories of articulation and representation, themselves grounded in Antonio Gramsci's critical correctives to Marxism. Hall extends Gramsci's use of the term *hegemony* to conceptualize a system of articulated social forces that gather partial but popular consent from a broad coalition of diverse interests to maintain an always dynamic and always contested balance of power relations. Hegemony, for Hall, is never complete but always contingent, requiring great expenditures of power and energy to keep itself articulated into a coherent unity across multiple contradictory differences. As Hall (1992/1996) describes it, cultural hegemony is "never about pure victory or pure domination [. . .] it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it" (p. 468). Hall's theory of articulation conceptualizes how these configurations are articulated together, as in how a tractor is mechanically articulated to a trailer. It takes significant power to keep those articulations moving.

Thus, that charged encounter in the coffee shop involves multiple hegemonies that sustain ideologies which require bodies, particularly suspect bodies, to be rooted to an established and mapped geographic point of origin. These ideologies require interrogations of from-ness of particular bodies and not of others, where "roots" are questioned for some bodies but not for others. And these ideologies gather partial consent from a broad coalition of bodies—even those bodies whose so-called "self interests" are harmed by the ideologies they support. Therefore, the three bodies in that coffee shop came into that space located differently at various intersections of privilege and inequality, and yet we reenacted a common questioning of each other's border crossings, a questioning that carried whiffs of White supremacist ideologies and sustained the unquestioned normalization of whiteness in contemporary American "common sense" understandings of identity. Hall (1986/1996) describes how

the idea of "nation" has been consistently articulated towards the right. Ideas of "national identity" and "national greatness" are intimately bound up with imperial supremacy, tinged with racist connotations, and underpinned by a four-century-long history of colonization, world market supremacy, imperial expansion and global destiny over native peoples. (p. 42)

He's speaking of "Britain" but much of that applies to contemporary U.S. imperialism as well.

I'm using "common sense" here in the ways Hall describes, as an "ideological terrain" that is structured and shaped powerfully by historical hegemonic processes which

"no longer have an inventory, but [they] establish and define the fields along which ideological struggle is likely to move" (Hall, 1986/1996, p. 42). Hall draws from Gramsci's understanding of how the ideological terrain of "common sense" is "a historical, not a natural or universal or spontaneous form of popular thinking, necessarily 'fragmentary, disjointed and episodic'" (p. 42). Hall goes on to observe from Gramsci that

The "subject" of common sense is composed of very contradictory ideological formations:

it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. [(1971, p. 324)]

And yet, because this network of pre-existing traces and common-sense elements constitutes the realm of practical thinking for the masses of the people, Gramsci insisted that it was precisely on this terrain that ideological struggle most frequently took place. "Common sense" became one of the stakes over which ideological struggle is conducted. (Hall, 1986/1996, pp. 42-43)

Thus, in an everyday encounter like in the coffee shop, what seems at first to be a simple "common sense" question becomes a conversational gambit between competing ideologies as they play out on and in the bodies of the people involved. Of these, a few specific ideologies dominate in shaping the "common sense" involved through a hegemonic process that leads all involved into questioning only certain bodies while ensuring that certain other bodies become unquestionable.

The questioning of our bodies extends beyond just interrogations of origin narratives. The "common sense" terrain also marks our bodies with a range of expected performances. Thus, a hegemonic construction of identity that relies on the establishment of a fixed origin also affixes a range of assumptions on what follows from that origin. These include expectations of language performance and competence, cultural access and ability, and so on. As an example, the authors of Arizona's infamous SB1060 law that legalized racial profiling could do so without explicitly citing race because they could rely on a "common sense" dominated by hegemonic understandings of racial performance that allowed the police to infer and act upon national origin based on such mundane markers as footwear and clothing.

However, Hall remarks that such ideologies are to be relentlessly challenged in an era of globalized migration, often involuntary and violent. This era implies, for Hall, a different way to understand cultural identities, involving a subtle shift of vocabulary:

I began to think of culture as the routes, R-O-U-T-E-S, by which people have come to their present situation and we've all come by different routes. But not just as roots, R-O-O-T-S, not just as something always buried in the same sand or living off the same cultural resources or embedded in the same society. (Hall, 2009, p. 29)

Thus, exploring and understanding the mutuality of our "routes" might lead us toward seeking solidarity and community in understanding how our respective itineraries shape the ways we each navigate oppressive sociopolitical structures. And doing so is not merely a matter of individual or personal reflection. As Hall has written with John Clarke and others, individual biographies "cut paths in and through the determined spaces of the structures and cultures in which individuals are located" (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1975/1993, p. 57). And since everyday performances of identity emerge from tight articulations of myriad ideologies, those same performances provide opportunities for publicly pushing back on those articulations, to throw a spanner into the articulated linkage and see if we can gain counterhegemonic leverage in the resulting wedges and gaps.

I'm a graduate instructor.

It's the first day of the semester.

I walk into class with a bounce in my step and a grin on my face. I love walking into class on days like this—to meet students who do not know me.

This semester I have about 25 college students, mostly juniors and seniors.

I'm at a large public research university in New England. Most of the bodies in front of me are White. I'm one of less than a handful of bodies of color.

I smile, and begin:

"Good morning everyone! My name is hari stephen kumar, and I am your instructor for Comm 260, Public Speaking. Here is the syllabus for the course. Please take one and hand the rest back. Take a minute to look through this please."

As they do this, I switch.

"Now you will notice that there are five speeches that we will do this semester. The first two are simple warm-up speeches where we can practice some basic mechanics of how to use our bodies in our speaking."

And I switch again.

"You see, our bodies speak for us before we even say a word. Our bodies have a language, with its own grammar and vocabulary. And we often don't realize what our bodies are saying for us, about us."

And I switch one more time.

"So the first lesson in public speaking, the first thing for us to learn, is how to speak with our bodies. Public speaking is way more than just figuring out what words to say. It's about knowing and using how your bodies bring those words to life. For example, I've been saying a bunch of words, but my body has been speaking to you ever since I walked into this room. Have you noticed anything about how I've been speaking so far?"

By this point, there are usually at least a few confused faces. And at least one person will say: "Wait, what happened to your accent?"

And I'll say: "What accent?"

And I'll hear: "Well, you had an accent when you started, but you don't have one now."

And I'll say: "Oh but I do have an accent now—It just happens to be one that you've normalized as being nothing, as not being accented. But let me ask you this: What accent did you expect before I began speaking?"

And this is when I share with them how I used to hate it when White people compliment me on my English, but now I love it because I can say: "Thank you, your English is not too bad, keep at it."

Cultural studies scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen criticizes the modernist focus in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework on "one" particular subject position in the process of analysis. For example, Chen (1991/1996) describes how media studies often will center around the "audience" as if it were a single subject, "positioned by the camera angle and inserted into a textually constructed context" (p. 315). Chen says that this traditional model of communication does not consider the many ways in which "the 'moment' itself . . . can always be multiplied; that is, an audience is not simply a reading subject, s/he can always 'work out,' cook or fall asleep at the same time; and the textual context can also be plural" (p. 315). Chen argues that the term *audience* is an abstraction, but Chen grapples with the seemingly difficult question of how else to analyze such moments. However,

critical performance studies can provide a more embodied approach to such analysis, especially analysis that seeks to move “beyond the text” in Dwight Conquergood’s terms. Conquergood (1998/2013) argues that performance-based ways of knowing provide a necessary counterpoint to the hegemony of what he calls “textual fundamentalism” in the academy, where representations of knowledge are dominated both by actual texts (books, monographs, essays, conference papers, etc.) and by textualized metaphors for communicating social realities.

To counter the hegemony of static texts in the academy, Conquergood puts performance into motion through his shift from *mimesis* to *poiesis* to *kinesis*. That is, rather than performance as *imitation* (“faking”) or as *invention* (“making”), Conquergood (1998/2013) conceptualizes performance as a dynamic and transgressive *intervention*, a “breaking and remaking” (p. 58). Conquergood emphasizes the importance of such kinetic performances in high-stakes ideological struggles; he calls for ethnographers to “avoid apolitical theories of motion as free play, floating ironic detachments, and the endless deferral of political commitment—the hollow luxury of never having to take a stand” (p. 58). He draws from Homi Bhabha’s use of the term *performative* to frame performance as “action that incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, and antagonizes powerful master discourses” (Conquergood, 1998/2013, p. 58). For Conquergood, kinetic performances occur within what Bhabha called a “contentious, performative space” that subverts tradition instead of sustaining it, since “tradition needs to be problematized, particularly in a postcolonial world characterized by dislocation, discontinuity, and diaspora communities” (p. 58). Thus, kinetic performances necessarily involve “transgression, that force which crashes and breaks through sedimented meanings and normative traditions and plunges us back into the vortices of political struggle” (p. 58).

Connecting Conquergood with Stuart Hall, I see kinetic performances as a key component in ideological struggles for the charged terrain of “common sense”—a way for everyday performances to disrupt and provide alternative ways of understanding identities. In everyday moments, these performances can become acts of public critical pedagogy. And as public acts, they are also open for interpretation and critique.

I remember one time my mentor Claudio and I were invited as guest speakers to a colleague’s social theory course. Claudio asked me to speak first, and I did my multi-accented public speaking intro performance. Then Claudio followed, and he apologized to the students for what he called his “thick-accented tongue with bad English.” In that public moment, it hit me powerfully that what I had thought of as a kinetic performance could actually communicate a very different message that these embodied ideological expectations of identity can be broken, transgressed, rewritten through a fluid shifting of accents, and that I might be

implying that such fluidity is what postcolonial subjects should strive for. In my performance, I was “imitating” a stereotypical Indian accent, a stereotypical Arab accent—but what about the actual Indian student, the actual Arab student in my classes? Would they see my performances as somehow suggesting that they ought to become “culturally competent” enough to change their accents like I do? What about my own privileged access to ways of learning and performing “Americanized” accents? What about my own tendency to perform “whiteness” because of the doors it opens for me—and the doors it ensures I won’t be locked behind? Was my performance really kinetic—or was it mockery? Who does it marginalize?

I’m not in this scene.

This is happening before I was born, shortly after my mother married my father.

This is happening when my newly married parents are visiting my father’s house.

And my father’s father, my grandfather, my mother’s new father-in-law, has just called her “an illiterate woman.”

She is in shock, I imagine. Or, at least, that’s how she sometimes tells the story to me.

She has a master’s degree in economics, while my father could not finish engineering school.

But she does not speak English—she studied in Tamil.

She is from Kerala, her parents moved to Madras before she was born, so she describes herself as “born and raised” in Madras.

Her parents speak Malayalam, but my mother speaks Tamil, she’s a Tamil fanatic, she writes exquisitely nationalistic Tamil poetry, she has fallen in love with Tamil and a Tamilian. She has participated in student protests against Hindi when the Indian government moved to establish English and Hindi as its two official languages in the 1960s. She’s an officer at a major national bank.

She has done all this by the time this scene happens, but in this scene, here, her Tamilian father-in-law has called her “illiterate.”

My grandfather is an elite old-school Tamil Brahmin Iyer. But he has worked for the British most of his life. He knows his English REALLY well.

He was forced to retire when his son was still in college, and when his three other children were still in grade school. So his son, my father, had to drop out of college to work in a factory and support the family. And now his son has brought this college-educated lower-caste non-Tamilian banker home, but she doesn't know English.

I am in this scene some years later, as a little boy, maybe 5 or 6 years old.

Here is my mother again, we are in a small town in North India, where my father is working in a factory.

The kindergarten teacher has sent me home with my mother, scolding my mother for not having English books for me to practice my reading, sarcastically asking my mother about whether we read newspapers.

So in this scene I'm trying to read an English-language national newspaper. It's the same newspaper that my grandfather reads down South. I'm trying to read the headlines.

My mother is trying to teach me to read and say "banana"—but I keep saying "banananana."

My mom says "ba-na-na!"

I say "ba-na-na-na-na!"

She gets angry. She starts yelling "B-A-N-A-N-A!"

And tears are on her cheeks.

I'm confused.

She tells me she wants me to read the newspaper to my grandfather when we visit next time.

She tells me my grandfather would be proud.

Decades go by before I figure out who she hoped my grandfather would be proud of.

Decades go by before I realize that she was trying to read those headlines too.

A decolonizing approach allows me to move beyond a static opposition to colonization that often reinscribes the colonizer and the colonized. Instead, decolonizing lets me start with a dynamically tense position as a between, being between and both colonizer and colonized, between both researcher and researched, experiencing privileges and

marginalizations simultaneously in and around my marked body. The between position is dynamic in the sense that it works against reifying oppositional categories by refusing to divide the oppressed versus the oppressor. Marcello Diversi and Claudio Moreira (2009) write,

What does oppression mean to us? We contest static notions of oppression/oppressor/oppressed as enforcers of exclusiveness in concepts of the Other. We still live in the betweenness of the postcolonial world: We are privileged in our positions of Third World scholars working in First World institutions yet do battle every day against the colonizing paradigms informing education, academic scholarship, and production of knowledge about the Other. (p. 15)

Decolonizing knowledge production therefore involves an always shifting stance that not only inquires into its own positionality and authority as a privileged producer of knowledge. Decolonizing instead offers an invitation to turn the colonizing gaze back toward critiquing the structures of knowledge production (kumar, 2011) that empower and authorize a very narrow range of knowledge which systematically exclude other and Othered ways of being and doing in the world.

Norman Denzin critiques the ways that the academy treats indigenous knowledge systems as "objects of study, treated as if they were instances of quaint folk theory held by the members of primitive cultures"—instead, Denzin (2005) pushes for a transgressive reversal in "making Western systems of knowledge themselves the object of inquiry" (p. 936). The question of knowledge production thus shifts from an objective stance—from the question of producing knowledge *about* the indigenous other—to a viscerally embodied stance that seeks to "dismantle, deconstruct, and decolonize Western epistemologies from within" (Denzin, 2005, p. 934).

As Diversi and Moreira (2009) point out, "narratives of the decolonial imaginary can't be told through disembodied analysis, statistics, or group differences" (p. 208). Rather, they call for embodied narratives as central to decolonizing praxis from an in-between space that is,

... a constant site of struggle against oppressive forces of colonization. And it's not a metaphorical site but a bodily, visceral site. We want to recover and honor the embodiment of the in-between space, of the physical experience of betweenness. We want to highlight the lived experience of the body, of the flesh, in these in-between spaces. And highlight not only the body of the Other but also the body of the narrative marker. (Diversi & Moreira, 2009, pp. 207-208)

A decolonizing approach thus allows me to engage the complexity of belonging to multiple intersecting communities—some with immigrant identities, some with religious affiliations, and some with markers of privilege within academic and professional organizations, and yet always held at

“arm’s length” in any particular community due to my multiple conflicting allegiances with other intersections. Drawing from Gloria Anzaldúa’s call to create our own roots, and rereading that through Stuart Hall’s shift to routes instead of roots, a decolonizing approach allows us to engage the embodied desires and hopes and complicities of living in between multiple language ideologies, and to turn our gaze toward questioning the structures that sustain those ideologies.

I’m 16 years old.

I’m in my grandfather’s house.

He’s 92—he will pass away in 2 years, but in this scene he’s still sharp-tongued and intimidating.

I’ve come home from wandering around Madras, and I’ve brought home a newspaper.

My grandfather is a voracious reader but has cataracts and reads only with great difficulty.

I sit next to him and say gently, “Thatha, newspaper padikkata?”

His face lights up, he gestures to me and leans back, closes his tired eyes.

I start reading, word by word, slowly.

The Tamil newspaper is hard for me to read. I’ve been learning Tamil from reading signposts and shop windows while riding the bus around town.

But my grandfather loves it when I read Tamil to him. He whispers suggestions when I run into difficult words. I cannot read beyond a third-grade vocabulary.

He smiles when I finish, eyes still closed, and he murmurs, in English, “Tamil is a divine language.”

I’m a graduate student.

I’m in the department’s graduate program office to fill out the language requirement form.

The administrative assistant asks me: “What’s your mother tongue?”

I breathe deeply.

I say: “Tamil.”

She says: “What? Is that a language?”

I say: “Yes, it’s a South Indian language.”

She writes: “Non-native speaker. South Indian language. (Tamil)”

I’m a father.

In this scene, I’m a first-time father, a new father.

My daughter Eliana is 5 months old.

My wife Alexis is holding her.

My mother is cooing and fussing all over Eliana.

My mother is delighting over her granddaughter for the first time.

She is saying many sweet things in Tamil—None of which Alexis understands and many of which go over my head.

My mother turns to me and says, in Tamil, to teach Eliana Tamil.

I tell her, in Tamil, that it would be like the blind leading the blind. At least, that is what I want to tell her, but I don’t know the words well enough and I’m not sure if there’s an equivalent Tamil idiom for what I want to convey.

So I stumble and say something else, something awkwardly worded about us being more comfortable teaching Eliana English and that maybe we’ll teach her Spanish someday.

My mother responds, in rapid English, that Tamil is my mother tongue, and therefore I should teach Eliana Tamil.

Alexis and I smile but we don’t say anything. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell my mother that Eliana’s mother has a tongue too, but is it my place to do so?

Eliana squeals loudly.

She’s got a wide toothless grin.

She’s reminding all of us that she has her own tongue.

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Author Biography

hari stephen kumar is a PhD student in English, with a focus on rhetoric and composition, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He lives and loves and labors toward decolonizing the teaching and performing of academic knowledge production.