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Bucholtz, Mary  
miles-hercules, deandre

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# The displacement of race in language and gender studies

*Mary Bucholtz and deandre miles-hercules*

## Abstract

*As a collaboration between the two authors, this essay first addresses each author's individual perspective on language and gender studies, particularly as it has taken shape in the US context, and then offers a jointly developed argument regarding the field's history and trajectory. We write from the respective standpoints of our lived experiences within and beyond the academy. Mary is a white cis female-identified linguistics professor who was deeply involved in the Berkeley Women and Language Group in the 1990s and has conducted research on language and gender throughout her career, especially with respect to its intersection with race. deandre's Black and gender-creative subjectivity substantially colours the lens through which they experience and interpret the social life of language.*

KEYWORDS: HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE, INEQUALITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, RACE

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## Affiliations

Mary Bucholtz

she or they

Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Barbara

email: bucholtz@ucsb.edu

deandre miles-hercules

they, them, their(s)

Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Barbara

email: dmiles@ucsb.edu

## Mary's reflection

When I was a graduate student in the 1990s in a linguistics department where sexism and toxic masculinity ran rampant,<sup>1</sup> the Berkeley Women and Language Group (BWLG) was a lifeline for me intellectually, politically and personally. One day, Kira Hall, who was two years ahead of me in the graduate programme, said, 'Come on, Mary, we're going to organise a conference!' The experience was literally life-changing: it provided me with an international, interdisciplinary network of scholars and students doing exciting work on important issues; it validated my research specialisation, which was mostly disparaged or ignored within my home department; and it launched my career as a linguist. Thanks to BWLG, I had four edited volumes on my CV as a graduate student, which proved to be a huge advantage in a depressed job market. BWLG, and the field of language and gender studies more generally, gave me a reason to persist in graduate school as well as a vision of what linguistics could be: more expansive, more welcoming, more relevant and – frankly – more interesting.

At the same time, it was hard to miss the field's overwhelming whiteness, which was evident at all five of the Berkeley Women and Language Conferences held from 1985 to 1998. As organisers, we tried to address this issue by inviting such luminaries as Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Marcyliena Morgan as keynote speakers and also by selecting 'Cultural performances' as the theme of the 1994 conference and including in the call for papers explicit encouragement of research on the intersection of race and gender (Bucholtz et al. 1994). We were fortunate to receive submissions from innovative scholars of colour like Michèle Foster and Norma Mendoza-Denton (see Mendoza-Denton 2021; Morgan 2021; Foster, this issue). But the relative paucity of feminist linguists of colour at the conferences reflected the more general paucity of linguists of colour, given the discipline's ongoing history of white supremacy (Charity Hudley, Mallinson and Bucholtz 2020).

In short, language and gender studies had – and still has – a race problem. The efflorescence of feminist theory in the 1980s and 1990s was an important influence on the field, but the unevenness with which specific theorists were taken up or not was striking. Language and gender researchers eagerly embraced the writings of white theorist Judith Butler (1990), but this was primarily due to her reworking of linguistic concepts such as J. L. Austin's (1962) notion of performative utterances rather than for the inspiration she drew from the gender-subversive practices of Black and Latinx drag queens and trans women. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the work of feminist theorists of colour that also spoke directly to linguistic concerns, such as that of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), was not seized upon by language and gender researchers with equal

enthusiasm. A particularly noticeable gap was the lack of engagement with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality, which had, like Butler's, swept across the academy and offered an entirely new theoretical and political paradigm for research on gender and race as interlocking axes of oppression (not of identity, a detail that current discussions of intersectionality sometimes miss). Indeed, nearly twenty years after the first appearance of Crenshaw's landmark publication, Sonja Lanehart (2009a) – a Black feminist linguist whose own contributions to the field (e.g. 2002, 2009b) have not yet been fully appreciated – reported that she was unable to find any linguistic scholars doing research on the intersectional experiences of Black lesbians.

The neglect of these major theoretical advances has had the effect not only of limiting the growth and insights of language and gender studies but also, and more importantly, of distorting scholarly understanding of both language and gender, as well as the closely related question of sexuality (miles-hercules forthcoming). The field's resistance to intersectional analysis is inscribed in the very name of this journal and its host organisation: Despite arguments from numerous scholars, it was ultimately decided to exclude the term *sexuality* from both.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that the field's very limited engagement with intersectionality as a theoretical concept, and with the complex relationship of race and gender in particular, is directly related to the shamefully low numbers of scholars of colour in language and gender studies, especially in the US context. Despite important contributions from such researchers, the field's continuing hegemonic whiteness and resulting inattention to race and other intersectional issues create an unwelcoming climate for new generations of scholars. Even Mel Chen, a BWLG organiser (Warner et al. 1996) whose groundbreaking book *Animacies* (Chen 2012) brings together cognitive linguistics, gender studies, critical race studies and more (see also Chen, this issue), is known more widely in other fields than in linguistics, the discipline in which they received their PhD. There have of course been numerous scholars of colour working on these topics since before BWLG was founded, and the new generation – of which my coauthor is a leading figure – is moving the field in exciting new directions. Thanks to the work of all of these scholars, language and gender studies is gradually becoming more like the field I imagined it to be back in 1992: more expansive, more welcoming, more relevant – and more interesting.

### deandre's reflection

ONE. TWO. THREE. FOUR. FIVE. SIX. SEVEN. EIGHT. NINE. TEN. ELEVEN. TWELVE. THIRTEEN. FOURTEEN. FIFTEEN. SIXTEEN.

SEVENTEEN. EIGHTEEN. NINETEEN. TWENTY. TWENTY-ONE. TWENTY-TWO. TWENTY-THREE. TWENTY-FOUR. TWENTY-FIVE. TWENTY-SIX. TWENTY-SEVEN. TWENTY-EIGHT. TWENTY-NINE. THIRTY. THIRTY-ONE. THIRTY-TWO.

On 23 September 2020, a Kentucky grand jury failed to indict Brett Hankison, Jonathan Mattingly or Myles Cosgrove on any charges marking their responsibility for the death of Breonna Taylor. The three Louisville Metropolitan Police Department officers had served a ‘no-knock’ warrant by battering into the Blackwoman’s home and, in response to one warning shot fired by her boyfriend Kenneth Walker, who was attempting to protect Breonna and himself from the apparent intruders, fatally fired thirty-two shots into her apartment (New York Times 2020). Thirty-two shots. I sit writing this essay thirteen days after the release of the grand jury’s verdict.

I first learned of the Berkeley Women and Language Conference at the 2019 Linguistic Society of America Institute at the University of California, Davis. While there, I endeavoured to compile a comprehensive bibliography of scholarship on Blackwomen’s language and stumbled across a citation of ‘No woman no cry: the linguistic representation of African American women’ (Morgan 1994). Since an electronic copy was not available at the time,<sup>3</sup> I braved the stacks of UC Davis’s library and, after getting lost once or twice, I found *Cultural Performances* (Bucholtz et al. 1994), the 1994 BWLC proceedings it appeared in, as well as its two 1992 predecessor volumes, *Locating Power* (Hall, Bucholtz and Moonwomon 1992). While I had studied the work of a few Blackwomen who had published texts about language, such as Sonja Lanehart, who gifted me a copy of *African American Women’s Language* (Lanehart 2009b) at the inaugural Advancing African American Linguist(ic)s Symposium at UC Davis when I could not find a single source to purchase it from, the BWLC proceedings contained the names of several other researchers of whom I had never heard: Michèle Foster, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Arnetha Ball, to name a few. In my five years of linguistics courses, summer research programmes, conferences and invited lecture attendances, none of their names had ever appeared.

On 29 April 1992, a Simi Valley jury failed to convict Los Angeles Police Department officers Laurence Powell, Stacey Koon, Timothy Wind and Theodore Briseno of any wrongdoing for brutalising an unarmed Blackman, Rodney King. The second Berkeley Women and Language Conference convened on 4 and 5 April of that year, one month into the trial, about 360 miles south of where the incident occurred.

Intersectionality means that the aforementioned scholars carried the weight of that looming jury decision as they prepared to present their work to an audience of primarily whitewomen. Intersectionality means that thirty years later, I find myself in much the same position, writing for a

special issue on language and gender studies composed primarily of white contributors in the midst of #JusticeForBreonnaTaylor. Intersectionality means that this field is an academic enclave within an anti-Black society that is bound to remain steeped in misogynoir (Bailey 2013; Bailey and Trudy 2018) without a demonstrated commitment to an epistemological overhaul of the field. Toward that end, there are three intersecting avenues to which I would like to gesture.

### (1) Concepts

The limited extent to which scholarship on language and gender has taken up intersectional perspectives stems from a fundamental conceptual misalignment in the field. Thus far, gender and race have been treated under social constructionist paradigms construing them in terms of identity. In such paradigms, gender has been represented as co-constructed in interaction within a broader heterosexist discursive field; agency in the process of co-construction is a key facet of this perspective (Zimman 2019). The conceptual logic of race and racial formations (Omi and Winant 1986) and the extent to which it has been represented as mirroring that of gender (e.g. 'racial identity'), however, has been taken for granted. Race is grounded less in identity construction and more in sociopolitical imposition, organised through systems of domination that are largely unresponsive to the type of dynamism with which social constructionism is often associated. The history of laws supporting the disenfranchisement of African Americans provides a timely exemplar (Anderson 2018). As a result, I argue, identity itself, while apt in describing the fluid and negotiated nature of gender, is conceptually ill-equipped to deal with the ontological qualities of race, which principally render self-identification moot. In other words, anti-Black institutions and their actors do not negotiate with us. The conceptual limitations of *identity* consequently foreclose a serious consideration of the intersections of gender and race (and class and ability and sexuality and...). I argue for sustained interrogation of *sociopolitical identifications*, which are wholly distinct from the psychoanalytic notion of identification that has sometimes been proposed in the field. Sociopolitical identifications are complex bifurcated processes qua discursive locales in which actors – institutional and individual – position each other with asymmetrical access to power and agency.

### (2) Methods

Of course, conceptual shifts often set off domino effects. *Thinking* differently requires us to *move* differently. In order to push the field into discussions of sociopolitical identifications, I believe two points are of considerable

significance. First, positionality is a crucial aspect of situating where one's work is coming from and where it's going. While isolated statements to that effect are an important first step, one's positionality and the sociopolitical identifications (e.g. whiteness, maleness) that condition it must be – indeed, necessarily *are*, whether acknowledged or not – central to one's analytic. How does your interpretation of your data emerge from the interplay between your positionality and the positionalities of your research participants? In what ways does your analysis emerge dialogically (Kinloch and San Pedro 2014)? Second, it is imperative to work within the frames of epistemological value to the communities one engages with, rather than those that have been historically disciplinarily privileged. Attending to sociopolitical identifications requires us to, as theorist Christina Elizabeth Sharpe (2016:13) writes, 'become undisciplined'.

### (3) Citations

#CiteBlackWomen. Period. (Or for those who aren't on social media: <https://www.citeblackwomenscollective.org>.)

## Conclusion

Our work as linguists now will shape the field for future generations, just as the work of language and gender scholars thirty years ago shapes the field today. As we look ahead to the future of the field – a field we envision as intersectional language, gender and sexuality studies – we call on white scholars to learn from the work and ideas of researchers of colour both within and beyond linguistics, to cite Blackwomen and to critically scrutinise and actively dismantle the pervasive ideologies and structures of our field that reproduce white supremacy and thus continue to exclude the experiences and epistemological insights of those with simultaneously gendered, raced and otherwise othered bodies.

## About the authors

Mary Bucholtz is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she is also affiliated with the departments of Anthropology, Education, Feminist Studies and Spanish and Portuguese as well as the programs in Comparative Literature and in Latin American and Iberian Studies. She specialises in language, race, gender, power and agency, including the critical examination of racism in the academy and other institutions.

deandre miles-hercules studies the ways in which language organises culture and power, particularly vis-à-vis (anti)Blackness and gendering. Originally from Prince George's County, Maryland, they are pursuing a PhD in linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and occasionally serve as an expert consultant to news media. deandre's research topics have included virtue signalling, intersectionality and phonetic analysis of nonbinary voices. Their work is supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship.

## Notes

- 1 See 'Mary Bucholtz: reflections' and 'A toxic climate: reflections,' available at <https://lx.berkeley.edu/about/women-berkeley-linguistics>
- 2 Resistance to the word *sexuality* may have been due in part to pressures from the journal's publisher, perhaps because it was seen as too titillating. When I founded the Oxford University Press series 'Studies in Language and Gender' in 1997, the press rejected the original proposed series name, 'Studies in Language, Gender, and Sexuality'. OUP was also extremely resistant to the title of Anna Livia's (2001) book *Pronoun Envy*, which appeared in the series, because of its playful reference to *penis envy*. It was only when I threatened to resign as series editor that the press agreed to the title.
- 3 All BWLC proceedings are now available online, thanks to IGALA: <https://igalaweb.wixsite.com/igala/proceedings-of-bwlc>

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