

BOOK & ARTICLE REVIEWS

Next Steps in the Transformation of ELT: Considering Motha's *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching*

Anna Ciriani-Dean & Shélynn Riel

Motha, S. (2014). *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. Teachers College Press.

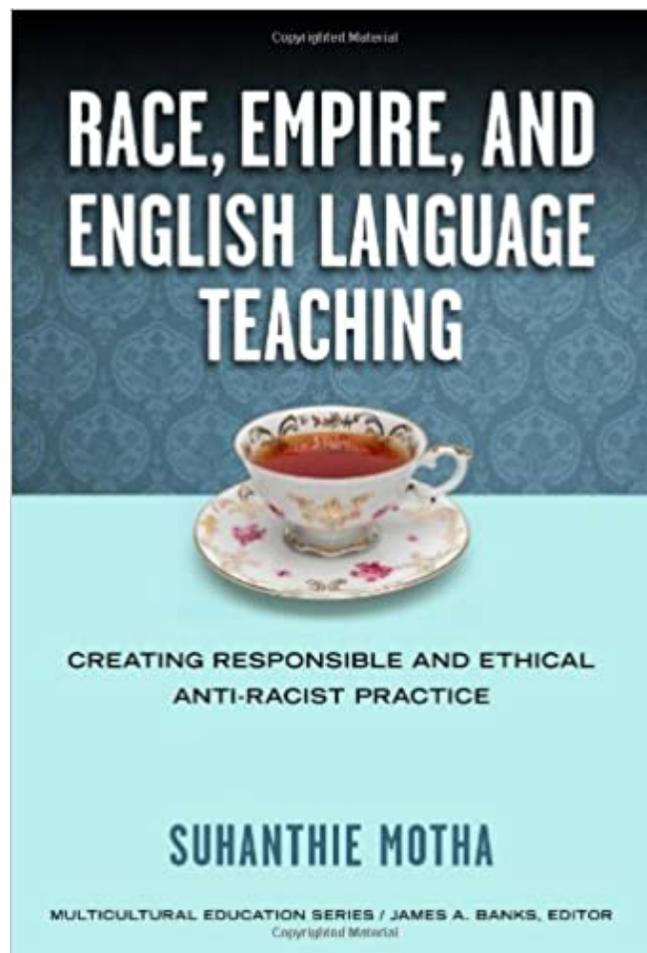
Summary: *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching* by Dr. Suhanthie Motha (2014), is a well-researched, thought-provoking survey of the palpable yet often invisible intersections of ELT and racist systems. Motha invites readers to consider how their classroom practices are embedded in systems of racism and oppression and guides them through a journey of reflective practice, moving the conversation within ELT towards anti-racist pedagogy.

Keywords: anti-racist pedagogy, classroom practices, reflective practice, racism

Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice, by Dr. Suhanthie Motha (2014), is a well-researched, thought-provoking survey of the palpable yet often invisible intersections of ELT and racist systems. Though restrained in its supply of tangible classroom practices, it invites readers to confront their own relationship to Empire—which Motha denotes with a capital “e” to distinguish between the overarching power structures of modern-day colonialism and lower-case empires connected historically to individual nation-states—and to reflect on how their practices in the classroom are inherently connected to systems of racism and oppression.

The book is not for the faint of heart, especially those teachers in denial of their role in systems of oppression or who have not yet begun their journey of reflection. Motha begins by laying out the contradiction of teaching English—a simultaneous tool for emancipation and systems of oppression—and calling upon readers to ask how they can “participate in English language teaching in a way that is responsible, ethical, and conscious of the consequences of our practice” (2014, p. xxiii). She starts from the assumption that all English language educators are complicit and challenges the belief that teachers cannot make a significant difference in such a large industry. From there, Motha launches into a comprehensive literature review of relevant theory and research, defining terms such as neocolonialism, Empire, and liberal multiculturalism. She devotes the rest of the book to problematizing issues faced within the US ESOL context. Uninitiated readers may feel overwhelmed or discouraged by the learning curve. However, while some may come out of the experience intimidated

by the density of the book, others may feel empowered by their reinforced understanding of many of these concepts, thanks to the robust theoretical and empirical background the book supplies. The best recommendation would be to



explore this book in the company of an experienced mentor or a trusted professional learning network.

The concepts presented in the book are guided by Motha's tea-time conversations with a group of four first-year ESOL teachers, in which they report on scenarios happening in their own classrooms. The experiences reported by the study participants are woven throughout the book, to illustrate the issues discussed and raise questions around the claims made. Yet the amount of conversational data shared remains scant. More instances of directly-reported data might have helped readers form a more thorough understanding of the phenomena described and, most importantly, identify or adopt strategies from the teachers themselves as appropriate in their context. Rather than forcing readers to seek this data out in Motha's other scholarship, the book would have benefited from more robust data presentation.

Given the provenance of the selected case studies, the book naturally and singularly centers on the US K-12 context. Though somewhat generalizable to other inner-circle English-speaking countries, such as the UK, Australia, and much of Canada, the book does not grapple directly with the intersection of race, Empire, and ELT as it is manifested abroad. Its relevance is thus limited for people working in other educational contexts, with different student populations and different historical relations to English and imperialism. Still, the phenomena Motha describes and provides evidence for are helpful catalysts for examining the state of ELT in other settings.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its ability to provoke reflection. On page 131, Motha states, "this book is designed not to tell you what to do but rather to support you as you think." And indeed, it does. At several points, even the most self-aware educator might stop to accommodate an idea they may not have thought deeply about before reading or to question a practice they themselves have implemented. This focus on reflective practice is achieved by the thought-provoking questions included at the end of

each chapter, meant to guide readers through their own exploration of the topic. Given this structure, teachers may critique the lack of clear, practical applications to teaching practices. In Chapter 6, Motha does provide two calls to action with the intention of moving the conversation on race and ELT forward: first, integrating discussions of race and ELT into teacher preparation programs; second, providing ongoing support of in-service educators in their exploration of these issues. However, these suggestions may not feel so immediately applicable to teachers' educational contexts. For example, Motha states, "I argue for an approach to English language teaching that [...] takes as its point of departure a race and empire approach that provincializes English" (2014, p. 140). This kind of directive may not mean much for teachers who have just started to think about integrating antiracist pedagogy into their practice. Motha remains within the realm of theory rather than providing the "quick fixes" that teachers seek. Still, while frustrating, the self-exploratory nature of the book rightly acknowledges the complexity of the contexts teachers work in and forces teachers to do the work of reflecting on their own identities and potential roles in perpetrating coloniality rather than applying practices that might be less relevant in their respective teaching contexts.

While somewhat limited in its practical support, this book was years ahead of the discourse around race and ELT when it was published in 2014. As these topics step into the limelight of mainstream discussions of teaching practices and research, Motha's work acts as a canonical stepping stone to inform teachers' and researchers' next steps in the transformation of the field of ELT.

For more conversation around the book, check out our episode on [The Teacher Think-Aloud Podcast](#).



REFERENCES

Ciriani-Dean, A. & Riel, S. (Executive Producers). (2021-present). The Teacher Think-Aloud Podcast [Audio podcast]. <https://www.teacherthinkaloud.com/>



ANNA CIRIANI-DEAN is co-creator of *The Teacher Think-Aloud Podcast* and program manager at Jump on Languages in Seattle. She previously worked as an English Language Fellow (U.S. Dept. of State) to Armenia and Ukraine, an instructor at various institutions in Washington and New York, and an assessment developer for small- and large-scale tests. Her interests include teacher development, L2 writing, media literacy, and antiracist pedagogy. You may contact her at anna.cirianidean@gmail.com.



SHÉLYNN RIEL is co-creator of *The Teacher Think-Aloud Podcast* and a professional development consultant and facilitator. She has served as an ESOL instructor for over a decade, a program coordinator in both university and community-based programs, and an English Language Fellow in Argentina with the U.S. Department of State. Her current interests include teacher development, intercultural competence, curriculum development, and decolonial ethics in the language classroom. You may contact her at shelynnriel@gmail.com.