

Spring 2017

## **“My Little English”: a Case Study of Decolonial Perspectives on Discourse in an After-School Program for Refugee Youth**

Michael T. MacDonald  
*University of Michigan-Dearborn*, [mikemacd@umich.edu](mailto:mikemacd@umich.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

MacDonald, Michael T. “My Little English’: A Case Study of Decolonial Perspectives on Discourse in an After-School Program for Refugee Youth.” *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp. 16-29. doi:10.25148/clj.11.2.009131.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

# “My Little English”: a Case Study of Decolonial Perspectives on Discourse in an After-School Program for Refugee Youth

*Michael T. MacDonald*

## Abstract

Literacy “sponsorship” in refugee communities is not without its risks and limitations. For potential sponsors, risks include the commodification of refugee voices, while limits include inaccurate generalizations of those being sponsored. This essay draws from a case study of refugee student discourse to discuss how a more explicit *decolonial* approach to sponsorship can help sponsors rethink a giver-receiver paradigm. This approach would first deconstruct imperialist discourses of power and then replace them with new, alternatives to meaning-making. While contingent on local contexts, this study aims to set an agenda for continued debate within refugee community literacy support projects.

**Keywords:** refugee, decolonial, sponsorship, discourse, commodification, neoliberalism

*They had special names for people like refugees from different countries. It's almost like they kind of know you because of your struggles with the language.*

(Michelle, on her experience going to school in a South African refugee camp)

## “We Are From Africa! We Do Not Write!”

When I first met the students in this case study, I was a volunteer tutor in an after-school program designed to serve refugee and immigrant youth from the African continent. The majority of students were resettled refugees from Somalia who identified as Somali Bantu. Others were from places like Eritrea, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Somali Bantu students were in high school at the time, but before coming to the U.S., few had limited access

to formal schooling. Aid workers reported that when the students were resettled, they were placed into classes according to their age rather than their academic level, which made it difficult for them to catch up on subjects and learn English at the same time. The afterschool program had become an important part of their new relationship with English literacy.

One day, I was working with a student who had a particularly sharp sense of humor, once telling me—despite him being only seventeen—that he had been a background dancer in the video for Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. He would often challenge people to dance contests. While going over some reading response questions, he became frustrated. He pushed his chair back, threw up his hands, and exclaimed, "We are from Africa! We do not write!" We laughed and moved on, but for me, his statement came to embody the intersection of competing discourses educators, politicians, aid workers, and volunteers use to describe the educational histories of refugee students. By parodying back to me statements others have made of students like him, he both identified the colonizing discourse of literacy and talked back to it.

In her reflection on decolonizing research methodologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes how literacy has been a primary medium of imperial rationality. While literacy has often been presented as a catalyst for opportunity, only certain kinds of literacy have been valued (English, written), and it has instead represented for many colonized peoples a double-standard and an artificial measure of development:

Writing or literacy, in a very traditional sense of the word, has been used to determine the breaks between the past and the present, the beginning of history and the development of theory. Writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions. (30)

These are the colonial contexts from which refugees are resettled. They are also the neocolonial beliefs with which sponsorship is realized. That is, sponsors, despite the best of intentions, risk constructing those they sponsor according to colonial discourse, not necessarily out of ignorance (though sometimes that can be the case), but because an imperialist view of literacy as a "mark" of superiority is the dominant discourse in which we work.

The support and promotion of literacy—or what Deborah Brandt (1998) has termed "literacy sponsorship"—provides an important theory for understanding the materiality and circulation of literacy. Within the sponsorship framework, isolated language practice is not so much important as is the relationships by which those practices are made possible. In refugee communities, sponsorship is comprised of a complex network of stakeholders, each having a vested interest in the sponsorship of literacy in refugee communities. While the impulse to sponsor comes from a place of good intentions, the impulse itself is driven by an imperial rationality that

uses literacy, English written literacy in particular, as a “mark” of a superior form of progress and development.

In order to make space within the giver-beneficiary sponsorship paradigm, a more explicitly *decolonial* approach is needed, one that first deconstructs imperialist discourses of power and then replaces them with new, alternatives to meaning making (see Smith). This essay provides one case study of refugee student discourse gathered from interviews conducted in an after-school program. However, it should be noted that as a researcher, I have put myself in a questionable position—the fact that I am a white, English-speaking, academic attempting to use a decolonial approach to analyze refugee discourse has me playing a similar role to that I aim to critique. I hope to make my methods and interpretations open to questioning. My positionality represents a microcosm of the central problem this essay addresses: literacy sponsorship in refugee communities, while well-intentioned, is a primary means of circulation for the discourses of power that prevent refugees from actualizing sovereignty and participating fully in self-governance. In short, refugees are cast as a “problem” to be fixed (Lui, 116) rather than as providing important resources and solutions to the inadequate institutions of education. In this case study, refugee students identify and speak back to the neocolonial discourses that govern their encounters with English literacy. Close attention to these discursive moments can point to ways in which sponsors might cultivate a decolonial perspective, one that disrupts discourses of power, shifts the paradigm of sponsorship, and makes space for new and radical knowledges.

### ***Decolonizing Discourse and Paradigms of Sponsorship***

While the idea of literacy sponsorship here is the focus of my critique, it must be acknowledged that literacy can also provide a powerful means of awareness and resistance. But, unreflectively entering a marginalized and vulnerable community with a perspective informed by a “rhetoric of liberation” (Smith, 75) is a problem; it is short-sighted at best and oppressive at worst to assume that merely supporting English literacy in refugee communities will “lift” those communities up and out of economic poverty, remove them from the scrutiny of public suspicion, and restore political self-determination. As sponsors—composition teacher-scholars, literacy researchers, and community activists—we must be willing to ask the question as to whether it is even possible for us to shift the sponsorship paradigm away from colonizing discourses. It must also be noted that many sponsors are from indigenous and refugee communities, and working with them would be an important opportunity for future research on community literacy. Institutional structures of sponsorship, however, like university-community partnerships, need more radical perspectives in positions of power, and this is one potentially overgeneralized assumption from which my critique begins.

A decolonial perspective can be thought of as requiring at least two approaches: the identification of colonizing knowledges and the advocacy of new ways of imagining the world that are specifically informed by indigenous experiences. This second point is why sponsors might have difficulty transforming sponsorship on

their own. Pan-African studies scholar Sabeel J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, for instance, calls the decolonial approach an “epistemic perspective,” arguing that it expresses “counter-hegemonic intellectual thought” that “opens up the invisible global imperial designs embodied by modernity” (386-87). *Modernity* in this case represents the perceived distance between literacy sponsors and refugee communities, the catching-up students might have to do, and the ways in which sponsors perceive a refugee’s educational background. Such “designs” of distance have historically sought to “classify and name the world” in asymmetrical ways (388). Contemporary imperial designs are engaged through neoliberal rationalities, free market obsessions, and as Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes, the “deployment of democracy” rather than advocacy for equality (391).

For Smith, a decolonial perspective identifies the “order”—the underlying “code” and “grammar” of imperialism, a code that has, in fact, generated “disorder” and “fragmentation” in the lives of indigenous peoples (29). Smith critiques Western academic traditions for constructing artificial “binary categories” and regarding history as a “totalizing discourse” that is all-encompassing rather than nuanced, subtle, and contingent (30-31). In composition and rhetoric studies, Ellen Cushman also adopts a decolonial perspective and identifies a need for the examination of “dualistic thinking ... because it maintains the center/periphery of knowledge-making efforts” (239). Imperial constructions of knowledge dictate what discourses are possible in a given context, and scholars like Smith argue that real critique of imperial discourse cannot be conducted without the explicit inclusion of indigenous voices. If western academics are embedded within these totalizing discourses, then indigenous perspectives remain *outside* these established knowledge regimes and as a result, can offer alternative strategies not possible within the imperial paradigm.

Sponsorship is not exempt from imperial discourse and can reinforce asymmetrical relations of power between the sponsor and sponsored. As Brandt notes in her oft-cited definition, sponsorship involves the regulation and suppression of literacy just as much as it supports and enables it (166). A decolonial approach to literacy sponsorship in refugee communities would question literacy as a “criterion for assessing the development of a society” (Smith, 33). It would embrace what Cushman calls “pluriversal realities” of language, literacy, and lived-experience (235). It would defy categorization that is based on linear, developmental models wherein those who are literate sponsor those perceived to be illiterate. From this view, sponsorship appears more akin to a kind of corporate sponsorship, regulated by neoliberal expectations of behavior. If performances of literacy do not meet the neoliberal prerequisites of English, then the sponsored are deemed “ineducable,” “troublesome,” and “delinquent” (Smith, 67). Instead, as Cushman proposes, “Understanding the differences within difference as the norms of all utterances” can open up new forms of meaning making (238).

Acts of sponsorship also are prone to what Leigh Patel identifies as “compartmentalization,” or the understanding of “parts at the expense of the whole” (19). Focusing on English literacy acquisition rather than on a multilingual whole, or on individual literacy practice rather than on systemic educational deficiencies puts

an undue burden on the sponsored, positions them as a problem to be solved rather than as part of a holistic solution. Perhaps viewing difference as a norm can shift the sponsorship paradigm so that those who are sponsored, like refugee students who live and learn in vulnerable communities, are not treated as problems, but as leaders and problem-solvers.

### **Methods and Reflection**

The after-school program took place in a mid-sized, Midwestern city that had been a primary resettlement location for several groups of refugees. The organization within which the program was housed had a strong commitment to serving groups from the African continent in particular. And, during my time there, the city saw an influx of refugees from Somalia and Eritrea.

The students I interviewed—Ali, Musa, and Michelle—were in high school at the time of the study. Ali and Musa had just turned 18, each having the same assigned birthday of January first. They had come to the U.S. at a late enough age to remember their resettlement, including what it was like to learn English for the first time. One of the most important findings that came out of working with them was learning how they responded to the assumptions that circulated about them. When I told Ali, for example, that I would be reporting my research specifically to an *academic* audience, he laughed and said, “Tell them you have a real, live African guy.”

Michelle was a sophomore at the time who excelled in her English classes, but told me she struggled with math. She eventually became a tutor herself at the program and was very involved in summer mentorship activities. She was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but after being forced to flee, lived much of her life in a South African refugee camp. She often talked about how her mother would use writing as a form of therapy, as a way to make sense of the disjuncture in their lives.

I frame this essay as a case study of discourse in order to “establish a framework for discussion” (Yin 2) and place emphasis on the “exact words used by” my participants (60).

My use of interviews as the source material for this discourse comes with some limitations. Most concerning is the risk of uncritically celebrating, fetishizing, or commodifying refugee student voices. Janet Bye attempts to clarify some of these problematics in her post-structural analysis of education reform, emphasizing an important distinction between the individual voice of the *subject* and discourse. According to Bye, focusing specifically on discourse can “provide important opportunities to observe the individual being constituted as a subject of neoliberal education” (401). Similarly, my aim is to treat student interviews *as texts* in order to identify discourse that appears to reject, challenge, and question, or accept and accommodate the sponsorship paradigm.

Another guiding principle for this case study has been my ongoing understanding of representation, particularly as described by Trinh T. Minh-ha (2004) in her exploration of researcher self-reflexivity. Trinh argues that self-reflection can only be productive when it goes “beyond” the self in order to identify

“established forms,” norms, and dominant discourse (235). I keep returning to Trinh’s ideas in relation to my own positionality as a white, American, monolingual (I’m embarrassed to admit), academic, cis-gendered man, who was also a first-generation college student from a white working-class family in a small town. This positionality is important to account for, but should not overdetermine my analysis of discourse. One way I attempt to remain consistent with Trinh’s argument is by treating my findings and generalizations with caution. For example, rather than take a statement like, “We do not write,” as evidence of a generalization or a confirmation of written literacy superiority, I have tried to look for the possible parody and appropriation in the discourse and think about what kind of interpretations the discourse is pointing toward. As a case study, this essay does not pretend to come to definitive conclusions about literacy sponsorship in refugee communities. It only attempts to identify problems and responses to those problems that are already present in the interview texts.

### ***“We Have to Speak It”***

While most of this study’s examples draw from interviews, my daily interactions with students added to my understanding of their senses of humor, their daily frustrations, and the kinds of relationships they were forming—at least during the time they were in the after-school program. Many of the students came to the program everyday the program was open, and their schoolwork included a wide range of activities. One of my favorite moments was reading *Romeo and Juliet* with one student, who, once we both looked up the annotations to the text, quickly grasped the humor and kept shaking his head in disbelief at the characters’ actions.

At other times, students appeared to appropriate discourses of power, reflecting in some ways the “literate arts of the contact zone” (Pratt, 37). That is, students seemed to subvert dominant depictions made of them by drawing on practices such as, “autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism,” as well as multilingualism and “parody” (37). Statements like, “We do not write” and “Tell them you have a real, live African guy,” often took the form of cutting or self-deprecating remarks. On several occasions, the Bantu students asked me—and sometimes the other tutors—if I liked bugs on my pizza, saying that that they would always eat bugs when they were in “Africa.” They asked me to write them checks for a thousand dollars, a joke that underscored the discourses of aid in their everyday lives. Through these jokes, their audience was forced to see value in rhetorical strategies meant to push them away.

An important “literate art” that spoke back to representations of refugees—Somali Bantu refugees in particular—as having limited or deficient literacy histories was their use of multilingualism. For example, Ali told me that he knew eight languages. Musa said he knew four, and they both spoke with pride about their home languages, particularly Maay Maay. Closely connected to Bantu history, Maay Maay is sometimes symbolic of the marginalization of the Bantu in Somalia. As an ethnic minority, the Bantu were descendent from the indigenous peoples exploited and displaced by continental slave trade (Van Lehman and Eno).

Ali and Musa continued to use Maay Maay with their Bantu peers in the U.S., wanting to preserve the language as part of their identity. Musa said, “My friends like speaking English, but you know, we don’t want to lose this language, so we have to speak it.” Ali also explained how Maay Maay was like a secret language for him: “We didn’t forget it ... We use it and most people say, ‘What are you talking about?’” Maay Maay appeared to play a complex role in the after-school program because it united students who had similar linguistic backgrounds, but tutors sometimes talked about how students who were newer to the program, and to the U.S., seemed to feel left out. I cannot comment on this because I only heard positive things about the use of Maay Maay from students and aid workers. The program itself advertised the linguistic diversity of its aid workers and students, and Maay Maay was one important aspect of this message. From a more holistic point of view, this norm of linguistic diversity in their lives reflects the “pluriversal realities” of their encounters with English literacy sponsorship (Cushman 235). A decolonial approach would work to understand these contexts and look to the experiences of Ali and Musa for solutions to systemic problems.

### ***“My Little English”***

While students spoke a variety of languages, the three I interviewed each expressed seeing English as an integral part of their future goals. When I asked Ali and Musa about the importance of English in their lives, they agreed with popular sentiments that English literacy would give them access to important opportunities. For example, Musa said, “All over the world, English is a major language ... and that’s important because I’m going to be the first one going to college in my family.” Many of my discussions with students focused on the subject of English, their memories of learning the language, and their perspectives on its importance.

Ali told me about his initial, but very minimal, exposure to English as a child in Somalia:

I remember I started learning English in Africa. ... Mommy always say go to school, learn some English, but all I knew was “How are you?” and “I’m fine.” That’s what I knew. That was my English right there. ... A-B-C, 1-2-3, and count to ten, that’s it. That was my English, my little English. And, that’s when we came to America.

While they acknowledged the importance of English, Ali and Musa also did not express any particular need for it during their resettlement process. In the discourse of “little English,” Ali presents a knowledge of English that positions it alongside other languages rather than as superior to them. His mother tells him to “learn *some* English.” The emphasis on English seems understated. In fact, Ali and Musa also spent time in a refugee camp where they learned Arabic. And, because of their Muslim backgrounds, when they came to the U.S., they were enrolled in a Muslim school where both English and Arabic classes were required. Ali and Musa’s interviews seem to present a “pluriversal” view of English. It is portrayed as co-existing with rather than *trumping* or foreclosing other languages. Perhaps, their



literate lives could be viewed as “translingual” in nature because, in many ways, they show how their language use is not constrained by borders, but is flexible and adaptive (Cushman, 236).

English, of course, played a more dominant role after Ali and Musa were resettled. For example, the immediate impacts of English literacy sponsorship were felt by Ali when his family received help finding housing. He said, “My house was like a library. They prepared everything for us. Books, all that stuff.” The presence of books reflected an important “materiality” (Brandt and Clinton) of sponsorship and appeared to show evidence of sponsorship having had happened—aid workers placing books in the house, volunteers donating them. But, this kind of sponsorship also seemed distanced. The materials of literacy were left for the families, but in reality, many of Musa and Ali’s family members, the adults especially, did not speak, read, or write even a “little” English. The books were there, but it was *unclear* what resources or access they were providing.

As Patel observes, a holistic approach to decolonizing methodologies seeks to understand how “dynamic systems ... function in material contexts” (17). A small detail, like a book donation, can reveal a larger economy of aid and sponsorship wherein the sponsor actively gives and the sponsored is regarded as a passive recipient. Of course, books can provide important resources, but in my limited experience with book donations, I have seen wild inconsistency in their content. When I first started tutoring, the students were meeting in a classroom that had a shelf of donated books; it was like a magazine display rack set up for easy browsing. This rack contained a range of texts that included golf magazines and ESL versions of “classic” novels like Ayn Rand’s *Anthem*. Later, when I suggested that people in my graduate program make some small book donations during the holiday season, one of the books I received was about stories of “great explorers.” While these examples are anecdotal, I think they show how something as “innocent” and well-intentioned as a book donation needs care and attention on the part of the sponsor.

This brief example of materiality points to inequalities in the sponsorship paradigm and how the concept of sponsorship itself might not encapsulate the entirety of literacy encounters. The stories Ali and Musa told about their initial experiences with literacy in American schools expressed a complex sentiment. For example, Ali told me about attending school for the first time, explaining how, “The school I went to, they weren’t teaching me English. They just put a big book in front of me. The teacher didn’t talk to me.” In contrast to sponsors filling his house with books—a move that invited his participation in English language learning—formal schooling made him feel unwelcome. This feeling is not necessarily apparent from the perspective of materiality. As Katie Vieira argues, an emphasis on “the economic and material aspects of literacy” can be useful, but at the same time, students like Ali and Musa describe experiences where “literacy *also* seeped into their relational and emotional lives” (426). In addition to material sponsorship—books, English and Arabic classes, etc.—Vieira “proposes a deeper investigation of interpersonal literate meaning-making” (426). As a sponsor of literacy, the teacher in Ali’s story neither

directly supported nor actively withheld literacy. Ali was, instead, ignored, and this affected his interpersonal relationships with sponsors.

By telling this story, Ali identifies a discourse of silence surrounding refugee education. If teachers are not equipped with the training or resources to support refugee students, then students remain silent and invisible. Ali's discourse captures this moment, and in some ways "reclaims" it by juxtaposing silence with voice. As Smith observes, "Reclaiming a voice in this context has also been about reclaiming, reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground" (72). Examining discourse in these examples provides opportunities for literacy sponsors to reflect on the ways in which they themselves might have "submerged" the experiences of those they have tried to sponsor.

### ***"It's Almost Like They Kind of Know You"***

Students' struggles with English literacy were not limited to the U.S. For example, Michelle told me about the asymmetrical power relations that existed in the refugee camp where her family lived before being resettled. Michelle was born to a military family in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where she went to a French-speaking school. Civil conflict forced her, her mother, two sisters, and brother to seek refuge in South Africa. Michelle told me how not knowing English marked her as Other in the refugee camp:

We didn't fit in because kids and older people—if you didn't speak their language, they are just against you. They had special names for people like refugees from different countries. It's almost like they kind of know you because of your struggles with the language so they call you names and stuff.

Even though Michelle was in the multilingual context of a refugee camp, English was the discourse of currency, so it was hard for her to be accepted by students and teachers.

Despite her negative experience in the camp, Michelle had much more exposure to the English language before her resettlement than many of the other students in the after-school program. If her lack of English had marked her as a refugee in South Africa, years later, her South African English accent would mark her in other ways:

Well all my teachers are positive. I mean they were amazed that I'm from Africa and they like my accent, I guess, most of them are always like, I like your accent and stuff. And they say we should write about us that nobody knows and I wrote about that I was from Africa and everybody was like "really?" And I was like yeah, I'm from Africa. "Oh we thought you were born in America."

Contrast this with Ali's experience and Michelle's previous exposure to English seems not only to prepare her for school, but also appears to grant her citizenship status in

the minds of her U.S. sponsors. Two groups of refugees, one from Somalia, one from South Africa, are perceived completely differently from each other by sponsors before and after their resettlement.

Ali and Musa did not have access to more than a “little” English. Their negative experiences did not begin until they were resettled. But these experiences were complex. In the following excerpt, Musa explains how English simultaneously played an important role in his feelings of marginalization and his increasing sense of belonging:

I was in fourth grade and I felt kind of different, you know, meeting new people. I felt different because I didn't know the language. ... At first, when I didn't know English, I didn't want to go to school because people didn't know my language, and I didn't know their language. ... And since then, I started learning it, saying the words and hearing things from other people. Then I liked it. I was the first one out of the house, getting onto the bus.

Both Bantu students expressed an appreciation for education that was previously inhibited by not knowing English. What these perceptions imply is that sponsors risk making inferences about a student's history based on English fluency. While assumptions about educational history might be accurate, these assumptions seem to extend to citizenship, as in Michelle's case, implying that relations of sponsorship are not necessarily equitable.

In these instances, the English language appeared as a regulatory force, but it also seemed to have contradictory effects. Michelle, who had previously gone to a French-speaking school, found herself having to trade one colonizing language for another in South Africa. In contrast, Ali and Musa learned English in primarily English-only settings in the U.S., where not knowing the language made them feel like outsiders. As Prendergast observes, the currency of English can act as a “lubricant” for the mobility of people (127). In these cases, English could keep a student like Musa from going to school, or get him to be the “first one out of the house, getting onto the bus.”

These students' statements suggest that the power of English literacy in the everyday lives of refugees is asymmetrical and inconsistently manifested. This power can be silencing, but also contradictory. For instance, Musa told me that he liked to write poems in both Maay Maay *and* English, and all three students expressed an interest in reading English language novels. In composition studies, A. Suresh Canagarajah has warned against sweeping arguments about the global dominance of the English language, observing the complexities of power in postcolonial contexts and how “domination is never wholesale” (25). Students in this case study reflected this perspective. They expressed an awareness of the power dynamics of sponsorship and hinted at their strategic resistance to it. Through parody, multilingualism, and storytelling, students demonstrated how they used their literacy practices to engage with the governing powers of English to craft their own “little” Englishes, illustrating

the competing and contradictory effects of literacy sponsorship in the contexts of refugee resettlement.

### **Conclusion: Toward a Decolonial Approach**

“I sincerely believe that a subjective experience can be understood by others.” (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 86)

Identifying the discourses of power that limit the radical potential of literacy sponsorship is a necessary component of a decolonial analysis. And while sponsors should engage in self-reflective practices that bring those discursive constructions to the forefront of critique, the voices of students are also necessary for considering perspectives outside of the sponsorship/imperialist framework. Sponsorship, wherein there is an actor who seeks to help someone perceived to be in need of help, is a deeply engrained habit of Western educators, including tutors, volunteers, and others who directly or indirectly support literacy in refugee communities. Embracing the “pluriversal realities” (Cushman, 235) of literacy sponsorship requires more diligent deconstruction of the sponsorship paradigm itself.

Greater inclusion of student discourse is one argument my essay makes, but this is a common observation among community literacy researchers and advocates, so it is worth noting the differences between inclusion, recognition, and reclamation. As Smith argues, “reclaiming” voice involves a commitment to acts of “reconnecting and reordering” (72). Sponsorship needs a dramatic paradigm shift rather than just additive inclusion. Smith argues that only through the reclamation of indigenous voices can systemic, decolonial change take place. That is, unless indigenous and marginalized peoples are in positions where they can contribute meaningfully to research and knowledge, a colonial agenda remains active. In this regard, my own work here only points toward that fact; it is not necessarily able to follow through on it. But, venues like the *Community Literacy Journal* are already poised to support decolonizing methodologies. For instance, Keyword essays like “Adult Literacy” by William Carney, “Qualitative Research” by Stephanie Vie, and “Reciprocity” by Miller, Wheeler, and White engage in deconstructing and demystifying some of the common tropes in community literacy work. Reciprocity, especially, is a term that embraces a decolonial approach to research because it attempts to decenter authority in researcher-subject relationship. These approaches lay the groundwork for radical shifts in perspective.

The “little Englishes” students have crafted show how English sometimes can, in fact, be a *little* thing to students—powerful and regulatory, yes, but also “little” in the sense that English was only part of a broader landscape of governing forces, all of which, big and small, are subject to commodification as well as contradiction. It followed that students prioritized their English literacy-learning accordingly. Those who find themselves to be the perceived objects of sponsorship have much more to contribute to the reworking sponsorship than they are given credit for—or perhaps it is that such a reworking might seem dangerous to those invested in the status quo?

In that case, students and others at the receiving end of sponsorship should be given the lead in any possible sponsorship reform projects. What this would look like would depend greatly on local contexts and would rely on the local expertise of community members. I remember when I asked one student if I could interview him about his memories of learning English for the first time. He grinned, and with more than just a touch of sarcasm in his voice said, "Oh, I know all about that."

## **Works Cited**

- Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 49.1 (1998): 165-185. Print.
- Brandt, Deborah and Katie Clinton. "Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice." *Journal of Literacy Research* 34.3 (2002): 337-56, doi: 10.1207/s15548430jlr3403\_4
- Bye, Janet. "Foucault and the Use of Critique: Breaching the Self-Evidence of Educational Practices." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies* 28.4 (2015): 394-414, doi: 10.1080/09518398.2014.916003
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Carney, William. "Keywords: Adult Literacy." *Community Literacy Journal* 4.2 (2010): 100-04. Web.
- Cushman, Ellen. "Translingual and Decolonial Approaches to Meaning Making." *College English* 78.3 (2016): 234-42. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967. Print.
- Lui, Robyn. "The International Government of Refugees." *Global Governmentality: Governing International Spaces*. Eds. Wendy Larner and William Walters, London: Routledge, 2004. 116-35. Print.
- Miller, Elisabeth, Anne Wheeler, and Stephanie White. "Keywords: Reciprocity." *Community Literacy Journal* 5.2 (2011): 171-77. Web.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabeb J. "Decolonial Epistemic Perspective and Pan-African Unity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." *The African Union Ten Years After: Solving African Problems with Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance*. Eds. Mammo Muchie, Phindil Lukhele-Olorunju, and Oghenerobor B. Akpor. South Africa: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2013. 385-409. Print.
- Patel, Leigh. *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* (1991): 33-40. Web. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469?origin=JSTOR-pdf>

Prendergast, Catherine. *Buying into English: Language and Investment in the New Capitalist World*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2008. Print.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: U of Otago P, 1999.

Trinh T. Minh-ha. "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning." *Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory*. Eds. Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy Griffin. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004. 225-38. Print.

Van Lehman, Dan and Omar Eno. "The Somali Bantu: Their History and Culture." *Culture Profile*. Washington, D.C.: Washington, D.C. Center for Applied Linguistics, Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2003. 1-33. Web. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED482784.pdf>

Vie, Stephanie. "Keywords: Qualitative Research." *Community Literacy Journal* 5.1 (2010):175-80. Web.

Vieira, Kate. "Writing Remittances: Migration-Driven Literacy Learning in a Brazilian Homeland." *Research in the Teaching of English* 50.4 (2016): 422-49. Print.

### **Author's Note:**

Student interviews were part of an IRB-approved study, and all student names are pseudonyms.

### **Author Bio**

**Michael T. MacDonald** is an Assistant Professor of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where he teaches courses in basic writing, literacy, and global studies. His work has appeared in *College English* and is forthcoming in *The Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.