

## Book Reviews

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### **Antisocial Language Teaching: English and the Pervasive Pathology of Whiteness**

*JPB Gerald*

Multilingual Matters, 2022, 180 pages, ISBN 9781800413269 (paperback), publisher's list price US\$24.95

It may sound like a cliché to declare that everyone in a specific discipline should read a particular book in that field, but it really is the case that every English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioner should read *Antisocial Language Teaching* by JPB Gerald. It will inspire a range of reactions, some of them quite strong, but that is the point precisely. Given the challenges it raises, this book is essential reading.

Gerald uses the seven criteria for diagnosing antisocial personality disorder (APD) as a framing device for the book. This has the advantage of providing an engaging and clear structure for the reader—as well as forcefully conveying the author's primary criticism of the ELT field—though it also has the disadvantage of rendering some of Gerald's analyses (striving to adhere to this framing device) rather strained. Gerald's criticism of ELT is unequivocal and unrelenting: by centring itself on whiteness, ELT is an inherently antisocial field that perpetuates axes of oppression involving settler colonialism, capitalism, language ideologies, and the ongoing marginalization of blackness, disability, and users of non-standard English. In short, Gerald's book "exists to make the case for why it is a moral imperative that ELT sever its ties to whiteness once and for all" (p. x).

The first two parts of the book are each divided into seven sections. In Part 1, "Disorder," Gerald situates ELT within a power dynamic (described as a "pyramid scheme") that establishes whiteness as the norm from which other racial groups diverge. "The racialization of those with less power" (p. 17) has perpetuated this dynamic, as does ELT as a field. Deviation from this norm is identified as a "disorder" that must be controlled and neutralized.

In Part 2, "Symptoms," each of the seven sections examines ELT with respect to one of the diagnostic symptoms of APD in order to identify the most problematic issues endemic to the field. As indicated, some of Gerald's assertions in this section are somewhat tenuous; however, regardless of whether he makes a convincing case that ELT's flaws correspond exactly to these seven symptoms, he does effectively identify the most problematic elements of the field.

Among these, Gerald accuses ELT of "deceitfulness, repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for pleasure or personal profit" (p. 70). In this regard, Gerald cites the prevalence of precarious employment in ELT. Many teachers are credentialed for work in the field because of their identity (as white native speakers); as a result, racialized teachers are generally devalued. However, while racialized teachers in particular face more challenges, Gerald points out that there is little career stability for non-racialized teachers as well. Precarious employment is a feature of the ELT field. This criterion's element of "lying for profit" comes into play when administrators, managers, or institutions in the field suggest that this lack of employment security is not intentional. As Gerald states, "this precarity is absolutely by design, despite what the field would prefer us to believe" (p. 70). In making this point, Gerald draws upon a study (Breshears, 2019), published in this very journal, examining precarity amongst ELT practitioners in Canada. The adherence, driven by the prioritizing of profit, to an exploitative employment model that ensnares teachers in a cycle of precarity—stringing together one short-term contract position to another—is one of the great shames of the ELT field and one of the most obvious indicators of its antisocial character.

Another criterion, "impulsivity or failure to plan" (p. 77), is linked to the ELT field's failure (or refusal) to acknowledge the harmful ideologies on which it is based and to plan for a genuine reshaping of

the field. In this regard, Gerald calls out organizations like TESOL International, IATEFL and JALT (p. 83). These organizations seem to think that leaving behind the acronym “ESL” constitutes meaningful change. In addition, Gerald characterizes the propagation of the ideology of “standard English” as a “reckless disregard for learners’ safety” (p. 96) since it marginalizes learners and places them in a deficit position.

The third and final part of the book is entitled “Treatment...?” This part dispenses with the seven sub-sections format and instead offers some considerations as to how the condition afflicting ELT might be confronted. As a starting point, Gerald describes a series of online courses he developed entitled “Decoding and Decentering Whiteness” (p. 115). The goal of these courses was to have the participants—ELT practitioners—reflect upon and recognize their own identities, their relationships with whiteness, and the ways in which these inform their pedagogy. The ultimate aim was to inspire participants to take action in confronting the axes of oppression embedded in ELT.

In a final section entitled “Presocial Language Teaching,” Gerald presents a number of recommendations for “creating a new version of ELT” (p. 146) that destabilizes oppressive hierarchies. For example, he suggests dispensing with the term “ELT” and replacing it with “TSE” (teachers of standardized English). He also calls for more comprehensive training for future teachers, one that recognizes the ideologies upon which traditional ELT is founded, and for schools and program directors to select different materials for teachers-in-training. The prerequisites for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers also need to be upended, with white “native” English speakers no longer being valued over other qualified non-white teachers. There needs to be greater transparency around standardized tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL—with the ultimate goal of eradicating such tests altogether. Moreover, professional organizations such as TESOL International need to be reformed.

Gerald ultimately issues a challenge to white ELT practitioners in particular to become “heretics” of sorts and to confront and renounce the structural oppression within their field. This challenge—and Gerald’s book as a whole—is bound to spark conversations among all of those working in ELT. There will be those who embrace Gerald’s call for heterodoxy; others may resist and argue for the status quo. But however they play out, these are conversations that ELT practitioners need to be having.

### *The Reviewer*

Jeff Brown is a professor in the Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies at George Brown College in Toronto. His research interests focus on critical pedagogy and the ethics of English language teaching.

### *Reference*

Breshears, S. (2019). The precarious work of English language teaching in Canada. *TESL Canada Journal*, 36(2), 26–47. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v36i2.1312>

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