



Color, Race, and ELT: Shades of Meaning 20 Years Ago

by [Andy Curtis](#)

It was a chilly morning on Friday, 2 March 2001, in St. Louis, Missouri, USA when we made a small but enduring piece of association history by presenting a panel at the 35th Annual TESOL Convention titled “Linguistic Perceptions of TESOL Professionals of Color.” The “we” that day was Mary Romney, Shelley Wong, Gertrude Tinker-Sachs, Donna Fujimoto, and me. In the Convention Program Book, *Gateway to the Future*, it says: “Panelists discuss linguistic perceptions of TESOL professionals of color who are NS [native speakers of English], but who are sometimes assumed not to be. Through individual experience and research, some teaching-learning implications of these perceptions are examined” (Curtis et al., 2001, p. 144).

Room 162 of the America’s Center, where we presented, holds a maximum of 50 people, and while our panel presentation was well attended, we did not realize that the long-term effects of that morning would resonate over 20 years! And in terms of diversity, it is important to note that, of the 15 TESOL officers and Board of Directors for 1999–2000, Mary and Donna were the only TESOL professionals of color (TESOL International Association, 2001, p. 275). According to the 340-page program book, of the 1,000 or so presentations at the 2001 Convention, ours appears to have been the only one focused on the relationships between color, race, and English language teaching. Whatever the reason for our panel being described by some of our workshop attendees as “ground-breaking,” a follow-up book was set in motion that day, which would take 5 long, hard years of labor to complete. As many of us have experienced, oftentimes, the most important moments can come *before* or *after*—rather than during—the presentation we just gave. And so it was with our book: During the Q&A at the end of our session, 1998–1999 TESOL Past President Kathi Bailey asked Mary and I what we were planning “to do next with this information, this momentum” (Curtis & Romney, 2006, p. x).

Apparently, my nonverbal communication gave away the fact that we had not planned to do anything in particular with that information, and we may not have even realized that there was such a momentum. As Kathi put it: “They looked at me somewhat startled...[Andy and Mary] thought they were done. (Andy didn’t exactly say, ‘What do you mean, *next*, Bailey?’ but that was what the look on his face conveyed)” (Curtis & Romney, 2006, p. x). To employ the well-worn but still meaningful cliché, I remember that moment like it was yesterday, and I remember the emotions, too. Kathi wrote that, while she “expected that the content of the program would be quite good,” she did not expect “to be moved to tears by most of the speakers...to learn about

serious (often negative) youthful experiences that my friends and colleagues had had, apparently as a result of their race” (Curtis & Romney, 2006, p. ix).

Kathi went on to write that she “did not expect to be ashamed of what teachers had said and done to [the panelists], perhaps sometimes unknowingly, perhaps sometimes intentionally” (Curtis & Romney, 2006, p. ix). When my friends and family who are not in education ask me: Why spend all that time and hard-earned money to go to these events? I answer that it is for those moments of connection and realization, whether while presenting or being presented to. At the risk of stating the obvious, the content is what it is, whether online or in person, but it is the emotional connections that can last a lifetime that we miss when everything has to be all online.

Color, Race, and ELT: Shades of Meaning 20 Years Later

The book in which Kathi wrote the aforementioned words, in the foreword, is *Color, Race, and English Language Teaching: Shades of Meaning*, coedited by me and Mary Romney, published in 2006 by the now-defunct Lawrence Erlbaum. I wrote the opening two chapters, the first of which is titled, “A Brief Introduction to Critical Race Theory, Narrative Inquiry, and Educational Research.” Critical race theory was such an obscure topic 20 years ago, that never would I have imagined it becoming one of the most hotly debated race-related political topics in the United States today! In addition to her own main chapter, “Not a Real American: Experiences of a Reluctant Ambassador,” Mary also wrote the conclusion chapter, in which she summarized “recurring themes emerging from the narratives,” which included “the influence of popular culture on perceptions of people of color,” “the compounding of English non-nativeness with race,” and “the dearth of TESOL professionals of color in certain contexts and in positions of influence and authority” (Curtis & Romney, 2006, p. 189).

In between Mary’s opening chapters and my closing ones are powerful, moving, and insightful narratives from TESOL professional of color from England, Guyana, Japan, Venezuela, Hong Kong, Suriname, the Bahamas, India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Again, at that time, we may not have fully realized the significance of bringing together—for the first time—such a diverse group of TESOL professionals in a single volume focused on the relationships between color, race, and English language teaching. Each of the authors responded to questions that are still very valid today, for example:

As a person of color, can you identify one or more critical incidents in your personal or professional life that were or are the result of being a person of color, which affect who you are now, what you do, and how you do it as a TESOL professional of color? (Curtis & Romney, 2006, p. xii)

I must confess that I have used that question, and the others we asked in our book, in my recent research methods courses as examples of questions that just ask *way too much in one go*! And while we would ask the questions differently today, these questions still need to be asked, as the recent and ongoing work of the association’s Diverse Voices Task Force shows (Healey & Powers, 2019).

More than 20 years later, on 22 June 2021, history came full circle when Mary and I brought together, for the first time since 2001, the five-member panel from that day, with Shelley Wong, Gertrude Tinker-Sachs, Donna Fujimoto, Mary, and me to present online at the [2021 Virtual TESOL Advocacy & Policy Summit](#). The webpage lists the benefits of attending, which include: “Share powerful messages with your members of Congress.” Our panel members decided to focus on that sharing, and the focus question to address during our panel presentation was: When you re-read your chapter in our *Shades of Meaning* book, 15 years later, what do you think has and has not changed for you, as a TESOL professional of color, and what do you think has and has not changed for TESOL professionals of color in general?

Long Time, Little Change, Still Much Work To Do

While it would be uplifting to conclude by saying that the recurring theme of our five presentations was how much has changed and improved for TESOL professional of color, sadly, the opposite turned out to be true: Though some positive changes have taken place, in large part thanks to efforts by the association, given how much time has passed between our two panel presentations, and the publication of our book, relatively little has changed, and there is still so much work to be done. And although our *Shades of Meaning* book appears to never have sold more than a few hundred copies, I am still writing about race (Curtis, 2020), and many of the authors in our book, including Shondel Nero, Suhanthie Motha, and Ahmar Mahboob, went on to publish major works in the field of color, race, and English language teaching. Who knows? Maybe one day there will be a second edition of our book that grew out of a chilly Missouri morning all those years ago...

References

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