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Translingual Practices and Neoliberal Policies: Attitudes and Strategies of African Skilled Migrants in Anglophone Workplaces

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Translingual Practices and Neoliberal Policies: Attitudes and Strategies of African Skilled Migrants in Anglophone Workplaces. Suresh Canagarajah, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017, 66 pages, \$54.99 (eBook).

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Abstract:	The article reviews the book "Translingual Practices and Neoliberal Policies: Attitudes and Strategies of African Skilled Migrants in Anglophone Workplaces," By Suresh Canagarajah.

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5 **in Anglophone Workplaces.** Suresh Canagarajah, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017,
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8 66 pages, \$54.99 (eBook).
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13 Reviewed By Sara Vogel

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22 **Abstract:** The article reviews the book “Translingual Practices and Neoliberal Policies: Attitudes and
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24 Strategies of African Skilled Migrants in Anglophone Workplaces,” By Suresh Canagarajah.
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28 **Subject terms:** Books - Reviews, Nonfiction; Multilingual turn; Neoliberalism; Translingual practices
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33 At what point do scholarship and pedagogy in sociolinguistics and language education become
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35 complicit in neoliberalism? What can researchers learn from their multilingual informants about how to
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37 resist neoliberalism? Those are central questions readers ponder as they dive into Suresh Canagarajah’s
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39 logically organized and well-argued volume, *Translingual Practices and Neoliberal Policies: Attitudes*
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41 *and Strategies of African Skilled Migrants in Anglophone Workplaces* (2017). A book that uses empirical
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43 data to support theory construction, it is written for scholars who have followed recent debates in the
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45 sociolinguistics and language education fields. At the same time, the book has implications for social
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47 justice-minded teacher-educators and language teachers to consider.
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51 Canagarajah is a Professor of Applied Linguistics, English and Asian studies at Pennsylvania
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53 State University. His research focuses on the creative language and writing practices of multilingual
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55 people in workplace, academic, and English teaching and learning spaces. Canagarajah also coined the
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57 term *translingual* to describe the diverse ways multilingual people language in the 21st century (2013).
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59 Rather than focusing on whether an individual’s speech follows the “rules” of a named language like
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4 English or French, *translingual practices* refer to instances when individuals integrate “codes” from a
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6 single semiotic repertoire to make meaning and communicate in context. As an example, consider how
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8 one of Canagarajah’s interviewees, a female school administrator from Uganda who immigrated to
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10 England, describes her orientation towards language:

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13 I don’t feel any tension about my ability to communicate in English and I think that it is sloppy
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15 when people say that they do not understand a person due to accent etcetera, as I speak a little of
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17 many different languages and try my best to communicate with everybody and expect all to do
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19 likewise (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 44).
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22 The communication modes employed by this informant are translingual practices because they “transcend
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24 individual languages” and “involve diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances” (Canagarajah,
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26 2013, p. 6).
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29 Canagarajah’s scholarship on translingual practices is indicative of a broader trend in the Western
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31 fields of applied sociolinguistics, bilingual education and TESOL called the “multilingual turn” (May,
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33 2013). In the last decade, scholars in these fields have drawn on empirical research in diverse and rapidly
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35 globalizing regions of the world, and with informants from mobile populations in order to critique
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37 structuralist and modernist-era language ideologies. Rather than conceiving of languages as static,
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39 politically designated, state-sanctioned entities, these scholars view language as varied practices and
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41 resources used strategically in social contexts. This reframing, Canagarajah and others argue, is
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43 potentially empowering for people who have been marginalized for communicating in ways that deviated
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45 from a monolingual norm.
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49 There have been debates in the field, however, over the extent to which conceptions from the
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51 multilingual turn are actually empowering for marginalized groups. Some critics trace throughlines
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53 between what Canagarajah shorthands as “translingual scholarship” and the construction of the neoliberal
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55 subject and the advancement of neoliberal projects. Two critiques that exemplify this point of view are
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57 discussed at length in *Translingual Practices and Neoliberal Policies*. Nelson Flores, a professor of
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59 educational linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania (Flores, 2013) cautions the field to notice and
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4 interrogate parallels between the ideal “plurilingual” subject -- as outlined in framing documents from the
5 Council of Europe -- and the flexible, enterprising, life-long learning neoliberal subject. Ryuko Kubota, a
6 professor of language and literacy education at the University of British Columbia advances a broader
7 claim: that much scholarship from the pluri/multi turn overlaps with a neoliberal agenda due to its
8 grounding in what she views as a problematic conception of “hybridity,” its tendency to obscure power
9 relations, and its detachment from people outside of the academy (Kubota, 2014).

10
11 In his book, Canagarajah responds to these two scholars and others who perceive “complicity
12 between neoliberalism and translanguaging” (2017, p. 6). Canagarajah agrees with those critics that it is
13 time that the field clarified its language ideologies and commitments vis a vis those of neoliberalism. This
14 book presents Canagarajah’s approach to doing so.

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16 That approach includes first clearly defining neoliberalism and its (often seemingly inconsistent)
17 motives and component parts. He then parses out the critiques, examining their assumptions about the
18 links between neoliberalism and translanguaging. Canagarajah also identifies keywords associated with
19 neoliberalism (flexibilization, tertiarization, market saturation, etc), and uses previous scholarship to
20 locate the expectations for language that come with those trends. Next, he draws on empirical data from
21 his interview-based study about the translanguaging practices of skilled migrant informants to investigate the
22 ways in which their languaging both confirmed and resisted neoliberal expectations. Finally, Canagarajah
23 offers implications of this discussion for theory and pedagogical practice. At each stage, his writing is
24 characterized by nuanced analysis and argumentation, all of which make this work convincing.

25
26 At the outset, Canagarajah is careful to describe the differences between Kubota and Flores’
27 critiques -- recognizing that Flores’ piece calls the field’s attention to the possibility that plurilingualism
28 might unwittingly converge with neoliberalism, while Kubota’s implicates the broader pluri-multi turn
29 more explicitly. At some moments in Canagarajah’s analysis, however, Flores’ narrower critique gets
30 conflated with Kubota’s broader argument, such that Flores is cited as critiquing translanguaging -- and
31 not just plurilingualism as it is interpreted by the Council of Europe. This issue is somewhat mitigated by
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4 the fact that Canagarajah states he knowingly groups distinct and diverse conceptions under the
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6 “translingual scholarship” umbrella, and does so mostly for convenience-sake, but is important to note.
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9 To the question of whether critical translingual scholarship emerging from the dynamic or
10 pluri/multi turn is *willingly* complicit in neoliberalism, Canagarajah’s answer is a fairly firm “no.”
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12 Canagarajah does, however, acknowledge that neoliberal agencies have co-opted and will continue to co-
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14 opt any and all conceptions of language -- including those advanced in translingual scholarship. This is a
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16 subtle argument to make. He is able to deftly thread the needle by comparing why neoliberal entities
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18 mobilize translingual practices, versus why translingual scholars and the skilled migrants interviewed for
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20 his study employ these practices.
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24 For Canagarajah, the motives of neoliberal entities make their appropriation of translingual
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26 language ideologies fundamentally reductive. Multinational corporations, for instance, have particular
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28 goals related to efficiency, material development and profit-making when they, for instance, use a
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30 combination of English or Japanese scripts in an advertisement. But, he argues, neoliberal entities can
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32 only go so far in co-opting the theories of translingual scholars and the translingual practices of
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34 multilingual people without shifting away from neoliberalism’s core profit-making motives.
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38 Canagarajah locates a more “expansive” translingual language ideology in data he collected from
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40 65 interviews with informants who migrated from Sub-saharan Africa to English-speaking Western
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42 countries to pursue professional occupations (nurse, college professor, etc). He conducts a qualitative
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44 analysis using a grounded theory methodology, looking for themes that could represent the data and to
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46 guard against “cherry picking” (p. 21). In extended quotes from interview transcripts, his informants
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48 describe their language practices. Canagarajah found from his data that informants’ languaging at times
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50 satisfied neoliberal interests, and at times resisted those interests. Informants practiced a form of
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52 communication that Canagarajah concludes is governed by a “two-way street” ethic. In such an ethic,
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54 individuals draw on their full linguistic repertoires, are patient, intently listen to their interlocutor, slow
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56 down to clarify when they do not understand, exercise tact, and work collaboratively to negotiate
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58 meaning. Since these practices have aims that go against strict profit-making, and emphasize collectivist
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4 or holistic interests, those practices embody an “expansive translingualism” which goes beyond the
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6 reductive ideology of neoliberal interests.
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9 Given that it is this more expansive language ideology that is valued in much translingual
10 scholarship, Canagarajah is able to argue that the field is not wholesale “complicit” in neoliberalism, even
11 as discourse about translingualism is not immune from getting co-opted and “reduced.” This distinction
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13 between neoliberalism’s “reductive translingualism” and a more “expansive translingualism” will prove
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15 useful for the field moving forward, and will be no doubt a way future critical scholars clarify their own
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17 commitments and ideologies vis a vis those of neoliberal interests.
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22 While reading the chapter on pedagogical implications at the end of the book, I felt compelled to
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24 view the issues raised by Canagarajah’s book through the lens of my work as a teacher-educator. The
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26 teachers I work with are often initially drawn towards arguments for bilingual education that focus on the
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28 “competitive advantage” of having a bilingual linguistic repertoire. As we read scholarship from the
29
30 multilingual turn which focuses on connections between language and power, and theory which
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32 dismantles structuralist language ideologies, students come to view bilingual education as important not
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34 just for economic reasons, but for social justice and equity reasons.
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38 Canagarajah’s argument is an important one for those educators to reflect upon. On the one hand,
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40 he validates the transformative potential in the theories and practices driving the multilingual turn. On the
41
42 other hand, he cautions us to be vigilant, on the look-out for the ways our own discourse about dynamic
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44 language practices morph into support for neoliberal projects and the oppression of minoritized language
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46 users. The book addresses points that should provoke self-reflexiveness in all of us.
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53 **References**

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