

# Interlude #4

## Conversation with Ofelia García

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ANNA KAIPER-MARQUEZ: The first question is how do you conceptualize the idea of the Global South in your own work?

OFELIA GARCÍA: It's interesting because we read about the Global South, and I could give you definitions. I guess the one that most people use would be Santos' definition of the Global South as people who are suffering as a result of colonialism and global capitalism and the ways in which we go about trying to mitigate those effects.

And what's the academic part of the Global South? I came to the Global South late, and Sinfree Makoni has a lot to do with it because he was the transition for me.

I understand the Global South as the conditions in which people live, work, and go to school. In my own context, which is the geographical North, but the idea of course, is that within these geographical North, there are also people who live in the Global South. In my own work, there has always been a tension between the Global North and Global South. The intellectual epistemologies which I grew up with, that I was nurtured with, were traditional. As a young scholar in the US academy, the work of Joshua Fishman surely opened up a whole world of understandings for me regarding multilingualism.

At the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, with which I was involved in New York City, I was interested in their ideas of language in the community and how language worked in the community. They were different from the academic concepts that I had been working with. And through their work in the East Harlem community in the late 70s and early 80s, they would say, "No that's not true, that's not the way that language is used in this community, because these communities are colonial in nature." I am not Puerto Rican; my family lives in Puerto Rico, but I was born in Cuba, so I have these worlds that I go between and back and forth, so the colonial situation was very much a part of me. I was fortunate enough to get an academic job at City College, which was in Harlem. Clearly, they say that they're Morningside Heights today, but they were in Harlem. To me, that's where my learning took place, really. I couldn't reconcile what I was reading academically with the reality of my students, and there was this tension that kept popping up. I think I started going beyond the Global North and South, but there's tension between them.

The academy recognized only certain knowledge and certain ideas that were not based in my life experience, not in my students' life experiences, not in my communities' life

experience; so how do I reconcile these two things? I would say the Global South was always part of what I was experiencing without knowing how to name it, without thinking about it in that way. And I remember the first time I heard the phrase “Global South,” I really thought we were talking about the lack of attention to the knowledge and the experiences of the geographic Global South and again, because my links are to Latin America, that has always been a very important part of my work: “How do I connect to Latin America?”

My first experiences with thinking about the Global South was, “How do I make visible the Latin American experience?” But I have had a lot of trouble, bringing the South to the North, to my own experience. That has taken time. I want to say that I think, for me, my watershed moment, you know we all have watershed moments in our lives, and I think, for me, my watershed moment was being invited to write the preface to Makoni and Pennycook’s *Disinventing Language*, because when I read that manuscript, I realized that up to then, my work had been nonsense, because I refused to reveal the part of me that was different from the traditional aspects of the Academy, and I was not brave enough. I must say that [what] I admired [about] young scholars today is how courageous they are about bringing forth their voices. I think back then, I was one of the only women, one of the only Latina[s]. And so, it was very hard for me to speak up or to trust what I was seeing or, to be able to see without the theoretical lenses had been imposed on me. There was also always this tension between what I was seeing in the community and what I was reading. But I wasn’t courageous enough, I would say, to put forth a vision that was different. And it took reading Makoni and Pennycook to realize, oh my God, yes! I had not explicitly seen it, so I think that’s when the Global South started to make sense for me.

It’s a great question. I was once asked to write something and the reviewer said: “How could you say this from the North?” And again, it’s the idea that the North has this privilege, which we do, but there are people in the South who also have privileges. Santos has really made me think that the line was important for us to see that there were things that were visible and that there were things that we have made invisible. I think the line was important in the beginning, but I think it’s time to do away with that line. Because what it does is align some of us in one way and some of us in another way, instead of trying to be generative about bringing all of us together. And there’s a danger of that. As always, the geographical North, the people who write in English, the people who are brought up in countries where there are these dominant colonial languages, will have the advantage, so I mean the question is always “How do we invert that relationship and not exclude them?” And it’s a very difficult thing to do because the minute you start to invert the relationships, the new created power in some contexts makes invisible allies, so the question is “How do we make sure that our work makes visible the suffering that has occurred, and continues to occur, through these colonial processes, and how do we mitigate that? How do we make sure that our work makes visible the suffering that has occurred, and that continues to occur, through these colonial processes and capitalist processes, and how do we mitigate that without dividing; at the same time, so how do we start from that position?” I think that’s what I’m trying to say, and I think the starting point is always important. Because once you start, then you can include, and I’ll tell you why.

I think of it in my own work on bilingual education, which, in the United States, has turned out to be what they call “dual language education.” And by dual language, what they mean is, “I’m going to bring in the white English-speaking kids and put them together with the others,” and this is what has been happening in the last 10 or 15 years.

It is clear that the advantage is towards white English-speaking bilingual kids, and the other ones are left behind. As with everything else, the challenge for me has been, “How do

you then start with making sure that the programs are equity-based for the racialized bilingual children, right?" How do you start with that and then maybe extend that to the others, but keeping the focus on the racialization of linguistic minorities? So, the starting point is what's important, I think; the starting point has to be the analysis of power. Power has to be inverted, and then I think gradually and carefully, how do you then extend to others because you cannot do this alone?

SINFREE MAKONI: I agree with you that you cannot do this alone. My conception of scholarship is that it's a series of multiple collaborations that you have with different people. The Centre for Puerto Rican Studies concentrates on the South in the geographical North.

OFELIA GARCÍA: Ah, you know I have always been influenced by Latin American philosophy, right? I mean, the philosophy of liberation theology. I always tried to read what was going on in Latin America because that was the only way that I could feel who I was. I couldn't draw from anything else, so I had all this interest in liberation theology, and then when I went to Teachers College at Columbia University, I went to a department in International and Transcultural Studies, and there, colonial theory was important, but the problem with, I'm sorry I shouldn't say this, but the problem with some institutions is that they talk [in theories], but they don't understand what is happening on the street. I used to look out of my window and say, "Hey, you know, there's a lot of work taking place which we are missing." That's not what they were interested in. It's interesting to me because Boaventura de Sousa Santos is a European, right? He breaks the stereotype that you can only do colonial theory in Latin America.

SINFREE MAKONI: It means that the ideas are resonating in different environments, with diverse people.

OFELIA GARCÍA: Right. I think that the forum that you have organized has been extremely valuable because I think it legitimizes this knowledge and makes it visible. And I think there is a need for, like I said before, starting with it. It resonates so much, and it changes our perspective as well. Yes, and actually, when you first invited me to this, I thought I don't know anything about African Studies and languages. I knew very little. Let me tell you that Zoom, although exhausting, creates opportunities to participate with many different people. I'm participating in a feminist linguistic group in Latin America [with] women whom I have never met, so I think Zoom is helpful. It gives us room to reach out and to form alliances. Yes, so I mean one good thing that came out of the pandemic was the use of Zoom, so we can meet and form [new] alliances.

LORATO MOKWENA: I would like to know how our conceptions of the Global South are being picked up within institutions.

OFELIA GARCÍA: In some of the institutions I've worked in, they had no idea really of the Global South. They had theories. But I don't think they had the concept right, that is, the concept of highlighting the experiences of people who have suffered as a result of colonialism and capitalism, and mitigating the effects of colonialism which is part of that definition. It's interesting because I left a prestigious private university because I thought I had the opportunity to retire in the public university working with doctoral students. I thought I was tired of theory. I said, OK, let's work a little bit with the reality. I'm very happy that I did that. I know in that institution, in the public institution, I think the work is really very critical everywhere. The work was critical, whether you were a sociologist or whatever. In the public institution, the Global South wasn't mentioned too much because I don't think it was all that visible within critical theory in North America. Little was recognized from other parts of the world, so it's interesting to me to compare these two ways of conceptualizing, because in one institution, it was all theoretical and no reality. In the public institution, it was all reality, but the concept of the Global South wasn't used to think with.

ANNA KAIPER-MARQUEZ: Well that actually connects really beautifully to the next question, because what we are curious about is how Southern epistemologies have impacted both the way that you see the world and experience the world, but also, “how do you think that more understanding of Southern epistemologies, whatever those might be, could impact, some of the programs, for example, that you’re talking about, which maybe I don’t want to say [are] lacking in theory, but have differing understanding of theory oftentimes in a Western framework?”

OFELIA GARCÍA: You know, it’s interesting. I’m glad you asked that question because something that I felt in my last institution is that there was a great understanding about, for example, native American cosmology that was done through English. I think the multilingual part was not understood. The idea that knowledge could be generated in languages other than English was, sort of, yeah, they were conscious of it, but no effort was made to retrieve that knowledge.

So, whereas there was great interest in, for example, I’m thinking of Linda Smith’s work in terms of research that was very impactful, but I remember even Walter Mignolo’s work. When I think that many of my colleagues had no idea what he wrote and thought, and yet they knew about major theorists that were pushing the critical work in English. And that has to do with language per se, the idea that knowledge generated in languages other than English was just not important.

ANNA KAIPER-MARQUEZ: I wanted to go back to your point about courage, because I thought that was really interesting. What you said was that younger people now are kind of more courageous. I was curious how you feel like that idea of courage ties to some of this work on the Global South or Southern epistemologies, or if you feel as though there’s any kind of connection that, one might impact the other, or vice versa. Like how do you see this idea of courage connecting to these differing frameworks of thought?

OFELIA GARCÍA: Well, I think socially, we have gone through a lot. So let me just start somewhere, and then we’ll talk a little bit more... um, one thing that I think, some famous scholars think of themselves as demigods. But younger scholars have made us more racially conscious. I see, for example, the idea of raciolinguistic ideologies raised by one of my students, you know, Nelson Flores. We’ve always been a racially conscious nation of some sort, but I think the last four years of Trump racism has raised all this energy, especially among young people, that you can’t leave behind. So, I think that there is a movement against global oppression, which is the result of maybe being subjected to it for years, that I think has raised both our consciousness and our courage level to resist, to oppose, and to call it out.

But I have to say that I always admire young people in the Academy, because they’ve had the courage to do what I think I was not courageous enough to call out in the same way. Maybe I didn’t see it. Maybe. I don’t think I was afraid because I’ve been tenured for a long time. I could have called it out, I just think I didn’t even have the language to do it that way. So, courage comes with context. Also, the context in which you live, in which you have experienced being an academic. And I think there’s something that has happened in the Academy as a result of the murder of George Floyd, the Trump era, which is, I find, it’s a renewal. It’s a renewal of what is accepted as research. For example, look at what questions could be asked. The idea that in research it’s not effectiveness that we’re after, but what we’re after is social equity. I think those are ideas that when I was a young scholar, if you said that in public, people would be surprised.

I remember when I was young, I had a telephone number that was hidden; I used to pay so they wouldn’t publish my telephone number. And, there was a woman with the same name, this is such funny stuff, there was a woman who didn’t speak English. My students used to call her all the time because she was listed; my number was unlisted. She talked to everybody and

told them that my students must love me because they keep calling her. And that wasn't me. That's the way that I grew up; you don't give up your personal information. And it has to do with our shift in research from quantitative to qualitative in ways that you have to bring forth your positionality first.

Someone emailed me about a month ago, saying, "You don't have anything personal on your website, so I don't even know who you are." I said, "You're right." But fortunately, I had just written something personal for someone who had asked me, and I emailed it to her. It is not out yet, but it will be published soon. It took a lot of courage for me to write about myself because I didn't start there. You see, that's why I keep saying, the problem is where you start. How do we induct people into the Academy in ways that give them courage up front? How do we do things differently, put Southern perspectives first and then extend from it? I think I have hope in the future; I have hope in the future of scholars who will invert that power, because people are resisting.

SINFREE MAKONI: Talking about the confidence that comes from different contexts...

LORATO MOKWENA: So I am struck by this notion of courage, and I have never thought of it in that way. Being a young scholar, I think I am qualified to be considered that, I've never thought of this notion of courage and being someone who's been adamant about doing work that is particular to where I come from and what is known to me. Every time someone says, "why is that important?" I think, because it is important to me, and, therefore, it must be important in the way it's important to me. And you have just given me a sort of an expression, a sort of a word and understanding of why. I mean when we go through the Handbook, we realize a lot of our scholars are people who are not known by anyone at the moment. But I mean for the majority, it's just a book that really just wants to showcase the alternative voices. It is not filled by big names. Now, I think I'm taking away from this conversation the theme of courage. Each and every one of us wants to have the courage to put out alternative voices in the things that are hardly safe, because nobody wants to listen to them. I want to thank you for giving me a concept that has helped me find my voice.

OFELIA GARCÍA: Thank you, Lorato. But I just want to say [one thing] before we end that I think, and I want to say it in front of Sinfree because I think he has been really instrumental in linking all of these things. You know I used to always say, "I don't know what the hell he is simply saying, but I know that I have to listen because he takes me out of my comfort zone." We talk in dichotomies. Thinking, and simply our thought is never one or the other, but it's always, "How do you put it all together?" And I think I've learned a lot from reading him and thinking with him and listening to him, and these forums that he has organized have been extremely important, and his work, you know, so [I] just want to say that.

ANNA KAIPER-MARQUEZ: I actually also have one more question. I think one of the things that we are struggling with is that here is this work that we're doing on multilingualism and Southern epistemology and all of these ideas, and yet we are having to go by Routledge standards [and] use APA; it's all in English. It's 6,000 words or less so, and then we read these works of people who are perhaps non-native English speakers, and we're telling them all the things that they have to change and edit. So my question is: "What do you think of this push and pull that we're experiencing in real time?" Like, here's theory over here and here's practice over there, and the practice doesn't always connect to the theory, and the theory doesn't always connect to the practice, so my question to you is: "How do you see the future of Southern epistemologies and the Global South moving forward while still being stuck within these constraints that the Academy has put forward. For example, that publishing has to be in the English language? How do you see those contradictions playing out in the future?"

OFELIA GARCÍA: I'll start by telling you this story. The other day, someone was asking me about being an activist scholar. I said "I'm not an activist." And I said, "I'm more of a pirate. You know, the piracy thing comes from not accepting all the norms in the Academy, but taking from it, so you can spread it out to others," right? The way that I see it, you know, and so, for example, regarding journal articles... I really have a lot of empathy for young scholars, who have to do all the crap that they're being asked to do with all the peer reviewed journals. Because I think I was able to do things, and you know it's interesting, I want to backtrack. I think that the reason I was able to do these things is because Joshua Fishman, who was a most traditional sociolinguist, always told me, "you can think differently always." He didn't take for granted the reality... I was in front of him, so we always sort of looked behind the reality that was in front of him, and he taught me how to do that. If you look at my work, most of it is actually chapters and books, because I didn't have the constraints that you do. I was also fortunate that I was not in a research one institution growing up; I was [in] this college environment, where I was building from the ground up. I used to call it "hacienda pueblo," right... we were making people. And I think that that sort of framed me, and I didn't have the pressure to publish in the way that if you're in another type of institution, you have those pressures, and I think that's sort of given me freedom. Today, with the proliferation of journals and the proliferation of measurement in how many citations you have, etc.; I was not constrained by that, so I'm fortunate. I was privileged to actually start from the bottom. I think that's important; I don't know how you get away from the journal constraints and language constraints. I write sometimes in Spanish. I have very little published in Spanish because people ask me to write in English, and when I write in English, with a lot of Spanish, and people complain, "Well, we don't understand it." So, it's like I don't know... You try to disrupt, but it comes back. Disrupt. I think that that tension is going to exist. I think we have to continue to push because I think that the more you push, the more you understand why you're doing it, and sometimes because people accept your philosophy, they go along. And then I think there's a movement afoot. I just reviewed a very large program of grants in the United States; and I was pleasantly surprised that at the end the finalists were people who were disrupting all the traditional research methodology that we have been taught. I can tell you that it was probably because the reviewers had a different vision of research. But I can tell you that 10 years ago, I wouldn't have been included in that group. Just before I retired, I was appointed to the National Academy of Education. I have come late to the Academy... right, so now, actually, I can push, you know, I can be present, and people realize, "Okay, she can work." I can change the discussion, and I can transform things. But I think that change is going to be slow, because the journals, to go back to your question, are making money. They're not going to let go of their privilege.

I think more and more people like you are putting out Handbooks that are different; putting out journals that do things differently, so I'm hopeful that it will take time, but that we will get there.

SINFREE MAKONI: I was pleasantly surprised last week when the *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, published by Oxford University Press, invited me to be one of four associate editors. The applied linguistics I do is not consistent with that done in either the UK or in the United States, so I said to myself, "Let's see what they're up to this time," but I was not the obvious choice for that particular position unless what has happened is that the disciplines are gradually changing. Yes, there is some shift that other people are seeing, but those of us who were fighting for the battle to change might not be seeing the changes currently taking place. What is required, as you said, is the courage to fight.

OFELIA GARCÍA: The mere fact that you will be there will make a difference. My experience with editing journals, I edited *Language Policy* for three years, but I gave it up because I didn't

see any possibility of change. The idea for the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* was Fishman's. I edited it after he passed away, I knew I had to hand it over to someone younger who could make a difference. You have to continue pushing. We have to engage with pushing, I guess. My work has been in schools where I know that things are not going to change the way that I want [them] to. I have to learn to negotiate: "What is it that I can change, what is it that I can live with?" and "How I can affect change in a way that they're going to respect?" Because they're not going to change completely, and I think I've applied the same philosophy to the Academy; there are some things that I can change, some things I cannot. But I have to be in it in order to effect change.

SINFREE MAKONI: Thanks a lot Ofelia.



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