

Globalization between crime and piety

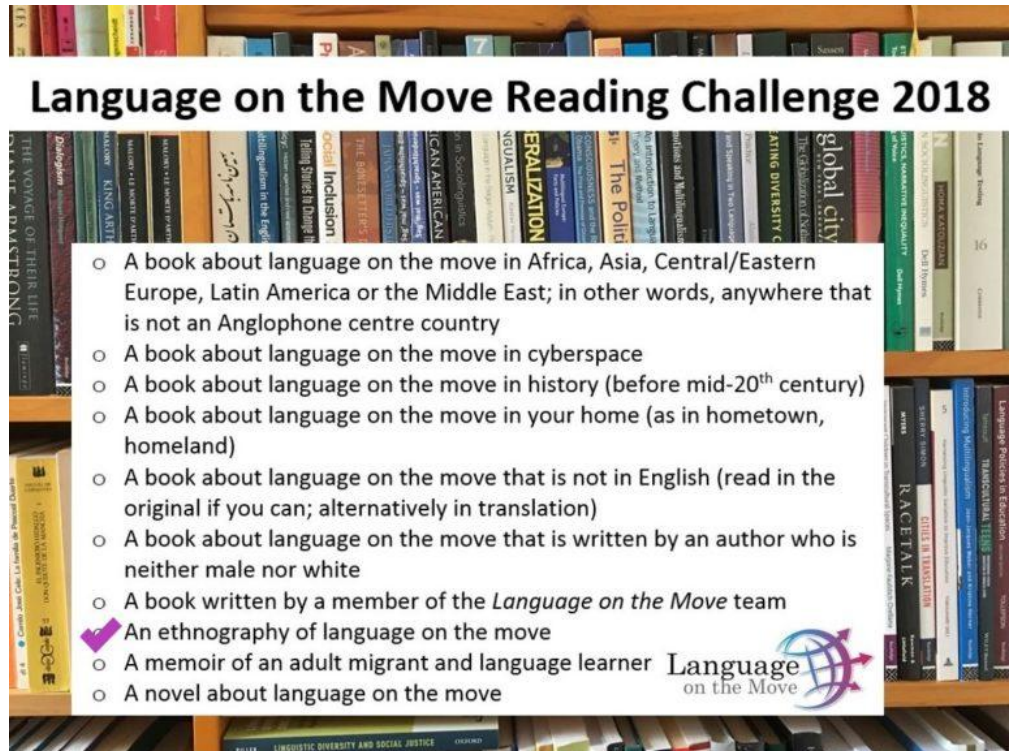
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By Ingrid Piller | March 1, 2018 | Globalization

How is your [Language-on-the-Move Reading Challenge](#) coming along? One month has gone by and you should have ticked off at least one book from our list. I started with an ethnography of language on the move and picked a study of Christian piety and gang prevention in Guatemala by religious studies scholar [Kevin O'Neill](#). While not ostensibly concerned with language, [Secure the Soul](#) is engrossing in a way academic books rarely are and will keep you glued to your reading.



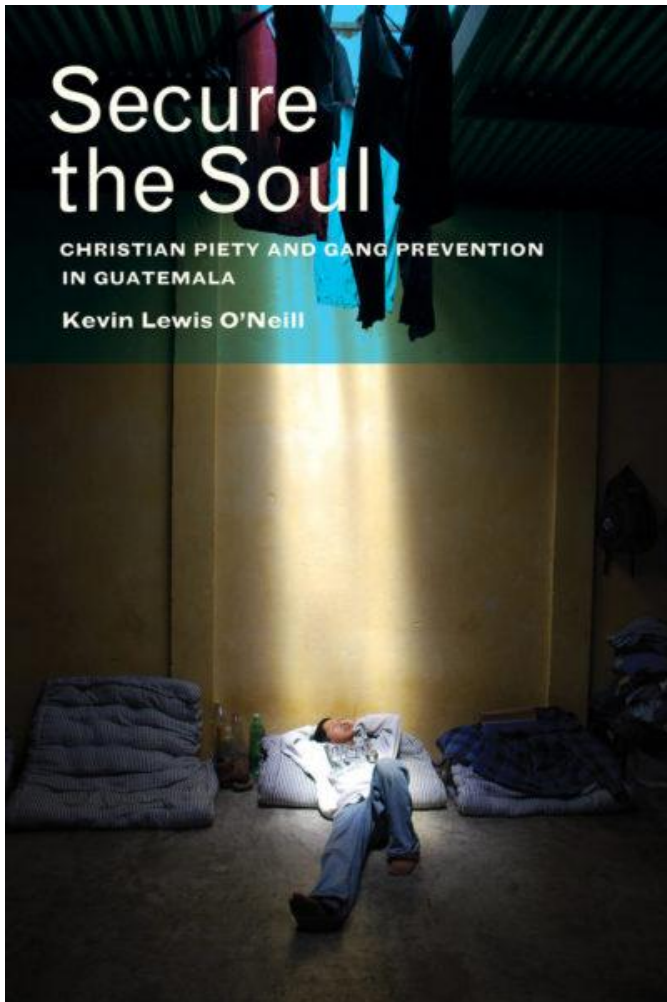
Language on the Move Reading Challenge 2018

- A book about language on the move in Africa, Asia, Central/Eastern Europe, Latin America or the Middle East; in other words, anywhere that is not an Anglophone centre country
- A book about language on the move in cyberspace
- A book about language on the move in history (before mid-20th century)
- A book about language on the move in your home (as in hometown, homeland)
- A book about language on the move that is not in English (read in the original if you can; alternatively in translation)
- A book about language on the move that is written by an author who is neither male nor white
- A book written by a member of the *Language on the Move* team
- ✓ An ethnography of language on the move
- A memoir of an adult migrant and language learner
- A novel about language on the move



[Secure the Soul](#) examines Christian practices of self-transformation in five spaces of globalization: high security prisons, reality TV shows, offshore call centers, child sponsorship programs, and Pentecostal drug rehabilitation centers. One key participant, Mateo, who has been in and out of all these institutional spaces, provides the narrative arc of the book. Mateo is introduced early in the book as an iconic type of a particular global person: a Guatemalan child migrant who is “illegal” in Los Angeles, becomes involved in drugs and organized crime, and, as a young adult is deported back to Guatemala, where he gets stuck between belonging and non-belonging:

Mateo, [...] was not tall, but he was obviously strong. He had broad shoulders, a thick neck, and a sturdy back. He could be mistaken for an athlete, a boxer perhaps, were it not for his gait. He walked like a gangsta. This is his word, not mine. He walked a little slower, a little more stridently than the average Guatemalan. Mateo had a kind of swagger that made him stand out. He knew it, and he liked it. The bald head, the baggy jeans, and the tattoos peeking out from under his collar—it all signaled a certain kind of time spent in the States. His stunted Spanish was also a tell. Mateo was not from Guatemala. Everyone knew as much. But, of course, he was. Everyone knew that, too. (O’Neill, 2015, p. 2f.)



Language – “his stunted Spanish” – is a key signa. ^
Mateo’s identity as someone who got caught up in the specific global circuits that link Guatemala and the USA.

A very short history of Guatemala

The territory that today constitutes Guatemala was sucked into the vortex of globalization in 1511 with the conquista, the Spanish colonization of Latin America. After more than 300 years, Guatemala gained independence from Spain in the 19th century. By that time, its agricultural exploitation by multinational companies based in the US was in full swing. By the mid-20th century, United Fruit was the largest landowner and employer in Guatemala. As the interests of United Fruit would have been jeopardized by an attempted modest land reform by a democratically elected government in 1954, the United States intervened. The coup d’état plunged Guatemala into more than three decades of a genocidal civil war. Today, Guatemala is officially at peace but is the most violent non-combat zone on earth. It is also still in the

clutches of an exploitative globalization for which Guatemala is nothing but a way station: in 2011, 84% of all cocaine produced for the US market passed through Guatemala.

Many have sought to escape this hell by migrating north. However, while Guatemalan bananas and drugs are welcome there, its people are not. Caught up in the “War on Drugs” and the “War on Terror”, deportation back to Guatemala has soared since the beginning of the 21st century.

Language and global crime

Guatemala’s civil war pushed tens of thousands of refugees into poor neighbourhoods of Los Angeles in the 1980s (along with El Salvadorians, Hondurans and Nicaraguans). In these harsh circumstances, their children quickly became involved in gangs and two transnational criminal organizations, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, gained strength from the 1990s onwards. From modest beginnings in Los Angeles, these gangs have now gone global. One step in their globalization was the US policy of deporting migrants with a conviction.

These deportees met minimum life chances, a complete lack of social services, and a glut of weapons left over from the region’s civil wars. And, as men and women born in Central America but oftentimes raised in the United States, the youngest of these deportees did not speak Spanish fluently; they had no close family ties and no viable life chances but gang life. (O’Neill, 2015, p. 15)

Lack of proficiency in Spanish is one of many factors that further limits the opportunities of deportees back in Guatemala and pushes them into gangs. Conversely, their proficiency in English is another. However, their proficiency in English sometimes becomes profitable in other ways.

Language and global service work



Call center signage, Guatemala (Source: O'Neill, 2015, p. 107)

In addition to organized crime, a sector that has been growing in Guatemala is call center work. Off-shoring call center work to India or the Philippines has increasingly given way to “near-shoring”. In this process, the work is still outsourced to a low-wage country but one that is in the same time zone and has greater “cultural affinity.” Linguistically, deportees make ideal call center workers. Having learned English “not just in LA public schools but also in the U.S. prison system or while shuttling product from Los Angeles to Las Vegas” (p. 99), their English accents are ideal to maintain the illusion that the US customer is actually speaking to a US service agent.

At the same time, their habitus constitutes a problem. The fact that their bodies are full of tattoos remains invisible in call center work but addiction, problems with punctuality and following tedious scripts, or anger in the face of customer abuse were more difficult to hide. Call centers attempt to manage employee’s habitus through Protestant Christian piety mixed with corporate maxims. In most cases, this was not enough to keep employees on the job, off the streets and out of drugs for long. As long as the deportees came rolling back in, this was no problem for management, though:

Instead they troll the airports looking for more talent. “The ones that we fight for are the *mojados* [wetbacks],” the director of human resources admitted. “They are the most valuable here. Because they have perfect English. Perfect. We can place them in any account. We find them in the airport.” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 116)

Language and global Christianity

The language of Protestant self-improvement permeates the sites in which the deportees circulate. Without material resources or any vision for social change, North American Christian piety is the sole means through which a destitute population comes to be governed. These global communications readily descend into farce, as is the case in the child sponsorship program, where US sponsors commit to a monthly contribution of US\$35 to the education of a Guatemalan child. Additionally, sponsors are encouraged to enter into an exchange of letters with “their” child. These exchanges end up producing highly disparate texts, as the head of



Prisoner transport vehicle, Guatemala (Source: O'Neill, 2015, p. 35)
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one child sponsorship explained:

"It was ridiculous," the director of child sponsorship complained. "Sponsors would write these wonderful letters. They'd write about their life and their hobbies. And then they'd get a letter back from a fourteen-year-old kid who should know how to write, and all it says is, 'Dear sponsor. I love you. Love, your sponsor child.'" These scrawny efforts suggested ungracious subjects. (O'Neill, 2015, p.

The idea behind the letter exchange is that it would help the sponsored child find god, show them they are loved, and, ultimately, prevent them from getting into drugs and crime. However, for children growing up in a Guatemalan slum keeping up a correspondence with middle-class North Americans constituted an almost impossible task. In the end, NGOs coach the children how to write letters following templates. Unsurprisingly, the content becomes entirely fictional in the process.

Ethnography of language on the move

Secure the Soul is a brilliant ethnography of Christian piety as a form of soft security. It also offers instructive glimpses into the ways in which language has become enmeshed in global circuits of crime, service work and security efforts. Highly recommended!



Research
Blogging

Full reference:

O'Neill, K. L. (2015). *Secure the Soul: Christian Piety and Gang Prevention in Guatemala*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Those of you who are after recommendations for ethnographies located more centrally in sociolinguistics, here are some of my favourites:

- Codo, E. (2008). *Immigration and Bureaucratic Control: Language Practices in Public Administration*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Duchêne, A. (2009). *Ideologies across Nations: The Construction of Linguistic Minorities at the United Nations*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Farr, M. (2006). *Rancheros in Chicagocán: Language and Identity in a Transnational Community*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Heller, M. (2006). *Linguistic Minorities and Modernity: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum.
- Hoffman, K. E. (2008). *We Share Walls: Language, Land, and Gender in Berber Morocco*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Martín Rojo, L. (2010). *Constructing Inequality in Multilingual Classrooms*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Prendergast, C. (2008). *Buying into English: Language and Investment in the New Capitalist World*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Sabaté i Dalmau, M. (2014). *Migrant Communication Enterprises: Regimentation and Resistance*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Zentella, A. C. (1997). *Growing up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Happy reading! And don't forget to share your progress. If you tweet about it and mention [@lg_on_the_move](#), you'll be in the running for our monthly draw of a copy of *Intercultural Communication*. The February winner will be announced on Twitter shortly.

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