Unpacking Language Weaponization in Spanish(es): Supporting Transnational Antiracist Relationality

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Abstract

One of the ways in which White supremacy remains largely unchallenged in the context of US Spanish-speaking communities is language (Lloréns & Dinzey-Flores, 2021). While many advocate for language access for Spanish-speaking communities in the US, few acknowledge the fact that there are multiple varieties of Spanish, and that in Spanish, language and race are also co-constructed (Flores & Rosa, 2015). As such, the adaptation and standardization of White Spanishes upholds White supremacy and erases Black and Indigenous languages of the Americas (Cusicanqui, 2012). In this article, we argue for a need to center Black Latinx and Indigenous experiences in discussions and definitions of Spanish and Spanish-speaking communities in the US. We put into conversation anticolonial and relational language work (Leonard, 2021) with transnational antiracist Black language education (Milu, 2021) to demonstrate how we can intentionally work to redress language weaponization in Spanish.

Keywords: language weaponization, White Spanishes, anti-Blackness, transnational Black language, relationality.

Introduction: The Positionalities of Spanish

It is now common practice, across fields and disciplines, for researchers to state and discuss their positionality when describing their orientation to research. Positionality statements in scholarly publications can help readers understand where a researcher is coming from, particularly when writing about students and communities. Positionality statements might help you, as a reader of this article, for example, know that this article is written by two Spanish-speaking researchers. Cristina, a White Hispanic from Spain, and Laura, a White Latina from Bolivia, write this piece as a way to highlight...
how White supremacy writ large and anti-Blackness, specifically, permeate language research in Spanish-speaking contexts.\(^1\)

While positionality statements are useful tools to understand who is conducting research, it is also important to recognize how the research is being conducted, specifically by investigating the positionality of the language(s) used to mitigate communication in research and pedagogical contexts. As Clemons and Lawrence (2020) recently point out, “antiracist scholarship requires transparent research subjectivities and an acknowledgment of the traditional privileging of certain positionali­ties and methodologies” (p. 254). In US educational contexts, there is often a binary created between mainstream White English and ‘other’ languages, where the other categories can encompass anything from African American English to German, to name just a couple. Thus, in mainstream language conversations in the US, ‘other’ languages, including Spanish, are frequently relegated to the margins, particularly when these languages are used in reference to communities of color. Yet colonial languages, such as Spanish, have long histories of weaponization, being imposed upon Black and Indigenous communities through the ongoing project of colonization and White supremacy. Assuming the marginalization of Spanish, and the marginalization of all Spanish speakers, can thus perpetuate anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity by “bolstering and normalizing the needs, wants, norms, and bodies of White subjects in ways that subjugate racialized populations” (Leonard, 2021, p. 218).

Extensive bodies of work reference Spanish-speaking communities or Spanish-speaking students, highlighting how ‘Spanish-speaking’ can sometimes denote a marker of marginalization in US contexts. As Pentón Herrera (2019) has explained, “Spanish is widely spoken in the US, yet, it tends to be associated with immigration and poverty” (p. 469), which prevents it from acquiring the status that other languages, like (White) English, hold. Moreover, conversations centered on Spanish-speaking communities can assume homogeneity (Pentón Herrera, 2021a) and result in the erasure of other identity traits like race and/or ethnicity, creating deeper and more nuanced forms of discrimination. In classrooms, as Barillas Chón et al. (2021) explain, “Indigenous Latinx students whose primary language is Indigenous often interact with multiple codes of linguistic power” (p. 139), situating their Indigenous languages in places of less prestige or even erasure under the Spanish or “Latinx” umbrella.

While the prevalence of English-dominant ideologies in the US may mark other languages as minoritized, when referencing Spanish-speaking communities and students specifically, we argue that it is important to interrogate the role that Spanish positionality plays (or does not play) in marginalization. Indeed, as many scholars have noted, not all people from Spanish-speaking countries and contexts speak Spanish, as Spanish itself is a colonial language used to erase and oppress Indigenous languages—and people—in Latin America, the Philippines, multiple African countries, and more. For example, as Chira (2021) recently pointed out, “Spanish colonialism tends to be mapped onto South America and perhaps the Philippines. However, the last Spanish colony to claim independence from Spain in 1968 was a territory in West Africa—Equatorial Guinea—a nation-state where Spanish still serves as the official language” (para. 1).

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\(^1\) We are aware that our identities shift according to the conditions around us and, thus, are much more complex and should not be simplified to the White-Other dichotomy and logics of Whiteness (Motha, 2020). However, in this article, we highlight the effects of our White identities as these are positioned in relation to anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity in our language communities.
As Zapotec activist Abigail Castellanos García (2021) points out, in Latin America and other global contexts, the Spanish language is used to oppress and erase the presence of Indigenous communities who speak Indigenous languages. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic,

[Una de las obligaciones del Estado [mexicano] fue generar a través de sus instituciones mecanismos y estrategias para informar a la población sobre la contingencia que el país estaba enfrentando. Sin embargo, los pueblos indígenas recibían la información en español, insuficiente y culturalmente inadecuada, o bien, la información no llegó a diferentes comunidades, convirtiéndose en uno de los sectores más desprotegidos. (para. 5)]

[One of the duties of the [Mexican] State was to generate, through its own institutional mechanisms, strategies for informing the population about the risk that the country was facing. However, Indigenous communities received this information in Spanish, received insufficient or culturally inappropriate information, or the information did not reach Indigenous communities at all, making these communities among the most vulnerable.]

In the US educational context, a “focus on an English–Spanish dichotomy” contributes to reinforcing “(t)he limitations and linguistic racism” in schooling language education and programs (Barillas Chón et al., 2021, p. 139), since this binary erases Indigenous languages and identities.

Thus, while the Spanish language may be minoritized in some (though not all) contexts in the US, when theorizing language positionality, it is important to recognize the status, history, and positionality of a language worldwide, and to acknowledge how colonial languages cause violence and erasure for Black and Indigenous people across the globe. To understand and unpack language positionality, as Milu (forthcoming) points out, researchers should practice Indigenous methodologies, such as pluriversality and relationality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), in order to “better understand the relationship between language and coloniality in both local and global contexts” (Milu, forthcoming, p. 7).

It is also important to note that not all communities from Spanish-speaking countries living in the US speak Spanish, as long histories of violence prevented many second- and third-generation immigrants from speaking their home languages (including but not limited to Spanish) at work and school. Finally, the named language, Spanish, like the named language English, has multiple variants, all of which are tied to race, class, nationality, and much more. Thus, in this article, written specifically for this special issue on language weaponization, we unpack labels like Spanish and Spanish-speaking to highlight how White supremacist ideologies permeate all language praxis, and how Spanish as a language is itself weaponized against Black and Indigenous communities from Spanish-speaking countries.

**Unpacking the Anti-Blackness and Colonial Roots of Spanish**

Part of the work of highlighting how Spanish is used as a weapon against nonwhite communities requires an interrogation of the terms, words, and expressions that are often used without question in White Latinx contexts. Take, for example, the word, quilombo, a term that Laura often heard in her family to describe a mess or a disaster. Laura’s father, for instance, would frequently say “todo está un

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2 We use the term named language to refer to abstract, reified, categorical, and discrete ways of defining the practice of (trans)languaging (García, 2019). The idea of named languages, as conveyed in the remainder of this article, is a colonial construct that obscures the power dynamics and relationships experienced by all individuals, but especially racialized individuals.
quilombo” (or “everything is a mess”) when describing a stressful familial or government situation in his home country.

The word *quilombo* stems from the word *kilombo*, which in the Bantu language, Kimbundu, means *war camp*. The word was originally used in Brazil to describe communities of enslaved Africans who escaped and formed their own settlements, known as Quilombos or Carabali. It is important to note that Kimbundu is a language spoken in Angola, which was formerly colonized by the Portuguese. Thus, a word like ‘kilombo’ exhibits language relationality across the Black linguistic diaspora, and is just one example of how language is weaponized through White supremacy in colonized contexts.

Quilombos are still known in Brazil as communities made up of predominantly Afro-Brazilians. Yet, the word quilombo was used by White Brazilians and later White Latin Americans to first reference slums or brothels, and later, more colloquially, to reference anything in a state of mess or chaos. Indeed, according to the Real Academia Española, the staple for ‘formal’ Spanish definitions, a quilombo is defined as a “lugar apartado y de difícil acceso” (a place that is distant and hard to access), or to describe something as “barullo, gresca, desorden,” (noisy, a quarrel, or a mess). This sharp distinction between a quilombo that references a safe-haven for Afro-Brazilians, and a quilombo used to reference chaos or a mess by White Brazilians and Latin-Americans is just one of many examples illustrating White supremacist ideologies in the Spanish language.

In a video from the account @aiplusespanol_ (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=876841332957387), Campbell (2021) provides other examples of words in the Spanish language that have anti-Black roots, some of which include ‘denigrar’ (denigrate), ‘negrar’ (darken), ‘oveja negra’ (black sheep), ‘mano negra’ (black hand), and many more. These terms have anti-Black roots in Spanish and some of them are also used as expressions in English, thus extending the racist undertones across linguistic boundaries.

If quilombo, a space that signals freedom for African descendants, equals a mess for White colonizers, and if words that embrace anti-Blackness in English expand their racist impact in Spanish, is it appropriate to use the same labels of Spanish to reference the marginalization or supposed oppression of all Spanish-speaking communities in the US? That is the question we continue to unpack and interrogate in this article. In order to illustrate the need for more antiracist work in applications and theorizations of Spanish, we first provide an overview of emerging calls for antiracist praxis in English language and education. We then discuss our own methodological orientations to theorizing an antiracist approach to Spanish language research, before discussing how this work has been expanded by Black and Indigenous Spanish speakers and providing implications for how it could be further expanded.

**Emerging Calls for Antiracist Language Research and Education**

Language is one of the ways in which White supremacy remains largely unchallenged in the context of US ethnically and racially diverse Spanish-speaking communities. However, extensive research on Black English can help us theorize and amplify the need to interrogate White supremacy in Spanish-speaking contexts. For example, scholars, teachers, and activists have been calling for antiracist views and practices towards Black English for decades, including Baldwin’s “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Tell Me What Is” from 1979, and Smitherman’s extensive work on African American Languages (1999). In the past few years, encouraged by conversations about systemic racism, anti-Blackness as a global phenomenon, and by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the role of Black language and literacy in education has been further centralized in conversations about social justice and equity in US educational contexts (Baker-Bell, 2020).
Baker-Bell (2020) proposes an Antiracist Black Language Education pedagogy to restore and bring justice to speakers of Black Englishes based on three main goals: “1) center blackness; 2) confront White linguistic and cultural hegemony; and 3) contest anti-blackness” (p. 32). At the same time, scholars of Black Language continue pushing forward conversations about language diversity, noting that there is rich diversity embedded within labels such as Black Language, particularly when noting the importance and presence of both Afro-Diasporic and African American speakers in US contexts (Milu, 2021). For example, Milu (2021) argues for a transnational Black language pedagogy that considers “teaching slavery, colonialism, and racism together to better reveal how they contributed to raciolinguistic ideologies, racialization practices, and racist sociolinguistic order in US and various Afro-Diasporic contexts” (p. 4236). Rather than labeling all communities and students under a single (linguistic) label, she illustrates that teaching these experiences together can bond and bind these disparate Black communities and perhaps lead to more effective and unified antiracist strategies that counter Eurocentric linguistic hegemony, white supremacy, racism, and violence toward all Black people in the US contexts and global contexts (p. 4237).

In short, if language scholars, writing instructors, and teachers in general want to continue working toward antiracist language pedagogies, it is important that we consider the multiplicity of experiences and histories embedded in our frameworks, labels, and pedagogies.

While there is renewed attention to the existence of multiple Englishes, and while language scholars continue describing the fluid and constantly shifting nature of language and languaging practices in general (García & Wei, 2014), we argue that less attention has been paid, particularly in rhetoric and composition studies, to how racism and anti-Blackness permeates non-English languages, including but not limited to Spanish. As Milu (2021) explains in her discussion of Black Language in African contexts, “the focus on English [in Black language research] fails to account for how other imperial languages of Europe, like Spanish, Portuguese, and French, have historically contributed to a racist and oppressive ‘sociolinguistic order’ globally” (p. 417).

**Centering Blackness and Indigeneity in Spanish**

Latinidad is a European and White-centered concept that consistently decentralizes and oppresses Blackness and Indigeneity (https://latinstudiesassociation.org/). As Barillas Chón et al. (2021) explain, there are “complexities and important differences that are erased with the use of current pan-ethnic categories such as Latina/os” (p. 288). For this reason, it is important to interrogate the role of language in perpetuating anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity in the very same concept of Latinidad. While many organizations, researchers, and community members advocate for language access for Spanish-speaking communities in the US, few acknowledge the fact that there are multiple varieties of Spanish, and that in Spanish, language and race are also co-constructed (Flores & Rosa, 2015). As such, White Spanishes, which we define as prescriptivist abstract varieties stemming out of colonial Spanish associated with White upper social classes, uphold White supremacy and erase Black and Indigenous languages of the Americas (Cusicanqui, 2012). Moreover, as Indigenous linguistic anthropologist Leonard explains, Indigenous languages are brought to the table when “(I)ndigenous knowledges function as add-ons” in discourses of diversity (2021, p. 224) but at the core, the ways in which language is defined, valued, and analyzed epistemologically remains Euro-western.

Coronel-Molina’s (1999) autoethnography provides a detailed account of the colonial effects of Spanish on his identity in Antaqaqtra, the Andean village where he grew up. For example, he explains that in his small town “both Quechua and Andean Spanish were spoken; but in the school, everything was taught only in Spanish, with no allowances made for the children like [him] who had never been
exposed to that language” (1999, p. 65). Furthermore, Blackness and Indigeneity intersect in some Spanish-speaking communities, such as the Yungas region of Bolivia, in which communities speak Afro-Bolivian Yungueño Spanish that draws from African Indigenous languages as well as Castilian Spanish.³

Other studies show the importance of maximizing opportunities of belonging in educational contexts where the English–Spanish binary dominates, by acknowledging and centering Indigenous students’ backgrounds, identities, and languages. For example, Pentón Herrera’s work on two Mayan students from Guatemala who were speakers of Mam and Q’eqchi’ illustrates the potential of “creating spaces that acknowledge, celebrate, and make visible their Mayan languages, cultures, and traditions” in their learning (2021b, p. 13).

What these stories tell us is that, while Spanish speakers in general are marginalized in the US due to ideals of English monolingualism (García, 2019), their experiences must be approached from a raciolinguistic perspective to account for the various ways in which racial hierarchies, and thus racism, are constructed and sustained through language (Clemons, 2021; Flores & Rosa, 2015). García (2019) explains that the historical origins of named languages are rooted in colonialism. As she eloquently explains, the construction of both (Castilian) Spanish and English as homogeneous languages was part of the colonial enterprise of both kingdoms during the 16th century, “render(ing) without language” the “powerless Others, most often brown and black” populations (p. 155). She emphasizes that this legacy extends to today through the use of other language constructs like bilingualism and multilingualism, which inform our educational programs, including those for foreign or heritage students.

As mentioned earlier, the history, status, and value of Black English have been studied, raising awareness of forms of inequity experienced by Black people and affirming Black voices. Less is known about the interplay between these efforts and the realities of colonial Spanish and its sociomaterial conditions. At the same time, Black Latinas have been pointing out that White Latinxs sometimes identify as people of color in the US, but they/we uphold White supremacy. For example, Haywood (2017) describes the “endemic nature of anti-Black Latino racism” (p. 957), and the Black Latinas Know Collective ([https://www.blacklatinasknow.org](https://www.blacklatinasknow.org)) explain that “Black Latina voices [are] a crucial source of knowledge to understand how race works within Latinidad” (Lloréns & Dinzey-Flores, 2021, para. 4). As Clemons (2021) demonstrates, it is not uncommon to see that alliance and/or knowledge of Spanish “language is enregistered as the boundary making element between Blackness and Latinidad” (p. 18). With this in mind, we recognize White Spanish as Spanish that sustains racism and colonialism, even when it is marginalized in relation to English. As scholars such as Anzaldúa (1987) continually point out, there is a complex history of marginalization and privilege embedded in Spanish-speaking communities. Furthermore, as Afro-Mexican poet Ariana Brown (2021a) points out, Afro-Latinx Spanish-speaking communities “need origins” of linguistic and racial histories that centralize, rather than erase, Blackness and the anti-Black racism perpetuated in Spanish-speaking contexts (p. 13).

The work of and about Black teachers of Spanish provides a useful portrayal of raciolinguistic ideologies around Spanishes. For example, Anya et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between Black teachers and students and Spanish language courses, demonstrating the following:

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³ In the Spanish-speaking world, the term Castilian Spanish is sometimes used to refer to the most formal and ‘correct’ form of the language.
80% of Spanish teachers from a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) quit their jobs at Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBUC) due to “culture shock, distress, and also, lack of student preparation or institutional support” (p. 3).

There is a lack of enrollment of Black students in Spanish courses, considering “negative classroom experiences due to poor instructional environments and a lack of ethno-racial affinity and integrativeness opportunities in the curricula” (p. 3).

Spanish teachers from an HSI did not engage in conversations relevant to Black students’ experiences with racism, which suggested that “black populations” were not seen “as important social and cultural agents in the study of Spanish” (p. 3).

Black heritage learners of Spanish did not identify with or relate to Latina/o/x communities to which teachers from the HSI belonged.

The authors provide a list of useful recommendations for teacher educators and higher education administrators, such as emphasizing that the Latina/o/x communities in the US have a “black foundation” (p. 15), embracing Black names, using all “School English, Black English, Spanish, and Caribbean Englishes all in the same space” through translanguaging, and “understanding the history of linguistic colonialism and how this has devastatingly impacted people’s language and heritage,” especially for Black students (p. 15). Despite the absolute relevance of these actions to addressing the inequitable conditions under which Black teachers and students engage with the Spanish language, the nature of the language itself is not called out. For example, what kinds of Spanishes are present in educational materials? When designing more “writing assignments about Afro-Latinx cultures” (p. 17), what kinds of Spanishes are invited and who do these Spanishes represent? Will these assignments and/or materials also address the “history of linguistic colonialism” in relation to colonial Spanish? While we do not necessarily provide answers to these questions in our article, our goal is to bring these questions to the forefront in discussions of Spanish and Latinidad in the US, particularly in our field of rhetoric and composition. In addition, our goal is to highlight and amplify the perspectives of Black and Indigenous Latinxs, who have long been arguing that labels such as Spanish-speaking and Latinx communities need to be dismantled to better address racism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity.

Additionally, works in raciolinguistics add more layers of complexity when it comes to defining Blackness in relation to Latinidad. For example, in a recent study, Clemons (2021) found that while language often functions to create and uphold notions of Latinidad (often being mobilized as evidence that Dominicans are not Black but rather Spanish), DNA functions to confirm (or to disprove) Blackness. The lack of co-occurrence between DNA and co-naturalization of language and race suggests the stronghold of a mutual exclusivity between Blackness and Latinidad in these data. (p. 16)

Overall, Clemons’s (2021) study shows that the co-naturalization of race and language (in other words, the co-construction of race and language as mutual processes) was not seen as a “valid tool for the construction of racial identity” (p. 16). Interestingly, in her study, “moments of anti-Blackness, conflict, and solidarity appeared in conjunction with the raciolinguistic ideologies” (p. 16), which speaks to the possibilities of framing raciolinguistics research as a potential opportunity to address anti-Blackness and promote solidarity among different Black subjectivities in relation to Spanish.

**Positionality and Orientation: A Critical Transnational Agency Framework**

Our methodological choices for this paper are guided by our commitment to learn from, credit, and highlight the importance of Black Latinx and Indigenous experiences in conversations about Spanish.
We do this as we also recognize the privilege that comes with our White identities as Spanish-speaking faculty in the US. In short, we do this work because we know we are privileged, and we care about building more inclusive and justice-driven conversations for and with our Spanish-speaking colleagues, students, and collaborators.

As Austin and Hsieh (2021) mention in their study about Black women’s presence (or lack of) in ELA (English Language Arts) and WL (World Languages), “(b)y strengthening the practice of centering Black girlhood/womanhood in ELA classrooms and introducing it in WL classrooms, we seek to produce a more cohesive and representative literacy and language experience that highlights the contributions of Black women to language practices and literature nationally and globally” (pp. 237-238). Another example comes from Littletree et al. (2020), who argue that “the knowledge itself, including the means of its making, must be treated with respect, with a sense of responsibility toward the restoration of justice for Indigenous peoples” (p. 416).

Methodological choices for knowledge production must therefore account for these ways of centering Black and Indigenous practices and voices, while also recognizing our own limitations as speakers of White Spanishes. For example, critical race theory (CRT) work includes “a wide range of methods such as family history, biography, autoethnography, cuentos, testimonios, and counterstory” (Martinez, 2020, p. 3). Among the foundational tenets of these methods, grounded in CRT, is the “centrality of experiential knowledge and/or unique voices of color” (p. 9). Given our primary positionalities in this project, we ponder the question, “are all marginalized narratives counterstory?” (p. 17). Martinez resolves this question by saying that while there are “indeed many marginal/ized narratives, the measure remains whether the tellers and stories subscribe to CRT’s tenets, particularly in their critique of a dominant ideology (e.g., liberalism, whiteness, color blindness) and their sustained focus on social justice as an objective” (p. 17).

In our article, we certainly advocate for linguistic justice in Black Latinx communities through transnational raciolinguistic approaches. However, we believe using narrative, counterstories, testimonios or other methods mentioned above would mean that we, with the privileged positionalities brought to this specific project, are appropriating this methodological tool for antioppression. Therefore, to provide methodological consistency with our main goal in this essay, we decide to be accountable and enact “critical transnational agency” (Thu & Motha, 2021, p. 15) informed by a raciolinguistics perspective (Flores & Rosa, 2015). We also embrace and seek to practice what Milu (2021) defines as a transnational Black pedagogy of solidarity, which seeks to counter anti-Black and anti-Indigenous discrimination of all kinds. This methodology allows us to ask the following questions put forth by Thu and Motha (2021):

1. What does it mean for us to intentionally and deliberately enact a critical transnational agenda as we seek to challenge racial, linguistic, and national categories and roles, and embrace a mindful antiracist equity-minded vision for our scholarship and pedagogy?
2. How might we support the development of critical transnational dispositions in relation to our institutional identities, both within ourselves as scholars/practitioners and also in our students?
3. How can we enact meaningful transgressions that make visible the frailty of normative logics of racial and national categories? (p. 15)

To disrupt dominant narratives around Spanish, especially when it is compared to English, we specifically:
1. bring attention and criticality to the complexity of language practices in Spanish, including those embedded in contexts dominated by English. For example, earlier in this article we addressed the complex, multilayered, and politically motivated meaning of quilombos and other Spanish terminology to understand the colonial and anti-Black history of Spanish;
2. provide examples of critical transnational and raciolinguistics agency enacted to address and transgress anti-Blackness in our transnational communities;
3. center the voices and experiences of Black Latinx and Indigenous scholars, listening and responding to them in critical ways to showcase how we must continue the work in our specific contexts and communities.

In the sections that follow, we enact critical transnational agency (Thu & Motha, 2021) as we share two major themes that emerged from our reading and theorization of the antiracist possibilities in Spanish: Beyond Mestiza Consciousness and Supporting the Reclamation of Historical and Relational Language Inquiry. While we did not conduct a formal coding or analysis of the texts and examples that we introduce in these themes, we share these examples as opportunities to continue expanding conversations about White supremacy in Spanish-speaking contexts, which have potential implications for both research and pedagogical practices in the US and beyond.

Theme 1: Beyond Mestiza Consciousness

The work of queer Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa is often centralized in conversations about Spanish variants. Indeed, in Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), Anzaldúa poignantly describes her Chicana identity and its connections to language, pointing to mestiza consciousness as her growing awareness of being “ni de aquí/ni de allá” (neither from here, nor from there). Drawing on research about Chicanx Spanish, Anzaldúa, and many scholars who cite her groundbreaking work, recognize that Castilian Spanish, though often denominated as the most formal and ‘correct’ form of the language, is just one variant, and that Spanish-speaking communities, including Mexican Americans, embrace variants of Spanish that greatly deviate from the Castilian roots. While many scholars point to Anzaldúa and her conception of mestiza consciousness as an important theorization of Chicanx identity and marginalization, Black Latinx and Indigenous scholars and writers also critique Anzaldúa specifically and mestizaje writ large for its foregrounding of whiteness.

In her critique of mestizaje, Ríos (2016) explains “the uptake of mestizaje in Rhetoric and Composition Studies has led to a recurring set of problematics that have been a source of tension between American Indians and Chicanxs as well as Mexican indígenas who have migrated to the United States” (p. 109). These problematics include the reification of racial dynamics that privilege whiteness by using mestizaje to “civilize the Indian within,” denoting humanity only through the Indians’ mixing with “the national subject, which is decidedly not the Indian subject” (p. 110). According to Ríos (2016), “for there to be a ‘mixed’ culture, subject, and knowledge, there must be a ‘pure’ culture, subject, knowledge with which to mix. Additionally, in mestizaje the Indigenous portion of the mixture is fixed in time and space, whereas the hybrid or mixed subject gains futurity and teleological status” (p. 118).

Thus, mestizaje, by signaling a “mixture” between Indigenous and Spanish White blood/language/culture erases the continued presence of Indigenous people across the Americas, and also provides an avenue for White Mexicans to ignore or hide their race behind the ‘mestizo’ label. By claiming mestizaje, White Mexican/Latinx people establish a claim to oppression by noting their Indigenous heritage, while also deflecting from the very real and constant racism that Indigenous communities continually experience. For example, by claiming mestizaje, White Latinxs can also reify...
The prevalence of White Spanishes, ignoring the racial dynamics embedded in the Spanish language by continuing to privilege Castilian derivatives that position White Spanishes as ‘correct’ or ‘superior’ to racialized Spanishes. Variants of Spanish that have African roots, such as Caribbean Spanishes, are erased under the ‘mestizo’ label, whereby all Spanishes become a ‘mixture’ of different variants.

The rejection of mestizaje was identified and continues to be amplified by Black Latinx authors and researchers. As Clemons demonstrates, mestizaje is “weaponized against African Americans in a way that does not allow for mixedness to be applicable to African Americans. Mestizaje is thus called into the construction of Latinidad in a way that reinforces the mutual exclusivity between Blackness and Latinidad” (2021, p. 10). Her study also points to the fact that English–Spanish “bilingualism is a mark of mestizaje” (p. 13), and thus, of colonial logics of whiteness, which once again indicates the need to further interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies.

This critique of mestizaje is extensively taken up by Afro-Mexican poet Ariana Brown. In her spoken word poem “For the Black Kids in my 8th Grade Spanish Class” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gx5oKuxQjQ), Brown (2021b) explains how she, as a Black Mexican student, found comfort in her Black, non-Mexican peers during Spanish class. While her identity as a Mexican or a Latina may have signaled her connections to White, Spanish-speaking students in her class, as Brown explains, with her Black peers, in the “island in the middle of the room” is the only space where she “could unveil my whole self without shame.” In this poem, and in her collection We Are Owed, Brown (2021a) illustrates that race, and Blackness specifically, should be centralized in conversations about Spanish specifically and Latinidad more broadly. Relying on generalized labels, such as Latinx or even Spanish, erases the embodied experiences of Black Spanish speakers whose language is always-already assumed to be unprofessional. In the poem “There Are Güeros & Then There Is Me,” Brown (2021a) provides insights into her experiences attending a school in Texas with a predominantly White/mestizo Mexican population:

The first day of first grade,
Three pencils & a set
Of hands I found in my hair.
I’m sure something was whispered
In Spanish, language
In which there is no word
To describe me with grace.
Let’s play a game, called
My school so Mexican,
the entire third grade was required
To sign & dance a Selena medley for our parents.
My school so Mexican,
we sold Hot Cheetos
With nacho cheese at fundraisers.
My school so Mexican,
Principal took my mama to the office,
Told her my hair was “outlandish.”
My school so Mexican,
I’m the only one
Who look like me.

In this poem, Brown (2021a) signals several cultural practices and icons that will resonate with Mexican communities, including Hot Cheetos and Selena. While these cultural aspects may seem to connect Mexican students, they do not erase her Blackness and her peers’ and teachers’ anti-Blackness. In
school contexts, such as those described by Brown (2021a), language and culture are used as a weapon to both highlight and erase difference, positioning Afro-Latinx students such as Brown as “too Black” for the White/mestizo Mexican students. The presence of a common language, i.e., Spanish, or common cultural markers, does not erase White supremacy, both in and out of school.

**Theme 2: Supporting the Reclamation of Historical and Relational Language Inquiry**

Part of our work supports the idea of “connecting and uniting all Black communities in resisting White linguistic hegemony and ideologies that harm all Black students” (Milu, 2021, p. 436) and Indigenous communities, especially when they experience the weaponization of their experiences through White Spanish. Like Laura, Cristina oftentimes notices the linguistic racism that is embedded in Spanish expressions such as “trabajar como un negro” (literally to “work like a Black man” to denote exploitative working conditions) or “hacer el indio” (literally “to act like an Indigenous person” with racist connotations to imply ‘being silly or stupid’) or in commentary about language practices seen as racialized nonstandard Spanishes.

In questioning the roots of linguistic practices and the impact of colonization and the Transatlantic Slave Trade that enabled racist and colonial realities to be encoded through these expressions, Cristina reflected on Smitherman’s affirmation about how “the lack of knowledge about (our) history” has shaped ideologies of whiteness in English. As a response, Baker-Bell (2020) takes on the task of “teach(ing) Black kids about the history of their native language” (p. 65). Immediate questions followed as Cristina read about this approach for linguistic justice: Do we learn and teach about the history of how anti-Blackness becomes encoded and is sustained in Spanish? Who and where? How can we promote transnational Black language pedagogy (Milu, 2021) without accessing that information?

The task of unlearning the dominant narratives around Spanish colonization and a concept of Latinidad that still emphasize mestizaje (which thus reinforce systemic racism) seemed overwhelming considering disciplinary divides and the vast and varied geographical, sociocultural, and historical contexts of Spanish colonization (Jones & Martinez, 2011). Almost by accident, Cristina encountered the autobiography of “Juan Francisco Manzano,” an enslaved Cuban who was born in 1797 in Havana in an enslaved ‘house’ family, who taught himself to write before his freedom was bought.

As Mullen and Manzano (2014) explain, this “(a)utobiography is not only the earliest antislavery narrative, but also […] the only such to be written by a person of African ancestry” (Kindle location 151). Manzano’s autobiography, in which he “distances himself from Blacks as a function of anti-Black racism among his potential readers” (Kindle location 201), offers details about the roles and intersections of racism, social identities, language, and writing in the colony. Manzano’s narrative includes multiple references to his use of language, poems, painting, songs, and tales and, on several occasions, he speaks about “la viveza de mi genio lo parlero de mis labios llamados pico de oro” (literally translated as “the liveliness of my genius and the verbal abilities of my lips that are called golden beak”). For example, his linguistically unsanitized account goes as follows:

> por carecer de escritura ablabá solo asiendo gestos y afecciones según la naturaleza de la composición decían qe era tal el flujo de hablar qe tenía qe pr. hablar hablaba con la mesa con el cuadro con la pared & yo a nadie desía lo qe. traía conmigo y solo cuando me podia juntar con los ninos les desía muchos versos y le cantaba cuentos de encantamientos qe.. yo componía de memorias en el resto del día con su cantarsito[,] (2014, p. 17).
Manzano’s autobiography continues, describing the abuse he experienced when he was found reciting and even performing these poems, songs, and “cuentos de encantamiento.” According to Pettway (2020) these “literacy” moments in Manzano’s story allude to “African-inspired principles of regarding the spirit world” (p. 23) and cosmology, demonstrating that “Africans relied upon whatever fragments of Yoruba, Bakongo, and other belief structures were available to them to navigate the dangers of the Cuban social world” (p. 30) and the colonial Spanish regime.

Literacy and language, therefore, function as a strategic tool for anticolonial and antislavery resistance. Besides his autobiography, Manzano also became popular for his antislavery poetry, and was ultimately recognized as a key foundational literary figure in Afro-Cuban literature. He composed some of his poems by following the ‘canonical models’ found in the houses where he lived—mostly poetry with Spanish patriotic undertones like Arriaza, who is mentioned by Manzano (2014) in his autobiography (p. 33). However, Pettway (2020) explains that “Manzano mastered Spanish aesthetic forms so that he might manipulate their meaning and advocate in the interest of African-descended freedom” (p. 275), which indicates that Manzano, alongside other Afro-Cuban writers, were not “mere imitators but aesthetic and political innovators,” especially in their articulation of “African-inspired spiritualities” in their literary work during the Spanish colonial regime (p. 43). Along these lines, scholars have discussed the contradictions of Manzano’s experiences as someone who learned writing (in a traditional sense) from the very same people who kept him enslaved, yet scholars see an “involuntary parody of a canonical model” visible in how Manzano “borrows from black vernacular to achieve freedom from the master grammar of urban, peninsular Spanish” (Mullen & Manzano, 2014, Location 396).

In this sense, the complex language in Manzano’s autobiography reminds us of work by Black language scholars such as Smitherman (1999) and Milu (2021), who have pointed out that Black English in itself can be considered a decolonial language, since it encompasses African Indigenous languages while also dismantling the colonial roots of standardized White English. Likewise, Manzano’s self-described experiences speak to the importance of acknowledging and centering the resilience of language practice against colonial and racist powers.

It is out of the scope of this project to do a literary analysis of Manzano’s Autobiografía; instead, by discussing it here, we hope to point out the (lack of) presence of the many voices who, like his and many others after him, must be recovered and discussed as we rehistoricize, unlearn, and relearn the relationship between Spanish(es), English(es), and systemic racism against Black and Indigenous peoples.

**Toward Transnational Antiracist Relationality in Spanishes**

In a recent essay called “A Mi Orden: A Meditation on Dichos,” Afro-Latinx poet Elizabeth Acevedo (2021) reflects on the many gendered expressions that accompanied the roles and expectations she was assigned to during her upbringing. In her essay, she claims “(w)e need repurposed or entirely new language with which to raise. With which to rise” (p. 235). This “new language” that Acevedo (2021) calls for involves noticing and critically calling out the ways in which White Spanish weaponizes through expressions like “qué quilombo,” ideologies of mestizaje and language alliance, and the lack of widespread and accessible historical knowledge and conversations about colonialism and its effects from a perspective that centers Black and Indigenous stories.

To get there, besides approaching Spanish from a raciolinguistics perspective (Flores & Rosa, 2015) in the different transnational contexts where it exists, including in the US, we support efforts for bringing the voices of Afro/Black Latinx and Indigenous peoples into conversations about
transnational Black language education (Milu, 2021), and advocate for and utilize anticolonial forms of knowledge production. These are guided by epistemologies of Radical Indigenism (Garrouette, 2005; Leonard, 2021).

For Garrouette (2005) of the Cherokee Nation, Radical Indigenism is grounded in “philosophies of knowledge that can be understood as rationalities—articulable, coherent logics for ordering and knowing the world” (p. 170). This approach builds on experiential knowledge, specifically of elders, different forms of storytelling, and returning those knowledges to community practices. Moreover, describing the Nishnaabeg practices, Simpson (2017) reminds us that Indigenous knowledge “is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people. […] It is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion” (p. 151).

Another fundamental and well-known principle of Indigenous meaning is the idea of relationality, as knowledge “emerg(es) through and [is] dependent on a multitude of relationships that include humans with other humans; humans with lands, spirits, and non-human relatives; lands with spirits; and so on” (Leonard, 2021, p. 121). Guided by these approaches, we can intentionally center the connections between language, race, embodiment, and Land, which are erased through White Spanishes. How do all the aspects and practices mentioned above come together? In what follows, we illustrate our critical transnational agency (Thu & Motha, 2021) while responding to the calls for transnational Black language education (Milu, 2021) and antiracist work in relation to colonial and White Spanish, and following the principles of Indigenous practices of relationality.

**Expanding the Definitions of Quilombo**

We began this article pointing out the racist realities that shaped the trajectory of the word ‘quilombo’ across colonized communities and territories. When Laura shared her father’s expression ‘qué quilombo’ and all she had learned about the origins and trajectory of its meaning, she followed up and searched how this expression had been taken up in other contexts, realizing that the widespread meaning of quilombo was its reference to chaos or a mess. However, in her search she came across a place, Cafetal Quilombo, a Mexican restaurant in Seattle, WA, land of the Coast Salish peoples, touching the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the Suquamish, Tulalip, and Muckleshoot nations. Intuitively, Cristina followed the first lesson of relational knowledge and “land as pedagogies” (Simpson, 2017), which postulates that “(i)f you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it” and the fact that “learning changes when the relational context changes” (p. 167).

It was a sunny Saturday morning when Cristina walked into an even brighter space, Cafetal Quilombo, with mixed emotions, ranging from a sense of cautious curiosity, some feelings of culpability and privilege (due to her White Spanish heritage and presence in the colonized Americas), and responsibility. A warm welcome immediately followed, opening up opportunities for the question Cristina had in the back of her mind. So, after ordering the famous house tamales and delicious café de olla, Cristina asked the owner of the restaurant about the name “Cafetal Quilombo.” Perhaps being used to getting the same question, the owner pointed at the wall, and specifically at a frame by the entrance to the restaurant. Figure 1 below shows the reclamation of the original meaning of quilombo, before it became appropriated and impugned through racism. The text in the image reads as follows:

“What is a quilombo? Historically, a quilombo was a refuge in Brazil for escaped coffee slaves who later offered shelter and safety to other people marginalized by colonization. Being a safe welcoming space, the owners decided to name their coffee shop after this haven. Cafetal Quilombo Cafe is a community space welcoming to everyone, it’s a place to take a moment to relax, be present and enjoy some delicious coffee.”
Figure 1. What is a quilombo?

This image symbolizes the ways in which communities engage with the Land, the spaces that can be built around them through relational meaning-making and (re)telling stories through language and literacy practices that challenge anti-Blackness. While at first sight it might seem that there are no direct relationships between the nations and Lands of the Coast Salish and other Indigenous Peoples in the Seattle area, other Indigenous communities, and Afro-Latinx communities, the note in Cafetal Quilombo reminds us of the possibilities of “international relations, relationships that are based on consent, reciprocity, respect, and empathy” (Simpson, 2017, 61).

For these relationships to exist, “one does not have to physically travel to be engaged in (this type of) internationalism” (p. 59). Instead, we argue, building these types of relationships among marginalized communities requires much more than applying a generalized label, like “Latinx” or “Hispanic,” to disparate groups of people. Relationality through this orientation means working intentionally to interrogate the history of the languages we speak, and finding ways to work toward redressing the global phenomenon that is anti-Blackness as part of a global linguistic justice movement. As Baker-Bell et al. (2020) explain in “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice”:

[W]e cannot claim that Black Lives Matter in our field if Black Language does not matter! We cannot say Black Lives Matter if decades of research on Black Language has not led to widespread systemic change in curricula, pedagogical practices, disciplinary discourses, research, language policies, professional organizations, programs, and institutions within and beyond academia! We cannot say that
Black Lives Matter if Black Language is not at the forefront of our work as language educators and researchers! (para. 5).

These efforts to centralize Black language, and Black lives, extend beyond national borders, beyond the English language, and into contexts typically defined as ‘multilingual’ more broadly and ‘Spanish-speaking’ specifically. We can illustrate the type of work we can start to address these complexities through the retelling of ‘quilombo’ as “a community space welcoming to everyone, it’s a place to take a moment to relax, be present and enjoy” (Figure 1), which also symbolizes what Simpson (2017) calls “a place-based constellation” of resistance. This place-based constellation is collectively developed in solidarity with “Black and brown individuals” (p. 228) “within grounded normativity that refuse[s] to center whiteness” (p. 371), and when built that way, “real white allies [including white Hispanics and Latinas, we argue] show up in solidarity anyway” (p. 371).

Conclusion

In this article, we interrogate the weaponization of the Spanish language, seeking to highlight and learn from how Black and Indigenous speakers of Spanishes theorize, embody, and share their experiences with anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity in Spanish-speaking contexts. We recognize that this work is preliminary and limited, both due to our limited space for in-depth analysis and to our positionalities as White Hispanic and Latina faculty. However, what we aimed to do in this piece was to contribute to ongoing conversations about the violence and erasure that is perpetuated when White Spanishes are positioned as a marginalized subject in English-dominant contexts within the US. As academic fields in the US continue theorizing models for enacting linguistic justice, we hope to continue expanding conversations in solidarity with Afro and Indigenous Latinx communities, who have long been advocating for the need to interrogate the positioning of Latinidad writ large in academic conversations. As other White Latinx researchers continue engaging in their work, we also urge them (i.e., us) to consider how we are describing our positionalities not just in relation to White American speakers of standardized White English, but also in relation to Afro and Indigenous Latinx communities. Recognizing researcher and language positionality is important, and it is also important to acknowledge how our positionalities shift, and how whiteness (and White supremacy) prevails, across national and linguistic borders.

In the spirit of developing networks—constellations, in Simpson’s (2017) words—of solidarity and collaborative antiracist work that spans single named-languages, we end this article with some questions for reflection. We hope to continue asking these questions of ourselves while also welcoming other researchers who benefit from White privilege to engage in further conversation.

1. How can your positionalities and identities help unpack the different layers of oppression within and across (Spanish) language communities in different geographical and sociocultural spaces?
2. Do(es) your language(s) manifest racialized ideologies and/or anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity? How do you call out language weaponization?
3. In doing that work, how do you make visible and center Black Latinx and/or transnational Black experiences and those of Indigenous peoples?

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4. What does de/anti-colonial transnational Black language education look like in your context? What are the histories of racial and linguistic ideologies and realities that need to be at the forefront?

5. How does this work help to destabilize and undo systems of oppression and continue to open up spaces and opportunities for more equitable social structures and relations?

We recognize that engaging in this work is complicated and even ambitious, but as more calls for antiracist and equitable practices are made in our institutions and communities, we must take an active and deliberate stance to continue redefining the social structures we are part of. This article is a reminder to ourselves and others, especially those in positions of privilege, to “show up” (Simpson, 2017, p. 371) and be critically agentive to challenge the “faulty logics of White supremacy and discourses of Whiteness” (Thu & Motha, 2021) across and within language communities.

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