

Decolonizing US Latinx Students' Language: El Sur in the Schools of El Norte

Ofelia García 

The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA

*E-mail: ofelia.garciaotheguy@gmail.com

This article considers how the racialized bilingual Latinx students in El Norte live in an epistemological Sur where their knowledge systems, which include their language and cultural practices are discounted. Centring the schooling experience of two US Latinas today, the article theorizes the differences between perceiving their language and bilingualism from the *external* perspective of dominant schooling institutions of the Global North, and from the *inside* perspective of racialized speakers. Bringing to bear thinking from an epistemological Sur (Santos 2009), revealed through a *decolonizing sociolinguistic approach and Latinx decolonizing research sensibility*, the article discusses how tools external to the Latinx experience—academic language and additive bilingualism—have contributed to the subjugation and failure of Latinx students. It ends by proposing translanguaging as a tool that has emerged from Latinx own experience and how its use in their education may open a decolonial option.

Introduction

Countries in the world are often grouped on socio-economic and political characteristics as belonging to the Global North or the Global South. But regardless of countries' Gross Domestic Product, people experience different degrees of privilege or suffering depending on racial, gender, and language categorizations. This article calls attention to the many brown and bilingual people from el Sur who live and study in what José Martí, the Cuban national hero, essayist, and poet, called 'las entrañas del monstruo' (1991). To liberate racialized bilingual Latinx students from the bowels of the English-speaking empire that often spits them out as waste, educators and scholars must take up a *decolonizing sociolinguistic approach* that listens to them, views them and studies them without superimposing the categories of normed languages that are named as English or Spanish or racial categories that are *external* to Latinx people. In so doing, we follow Audre Lorde's (1984) reminder that the master's house cannot be dismantled if we continue to use their tools. For too long, solutions to what are considered Latinx students' 'problems' have relied on tools that have NOT emerged from the Latinx experience, but on concepts external to their complex lives and language use. Here we highlight how the concept of language as a system of linguistic structures that one can 'have', as well as bilingualism as simply an addition of L1 plus L2, have

been two tools of dominance that have ensured that Latinx cultural and linguistic practices remain outside of the definition of school success.

This article proposes a decolonizing sociolinguistic approach that centres the complex and dynamic lives and languaging of U.S. Latinxs themselves, as we use our own tools to describe their experiences and educate them. Our tools as U.S. Latinx people can only be generated by starting with *our own inside* perspective, gained through our own knowledge and cultural/linguistic/semiotic systems, that is, by taking over the locus of enunciation (Mignolo 2000) and seizing control of the type of languaging and literacy performances that are validated in the education of Latinx students.

This article builds on the work of the many Latinx community activists and scholars of colour who have made great strides in constructing a more socially just education. For example, Moll *et al.* (1982) focused their work on demonstrating the community's funds of knowledge, highlighting the importance of recognizing the strength of Latinx homes and communities. Guadalupe Valdés extensive scholarship has drawn attention to the languaging of the Mexican American/Latinx communities and the 'curricularization' of language in school (Valdés 2018). Paris and Alim (2017), building on the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), introduced the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, supporting teaching that sustains linguistic and cultural pluralism.

Grounded on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa on borderlands (1987), there has been increased critical scholarship that calls attention to how Latinx youth experience life, language, and education (see, e.g. Cervantes-Soon and Carrillo 2016). Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) and Urrieta (2004) have focused on decolonizing citizenship by showing how Latinx youth experiences transcend the nation state. In addition, a growing number of young Latinx scholars have described how Latinx children are experiencing their lives and education as *transfronterizos* (de la Piedra *et al.* 2018; Nuñez 2022). In many ways, the decolonizing sociolinguistic approach with which I take up the language of Latinx in this article, as well as what it means for their education, has points of contact with the work of these Latinx scholars.

Despite the critical Latinx scholarship here alluded to, many uninformed educators share the view of the teacher that Sepúlveda (2020) quotes in his chapter in Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020): 'The problem with these [Latinx] students is that their whole world is in Spanish. They're not immersed in English' (45). The language of Latinos is most often identified as Spanish, a problem for educators who believe that only English has cognitive value. But often, even educators who work through Spanish, for example, bilingual teachers and teachers of Spanish as what is called a 'heritage' language, value Spanish just as something external to the ways in which Latinx students *do* Spanish. Latinx communities and scholars many times perceive the use of Spanish as the only educational solution. Spanish is seen as Latinx students' first language, their L1 (see, for example, Guerrero 1997), and the 'saviour' in our educational struggle. What is little understood is how named languages, whether English or Spanish and bilingualism as simply the addition of a second language to a first, have been often used to colonize and subjugate Latinx populations. Without denying the importance of the role that Spanish and bilingualism play in the identity of Latinx students, we consider here a different tool to view how Latinx students *do* language—*translanguaging*. I build on translanguaging's relationship to Flores and Rosa's concept of *raciolinguistic ideologies* (2015) to show how language and race have been co-constructed in ways that racialize Latinx students and simultaneously produce the idea that they are poor and incompetent speakers, *nilingües* in both English and Spanish (García *et al.* 2021). To denaturalize the dominance of named normed languages, whether English or Spanish, of whiteness and of maleness, we must use *our own tools*.

Describing two Latina students taking up a Latinx locus of enunciation, that is, from an *inside* view and with an alternative research methodology, I will introduce Julia, a 10-year-old student who arrived in New York City from Honduras a few months ago, and Gisela, a 16-year-old who was born in New York City and whose mother was born in Mexico.¹ I then consider how the categories used by schools of language and bilingualism, *external* to Julia and Gisela's experiences, cast them as inferior. By closely describing their student experiences, alongside my own, I

theorize the difference between perceiving their bilingualism, on the one hand, from the *external* perspective of dominant schooling institutions of the Global North and, on the other, from the *inside* perspective of bilingual speakers who have been racialized, favouring the ways of making meaning of Latinx bilinguals who live and study in the USA.

A Latinx decolonizing research sensibility

A decolonizing sociolinguistic approach does not just deconstruct concepts such as language and race, it also questions the role of research that validate categories that are external to racialized bilingual people's experiences. Research from the Global North has most often rendered the cultures and thought processes of the Global South irrelevant (Smith 1999; Ndhlovu 2018; Lee 2022; Li Wei 2022). Latin American decolonial scholars—Grosfoguel (2007); Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel (2007), Santos (2018)—remind us that the knowledge produced by dominant cultures are imposed as rational and scientific and given universal currency. A decolonizing approach liberates research from conceptual and methodological constraints to capture a different logic emerging from another locus of enunciation. As African sociolinguist Finex Ndhlovu (2018) has said: 'The world cannot be fully understood through the use of methods that arose out of a colonial metropolitan reading of the world' (10).

In this article, I build on Canadian scholar Dwayne Donald's concept of 'Indigenous métissage' (2012) to adopt a Latinx decolonizing research sensibility, a way of studying people who have been colonized and racialized not simply as mestizos who use what are perceived as hybrid cultural and linguistic forms. The concept of hybridity has been used by scholars such as Homi Bhabha (1994) to discuss how discrete social practices combine in colonial settings to generate new structures, objects, and practices, which resist colonialism. But hybridity may also have the effect of essentializing a prior 'pure' state of language and cultural practices that can then stigmatize these new practices as impure and invalid. To study Latinx students with a Latinx decolonial research sensibility means to go beyond notions of hybridity and assimilation and understand their lives from their own perspective, with their own knowledge system without referencing that of the white Anglo North. Arturo Escobar (2018) has called for decolonial scholars to work within a territory of 'relationality' that does not simply take us to 'the other side', the side of whiteness, English, and dominance, but that brings all of us as a full human being into view, as we share, care, and interconnect. This requires researchers to look closely at bilingual Latinx lives and performances from within, following the Descriptive Processes proposed by Patricia Carini (2000). Developing this research sensibility requires '*hermeneutic imagination* directed towards the telling of a story that belies colonial frontier logics and fosters decolonizing' (Donald: 533, my italics). It necessitates researchers to hold together the layered, conflictual, messy tensions of Latinx and Anglo relations and reframe those relationships informed by close looking into Latinx knowledge, cultural, and linguistic practices. Hermeneutics requires that researchers understand themselves as implicated in interpretation that fits the context and participants. Researchers thus create meaning through their interpretations, *through their storytelling*, rather than simply reporting findings.

Following this research sensibility, I extend here the recent work of scholars questioning traditional research methodology that Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi (2008) have described as following 'white logic'. To capture translanguaging in action, some sociolinguists have called for a research methodology that captures the impromptu unplanned moments of translanguaging (see, Ndhlovu 2018; Li Wei 2011, 2022; Lee 2022). For example, Li Wei (2011) has proposed Moment Analysis as an alternative research method to capture the 'lived experiences of bilingual and multilingual individuals' (3). He explains that this requires a 'paradigm shift, away from frequency and regularity oriented, pattern-seeking approaches to a focus on spontaneous, impromptu, and momentary actions and performances of the individual' (1224). He further describes the methods he uses: Looking, Listening, Talking, and Thinking (LLTT) (2022). Likewise, Ndhlovu (2018) relates his unplanned encounter with a 10-year-old in Johannesburg as the only way to capture

translanguaging, as they leverage it during their impromptu soccer game. Ndhlovu pushes us to discard traditional research methods and structures if we want to understand the spontaneous, ongoing, and negotiable practice of communication that is reflected in translanguaging. He asks: 'How realistic is it for new philosophies of language to claim they are pushing scholarship forward in a new direction when their theoretical suppositions are supported by data generated through conventional research methods?' (3).

Here I tell the stories of two Latina students whom I came to know during my many school visits. I draw here from what I observed in some classroom 'moments'. As Li Wei (2022) explains, although some may see these descriptions as simply anecdotes, they are significant data points. Li Wei says: 'Anecdotes matter in our everyday life, and therefore should matter in discipline such as applied linguistics that deal with human beings' lived experiences' (para. 10). I did not start out researching the experiences of these two students; they, and the actions that I describe, simply emerged as most significant when I look back over my 40 years of classroom close-looking.

I tell the stories of these two students following a Descriptive Inquiry standpoint based on what is called the practice of *Recollections*, 'structured stories from life experiences' (Traugh 2021). This practice enables us to gain control of our minds and actions freeing our imagination from the shackles of knowledge systems that have been naturalized to enslave us. By describing the complexity of students' and teachers' actions, we centre their humanity (Furman and Traugh 2021). I tell the two students' stories based on my recollections of informal observations in their classrooms where significant moments emerged, as well as casual conversations that I had with them and their teacher. In telling and interpreting their stories, I make sure that there are no contradictions between the interpretation that I offer here and the experiences of the many other Latinx students whom I have encountered in classrooms over the years, as well as my own. I engage in a double narrative process, including not only the narratives of the participants but also my own voice as the narrator of those narratives, connecting the personal to the cultural.

Decolonizing Latinx bilingualism

By privileging the language doings and experiences of three Latinas—Julia, Gisela, and myself—I make visible how many traditional theories of language and bilingualism have been used to reinforce the colonial line that has divided people into, on the one hand, superior civilized human beings and, on the other hand, inferior uncivilized quasi-humans (Veronelli 2015). This categorization relates to what Santos (2007) calls 'abyssal thinking' (for more on this, see García et al. 2021). This hegemonic thinking, made visible in the philosophy of the Martinican critical theorist Frantz Fanon (1967), declares as nonexistent the knowledges and lifeways of those on the other side of the colonial line.

I start with my own experiences as a Latina, to theorize, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) says, 'from the flesh', from my own 'body-politics of knowledge' (Grosfoguel 2007). Bringing to bear thinking from an epistemological Sur (Santos 2009), I analyze US Latinx racialized students doing their multilingualism, in concert with a southern intellectual and political trajectory of resistance to what the Peruvian decolonial theorist Aníbal Quijano (1991, 2000) calls *coloniality*, that is, the remaining effects of colonial hierarchization. Throughout this article, *el Sur* stands as a metaphor of human suffering produced by the hubris of epistemic superiority, whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity, named languages, and English, here enacted in the schools of the geographical north.

The goal of this decolonial critique of Latinx bilingualism and their education is not simply social justice for racialized Latinx people in the USA, but *epistemic and cognitive justice* (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007; Santos 2018; also Mignolo 2000, 2002, 2007; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012). This article attempts to not just unmask the political violence that is present in US schools and through which Latinx students are objectified as subjects, as some critical theories would do. Following Black feminist scholars such as Collins (2000) and Crenshaw (1989) I look at the *intersectionality* of linguistic, racial, sexual, political, epistemic, economic and spiritual forms of

domination. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) say, referring to decolonial thinking, 'It still means to undo, but the undoing starts from "epistemological decolonization as decoloniality"' (121).

Cognitive justice for students from the Sur in schools from the Norte requires an *ecology of knowledges* (Santos 2007, 2018) that thinks beyond the abyssal line and that engages with what Kathleen Heugh (2021) calls *transknowledging*, 'the process of knowledge exchange and production' (43). To do so, I navigate the cracks in traditional sociolinguistic and socioeducational theories, policies, and practices that ultimately reveal their incompleteness and their role in the production of subjugated subjects. I open up established sociolinguistic and socioeducational theories, as well as traditional research methodology, to new possibilities, in effect introducing a plurality of cognitive options that include the decolonial one.

An inside view: Julia, Gisela, and my own positionality

Decolonial critiques start by unmasking oneself and operating 'con el corazón con razón en la mano' (Anzaldúa 2015:20), that is, by feeling reason in the hand and body, with what Latin American decolonial theorists call a *sentipensar* (Fals Borda 1979; also Escobar 2014). So, I start with positioning myself as a Latina who felt invisible when she did not speak English and yet had to struggle to perceive 'desde la tierra', from the ground, as Arturo Escobar (2014) demands for a *sentipensar*. The issue for me, as well as for Julia and Gisela whom we meet next, became that living in the USA engaged me in a *detritorialization* of my Latin American identity, which then was quickly *reterritorialized* with beliefs and practices from the Anglo North that did not quite fit me (here I am applying the concepts of *detritorialization* and *reterritorialization*, developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), to immigration/refugee movements towards the imperialist metropolis that caused these relocations in the first place). And so, it has taken me a very long time to attempt to delink, however unsuccessfully, from the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 2000) that envelops all of us as learning subjects of dominant epistemologies, and to understand that ontologies are relational, and that 'nada existe en sí, todo inter-existe', [nothing exists in and of itself, everything inter-exists] (Escobar 2014: 58).

Just a stupid Cuban girl

My family left Cuba for New York City when I was 11 years old. I still remember the first words I understood in English when my Latina friend told the teacher: 'Don't worry about her, she's just a stupid Cuban girl'.² My experiences growing up were somewhat schizophrenic. On the one hand, Cubans in the 1960s received preferential treatment in the USA to that of other Latinx groups, a product of being perceived as fleeing Communism; on the other hand, I had no tierra to nurture me, for there were no diplomatic relationships between my two countries, little information, no possibility of travel. I lived in that vacuum, cognizant of not belonging neither here nor there, although fortunately sustained by a Nuyorican community that enabled me to slowly develop a Latina identity.

I was fortunate to have been nurtured intellectually by many Latinx teachers in college and graduate school, and by Joshua A. Fishman, who taught me and worked with me throughout the years. The voices found in Latin American literature, coupled by sociology of language concepts, started opening my eyes to different sociolinguistic and socioeducational options.

I became a bilingual teacher before there was an academic field known as bilingual education. I was privileged to have been prepared as a teacher by progressive teacher educators who focused on 'building on the strength of children'. When I started teaching in a public school in 1971, my students were 90% Puerto Ricans, but the language of instruction was English. It soon became obvious to me that their strength was their home language and cultural practices, so I started teaching 'bilingually' with texts that centred Puerto Rican experiences. I became aware that my students were doing language, as was I—speaking, performing poetry, writing narratives—using more than what textbooks determined to be English or Spanish. I was also privileged to have colleagues such as Cecelia Traugh who introduced me to Descriptive Processes (see Furman and

Traugh 2021) and taught me to describe students closely and holistically ‘from another angle’. As I started re-seeing from Latinx students’ inside perspective, I began to re-see myself, questioning some of the concepts about language and bilingualism that I had been taught.

My bilingual family life as wife, mother, and now grandmother, as well as my constant dialogue with a husband who is a theoretical linguist—Ricardo Otheguy—paved the way for other understandings. Yet, it was not until recently that I had the courage to give up the conceptual external lenses about language and bilingualism which had been fed to me and which proved, time and time again, ineffective in transforming the education of Latinx students. Through the work on decolonial theory and race by Latin American colleagues and some of my students and Latinx colleagues,³ I started to look inward, from my own experiences as a Latina who grew up in a bilingual New York City community and family, and from the perspective of the many bilingual Latinx students and their teachers with whom I have worked in schools. It was then that I started to see, feel, and understand what Escobar (2014) meant by acknowledging the presence of a different world—a world that is enacted day after day by racialized Latinx bilinguals as an infinity of linguistic and cultural practices.

The recollections here are based on what Li Wei (2022) calls LLTT. I *looked* closely, *listened* to the classroom interactions as well as the stories that emerged from *talking* to the students and their teachers, and then have been *thinking* and have been haunted by these stories for years. In selecting these stories to tell readers now, I have taken into consideration not only how they impacted me emotionally but also their importance for educational policies and practices.

Julia: joy and resilience

Julia is a smart, vivacious 10-year-old. She was raised by her 48-year-old grandmother in Puerto Cortés, Honduras, a port city on the north coast in her community of Black Garifunas. Julia’s grandmother spoke Garifuna and Spanish to Julia from the time her mother left to work in New York when Julia was three years old.

Julia’s childhood seems to have been idyllic. She remembers learning how to swim when she was very young. Her grandmother had a small rowboat, and they would go out rowing together often in the laguna. With her grandmother, she also learned to fish and to be grateful for the waters and land in her life. Julia’s grandmother was also a great cook, and Julia can almost taste today the fresh fish she would cook, along with plantains and red beans from her land.

Julia was a precocious child. She learned how to read her grandmother’s Bible when she was four, before going to school. Her mother sent remittances to send Julia to a school in town. In school, she stood out for her ability to declaim poetry. Every year there were poetry declamation contests. Julia was always among the first three galardones/awards. She also wrote poetry, often intermingling her Garifuna for poetic effects. Besides excelling in academics, Julia outshined all other students in drums, energetically producing the beat of the Punta Garifuna music she loved.

In 2020 Julia’s mother and grandmother made the difficult decision that it was time for Julia to reunite with her mother. The time was auspicious, given President Biden’s policy of granting asylum to unaccompanied minors, and the prospect of doing the journey with the grandmother’s close friend. Julia’s mother paid the coyotes \$3,500, and Julia left one Saturday morning accompanied by the grandmother’s friend. They rode on trucks for over 2,500 miles for 10 days. When they arrived in Mexico, Julia knew what to do. She was taken along with others across the Rio Grande on an inflatable raft. She separated from her grandmother’s friend and surrendered to Border Patrol agents. She used her experience declaiming poetry, and with a firm voice and histrionics, she said: ‘I came alone, and I don’t know anyone here. My mother lives in the Bronx and her cell phone number is xxx-xxx-xxxx’. Julia stayed in a group home for three weeks until she was able to fly to New York City to reunite with her mother.

Julia arrived in the Bronx right before the Covid pandemic. She was given an English language assessment and scored low, so she was labelled an ‘English language learner’. Her school did not have a bilingual education programme, so she was placed in an ‘English as a New Language

program' which soon was remote because of the pandemic. Her educational experience in the USA was fraught from the start.

Gisela: a life of music and poetry

Gisela is a petite 16-year-old adolescent. She has two siblings and lives in a suburb of New York City where she was born and where there is a large Mexican American community. Her mother is a nurse, and her father is a mechanic. Gisela's mother was born in Puebla, Mexico, and spoke mostly Spanish to her. Her father, also of Mexican origin, grew up in this New York suburb. Although the father mostly speaks English to Gisela, he also speaks to her in Spanish. Gisela has an older brother who usually speaks English and a younger sister who usually speaks Spanish.

Gisela has many friends, and she spends a lot of time on her iPad making short videos on TikTok with her friends, and sometimes with her Mexican cousins. Her friends speak mostly English, her cousins mostly Spanish; and Gisela's videos connect in messaging, sentiment, and language to those her friends or cousins send her.

In school, Gisela is considered Indigenous because she looks 'Mexican' (for more on these racialization processes, see [Gómez Cervantes 2021](#)). However, Gisela's mother has always told her, following traditions in Mexico, that she is not 'Indigenous' because she does not speak any of the Indigenous Mexican languages.

When Gisela was in elementary school, she joined a Banda, a music group that plays regional Mexican music. Her mother and tíos belonged to that Banda. As she grew up, she became interested in writing and singing Latin ballads which she puts to music. Her friends in Banda and in her community want to be like Gisela, able to write and sing in ways that move some to tears and others to dance.

In first grade, Gisela was given an English language assessment. She was then labelled an 'English language learner', even though she spoke English upon entering school. She was put first in an English as a second language programme, and later, in a new school, in a dual language bilingual programme where instruction was in English and Spanish. Since then, Gisela has not been 'reclassified' as a 'fluent English speaker', and is now classified as a 'Long-Term English Language Learner'. In high school, she remains in a transitional bilingual education programme that is supposed to remediate her lack of English so she could be moved to an English-only programme.

Viewing with external tools: academic language and bilingualism

In schools, Julia and Gisela are not granted the power of validating their own lives, or their linguistic and cultural practices. Instead, schools use tools that reify, rather than efface, the colonial line—academic language and additive bilingualism.

Academic language

Academic English is hailed by US scholars and educators as the panacea for academic and economic success in the USA, even though teachers cannot identify what it is, and scholars have not agreed upon a definition, despite much work ([García and Solorza 2020](#)). Yet, the concept has been useful to make invisible what [Flores \(2020\)](#) calls racialized bilingual students' own language architecture.

The focus on the acquisition of this invented academic language limits the education of Julia and Gisela because it does not acknowledge them as people with talents and with presences, rather than lacks and absences. When Julia declaims her poetry, she becomes an interpreter, an actress, a singer, a musician. She uses not only her voice but also her hands and gestures, her eyes and mouth, her entire body; and sometimes she uses props, including costumes and other visual elements. She includes dance and music, as she intertwines elements of poetry drawn from what is considered the 'Spanish literary canon', with ways of expressing emotions and feelings drawn

from the African rhythms of drums that accompany the Punta dance and music of Honduran origin. She draws from her entire semiotic repertoire, conveying not only the message of the poem but also the emotions and feelings it raises within her. That is, Julia links with her *sentipensar*, her feeling-reason in her hands and body (Fals Borda 1979), selecting poems that are often tied to a form of social protest over the racialization and marginalization of the Garifuna black community in Honduras. In fact, by declaiming poetry, Julia re-exists, as talented and of value.

But Julia's teacher does not see her beyond her black skin and her label as an English language learner. The teacher does not know who the Garifunas are; she has never heard of Punta music; and she is not aware of the tradition of poetry declamation that exists in many schools in Latin America. The teacher does not recognize Julia's passion for the written word, and her interpretation abilities. In her English as a New Language class, the teacher is focused on teaching Julia more English academic vocabulary, ignoring the language with which she already performs. Because the teacher believes that Julia is just a learner of a language that has formal autonomous structures, she pours in vocabulary, washing away and ignoring Julia's strong language and literacy foundation.

Likewise, Gisela's English Language Arts (ELA) high school teacher views her as a poor English language learner and narrows her instruction to vocabulary and grammar, as she drills Gisela on the mechanics of the tasks that she will have to perform for the English graduation exam. Gisela is asked to read only abridged versions of literary texts from a book specifically designed for those labelled as Long-term English language learners which uses simple vocabulary and simplified language structures said to be 'academic'. When Gisela discusses these texts with her peers or the teacher, she is expected to do so in English only. Gisela is also supposed to write essays of the formulaic three-paragraph type, and these essays are always narrative or persuasive, and always in English only. Her ELA teacher is not aware that Gisela composes songs and writes her own lyrics, as well as music. She is not aware of Gisela's gift for using images and metaphors when she writes, or of her talent to write poetry because she only knows Gisela through the ELA curriculum for students who are expected to be poor language users.

In high school, Gisela also takes a subject named Spanish for heritage speakers. Gisela is happy to be in this class, for in this class she has many other Latinx friends. But Gisela struggles with Spanish as a subject in the curriculum. The teacher is always telling Gisela and other bilinguals in the class that their language production 'está mal'. She is expected to produce her oral and written texts only in Spanish, and she is not allowed to use her full repertoire to discuss readings or prepare her written response. The teacher wants Gisela to behave as a monolingual Spanish speaker, even though all her interactions in what is considered Spanish have always been with other bilinguals. The teacher wants to make sure that Gisela acquires 'academic Spanish', restricting Gisela's languaging, and preventing her from drawing from her 'own Spanish'. Gisela's grades in the Spanish class are poor, and her bilingual languaging subsides in this classroom space.

The emphasis on the acquisition of academic language, often understood simply as what racialized bilingual students 'do not have', prevents educators from engaging racialized bilinguals with a challenging education. Instead of pushing students to develop a critical consciousness with regard to their histories and lives, and nurturing their own knowledge production, it reduces education to a language programme, intent on remediating the absences that are produced when educators only acknowledge lives and practices that match those of the dominant white majority. Even when the linguistic and cultural repertoires of racialized Latinx bilingual students are acknowledged in many bilingual programmes, these simply serve as a gentle scaffold toward what is ultimately seen as the only solution—the acquisition of academic English.

Bilingualism

Another seldom understood concept in the education of racialized bilinguals is the concept of bilingualism itself. Based on understandings of language as bounded entities, and of bilingualism as two bounded languages, Latinx students are schooled in different educational programmes.⁴

Despite their differences, the intent of educational programmes for Latinx students is often to eradicate their bilingualism, either rapidly in English as a second language programmes, gradually in transitional bilingual education programmes, or limiting in dual language bilingual programmes, reserving bilingual and educational privilege only for non-racialized English-speaking students. Bilingualism is important to US Latinx students, but the construct of it being either subtractive or additive leaves no room for Latinx students' dynamic bilingual practices (García 2009).

The strict separation of English from Spanish in the now trendy dual-language bilingual education programmes in the USA relies on the sociolinguistic concept of diglossia. This arrangement privileges the acquisition of Spanish by white monolingual students in two-way programmes. Diglossic societal arrangements in which two languages are compartmentalized have been said to have an important role in maintaining minoritized languages (Fishman 1967). However, what remains hidden is the power dimension of the hierarchical diglossic arrangement (Martín-Rojo 2017), most often related to situations of colonial oppression. In schools, these diglossic arrangements disallow any crossing of the abyssal line, thus ensuring that power remains in the hands of those who speak the dominant language and revealing how and why many of these programmes have become instruments of gentrification (Cervantes-Soon et al. 2017; Freire et al. 2021).

The misunderstandings around the bilingualism of racialized bilinguals have led to educational practices that many times harm, rather than help Latinx students. Julia will be expected to read and write English without any so-called 'interference' from Spanish. The interference in her education, however, is being caused by a teacher who does not understand her bilingualism as being neither additive nor subtractive, but dynamic. Gisela has also been harmed by the notion that her acquisition of Spanish and of English has been incomplete (Montrul 2008), although Gisela's repertoire is full and expands in response to meaningful bilingual experiences.

The beliefs in additive bilingualism and diglossia in instruction have also impacted the understandings of assessments for bilingual Latinx students. As we learned before, both Julia and Gisela were given English language assessments that expected them to make meaning of language as if they were monolinguals, not allowing them to process meaning through their own languaging but demanding that they do so through someone else's language practices. When Gisela was in fourth grade, she moved to a neighborhood that had a dual language bilingual programme, where she was also given Spanish language assessments, but no one ever looked at those scores. Even if they had been considered, they would not reveal the full picture of what Gisela knows and is able to do. Expecting Gisela to perform in only one language in assessments requires her to act as if she were two monolinguals in one, which she is not. To understand what she knows and can do and for assessments to be just and equitable, bilingual students would have to be given the same opportunity as monolingual students to use their full repertoire (see Ascenzi-Moreno and Seltzer 2021).

The knowledge of Latinx students is sometimes held in the interstices of their bilingual and transcultural experiences. Additionally, bilingual students simply do not have practice producing language monolingually, for bilinguals are always making sense of their lives in what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has called an 'entre mundos', borderlands produced by the hemorrhages from their wounds/heridas, or as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) say, a lifeblood of two worlds forming a third (111).

An external view of Julia and Gisela

Schools view racialized students through categorizations that are external to them, molded on white middle-class monolingual English- or Spanish-speakers, or elite bilinguals, and on racial categories that negate their complexities. By perceiving Latinx students with tools external to their experiences like academic language and additive bilingualism, schools create *absences*. This contrasts sharply with the inside view of racialized students' experience that enables us to perceive the *presence* of so much that Julia and Gisela can do.

As US Latinas, Julia, and Gisela are both racialized, the product of the historical colonization by Spain, political dominance by the USA, and exploitation by Latin American mostly white elites. Yet, they are differently cast in the USA. Gisela, as we have read, is perceived by teachers as 'Indigenous', 'Indian', and 'Mexican'. Despite having been born in the USA, she is often enregistered as 'illegal' or 'undocumented', as illegality has been racialized (Gómez Cervantes 2021). In contrast, Julia's black skin means that she is often associated with other Afro-Americans, but rarely with being Afro-Latinx. When teachers and students first meet her, they speak to Julia in English, unsure of whether a black body can be considered Latinx or can speak Spanish. Latinx students in the USA often struggle with rigid racial classifications that do not quite fit their own sense of self. In the 2020 US census, 42% of the Latinx population identified as 'some other race', and 33% identified as having 'more than one race', resisting external rigid racial categories.

In schools, the racialization of Latinx students operates through language labels such as that of 'English Language Learners' assigned to Julia and Gisela. This label casts them to the other side of the abyssal line, the side assigned to darkness, produced as unknowing, with only popular or folkloric understandings. There are several sociolinguistic assumptions made about Julia and Gisela that enables the school system to label them in this way. First, there is an assumption that English is a language entity that Julia and Gisela do not have and that they must acquire. Along with the assumption that language is a bounded entity, there is also the supposition that Julia and Gisela speak different varieties of Spanish. Second, there is a belief that Julia and Gisela have a first language, a home language, Spanish, and are learning a second language, English. Third, it is assumed that only a monolingual English or Spanish speaker can be a native speaker and that Latinx bilinguals cannot be so perceived. Fourth, given that named languages are seen as bounded entities, students can only be classified as a learner of English or fluent in English, as if these were boxes that contain all language performances. Putting these four assumptions alongside the inside view of Julia and Gisela that we have described questions these understandings.

First, Julia and Gisela *do* language with a repertoire that includes features of what is said to be Spanish or English, and features of what is said to be Garifuna for Julia, that is, they language effectively with practices that reflect their complex lives. But the school expects them to 'have' an entity called English or Spanish with specific characteristics. A named language is a sociopolitical construction (Makoni and Pennycook 2007). All speakers *do* language, that is, they engage in *linguaging* in ways that are inherently heterogenous, and bilinguals defy boundaries of what have been constituted as 'named languages'. Speakers also defy boundaries of what are considered 'named varieties'. In school, they say that Julia speaks Honduran Spanish, and Gisela speaks Mexican Spanish. But this only refers to some linguistic features. How different features are leveraged in the speaker's acts of communication depends on their social class, race, education, gender, identity, and purpose, as well as their contact in the US with Spanish speakers of different national origins and social characteristics. For example, Julia quickly realizes that features associated with ways of speaking of Hondurans of Garifuna background are stigmatized in the USA because of the speakers' blackness. Although Julia is fiercely proud of the ways in which she speaks Spanish, she begins to understand how racism and language are mutually constituted. US Latinx people are not only racialized by monolingual English speakers but also by other Latinx people.

Second, schools assume that both Julia and Gisela are Spanish speakers learning English in school. However, we learned that Julia also speaks Garifuna, although it was not taught in her school in Honduras. And we also learned that Gisela grew up in a bilingual home. The concepts of an L1/L2 or a mother tongue do not fit their experience. It is impossible to say with certainty which language Julia and Gisela learned first and which second, for they are simultaneous bilinguals. Today, Julia feels that Spanish is the language she uses most, although she identifies more with Garifuna, and others also associate her with Garifuna. Gisela, on the other hand, recognizes English as the language she uses most and best and identifies with, although she is aware that her teachers believe that Spanish is her L1, ignoring the dynamic and socially competent ways in which she leverages her bilingualism.

Third, the label English Language Learner robs someone like Gisela from performing English as a 'native speaker'. Gisela was born in the USA and has spoken English since birth. She is a native speaker of English, even though the raciolinguistic ideologies of many 'white listening subjects' look at her brown skin and hear 'broken' English (see Flores and Rosa 2015; Rosa 2019). Likewise, Gisela is a native speaker of Spanish, despite the Spanish teacher demeaning it as 'Spanglish'. As Bonfiglio (2010) has said: 'The purpose of the notion of linguistic nativity, i.e. of saying that there is a certain "really native" accent, is to anchor power in a certain class of speaker' (641).

Finally, the category of English Language Learner is opposed to that of Fluent English speaker. But as we have learned, Julia and Gisela's languaging does not take place solely with linguistic features said to be from English or Spanish. The semiotic features of their communicative repertoire include what are considered to be different multimodalities—spoken and written language, gestures, singing, dancing, and drawing—as well as features believed to belong to two different named languages. The constructed duality of English Language Learners vs. Fluent English Speakers hides the continuum of practices that make up the communicative repertoire of all bilinguals, and the fact that depending on the task, language performances can vary. By constructing only two separate student linguistic identities, bilingual students who access their full repertoire step into a non-recognized vacuum, a constructed gap that then sinks them further into a hole that produces academic failure. This is especially the case of Gisela, who has now been labelled not only as an 'English Language Learner', but as a 'Long-Term English Language Learner'. And yet, Gisela's preferred language is English, which she uses competently to do school tasks.

The label English language learner is a way of marking the abyssal line that places those on the other side of the line in an existential abyss where what they know is made invisible. Julia's teacher only knows she is an English Language Learner with black skin. Her Garifuna identity and bilingualism remain hidden since she is only perceived as a Spanish speaker. Gisela's teacher only considers her as someone who has taken a 'long-term' to learn English, and thus, as a slow and disengaged student. She has neither heard of Banda; nor does she know that Gisela writes lyrics, composes songs, and is a talented singer and performer. Educating these so-called English Language Learners is then reduced to trying to move them across the abyssal line to become Fluent English speakers, not understanding that this task can never be accomplished given the colonial function of the line and the raciolinguistic ideologies that keep it in check. By casting Julia and Gisela to the other side, white monolingual students are reserved a place of privilege and can successfully be segregated to be educated for positions of power. White monolingual privilege is 'the other side' of racialized bilingual subjugation.

Disregarding a Latinx locus of enunciation

Julia and Gisela's family have moved to el Norte, but they have crossed only a geographical boundary, for they continue to be subjected to the exploitation, disregard, and extraction of resources that el Norte has produced in the geographical Sur, and to which they had also been subjected there. There are many lines of privilege/oppression, and many epistemological souths, in los Nortes and los Sures.

Julia and Gisela have been raised to think of the USA as the land of possibilities. The US educational system prides itself in being 'the great equalizer'. Yet, Julia and Gisela remain mostly misunderstood and miseducated. They are neither estadounidense nor latinoamericana, and therefore, without value. In school, they are considered misfits since they do not fit the institutional language expectations.

The mold of the estadounidense was cast a long time ago. It was meant to contain and give shape only to white people of Anglo-Saxon descent, said to have special virtues and a mandate from God, as enacted in the policy of Manifest Destiny, whereby the USA expanded its territory. Despite Gisela's US birth, she continues to be perceived as a brown Latina who does not speak

English properly and who therefore cannot be an estadounidense. Because of the continued segregation that has persisted in the USA, Gisela lives only among Latinx and African Americans. In fact, she will tell you she does not know any white people except for her teachers. Gisela rebels against a school system that refuses to value her languaging and *conocimientos*, her own knowledge. Anzaldúa (2015) describes *conocimiento* as *spiritual activism*, that is, the deep awareness of political and spiritual work which results in transformation of subjectivities capable of producing their own knowledge from their own locus of enunciation.

An anecdote involving a moment in Julia's classroom that I observed and made note of makes evident how her locus of enunciation is disregarded in her education. One day Julia sits quietly in her ENL class where the teacher is teaching a lesson on comparative adjectives, as she emphasizes the construction 'as + adjective + as'. When Julia hears the teacher say 'as pretty', she says to herself, 'tan bonita' and immediately is transposed to Puerto Cortés, Honduras. Julia recalls 'Margarita', a poem by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío which she has declaimed numerous times. She remembers the way her grandmother said when reciting the poem to her when she was little: 'Tan bonita, Margarita, tan bonita como tú'. She feels how her grandmother used to pat her cheek, as she said, 'as pretty as you'. Julia starts to really see and feel the sea in Darío's poem now turned into Puerto Cortés, where she can smell the orange blossoms in the breeze of the poem/city, and the brightness of the 'estrellas' that Margarita sets sail to cut from the sky in the poem. As she recites the poem to herself, oblivious now to the English adjectives of the lesson, she recalls the last verse of the poem: 'Guarda, niña, un gentil pensamiento/ al que un día te quiso contar un cuento'. ['Keep, my girl, a kind thought/ for the one who one day wanted to tell you a story'.] As she feels the love for her grandmother and thinks about her, she starts to cry inconsolably, while the teacher and her classmates look on surprised. When asked by the teacher, she says, 'Rubén Darío'. But the teacher has never heard of the Nicaraguan poet who initiated the Latin American literary movement of *modernismo* in the nineteenth century. One of her Spanish-speaking classmates translates for the teacher, 'Something about a Rubén'. No one understands the intense feelings, emotions, and *conocimiento* that emanate from this poem for Julia. Whereas the teaching is restricted to what the teacher knows—English and an Anglo-American canon of knowledge—Julia understands and sees new words and worlds only in relationship to her own experience.

In the last verse of the 'Margarita' poem, Julia finds her *sentipensar*, as she enacts a 'gentil pensamiento' for her grandmother. Julia brings to the schools of El Norte a *sentipensamiento* that is a product of what Escobar (2014) calls a *relational ontology* that links what is considered rational with what is thought of as irrational and magical—feelings, intuitions, and emotions. Decolonial feminist thinker María Lugones (2006) has argued that to liberate the *sentipensar*, one must have an appreciation for aesthetics. In Julia's case, a poem brings forth all of her *sentipensar*, and yet, it remains unexpressed and unrecognized because the teacher is only concerned with the adjectives in a curriculum that is supposed to be rational and logic, casting feelings and emotions to the dark/invisible side of the line.

Julia and Gisela can only learn within a *pluriverso* colectivo, and not a *universo* that only validates a unique universal truth of the real and scientific, based, of course, on the coloniality of dominance. The pluriversal, as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) have said 'connects and brings together in relation—as both pluri- and intersversals—local histories, subjectivities, knowledges, narratives, and struggles against the modern/colonial order and for an otherwise' (3). This relational way of seeing the world require an attempt to delink from the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 2002), and to relink to a re-existence.

Both Julia and Gisela live not in El Norte, and no longer in El Sur, but in an *entre mundos* (Anzaldúa 1987)—an in-between space, borderlands that Gloria Anzaldúa has termed with the Nahuatl word, *Nepantla*. Anzaldúa (2015) describes *Nepantla* as 'the point of contact y el lugar between worlds—between imagination and physical existence, between ordinary and nonordinary (spirit) realities' (2). To describe and include these new subjectivities, *otras formas de ver* and see produced in this third space of possibility must be found, other languages beyond simply

the academic English and Spanish recognized in schools, as well as other research methodologies beyond traditional ones.

Decolonizing language and research: the role of translanguaging

How can schools then open space for Julia and Gisela's worlds and practices, for their *sentipensar*, a space for the restitution of knowledge that has been dismissed, as well as border thinking? And how could language and bilingualism in school be reconstituted? Doing the work in Spanish, as some claim, is simply not enough, especially if the content is not going to include the political ontologies that result from the histories of oppression and racialization that US Latinx have experienced. And doing the work bilingually as double monolingualism is certainly not going to help either Julia or Gisela.

For Latinx people living *entre mundos* in *Nepantla*, their words, worlds, and what are considered their two languages are always relational. Enacting their *translanguaging* (Li Wei 2011, 2018; García and Li Wei 2014; Otheguy, García and Reid 2015, 2019), Julia and Gisela act with one unitary repertoire. Translanguaging, understood from a Latin American decolonial stance, is not simply about going across languages or even going from oral and written language across to other multimodalities. The languaging of US Latinx is NOT hybrid; it is *our own*, produced by a bilingual existence that will never fit the boundaries established externally of what is validated as knowledge and standardized language.

Teachers who understand Latinx bilingualism as translanguaging develop pedagogical practices that bring Latinx students some measure of epistemic and cognitive justice (see Sánchez and García 2022). They leverage their knowledge, their lives, their languaging, and assess them within those parameters while extending their repertoire from the inside out. These teachers return the locus of enunciation to the Latinx bilingual community itself, as they educate (for examples of translanguaging pedagogical practices, see, among others, García et al. 2017; City University of New York-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals/CUNY-NYSIEB 2021; Sánchez and García 2022).

Translanguaging conceptualizes language and bilingualism not only as *relational* but also as *political*, engaged in constructing a pluriversal world in which all systems of knowledge can fit. Translanguaging denounces the coloniality of power and knowledge that has been achieved through the construction of named languages and varieties, academic language, and additive bilingualism. As Mignolo (2002) has said, 'an other tongue is the necessary condition for "an other thinking"' (249). For racialized bilingual students, leveraging their translanguaging becomes a process of sociopolitical engagement that enables them to produce their own transknowledging in their *entre mundos*. Language and bilingualism are much more than the ways in which they have been constructed in schools. To realize the potential of racialized Latinx bilinguals, one must uncover and name the *intersectionalities* of linguistic, racial, sexual, political, epistemic, economic, and spiritual forms of domination.

To uncover and name these forms of domination requires that researchers also decolonize their own understandings of research. To exercise their *sentipensar*, researchers must revisit their own methodological assumptions and, as Lee (2022) has said, 'translanguage research methodologies' (3).

A decolonial approach to the education and research of racialized bilinguals imbues with intellectual authority what has been considered spiritual, mythical, folkloric, popular, incomplete, broken, corrupted, or merely descriptive. That is, a decolonial sociolinguistic educational and research approach sheds light on the language and *conocimientos* that racialized bilingual students already have by opening up a space to observe and describe naturally occurring processes of languaging, teaching, and learning. It requires scholars to depict Latinx bilingual students' knowledge and linguistic practice from the inside perspective of the students themselves. It urges Latinx racialized bilingual students to produce their own *conocimiento* by leveraging their translanguaging and their transknowledging (for more on this, see Sánchez and García 2022).

Conclusion

The work to decolonize language and education within institutions of the state is hard work. As Anzaldúa says (2015), ‘You have to plunge your hands into la masa, into embodied practical material spiritual political acts’ (89). These acts include questioning the foundations of the knowledge systems that have been validated by research methods that ‘arose out of a colonial metropolitan reading of the world’ (Ndhlovu 2017: 10). The space created by translanguaging research methodologies enables scholars to construct a new episteme of language and bilingualism that would, as the Zapatistas said, ‘crear un mundo en donde quepan muchos mundos’, where many worlds would fit. The language education work becomes, as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) remind us: ‘a process and project in continuous insurgence, movement, and construction, a conscious action, radical activity, and praxis-based tool of affirmation, correlation and transformation’ (59).

The decolonial option to educate Latinx bilinguals entices us to detach from the overall structure of knowledge about language and bilingualism that are products of external and colonial western epistemologies and their research methodologies. Only intimate relationships with racialized bilingual lives and close descriptions of their ways of *doings* can reveal their strengths. An inside view shows the cracks in the knowledge system through which we have viewed and studied racialized bilingual students. This then creates the possibility of engaging in a slow epistemic reconstitution of ways of thinking and doing language and bilingualism with *our own* tools. This is what this article has tried to do. The openings are small, the tension and discomfort remains, and the transformation is slow, but as Latinx bilingual students, their teachers, and scholars claim their own locus of enunciation, we can tell a different Latinx story— one that opens up possibilities for a cognitively just future.

Notes

¹ Both names are pseudonyms.

² For more on my autobiography, see García (2021).

³ I must acknowledge here especially my Brazilian colleague, Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza, who initiated me in Latin American decolonial theory; and my many doctoral students who are too numerous to mention and who have taught me so much.

⁴ Most Latinx students are in schools that do not acknowledge their different histories, languaging, or cultural practices. More attention to the differing needs of Latinx students is paid when Latinx students have been classified as ‘English Language Learners’. In New York, most of these emergent bilinguals are in programmes called *English as a new language* (ENL), in which only English is typically used. A second type of programme for Latinx emergent bilinguals are *transitional bilingual education programmes*. These programmes use students’ bilingualism as a bridge to full acquisition of English and are based, like ESL programmes, on subtractive bilingualism assumptions that move students towards performances in English only. On the other hand, the objective of a now trendy type of bilingual education programme, *dual language* (also called dual immersion or two-way immersion) is supposedly that of additive bilingualism, meant to produce students who are fully bilingual and biliterate, although many times they privilege the learning of Spanish by non-Latinx students.

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