

Article

Racialized Sociolinguistic Processes in the Spanish Learning Journeys of Non-Latinxs in the U.S.

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Abstract: Sociolinguistic frameworks of race have not been widely applied to non-Latinx Spanish learners in the United States. Consequently, there is limited insight into the impact of race on different learners' use of Spanish in their communities, including the local or national raciolinguistic dynamics between Latinxs and non-Latinxs that inform these outcomes. This article examines ethnographic interviews of women recounting interactions and experiences of using Spanish in different U.S. contexts. In their accounts, I identify three racialized sociolinguistic processes central to their Spanish learning journeys, which I title *racialized positionality*, *racialized embodiment*, and *indexical fields of racialization*. These processes highlight, respectively, (1) the raciolinguistic dynamics enacted by Spanish language usage in the U.S. by non-Latinxs, (2) the sociolinguistic input a learner comes across as raciogendered subjects, and (3) the social meaning they ascribe to racialized terms and discourses in Spanish. As critical approaches to Spanish language learning and pedagogy continue to emerge, more research is warranted on these three processes to trace the impact of race on Spanish language learning and use.

Keywords: raciolinguistics; sociolinguistics; Spanish learners; Spanish in the U.S.; positionality; embodiment; indexical fields; critical pedagogy



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1. Introduction

Race as a category, racialization as a process, and racism as a system of inequality are central to critical frameworks in sociolinguistics (Alim et al. 2016), and these topics have been widely applied to research examining how Latinx bilingualism is evaluated in U.S. education and society. For instance, significant attention has been paid to the social and institutional discourses that frame Spanish/English bilingualism in ways that Clemons (2022) calls the “benefit versus burden paradox”. That is, Spanish/English bilingualism becomes a burden to U.S. institutions when it is framed as a tool for Latinx identity formation and communal solidarity. Yet, it becomes a benefit when detached from localized Latinidad and framed as a commodifiable resource in a neoliberal language learning marketplace (Flores 2016; Subtirelu 2017; Mena and García 2021). Central to the discourses that these works examine is the prevalence of raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores and Rosa 2015; Rosa and Flores 2017) or beliefs of the co-naturalization of language and race. These ideologies are used to form an inextricable link between Spanish and Latinidad (Davis and Moore 2014; Rosa 2018); between Latinidad and non-white racialization (Maldonado 2009; Ramirez and Peterson 2020; Baca Zinn and Wells 2023); and between anti-Latinx racism and Spanish language attitudes, planning, and policy (García 2009; García and Otheguy 2014; Flores and Rosa 2015; Licata 2021).

Clearly, issues of race are deeply rooted in the usage of Spanish and the social perception of Spanish speakers in the United States. Yet, few studies examine the impact of this raciolinguistic context on the Spanish learning journeys of non-Latinxs in the U.S. (Exford 2023) despite Spanish being the most studied language across racial groups in the nation (Goldberg et al. 2015). Filling this gap through sociolinguistic approaches will illuminate non-Latinx experiences of acquiring and using Spanish in a nation where the language is

racialized distinctly from their own identities. This includes understanding how localized racial dynamics impact their engagement with Latinx cultures, how their non-Latinx identities impact their social interactions with Spanish speakers, and even how their linguistic repertoires as racialized people clash with notions of race in Spanish-speaking contexts (e.g., racial terminology, discourses of racism, etc.).

In this article, I examine ethnographic interviews I collected of Spanish learners from different racial backgrounds who are at different stages in their Spanish learning journeys. Following Anya (2016), these learners recall interactions, discourses, and participation within communities of practice. Through a discursive analysis, I focus on three learners whose stories I use to capture three racialized sociolinguistic processes of Spanish learning that I call *racialized positionality*, *racialized embodiment*, and *indexical fields of racialization*. I define and exemplify my analysis of each process below. I close with a discussion on the theoretical and pedagogical benefits of garnering more research on these three processes.

2. Sociolinguistic Approaches to Race in Spanish Language Learning and Education

At present, there is substantial research that documents a range of variables that condition the sociolinguistic variation that L2 Spanish learners acquire and use. Some of these variables include the roles of identity, agency, social interaction, context of acquisition, and linguistic variation (see Lynch 2015 for a synthesis of this work). However, in most of these studies, Spanish learners are imagined as monolingual and non-racialized subjects, or the participants' linguistic and ethnoracial backgrounds are omitted. These decisions (in)advertently homogenize L2 learners, conflate English speakers with whiteness and monolingualism, and construct fixed notions about how these learners' identities and linguistic experiences are positioned in relation to Spanish and Spanish speakers.

Yet, many scholars have demonstrated the extensive theoretical benefits of second language acquisition (SLA) when the homogenization of U.S. English speakers is deliberately avoided, and issues of race are explicitly engaged (Flores and Rosa 2019; Austin 2022; Licata et al. 2023). For example, Calhoun (2012) examines Black learners acquiring additive languages and finds that in some of their L2 contexts, these learners use different tools to embody Blackness, and in others, they abandon those tools to foreground other parts of their identities. She concludes that race is a complex and malleable aspect of one's identity that even learners enact and perform contextually through linguistic and other semiotic forms. Anya's (2016) groundbreaking project on Black students' study abroad experiences found that their acquisition of Portuguese was heavily mediated by their Blackness. That is, their identities influenced the experiences that they needed language to convey as well as the spaces that they frequented to acquire and use their Portuguese (e.g., Black barbershops/hair salons or certain nightclubs). As such, when social identities like race are theorized beyond a variable or demographic category, new pathways open to understanding the complexity of SLA phenomena.

Centering localized and global issues of race in Spanish language learning and use also has applied benefits. Specifically, revelations about the impact of race have created more opportunities to examine unchallenged raciolinguistic ideologies in the curriculum, pedagogy, and policy of different language programs, including L2 Spanish (Padilla and Vana 2022; Licata et al. 2023), Spanish as a heritage language (Leeman 2005, 2012, 2015; Lacorte and Magro 2022), and bilingual education or dual immersion (Flores and García 2017; Cioè-Peña 2021; Frieson 2022). As a result of these contributions, many researchers and educators have championed critical sociolinguistic approaches in Spanish education (Leeman 2014; Leeman and Serafini 2016; Licata et al. 2023) to highlight the co-construction of language, identity, and power in all aspects of "linguaging" or a multimodal discursive activity through which speakers can signify their identities in relation to others (García 2010).

As an example, one prominent approach is Critical Language Awareness (CLA), a pedagogical framework that foregrounds how power is imbued in languages, linguistic varieties, and speakers (Fairclough 1992). Proponents of CLA in Spanish language education have predominately focused on engaging heritage speakers to challenge linguis-

tic hierarchies in Spanish-speaking communities and the stigmatization of U.S. Latinxs' translinguistic practices (Holguín Mendoza 2018; Leeman 2018; Loza and Beaudrie 2021; Beaudrie et al. 2021; Beaudrie and Wilson 2022; Gómez García 2022). Other scholars are optimistic that CLA and similar approaches can raise L2 learners' awareness of language variation, language ideologies, and linguistic discrimination that impact Spanish speakers locally and globally (Quan 2020, 2021), albeit the framework has predominantly assumed white, monolingual learners. Accordingly, we have limited knowledge of how Spanish learners of color, for instance, see their role in the marginalization of Spanish and Spanish speakers in some U.S. contexts.

Moving forward, researchers and educators must continue to restructure and reconceptualize Spanish language education in ways that help learners understand and navigate the shifting raciolinguistic contexts of Spanish and Spanish speakers in different parts of the United States (Baralt et al. 2020, 2022; Exford 2023). In *Spanish So White*, Schwartz (2023) calls for a "radical rethinking" of what it means for non-Latinx white people to learn, teach, and speak Spanish in this country (p. 9). He encourages students and educators to have "inconvenient discussions of race" through critical linguistic autoethnographies or an analysis of one's language practices as a social, cultural, and political being. Following suit, I encourage an expansion of this endeavor to all non-Latinxs. This effort must involve an intentional and explicit engagement with discourses, experiences, and perceptions of race that learners (1) bring to their Spanish learning journeys and (2) encounter in the Spanish-speaking contexts they navigate. Doing so can inform critical research analyses and pedagogy that center the multitude of raciolinguistic identities and experiences that influence how learners across racial groups navigate learning and using Spanish across the U.S. and beyond.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data used in this article are part of a larger dataset I began collecting in 2021 for a series of projects on non-Latinxs navigating different aspects of identity in their Spanish learning journeys.¹ As a Black American woman who acquired Spanish as an additive language, I notice that my comfort with speaking Spanish in the U.S. shifts based on location and the demographics of Latinxs in the area. For instance, I typically feel more comfortable using Spanish in parts of New York or Florida where there are large amounts of AfroLatinxs. In these places, I can use Spanish when necessary for functional purposes without having to explain how I know Spanish. In places where AfroLatinxs are fewer like California, using Spanish as a Black person is typically met with shock and curiosity in almost every interaction, which at times I prefer to avoid.

Moreover, I have noticed that I prefer Caribbean or coastal varieties of Spanish over Peninsular Spanish or varieties in the Southern Cone. While I enjoy interacting with all, the former varieties have more speakers of African descent. For me, this gives me a greater connection to those varieties. Specifically, Caribbean and coastal varieties of Spanish often experience similar forms of ridicule as Black languages in the Americas. By connecting with those varieties, I can establish solidarity against the related raciolinguistic ideologies that stigmatize my language practices as a Black person in the United States. Upon reflection, I have come to see the significant impact of race in my interactions with Latinx communities and in my sociolinguistic choices of when, how, and why I used Spanish. To that end, I came to this project looking to theorize the impact of race on the Spanish learning journeys of other U.S. learners.

My requirements for participation were that learners lived in the United States, were 18 years or older, did not identify as Latinx or Hispanic, and were learning Spanish to become fluent or proficient. At the time this article was prepared, I had collected 18 interviews with learners who identified as Asian, Black, or white. All learners were personal contacts of mine or undergraduate students at either my graduate institution in southern California or a Historically Black University in South Florida where I worked with Spanish educators. Learners' level of proficiency and experiences with Spanish speakers varied widely—from

beginners to advanced and from not growing up around Spanish speakers to hearing and seeing Spanish regularly in their hometowns. The diverse representation of these learners permits an analysis that can uncover the range of real-life ways that race, racialization, and racism impact non-Latinx Spanish learners in the U.S. regardless of ethnoracial background or stage of acquisition.

For this article, I focus on three learners—Emerson, Jada, and Andrea—who I discuss further in the following section. I chose to highlight these three because they shared experiences that are emblematic of the three racialized sociolinguistic processes. I engaged each participant in a semi-structured, one-on-one, ethnographic interview. An ethnographic interview collects information about a respondent's perspective or perception of a topic (e.g., concept, phenomenon, event, or experience). The discourses and linguistic features that respondents use in their narratives are examined and connected to macro-sociocultural ideologies (De Fina 2019). Each interview was recorded through Zoom and lasted from 1 h to 1 h and 45 min. During this time, we discussed a range of topics regarding their Spanish learning journeys including their experiences of studying Spanish formally or informally, their experiences of using Spanish outside of the classroom, and how they understand their racial identity in relation to Latinxs, among other topics.

When collecting learners' accounts to examine language learning processes and experiences, Pavlenko (2007) encourages going beyond a "content analysis" that solely identifies themes or patterns based on what the participants mention. Alongside content, the analysis should examine *context* such as unique information about the speakers and macro-social ideologies that inform the topics being discussed. The analysis should also include *form* such as the linguistic features and structures used by participants to construct their responses. My approach to content was first to identify emerging themes surrounding the impact of race, racialization, or racism on any experiences that learners shared with me during the interviews. The themes that emerged were positionality, embodiment, and indexicality, all of which became the focus of my analysis and informed the names of the racialized sociolinguistic processes that I define below.

I approached context by considering the details that my participants foregrounded. For instance, some learners referenced their geographic context such as the demographics of their neighborhood or the city in which they lived. Additionally, I considered context by identifying macro-social discourses that inform the experiences learners shared. As an example, one learner in the larger dataset shared that at their high school, non-Latinxs and Latinxs who spoke Spanish regularly did not socialize with each other. These dynamics can be framed by several macro-social discourses or studies on intercultural tensions informed by language and race.

Lastly, as a sociocultural linguist, my approach to form included critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) to consider the linguistic, embodied, and discursive tools that participants used to shape the meaning of the content in their narratives. Some examples include how they took epistemic stances such as what they know or believe to be true (Du Bois 2007), how they embodied their narratives through facial expressions, gaze, and other gestures (Müller et al. 2013), and how they expressed their narratives through deixis, pauses/silence, laughter, shifts in clauses, hedges, discourse markers, shifts in phonation (e.g., whisper, falsetto, creaky voice), and more (Morgan 1991; van Dijk 1993, 2006; Fraser 2010). Table 1 is an overview of my analytical approach.

Table 1. Analytical approach to content, context, and form in learners’ narratives.

Analytical Approach	Description	Examples
Content Analysis	Emerging themes in the narratives surrounding the impact of race, racialization, or racism	Emerging themes including—but not limited to—positionality, embodiment, and indexicality
Contextual Analysis	Details about the participant/their experiences or macro-social discourses that inform the conversation	References to place and space (learners’ geographic context), discourses of linguistic appropriation, dynamics between Latinxs and non-Latinxs, discourses of race in the U.S. and Latin America, etc.
Structural Analysis of Linguistic and Embodied Forms	How participants convey their narratives through embodied and linguistic features	Epistemic and affective stances; facial expressions, gaze, and other gestures; deixis, pauses/silence, laughter, truncation, hedges, voice modality, and discourse markers

I reviewed each interview, and I coded extracts by the themes that emerged (positionality, embodiment, and indexicality). Afterward, I transcribed extracts using a basic-level transcription method to capture elements of discourse that are described in Table 1. The conventions I followed for this interpretive process are outlined in Table 2, which is immediately followed by the analysis.

Table 2. Transcript conventions *.

Line Break	Boundaries based on pause length
.	Falling intonation
,	Brief pause in continued speech
?	Rising intonation at end of clause (may or may not be a question)
↑	Shifting modality (e.g., creaky voice, slowed speech, falsetto, other inflections) of a specific word within a line break
-	Self-interruption or truncation
:	Elongated vowel
@	Pulses of laughter
Text in italics	Spanish words
Text in bold	For emphasis by researcher
[TEXT]	Overlap between interlocutors
/TEXT /	Smiley language
((TEXT))	Researcher notes or descriptions of non-verbal actions

* These conventions were adapted from [Du Bois et al. \(1993\)](#) and [Du Bois \(2022\)](#).

4. Racialized Sociolinguistic Processes in Learners’ Narratives

As a result of my analysis, I found that all three learners navigated three racialized sociolinguistic practices: racialized positionality, racialized embodiment, and indexical fields of racialization. While all learners provided accounts that highlight each process, for analytical convenience and demonstration, I use the accounts of one learner per process—a point to which I return in the discussion.

4.1. Emerson and Racialized Positionality: Navigating the Sociopolitical Landscape of Using Spanish as a White Learner

I define racialized positionality as a process by which learners describe how racial identity impacts their engagement with Latinx communities. To identify this process, I specifically underscore learners’ perceptions of how issues of race and power arise when

using Spanish as non-Latinx people. Positionality has roots in feminist theory (Alcoff 2005), and it is now a principal topic in anthropology and qualitative research across disciplines, including STEM fields and medical training programs (Rushton 2022; Songin-Mokrzan 2023; Folkes 2023; Strimel et al. 2023). Fundamental to the inception and current explorations of positionality is the role of context and power in understanding the relationship between social identities.

Over time, the exploration of positionality has become a standard practice for scholars who carry out ethnographic or community-engaged research. For instance, some journals encourage a “positionality statement” in published articles in which the researcher critically examines the impact of their identity and power in their work, such as the researcher’s cultural biases, nation-specific ethical values, or their relationship to the communities they study.² Some scholars assert that centering researcher positionality as a site of inquiry has theoretical and empirical benefits (Muhammad et al. 2015; Muwwakkil 2023). Per these scholars, positionality impacts the entire research process, allowing scholars to theorize the affordances and limitations of their identities in their research contexts.

For L2 learning in the U.S., the Douglas Fir Group states that learners experience either difficulty or ease when practicing the language in a natural community context due to “how their ascribed race, ethnicity, gender, or social class” are positioned toward native speakers (The Douglas Fir Group 2016, p. 32). This means that different learners are uniquely positioned in relation to community members of the language they study, and these unique positionings will impact their community engagement, social interaction, and linguistic input. Yet, more empirical research is needed to capture these dynamics. In this study, this reality is exemplified in the narrative of a learner I call Emerson. Specifically, she confronts racialized positionality to navigate issues of power in her sociolinguistic engagement with Spanish speakers.

Emerson is a white woman who was in her early 20s during the time of the interview. At this time, she was an undergraduate student at my graduate institution who heard about my study from her Spanish professor. I had not met Emerson prior to her interview, but she was very interactive, making the interview style conversational. She described her ethnoracial background as Anglo-Saxon and indicated completing intermediate-level Spanish courses. She grew up in an affluent neighborhood in Northern California where Latinx communities were scarce, but they were larger in neighboring cities. Like many of the white learners I interviewed, Emerson expressed wanting to become fluent in Spanish because it is especially useful in the U.S. where there are many Spanish speakers. Yet, when we discussed her experiences of speaking Spanish outside of the classroom, she (like many other learners) expressed having various opportunities but seldom taking them. That is, even though one of their goals of learning Spanish is to communicate with America’s large Spanish-speaking population, they consistently made little use of it in the United States. For Emerson, most of her opportunities to use Spanish were with co-workers or during encounters with service workers. In Excerpt 1, she explains why she avoided using Spanish during these opportunities.

Excerpt 1: *It feels like crossing a boundary.*

1. I don’t want to assume that they don’t-
2. or I don’t want to give the implication that I assume they don’t speak English.
3. or:
4. like.
5. That.
6. I think they’re not understanding me to the extent that I need to speak to them in **their** language for them to get what I’m saying.
7. Cuz I feel like that could be an implication that comes with me switching to Spanish. ((4 lines omitted))
8. And I guess like,
9. by like using **their** language,
10. it feels maybe kind of,

11. I don't know if appropriative↑ is the right word.
12. But I guess it just feels like crossing a boundary in terms of like,
13. this is **their** thing.
14. I don't know if they just want this random person to like assume that they can be in on it.

In this response, Emerson frames Latinxs in her context (California) as having “linguistic ownership” (Bucholtz and Zimman 2019) over Spanish. That is, despite acquiring Spanish to use it with native speakers, she describes it as an exclusive community-internal practice. For instance, she consistently refers to Spanish as “their [Latinxs] language” (lines 6, 9, and 13) and “their thing”. Moreover, she calls herself “a random person” (line 14) or someone with no connection to those communities, and therefore she runs the risk of “crossing a boundary” (line 12) by trying to “be in on it” (line 14). This conundrum underscores the issues with the aforementioned paradox described by Clemons (2022). That is, although Spanish can be considered a social and economic resource for non-Latinxs, deploying this resource requires tact because the social meaning and cultural functions of Spanish in the U.S. usually cannot be separated from Latinidad. In California where Emerson lives, the social and political histories of racializing Latinxs have formed a clear ideological distinction and unequal power dynamic between Latinidad and whiteness (Ramírez and Peterson 2020). Seemingly, Emerson alludes to these localized histories and unequal dynamics as she begins to carefully consider how her race might position her to Latinxs, which may include appropriation (line 11) or racist assumptions about Latinxs’ linguistic capabilities (line 2 “I don’t want to give the implication that I assume they don’t speak English”). Turning to Excerpt 2, Emerson indicates the sociolinguistic identity of her interlocutor as a factor in deciding when to engage in Spanish.

Excerpt 2: *That would be the weirdest thing.*

1. but I’ve been told by other people like,
2. oh no people would really appreciate it if you spoke to them in Spanish like,
3. They like it when foreigners try to like demonstrate @like
4. @proficiency or that they practice Spanish.
5. So like I feel like,
6. that when people say that they’re usually gearing it towards people,
7. who speak Spanish who are **older** than me.
8. But I can’t imagine doing that to a **peer** like somebody **my age**.
9. I can’t like @ima-
10. /like that would be the **weirdest** thing ever /
11. And to someone who’s **younger than me** I feel like that would be just as **weird**.
12. But maybe like just **confusing** for the younger person.
13. Like what i-
14. what is going @on @@

Alongside being a community-internal practice, Emerson observes Spanish as a language that cannot be used particularly among peers if one is not Latinx. Moreover, she describes using Spanish with someone significantly younger than her as “weird” (lines 10 and 11) and potentially “confusing for the younger person” (line 12). Put differently, she predicts that using Spanish as a non-Latina could adopt a similar function as *Mock Spanish*—a hyper-anglicized register that draws upon humor and racist tropes of Latinxs to reinforce white hegemony and Latinx othering (Hill 1998, 2008, 2009; Barrett 2006). To that end, using Spanish would be offensive and would impede—as opposed to facilitate—communication.

Emerson’s discomfort with how using Spanish may position her can also be seen in the transcript through her quick and sporadic laughter such as on line 5 when she mentions Spanish “proficiency” by non-Latinxs and again on lines 9 and 14 when she thinks about using Spanish with a peer or someone younger than her. To avoid positioning herself as demeaning or appropriative, Emerson expresses feeling more comfortable speaking Spanish to people who are older than her and who likely prefer Spanish due to limited

English proficiency. Presumably, age balances the unequal social dynamic, and language proficiency warrants or legitimizes her use of Spanish over English. In the final excerpt, I analyze for Emerson, she explains how these social dynamics subsided when she was in Spain.

Excerpt 3: *That's not a thing in Spain.*

1. When we were talking about like opportunities for me to speak Spanish in the United States.
2. And like the weirdness around it.
3. /I guess is like definitely not a thing @in @Spain./
4. Just because um.
5. It's a mostly **white country** and also like because we're in a country where its-
6. Where the **dominant language** is Spanish.
7. It would make sense to speak Spanish.

In Excerpt 3, Emerson states that the “weirdness” she experiences using Spanish in the U.S.” is definitely not a thing in Spain” (line 3). This shift in feeling can be explained by the different social meanings, cultural functions, and political power of Spanish and Spanish speakers in each place. Primarily, by transitioning from the U.S. to Spain, Spanish ceases to have a racialized association with brown Latinidad. Instead, it becomes associated with white/European Hispanidad. Moreover, Spanish is no longer a minoritized, community-internal practice but a national or “dominant language” (line 6). As such, transitioning between the two nations comes with a difference in Emerson’s positionality with Spanish-speaking communities that are informed by different raciolinguistic logics and histories. To that end, her use of Spanish becomes neutralized and will no longer evoke appropriation or reinforce existing sociopolitical tensions related to language and identity in the United States.

4.2. Jada and Racialized Embodiment: Navigating the Racialized Exotification of Generic Asian Vocatives

Another process that emerged from the data is racialized embodiment, which I define as a process by which learners recall how their forms of embodiment—particularly physical and contextually symbolic indicators of ethnoracial identity—are drawn upon during social interaction with Spanish speakers. Embodiment is a prominent site of inquiry in linguistic anthropology, and it is emerging in qualitative approaches to sociolinguistics research. For instance, [Bucholtz and Hall \(2016\)](#) call for an “embodied sociolinguistics”, asserting that “bodies and embodiment are central to the production, perception, and social interpretation of language”. That is, bodies not only physically produce language, but bodies enter the semiotic realm through language. Sociolinguistics research that centralizes embodiment may identify how gendered, racialized, or classed bodies and personas (among others) are indexed through voice, dialect, or discourse ([Podesva 2007](#); [Mendoza-Denton 2008, 2011](#); [Zimman 2013](#)). Other research may examine the social meaning of linguistic forms when they are produced by certain bodies ([Calder and King 2022](#)) or how the body becomes a site of context that informs the presence of linguistic variation ([Exford 2023](#)). Such themes were apparent in the data and will be demonstrated by the experience of a learner I call Jada.

Jada is a Korean American woman who was in her early 30s during the time of the interview. She is from Southern California and indicated having an advanced level of Spanish proficiency. During the interview, she shared that she began learning Spanish in high school to become fluent because she was fascinated by languages, and Mexican culture was prominent in her area. She practiced Spanish occasionally with friends and people in her community, including with people during service encounters. Like Emerson, Jada was sometimes reluctant to use Spanish outside of the classroom. However, Jada’s hesitancy resembled foreign language anxiety ([Horwitz et al. 1986](#); [Horwitz and Young 1991](#)) because she feared making an error while Emerson feared evoking racialized tensions. Jada recalled that her Spanish-speaking interlocutors would be impressed by her Spanish. Moreover, she could not recall instances where she perceived them taking offense.

Jada mentioned traveling to Latin America—namely Argentina and Mexico—for study abroad, work, and leisure. On many occasions, she left these trips with vivid memories of how her race was evoked in ways that were much less typical during her Spanish interactions in her California context. Specifically, as a woman with an East Asian background, she has been addressed with the generic vocative, *china* or *chinita* (Chinese [fem.], Chinese [fem.; diminutive]; henceforth, *chin(it)a*). *Chino/a/x* has a few different referential meanings in Spanish, which have emerged from different sociohistorical contexts.³ However, in the interview, we attended to the following meanings: a person of Chinese descent and a generic term to refer to all Asian people (see [Stephens 1989](#)). In the excerpts analyzed below, Jada describes how common it is to be addressed as generic *chin(it)a* due to her racialized embodiment, and how she has interpreted this practice as an Asian American woman.

Excerpt 4: *It feels gendered and lowkey sexualized.*

1. When I have studied abroad for instance.
2. Like it's not uncommon for me to be called like *china* or even worse *chinita*.
3. And like I remember having really overt conversations with people who are native Spanish speakers about this,
4. Right.
5. And I've gotten different um.
6. Uh explanations.
(6 lines omitted))
7. Like it always feels gendered and like lowkey like also sexualized when people say like *china* or *chinita*.
8. Right.
9. And tha- that's the part that has actually felt belittling to me?
10. And I definitely gaslit myself be- being,
11. Like oh I'm being too sensitive as like someone with an American @politics sensibility,
12. /Like political sensibility./
(3 lines omitted))
13. But like I would say like most of the time it's always been like.
14. Very on the low very kind of creepy @
15. And always- usually from men.

In Excerpt 4, Jada discusses experiences being called *chin(it)a*, which happened predominantly during instances of catcalling or street harassment (cf. [Twombly 1995](#) on piropos in a study abroad context). She mentions having “overt conversations” with Spanish speakers to better understand generic *chin(it)a* as a practice (line 3), and she received mixed receptions (lines 5 and 6). Although not included, I asked her to clarify with whom she had these overt conversations, and she stated with acquaintances, friends, and colleagues in the U.S. and in Mexico. In some of the responses, people stated that generic *chino/a/x* is solely a term of endearment rooted in a larger Latinx cultural practice in which people can be addressed by their hair/skin color or another salient physical characteristic (e.g., *morena* [brown girl, brunette], *flaco* [skinny, masc.]). In other responses, some native speakers problematized generic *chino/a/x*, calling it an ignorant, insensitive, and anti-Asian practice. Relying on her own experiences, Jada describes feeling “belittled” (line 9) by generic *chin(it)a*. Despite this feeling, she becomes critical of her own interpretation of these vocatives. She positions herself as an outsider who might be interpreting the vocative through an “American political sensibility” (line 11) as a comparable practice would be socially unacceptable in the United States. Jada's stance shows a concern with enacting a form of linguistic imperialism, ([Phillipson 1992, 2013](#)) or an exertion of linguistic power over another group. That is, she shows hesitance to impose U.S. or English-speaking norms onto social interactions in Latin America or in Spanish. Yet, by indicating the gender and the voice modality of her interlocutors (“on the low”, “creepy”, and “from men” lines 14

and 15), it was revealed that her experiences have taught her to interpret this practice as a form of exotified sexualization and not just an endearing vocative.

In Excerpt 3 below, Jada talks about correcting those who have addressed her with generic *chin(it)a* by sharing that her ethnic background is Korean American and not Chinese in hopes they will discontinue addressing her as such.

Excerpt 5: *That's all the same to me.*

1. I think what **blew my mind** a little bit was when I would um correct people one on one.
2. Like oh um.
3. Like I am actually Korean or Korean American,
4. and they would still refuse to call me Korean you know.
5. And they were like oh that's all-
6. That's all the same to me. ((deepens voice, enregistering a jock))
7. And I'm like OK well then **that just feels really icky.**
8. **That feels gross.**

Jada shares the surprise she felt when people continued to evoke her racialized embodiment in inaccurate ways ("what blew my mind" line 1). She describes people's dismissal of distinguishing between Asian ethnicities as "icky" and "gross" (lines 7 and 8). Therefore, in addition to experiencing this practice as a form of sexualization and exotification, this practice also appeared to disregard the heterogeneity of Asian ethnicities. Regardless of the social meanings and cultural functions of generic *chin(it)a* in the U.S. or Latin America, Jada is subjected to these vocatives because of how her racialized embodiment as a woman of East Asian descent has been socially evaluated and linguistically defined in some of the Spanish-speaking contexts she has occupied.

4.3. Andrea and Indexical Fields of Racialization: Navigating the Social Meaning of Black Identity Labels

The final process that emerged from the data is indexical fields of racialization, which I define as a process by which learners use their indexical fields of racial terms/concepts in English or the U.S. to develop the social meanings of comparable Spanish terms or discourses. The indexical field (Eckert 2008) is a prominent theory of social meaning in sociolinguistics. It examines linguistic variation via its stylistic function in a situated context. Some studies examine sociolinguistic variation by identifying a one-to-one correlation between linguistic form and social category. For example, the pronominal *tú* is used in informal/solidarity contexts and *usted* is used in formal/power contexts. The indexical field, on the other hand, is a framework in which linguistic forms have a multitude of potential meanings or a "field of indexes" that derive from context and are ideologically linked to social categories such as regionality, gender, race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, degrees of formality, and more. Through this framework, the distributions of pronominal *tú* and *usted*, for example, are not inherently bound to informal and formal contexts, respectively. Rather, these forms might index, point to, or signify informality/formality and can therefore be used creatively by speakers in any context to establish different degrees of formality. As an example, Moyna and Rivera-Mills (2016) mentions that *usted* can be used in many Spanish varieties to console a hurt or sad child, which is a demographic that is not typically the recipient of a formal pronoun due to age. However, the use of *usted* in this context has an indexical meaning of strength or maturity that may reassure the young child in a vulnerable state, revealing the creative and fluid functions of linguistic forms and their potential social meanings.

For linguistic anthropologists, any linguistic or semiotic form can have an indexical field, which includes everything from phonemes and words to hairstyles and clothing. For instance, the racial labels Black and African American have different indexical fields in U.S. discourses (Hall 2014). In Hall et al.'s (2015) study of white American biases towards the terms Black and African American, they find that white people are more likely to think favorably of a person identified as African American over one described as Black. Therefore,

while both terms may have the same referential meaning in certain contexts, their repeated usage in certain discourses over time has created different indexical meanings for each term. These indexes, though, are not the same in Black communities where people have positive and neutral meanings attached to Black. As such, the indexical field of a form can vary across individuals and communities (Calder 2021; Beaton and Washington 2015).

Indexical fields also change with time, place, and space (Washington 2023). For instance, if a Black American travels outside of the U.S., they may face challenges navigating the indexical meanings of racialized terms in another country. For example, Simmons (2008) examines the experiences of Black students studying abroad in the Dominican Republic. She finds that students were tasked with navigating what she calls the “racial terrain”, or the complex processes of racialization through terms, discourses, and other forms of embodiment. She details how Black students were more likely to experience social and institutional discrimination if they had a deeper skin complexion or hairstyles that were braided, short, or not chemically processed. This is because these features and semiotic forms were associated with people of specifically Haitian heritage, and therefore, they indexed pejorative social meanings due to the pervasive anti-Haitian xenophobia in the Dominican Republic (Mazzaglia and Marcelino 2014; Arraiza et al. 2020). In a similar vein, Spanish learners are tasked with merging their indexical fields of racial terms/discourses in English with that of Spanish, which may be a contentious process, as I will show below in the narratives of the learner I call Andrea.

Andrea is a Black Caribbean woman from South Florida who was in her early 20s during the time of the interview. She had beginner-level Spanish proficiency, although she expressed having better Spanish comprehension due to her extensive contact with ethnically diverse Spanish speakers in her schools, jobs, and broader communities. Andrea mentioned that she is pursuing Spanish fluency because as an aspiring healthcare professional in Florida, she wants to communicate directly with her patients who prefer Spanish. At the time of the interview, Andrea was taking Spanish courses at a Historically Black University where the curriculum centers Blackness and AfroLatinidad.⁴ While discussing her experiences with race and Spanish learning, she shared with me that she refuses to identify herself with the Spanish term *negra* [Black, fem.] because its resemblance to the English label, “Negro”. In this article, when *negro* is written in lowercase and italicized, it refers to the term in Spanish. When “Negro” is unitalicized and spelled with the capital “N”, it refers to the term in English.

In Spanish, *negro/a/x* translates primarily to “black”, which can refer to both the color and Black racial groups. The latter has widespread modern usage throughout Latin America by Latinxs with and without African ancestry, and it has a range of meanings that are positive, neutral, and pejorative. For instance, in translated works, *negro/a/x* may be used as a translation for “Black”, “Negro”, and variations of the “n-word” (Wheeler 2020). Below, Andrea explains to me why she does not like the term *negra* for an identity label as a Black Bahamian woman who grew up in the U.S. and the Bahamas.

Excerpt 6: *People already called us “Negroes”.*

1. Negr-
2. that’s kinda,
3. That’s saying,
4. to me I feel like it’s saying Negro?
- ((4 lines omitted))
5. People already called us Negroes,
6. So it’s like that just doesn’t sit with me.
7. I know I wasn’t born in slavery time?
8. But I’m sure my ancestors they been through that.

Andrea consistently correlates *negra* with the English label “Negro” (lines 5, 7, and 8), which is considered outdated for standardized usage in both the U.S. and the Anglophone Caribbean. While older Blacks may continue to use “Negro” in socially neutral contexts

(e.g., people born in “the Silent Generation” between 1925 and 1945), Andrea’s indexical field of “Negro” is inextricably linked to the sociohistorical contexts in which the term was standard. For instance, in lines 8–12, Andrea explains how *negro/a* evokes overtly racist and oppressive eras such as African enslavement in the Americas. By transferring her indexical field of “Negro” onto *negra*, she builds the social meaning of *negra* as both pejorative (“that doesn’t sit with me” line 10) and regressive (“my ancestors... been through that” lines 12 and 13).

During the interview, Andrea made it clear to me that she knows *negro* primarily translates to “Black”, and not necessarily to the outdated label “Negro”. For instance, we discussed the terms that she has used (or would use) to identify herself racially in both English and Spanish. Like many Black people with heritage outside of the U.S., Andrea indicated that she uses the labels “Black”, “African American”, and her ethnic heritage “Bahamian” depending on the social and institutional context (Asante et al. 2016). Presumably, if one identifies with these labels, the term *negro/a/x* might be a suitable identity label in Spanish. However, Andrea expressed preferring a translation for the label “person of color”, which has more neutral and politically correct social meanings. This shows that Andrea is not solely concerned with using a racial label based on its referential meaning. Rather, she is also concerned with—and arguably to a greater extent—the label’s indexical meaning. In Excerpt 7 below, Andrea responds to the question I asked her earlier in the conversation about other labels that Black learners may use, like *afroamericana* [Afro- or African American] and *afrodescendiente* [person of African descent], and she responds in favor to both.

Excerpt 7: *I wouldn’t mind Afroamericana.*

1. A: Looking at- like just saying *negro* or whatever.
2. Or just looking at that even the Spanish way,
i- i- it just d-
3. Like I said it doesn’t it doesn’t sit with me.
4. So that’s why I had to end up saying a person of color.
((6 lines omitted))
5. Honestly,
6. A- Afr- *Afroamericana* and the other one ((*afrodescendiente*)) I wouldn’t mind.
7. Why?
8. Because it’s not saying @*negro*,
9. J: @@@[@@]
10. [It’s not saying that]

In lines 1–3, Andrea proclaims that using *negro/a*—even in Spanish—would make her uncomfortable, suggesting that she is not able to leave her indexical field of racialization behind when engaging in Spanish. Her feelings are directly responsible for her choice to choose other Spanish terms—i.e., *persona de color*, *afroamericana*, and *afrodescendiente*—all of which resemble English labels with socially neutral indexical fields. These choices show an element of linguistic transfer, or the use of one’s first language—usually phonological, morphosyntactic, and semantic features—during the acquisition of their second. However, the process of linguistic transfer cannot account for the sociocultural context that drives her linguistic decisions. Importantly, her preference towards these other options is a strategy to control how her Blackness is positioned in social interactions in Spanish. Again, this shows a concern with indexical meaning and not just referential meaning when choosing to adopt a racial label. I became interested in how Andrea would evaluate the decision of Black Latinxs calling themselves *negro/a/x*, and she gives her response in Excerpt 8 below.

Excerpt 8: *We could cling to it more than them.*

1. J: Would you be surprised if they ((Black Latinxs)) use the term *negro negra* to identify themselves?
2. A: ((exhales; long pause))
3. Honestly, ((long pause))

4. Yes. ((long pause; Interviewer, J, nods))
5. Mmm I would say yes.
((7 lines omitted))
6. The people who live in Cuba ↑**there** are Bla:ck.
7. But if Cubans come ↑**here** they will be considered white, or Hispanics or whatever.
8. They're Black and they- they're Hispanic,
9. Whereas we ((long pause))
10. I just feel like that word is more:
11. I wouldn't say that word is more a part of us but it's,
12. We could cling to it more than them.

Andrea's response underscores her perception of how Black people with and without Latinx heritage experience racialization in the U.S., and consequently why she may perceive the terms negro and "Negro" differently from Black Latinxs. From her experience and perspective, Black or AfroLatinxs are racialized differently from Black people without Latinx heritage. Correspondingly, she assumes AfroLatinxs have a different relationship to Blackness, and consequently, a different indexical field of negro. For instance, after my question in line 1, Andrea begins her response with an audible exhale (line 2), a discourse marker of divulgence ("honestly", line 3), and several pauses, suggesting disappointment and a challenge with explaining her stance. She affirms that she would be surprised by Black Latinxs self-identifying as negro/a ("yes", lines 4 and 5), which was followed by another long pause. During this time, I nod my head slowly to affirm hearing her response, but I remain quiet with my gaze towards the screen so she will elaborate. Once her thoughts surfaced, she brought up the different racial ideologies in the U.S. and Cuba, and she likely drew on Cuba because Cubans make up the largest Latinx demographic in her area. Her emphasis on adverbs of place (here, there in lines 6 and 7) draws attention to how she perceives processes of racialization shifting based on nation/geographical space. Andrea asserts that the racialization of AfroLatinxs as Black can be eradicated in the U.S. because of how Latinidad and Hispanidad are racialized. She states, "The people who live in Cuba ↑there are Black. But if Cubans come ↑here, they will be considered white or Hispanics or whatever" (line 07–11). Therefore, she appears to argue that Black Latinxs can disassociate from Blackness while in the U.S., and by extension, the sociohistorical impact of the English label "Negro". To that end, Andrea justifies using her indexical fields of racialization to build the social meaning of comparable terminology in Spanish, even if they differ from the norms of native speakers.

5. Discussion

The analyses presented here demonstrate that race, racialization, and racism play a unique and intricate role in the acquisition journeys of non-Latinx learners acquiring Spanish. Moreover, the experiences of each learner are informed by the shifting raciolinguistic context of Spanish in different parts of the United States. Table 3 summarizes each process in the experiences of learners presented here. In the remainder of this section, I discuss the impact of the U.S. context on learners in this dataset, the potential role of proficiency, and the implications of these racialized sociolinguistic processes for Spanish learning and education.

Table 3. Summary of racialized sociolinguistic processes.

Process	Description	Embodied/Linguistic Examples in Narrative	Exemplified by Learner
Racialized Positionality	References to power relations or dynamics between Latinxs and non-Latinxs	Constructing discourse via epistemic and affective stances such as what they know or believe to be true	Emerson navigating the sociopolitical landscape of using Spanish as a white learner
Racialized Embodiment	References to bodily features or other physical indicators of race	Embodying discourse via facial expressions, gaze, and other gestures	Jada navigating the racialized exotification of generic Asian vocatives
Indexical Fields of Racialization	References to learning or navigating social meaning of linguistic forms	Shaping discourse via deixis, pauses/silence, laughter, truncation, hedges, voice modality, and discourse markers	Andrea navigating the social meaning of Black identity labels

Primarily, Emerson believes that using Spanish as a white person could reinforce hierarchical raciolinguistic dynamics between white Anglo Americans and U.S. Latinxs. She did not identify these dynamics in Spain where Spanish is hegemonic. These preoccupations are rooted in social and economic disparities that are tangible. For instance, the Spanish/English bilingualism of white L2 learners is privileged over heritage speakers for higher-paying jobs in the U.S. (Subtirelu 2017). More ethnographic and perceptual studies on white speakers using Spanish in different U.S. cities and states are necessary. They would shed light on how localized raciolinguistic dynamics impact if, when, and how white Anglo learners use Spanish in their communities.

Jada navigated generic *chin(it)a* in ways that were shaped by her American background. Primarily, she rejects these terms because her heritage is Korean, not Chinese. Yet, as a person from the U.S., she is reluctant to take an adverse stance toward them because some native speakers view them as harmless or endearing. Her dilemma raises questions about how non-Latinx Spanish learners can balance agency and issues of linguistic imperialism. More studies on Asian American Spanish learners are necessary as this demographic is particularly underserved in SLA and Spanish language education. Specifically, ethnographic studies can illuminate their interactions with Spanish-speaking communities as learners.

Andrea evaluated the suitability of Spanish racial labels in ways that drew upon her Anglophone background in the U.S. and Bahamas. She rejected identifying with the racial label *negra* as it reminded her of the outdated label “Negro”. Therefore, she constructed a meaning of *negra* that was exclusively pejorative and socially regressive. Despite learning that some Black Latinxs favor the term, she could not connect to their view of *negra* due to the distinct ways that Black people with and without Latinx heritage are racialized in her Florida communities. In the larger dataset, Black learners were more likely to reference intercultural tensions between Latinx and Black communities at the local level. More studies should examine these dynamics and their impact on Black learners’ acquisition of Spanish.

Although I use the experience of one learner to demonstrate each racialized sociolinguistic process, all learners I interviewed had a unique encounter with each process. Alongside white learners like Emerson, racialized positionality emerged in the narratives of learners of color but in very different ways. Like Emerson, most white learners expressed a degree of hesitancy to use Spanish outside of the classroom to avoid potentially offending native speakers. Learners of color, however, did not express these preoccupations. For Jada, her Spanish-speaking interlocutors often encouraged her to practice Spanish even if they spoke English. For other learners in the larger dataset—especially Black learners—they expressed the likelihood of them not being competitive in the local job market without speaking Spanish. These distinct experiences inform their fears—or lack thereof—about using Spanish outside of the classroom. As such, it is important not to homogenize English

speakers in research by assuming how their sociolinguistic identities will be positioned in relation to Spanish and Spanish speakers. It is also important not to homogenize learners of the same race as a more expansive study can find intricate differences among them as well.

In addition to Jada, embodied racialization was prevalent across the larger dataset. For instance, many white Anglo women, in particular, recalled being called “barbie”, *gringa* (white, foreigner, American [fem.]), *chela*, or *güera* (white or fair skin [fem.]) in different parts of Latin America. They also mentioned being called *blanca* or *blanquita* (white [fem.]) by friends or co-workers in the United States. Learners of color were not called any of these terms. Embodied racialization can also be identified in the experiences of Emerson and Andrea. As a white woman, Emerson’s embodied racialization is the source from which her preoccupation about positionality emerges. For Andrea, if she was not perceived as a Black woman, she would not need to consider whether *negra* is suitable for her or the implications of identifying with it. Accordingly, it is important to consider how learners’ intersectional forms of embodiment impact the linguistic forms they encounter or do not encounter.

Lastly, indexical fields of racialization emerged in the experiences of all learners, and not just Andrea. However, in the larger dataset, learners of color expressed more concern than white learners about the indexical meanings of racialized terminology, especially those that applied to them. White learners were more likely to speak only about the referential meaning of terms that apply to them. For instance, a learner mentioned being called *gringa* often, which she defined as “white girl”, but she had no commentary about whether it was positive or negative. This outcome can be attributed to different factors. On one hand, white people are rarely expected to explicitly engage with their racialized identities (Bucholtz 2011). On the other hand, these learners were being interviewed by a Black woman, which could impact their comfort in speaking with any authority about the language of a minoritized group. As such, it is important to continue examining the lived experiences learners bring as racialized subjects and their impact on social meaning-making in Spanish.

These stories raise questions about the role of proficiency. Although proficiency is not a focal point of this project, it is clear that learners will encounter each of these processes in some capacity regardless of their level of Spanish proficiency. What is not clear is whether proficiency impacts the social and linguistic strategies learners use to navigate these processes. For instance, Emerson is an intermediate learner and her strategies to navigate her racialized positionality consist of avoiding Spanish, especially during service encounters or with peers. Instead, she opts to speak Spanish with interlocutors who are older or who have limited English proficiency. Jada navigates racialized embodiment by having overt conversations with native Spanish speakers, correcting interlocutors, and although not shown in the data, she tries to ignore feeling offended when someone calls her *chin(it)a*. Lastly, Andrea rejects identifying with *negra* and opts for other terms like *persona de color*, *afroamericana*, and *afrodescendiente*. Future work should address whether learners’ strategies are connected to proficiency levels. These studies should also consider how any of these processes impede or aid a learner’s development of proficiency.

Examining proficiency alongside these racialized sociolinguistic processes requires us to carefully consider the measurements of proficiency that are being used. Are we referring to proficiency in the Spanish language as a whole or proficiency in a given linguistic form? How are we considering social and cultural knowledge alongside linguistic knowledge? For instance, one might assume that Andrea’s understanding of *negra* is due to her limited Spanish proficiency. However, the data presented here and the larger dataset of Black learners I interviewed do not support such a claim. This is because, despite Andrea’s low Spanish proficiency, her lived experiences and intercultural contact at the community level inform her meaning-making process of *negra* and not just how the word translates. Within the larger dataset, most Black learners I interviewed had strong opinions toward the meaning of *negro/a/x*. A few Black learners with low proficiency expressed an initial dislike for the term until they realized it “just means *black*” and not the “n-word”. Two Black learners with intermediate and advanced proficiency developed an indifference or

preference toward the label. However, this did not appear to be related to their proficiency in Spanish as a whole, but rather their proficiency in and alignment toward the discourses of race that shape the social meaning of this specific term—all of which can be achieved without developing proficiency in Spanish.

For instance, those with higher proficiency also shared experiences of traveling in Latin America where they met AfroLatinxs who expressed pride toward their Blackness and the term *negro/a/x*. They encountered *negro/a/x* in different social, cultural, and political discourses across national contexts, which revealed its positive, negative, and neutral meanings much like their experience with the term “Black” in the United States. It was these experiences with cultural exchange that offered a more robust understanding of the term. Correspondingly, Jada expressed challenges with navigating the meaning of generic *chin(it)a* despite being an advanced speaker. In both cases, neither Andrea nor Jada had challenges understanding the referential meaning of *negra* and *chin(it)a*, respectively. Rather, they were tasked with navigating the social meaning and cultural functions of these terms, which may exist across proficiency levels.

Implications for Spanish Language Learning and Education

What are the theoretical and pedagogical benefits of exploring these three racialized sociolinguistic processes further in L2 Spanish learning, use, and education in the U.S.? Primarily, these processes provide the opportunity to expand “uncomfortable” (Schwartz 2023) yet cathartic and stimulating conversations on race in Spanish learning. Primarily, these processes help learners challenge binary logics of language, identity, and power, which includes tensions/alliances between ethnoracial groups and issues of racism, sexism, or xenophobia within and among communities of color. Although some frameworks are well equipped to engage learners on power relations between English/Spanish and Latinidad/whiteness broadly, there are fewer frameworks to engage non-white and linguistically minoritized learners in critical discussions on the sociolinguistic dynamics between them and Latinx communities. For that reason, I focus the rest of the discussion on the major takeaways from Andrea’s and Jada’s experiences.

For Jada, her experiences with vocatives were not only racialized but gendered and sexualized. It is well-documented that Asian women and femmes are subjected to unique forms of sexualization and exotification in the U.S. (Azhar et al. 2021; Chou 2012), but this practice occurs in many places and is enacted by men across ethnoracial groups. Media and academic discourses have critically examined the fetishization of Asian womanhood and femininity around the world, identifying it as an extension of Western colonialism in Asia. Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) argues that the hypersexual, yet docile Asian woman trope was ignited through films, artwork, and other media representations during U.S.-led wars in Asian nations, although it is not clear whether U.S. media is responsible for the presence of these discourses in Latin America. Nevertheless, these tropes can impact many Asian learners to different degrees based on ethnicity, nationality, color/phenotype, gender identity, linguistic background, and more. As learners acquire vocabulary for social interaction like vocatives, critical pedagogies can contextualize these terms with the racial, gendered, and classed dynamics to which they are connected. While all learners will encounter Spanish vocatives, their unique forms of embodiment will subject them to specific terms and even types of “othering”. Integrating this process into Spanish language learning can help learners uncover how their intersectional forms of embodiment are socially interpreted and linguistically defined in Spanish and how they influence the sociolinguistic variation they come across.

Beyond embodied racialization, Jada’s experiences show a need for Spanish language education to engage historical and contemporary experiences of Asian diasporas in Latin America. Like some of Jada’s friends and colleagues, generic *chino/a/x* is problematized by many Latinxs, although the discourse appears to be spearheaded by Latinxs in the U.S. or by Latin Americans who follow progressive politics. For example, *Remezcla*, an influential media brand for “Latino Millennials” headquartered in Brooklyn, New York City, published

a video⁵ on their Twitter and YouTube accounts in 2018 arguing that generic *chino/a/x* is racist if used as a “catch-all” for anyone of Asian descent. They draw a parallel between calling all Latinx people “Mexicans” in the U.S. which typically appears in racist, anti-immigration discourses that disregard the diversity of Latinx identities and experiences.⁶ Aiko Hilking (2021), a Colombian screenwriter of Asian descent, published an op-ed in which she reprimanded the practice as a form of othering that erases Asian diversity and Asian diasporas in Latin America. Including these voices, alongside contemporary stories on Asian communities in Latin America, opens up opportunities for learners to challenge the homogenization of *Latinidad*.

Andrea’s story demonstrates that labels and identity terminology cannot be taught as a vocabulary list. Andrea’s understanding of *negra* was extensively connected to her indexical field of the English term “Negro”. Because of this, she showed limited awareness of the range of ways that Latinxs, especially AfroLatinxs, orient to *negro/a/x* and the range of experiences that AfroLatinxs have with racialization in the United States. Instead, she seemed to engage solely with the (hyper)localized ways that some Latinxs in her Florida communities orient to Blackness and Black identity labels. Accordingly, her label choice considers how her Bahamian Blackness is juxtaposed with the Blackness of Spanish speakers in her communities. If provided the space, she could determine how her context of race in South Florida informs her experience with acquiring racial vocabulary. Her localized experiences are valuable as well as her sentiments toward the label. They should be leveraged and bridged with global perspectives. One example is the 1978 poem *Me gritaron negra* [They shouted *negra* at me] by AfroPeruvian poet, choreographer, and activist Victoria Santa Cruz (1922–2014). In this renowned poem, Cruz uses a first-person narrative, recalling the disgust in the voices and intentions of non-Blacks shouting *negra* at her. Ultimately, the poem reclaims *negra* via an unapologetic and blatant refusal to adopt a colonial gaze toward herself. This poem was mentioned by another Black learner in the dataset who expressed adopting a positive view of the label after learning about how Black Latin Americans have reclaimed it. Thus, teaching labels must be accompanied by cultural artifacts that highlight their use in discourses that are local and global, social and institutional, contemporary and historical. Ultimately, there should not be an expectation for learners to adopt the terminology that corresponds to their racialization or develop the same meanings as native speakers.

Ultimately, issues of race, racialization, and racism must continue to be explored in Spanish language learning and use in the U.S. by non-Latinxs. As we continue to move toward critical sociolinguistic frameworks in Spanish education, they must be informed by empirical research on learners’ experiences. The processes I have introduced in this article—racialized positionality, racialized embodiment, and indexical fields of racialization—can serve as a framework for future ethnographic and perceptual studies. Specifically, they are intended to continue a conversation that answers the following questions: What does it mean for non-Latinxs to learn Spanish in the United States or use Spanish with Latinxs in the United States? How do localized racial dynamics impact their engagement with Latinx cultures? How do their non-Latinx identities impact their social interactions with Spanish speakers? How do their linguistic repertoires as racialized people clash with notions of race in Spanish-speaking contexts? How can answering these questions inform critical research analyses and pedagogy that center the multitude of raciolinguistic identities and experiences that inform how learners across racial groups and proficiency levels navigate learning and using Spanish in the U.S. and beyond?

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Notes

- ¹ Participants provided written consent to complete an audiovisual recording of their interviews. To participate, each learner had to allow their audio data (without visuals) and/or the transcripts of their data to be presented in academic contexts like lectures, conferences, and publications. They also had the option to anonymize their identities by choosing a pseudonym.
- ² While some scholars have critiqued positionality statements (Oswald 2024), others argue that they increase scholars' awareness of power dynamics in academic research and allow readers to place a study in a greater context (Boveda and AncyAnnamma 2023; Zamzow 2023).
- ³ In Mexico, *chino/a/x* and *chinito/a/x* also refer to 'curly hair', which can be used as an adjective (e.g., *cabello chino*, 'curly hair') or a noun (*un chino*, 'a curly haired man' or *chinos/chinitos*, 'curls'). This usage dates back to the caste system of colonial Mexico (New Spain), which used *chino/a* to refer to mixtures between Black and indigenous people or "curly haired African–First Nations offspring" (Cuevas 2012). Another meaning of *china/o* in Mexico refers to getting 'goosebumps' (verb *ponerse chino/a*) from being cold, in which one could say (*piel china* or *chinitos*). Across Latin America, *chino/a/x* can be used as a nickname for people with physical features associated with Asian and/or indigenous communities, although like generic *chino/a/x*, this practice has become more scrutinized.
- ⁴ The construction of this course was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (#AC-264174-19). Dr. Melissa Baralt is the PI of the grant and I serve on the expert committee board, where I provide expertise on sociolinguistics, anthropology, and race/ethnicity. I also conduct research as a committee member to inform the coursework. Materials and resources from the introductory course can be found here: <https://laccmibridge.fiu.edu/editors-toolkit/tasks-lesson-plans-and-materials/> (accessed on 23 March 2023).
- ⁵ <https://twitter.com/remezcla/status/1001571133005512710> (accessed on 12 December 2019).
- ⁶ FOX News broadcasted on the show *Fox and Friends* in 2019 that U.S. President Donald Trump had "cut aid to three Mexican countries" in reference to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The conglomerate has since issued an apology, but the mistake is a clear sign of indignation about Latinxs in immigration policy discourse.

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