



## Is the Language you Teach Racist? Reflections and Considerations for English and Spanish (Teacher) Educators

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### Abstract

In this manuscript, I weave personal and professional stories with available literature to advocate for the necessity of decolonizing language education, taking a primary interest in the English and Spanish languages and in the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean islands. Thus, I first set the stage by providing a brief historical overview of the effects caused by colonialism on the Indigenous Peoples, languages, and cultures of the Americas and the Caribbean islands. Then, I introduce my journey toward personal and professional decolonization and share practical examples of how I decolonize my teaching with the vision that this information will be helpful to readers. I end this article with final thoughts and an open invitation for further dialogue. My hope is that language (teacher) educators will use this essay as a critical reading for their language teacher pre- and in-service preparation programs and in other academic spaces.

**Keywords:** language and racism, decolonization, colonialism, language teacher educators, English and Spanish

### Introduction

Can a language be racist? This was probably the first question that came to mind when you read the title of this article. To answer this question, we must keep in mind that languages are not sentient beings with feelings and emotions; thus, in that sense, languages do not have the capacity to learn how to be racist. However, we must also recognize that languages are human-made social and political objects (Otheguy et al., 2015) and that, throughout history, they have been used as weapons to assert control, delegitimize, negate membership and opportunities, and disassociate groups of people who look and act differently from those in power. In this sense, language is not innocent. Furthermore, the history that we (fail to) acknowledge in our schools about the language we teach, learn, and use in societies affects people's views, identities, and self-perceived privilege—or lack thereof—as speakers of those languages.

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In this essay, I weave personal and professional stories with available literature to advocate for the necessity of decolonizing language education, taking a primary interest in the English and Spanish languages and in the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean islands. Thus, I first set the stage by providing a brief historical overview of the effects caused by colonialism on the Indigenous Peoples, languages, and cultures of the Americas and the Caribbean islands. Also, I briefly delve into the residual effects of colonialism in societies today. Then, I introduce myself by briefly sharing my journey toward personal and professional decolonization. Next, I provide practical examples of how I decolonize my teaching, with the vision that this information will be helpful to readers. I end this article with final thoughts and an open invitation for further dialogue. My hope is that language (teacher) educators will use this manuscript as a critical reading for their language teacher pre- and in-service preparation programs and that scholars in the field of applied linguistics will continue this conversation in other academic spaces.

## Setting the Stage: Languages, Colonization, and Residual Effects

### Languages

What is *language*? This may be a simple yet difficult question to answer. Throughout recorded history, language has been used to share, document, communicate, and negotiate human experiences, as well as to connect us with speakers who came before us. Harrison (2010) tells us that language is a technology packaging “knowledge in radically different ways, facilitating certain means of conceptualizing, naming, and discussing the world” (p. 59). Certainly, when we speak our words, we are speaking the words, phrases, and memories of our ancestors and of the people who maintained our collective linguistic wealth and heritage. Language, as a form of passing ancestral knowledge, remains inextricably connected to who we are and to the relationship we keep with our communities.

In the field of applied linguistics and language education, language has often been discussed from a *nature* (also known as innatist or nativist) vs. *nurture* (also known as social constructivist) perspective. Proponents of the *nature* view believe that human beings have the innate ability to acquire and make sense of language. From this perspective, language is viewed as a genetic inheritance and a natural result of the prewiring in our brains (Chomsky, 2006). On the other hand, scholars supporting the *nurture* view believe language originates and is the result of social interactions. From this perspective, language is viewed as the product of humans’ need to communicate with one another and convey our intentions (Vygotsky, 1962). Regardless of how it is conceptualized, linguists on both sides of the *nature* vs. *nurture* debate agree that language is deeply connected to who we are as human beings and is tied to our identities, emotions, and culture (Brown, 2014).

### Colonization

Human history tells us that language users have been coming into contact or clashing for millennia (Ostler, 2005). In many cases, these contacts or clashes have been recorded as irruptions of one language into another where one community of speakers has been forced to learn another language, sometimes at the cost of their own. In the Americas and the Caribbean islands, the irruption of Spanish and English had devastating consequences for the Indigenous Peoples, as these two European languages were employed by their speakers to control, impose, and condemn. White-skinned English and Spanish-speaking *colonizadores*, who “viewed themselves as innately superior in intelligence and ability to people with darker skin” (Yellow Bird, 1999, p. 3), used their language—and their abilities as speakers of those languages—as symbols of intellect. Through this practice, language became a vehicle for granting intelligence to (native) speakers of English and Spanish while simultaneously

representing Indigenous Peoples—speakers of Indigenous languages—as violent savages (Johnson, 1881), *bárbaros* (barbarians), and *incultos* (uneducated) (Las Casas, 1876a, 1876b).

Colonizers' use of language to assert legitimacy and impose the label of inferiority onto Indigenous Peoples in the Americas can be explained through the lens and practice of linguicism. According to Phillipson (1992), linguicism is defined as “ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (p. 47). The practice of repeatedly exalting their status as speakers of colonial languages while simultaneously associating Indigenous Peoples with dehumanizing labels reinforced in the minds of *colonizadores* the idea that they were a superior race and that their inhumane actions were justified because Indigenous Peoples were ‘an inferior race.’ Language-based racism (i.e., linguicism) and discrimination remain directly connected to the history of European colonization in the Americas and the Caribbean islands, and their residual effects continue to afflict us in the present day.

### Residual Effects

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we struggle with the residual effects that colonialism has left in societies. From ‘English Only,’ White nationalist politics (see McIntosh, 2020) in the United States to the systemic implementation of politics seeking to negate, invisibilize, or assimilate Indigenous Peoples and languages in Latin American countries (see Coronel-Molina, 1999; UNICEF, 2009), societies continue to battle racism and discrimination. The residual effects of colonialism in societies can be explored and felt from different dimensions. However, for the purpose of this article, in the following section, I use a linguistic lens to briefly extend the conversation about two forms of residual effects: (1) *aggressive* (i.e., evident or overt) residual effects such as linguistic racism, and (2) *passive* (i.e., less visible or covert) effects such as linguistic appropriation.

#### *Aggressive Residual Effects*

The practices associated with aggressive residual effects of colonialism usually come from individuals at the top (e.g., politicians, policymakers) or from individuals who are part of a majority group of the populace, and affect those who are minoritized or made vulnerable at the bottom (e.g., everyday citizens). In the Americas and the Caribbean islands, colonizing language practices have made evident that certain languages are exalted and legitimized over others. For example, Ecuador and Guatemala are countries with large numbers of Indigenous Peoples and languages, but only Spanish is recognized as their official language. Another example is found in the United States, where Spanish speakers represent a large demographic population of the nation, yet the Spanish language remains a language with little cultural and intellectual legitimacy due to its link to immigration and poverty (Pentón Herrera, 2019a). This phenomenon, known as linguistic racism, embraces “ideologies and practices that are utilised to conform, normalise and reformulate an unequal and uneven linguistic power between language users” (Dovchin, 2020a, p. 773). Linguistic racism affects the emotional wellbeing (Dovchin, 2020b; Oliver & Exell, 2020) of individuals from Indigenous backgrounds, minoritized groups, and people who are culturally and linguistically different (Dovchin, 2020a). At the same time, linguistic racism can also lead to racially motivated attacks against these vulnerable groups (De Costa, 2020).

In societies, racially motivated, physical attacks against minoritized groups are often accompanied by the use of language. Labels or slurs continue to be used by those who see themselves as ‘superior’ to dehumanize individuals from minoritized groups, just as colonizers once did with Indigenous Peoples. In the United States, more specifically, pejorative language such as ‘illegal,’ has

been repeatedly used to represent people as *something* (i.e., not human), reinforcing the language users' feelings of superiority and "quietly [paving] the way for violent action" (Alim, 2016, p. 26). We may not be living in a time where English- and Spanish-speaking colonizers killed, murdered, and eradicated the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean islands, and yet we continue to witness how language is used as a systemic mechanism of colonization to dehumanize others in societies.

In my view, language is weaponized in societies through a three-step process. The conceptualization of this three-step process of language weaponization emerged as a result of deep research and extensive readings, which led me to identify similar patterns in different historical events where language was used to vilify, subjugate, criminalize, exterminate, invisibilize, dehumanize, marginalize, and/or segregate a group (or groups) of people. As an important point of clarification, in this conceptualization, I view *racism* through a Fanonian lens, wherein it is recognized that racism can happen on the basis of skin color, ethnicity, language, culture, or religion, among other factors (see Fanon, 2008). The three steps in which language can be weaponized are:

- **Step 1: Begin the process of dehumanization.** Colonizers, dictators, and those in positions of power use their language to create hierarchical structures/divisions and represent vulnerable groups—or those they see as inferior to them—as violent, barbaric, uneducated, and/or unwanted. In this step, groups of people are assigned labels, slurs, or names considered unclean, undesired, or subhuman (i.e., labels are usually related to animals or infections).
- **Step 2: Solidifying a culture of dehumanization.** By repeatedly imposing their language as legitimate and anything else as illegitimate or illegal, and by using labels, slurs, stereotypes, and pejorative language to refer to vulnerable groups, colonizers, dictators, and those in positions of power accept these groups of people—or those they see as inferior to them—as subhuman, solidifying the culture that these groups are *something* (i.e., not human) rather than *someone* (i.e., human). In this step of dehumanization, language weaponization evolves from covert to overt racist discourse (e.g., hate speech).
- **Step 3: From linguistic dehumanization to physical harm.** Colonizers, dictators, and those in positions of power, justified in their mind by their sense of superiority and righteousness, use force, violence, and any means necessary to erase the identity, languages, and presence of vulnerable groups—or those they see as inferior to them. In the minds of dictators and those in positions of power, these groups of people are subhuman, abhorrent, barbaric, filthy, unwanted, and/or a disease, so violence is permitted and justified as acts of nationalism to preserve their 'superior' race, language, and/or culture, and to eradicate those deemed undesirable from society.

#### *Passive Residual Effects*

In addition to aggressive, or more evident residual effects of colonialism, societies also struggle with passive—or less visible—residual effects, most commonly in the form of linguistic appropriation. Linguistic appropriation is defined as the process where speakers of the "target language (the group doing the borrowing) adopt resources from the donor language, and then try to deny these to members of the donor language community. They attempt this denial through formal legal prohibition and informal monitoring and censure" (Hill, 2008, p. 158). In the United States, specifically, Whites' and other non-Hispanics' appropriation of linguistic resources from Spanish has been used "to display *covert* racism toward people of color" (Mendoza-Denton, 2016, p. 145). This racist practice of linguistic appropriation "goes largely unnoticed and is broadly accepted by the majority [of] society, giving the impression that the speaker is a relaxed, easy-going sort of person with a surface familiarity with

another culture” (p. 145). These linguistic appropriations also access negative stereotypes. For example, when Whites and non-Hispanics use *mamacita* (little mama), *muy caliente* (very hot), and *muy picante* (very spicy), they perpetuate the culture of stereotyping the sexuality of Spanish-speaking individuals (Hill, 2005, 2008; Mendoza-Denton, 2016).

Some disagree with the concept of linguistic appropriation—whether or not they call it so—and believe ‘borrowing’ words from other languages is natural. For example, Dent (2019) wrote an article in the *National Review* where he attempts to make the case that using terms/words from other languages and cultures is a normal course of how languages ‘naturally’ evolve over time due to cultural interaction and exchange. Notably, in his article he uses phrases like “the English we speak today was heavily influenced by French and Latin” (para. 3) and “though other languages may still affect English” (para. 4), which make it seem as if the English language and speakers were passively being influenced and affected by other languages. However, linguistic appropriation can be traced back to invasions (e.g., military, religious, etc.), wars, and the appropriation of words that English speakers did not have in their language—similarly to Spanish. Throughout recorded history, we learn that English speakers, the same as Spanish speakers, were not being passively ‘affected’ by other languages and speakers, as Dent (2019) writes. Instead, they were colonizing and appropriating resources.<sup>1</sup>

As the famous saying goes, “history is written by the victors.” When individuals write about languages that were used as weapons of colonization to depict passivity, like Dent (2019) does, it creates an alternate, romanticized reality of colonization for readers. As language (teacher) educators, we must recognize that, in the past, colonizers *forcefully took* anything they thought was enriching to them or their culture from those they colonized, which includes forcefully taking linguistic wealth. In the same way that Spanish-speaking colonizers *forcefully took* and modified vocabulary words from the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean islands when they colonized these lands (e.g., *barbacoa* from the Taíno, *alpaca* from the Aimara, *chapatote* from the Náhuatl, to name a few), so did English-speaking colonizers (i.e., *opossum* from the Powhatan, *kayak* from Native tribes like the Inuit and Yup’ik, and *bayou* from the Choctaw, to name a few). In the same way that colonizers appropriated words and vocabulary they deemed necessary to enrich their own language and culture, they forcefully imposed their own language and sought to eradicate other languages by deeming them less important. In simple words, colonizers *forcefully appropriated* the linguistic resources they deemed enriching to their own language and culture, and attempted to erase the languages they deemed inferior.

There is a plethora of publications retelling how colonizers imposed their languages on Indigenous Peoples, contributing to the extinction or near-extinction of many Indigenous cultures and traditions as a result. Some examples of how colonizers imposed their language to vilify Indigenous Peoples’ languages and cultures in the Americas include the Indian boarding schools in the United States and Canada (see Lomawaima, 1994; Sellars, 2013), and the forced *castellanzation*, or teaching of the Spanish language, in Latin American (e.g., Makarán, 2016; Martínez Sagredo, 2020). I mention all of these examples to circle back to my main point, which is that colonizers, as language users, have forcefully taken linguistic wealth from Indigenous Peoples and speakers of minority languages, and imposed their own languages on them. From this factual acknowledgment, we must understand that the languages we teach and speak (such as English and Spanish) have been used as weapons to colonize others, and it is our duty to clarify their history for our teachers and future speakers of those languages. Through this process of teaching historical facts about the languages we teach and speak, we engage in the practice of decolonizing language education and, by extension, in

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<sup>1</sup> See Bryson (1990) for more information about the history of the English language, and Torres Torres (2016) for more information about the history of the Spanish language.

the practice of disrupting all privileges that colonizers have assigned to those languages of colonization in the past.

### Introducing Myself: Decolonizing My (Teacher) Self

Now that we have gone through a brief overview of language, colonization, and the residual effects we experience in societies, I would like to use this section to share my story. I was born and raised in Cuba, an island that was home to two Indigenous groups, the Taíno and the Guanahatabey, before Spaniards colonized it. Throughout my formal education in Cuba, Indigenous Peoples were always talked about in the past tense, and they were commonly referred to as uncultured or unadvanced. Parallel to this reality was the teaching that Christopher Columbus ‘discovered’ the Americas and that he ‘brought’ the Spanish language to us—often taught as if the Spanish language was a gift to the ‘New World.’ The history of Cuba taught at schools omitted details about the atrocities the Spaniards committed against the Taíno and the Guanahatabey, and there was little emphasis on the Taínos’ and the Guanahatabeys’ cultures, civilizations, and languages. Instead, the emphasis of the history of Cuba and the language we learned in our schools (i.e., Spanish) was solely dedicated to the Spaniard *conquistadores*’ legacy, and the Spanish language.

Interestingly, the discourse the Cuban regime maintains to this day to talk about the United States and its people stereotypes ‘el gringo americano’ or ‘el yuma’ (The American *gringo*, or *yuma*<sup>2</sup>) as White. In Cuba, the stereotypical representation of a native of the US is a blue-eyed, blond, and White individual. *Ella parece una gringa* (She looks like a *gringa*), is a common phrase used in Cuba to describe individuals who look like Americans (blue-eyed, blond, and White). In the English classes I took in Cuban schools, I never learned about the history of the United States, or about the fact that the actual Native Americans are the Indigenous Peoples of these lands, not White people. It was not until I immigrated to the United States that I realized the Eurocentricity of Cuban formal schooling. In Cuba, Spanish and English were taught from the colonizers’ perspective; that is, the education I received enforced the invisibilization of the Indigenous Peoples of Cuba, the Caribbean islands, and the Americas, and only referred to them as individuals from the past.

My journey of decolonization began with my student Diego (pseudonym) in a US English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom. One day, I was teaching my English learners (ELs) when I suddenly learned from Diego that he was Ixil Maya. Until that point, I had wrongfully assumed that he and all my other students from Latin America were Spanish speakers and that, as I had learned in Cuba, Indigenous Peoples were part of the past. In a previous publication, I shared my inner struggles the moment I learned that Diego, my student, was Ixil:

Learning that Diego was Ixil shattered everything I thought I knew from Latin America. I remember asking myself, “Why didn’t I learn this in Cuba? Why weren’t we taught in Cuba that Indigenous [P]eoples and languages are very much alive in Latin America?” More importantly, I asked myself, “Why isn’t this vulnerable group more visible in the academic literature addressing Latinx English learners?” I remember feeling confused, guilty, and unprepared all at the same time. One thought that I could not shake out of my head was the fact that Diego was struggling [in our classroom] because I did not know about his reality; I had not been trained to help Indigenous ELs and I had no idea how to look for academic resources in Ixil to support him in learning English. All along, I had been taught and trained to teach English to Latinx ELs using Spanish, but what about Diego? What about other Indigenous Latinx ELs? (Pentón Herrera, 2019b, para. 5).

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<sup>2</sup> Although the history behind the term *yuma* remains unclear, this word is commonly used in Cuba to refer to individuals from other countries and, more specifically, to Americans.

Since that moment, I recognized the necessity of unlearning the history that I had been taught in Cuba, and in schools in the United States. As a Spanish and ESOL teacher and a language teacher educator, I recognized that my ignorance about Indigenous Peoples was unacceptable. Thus, I began to relearn the history of Cuba, purposefully looking for information about its Native Peoples—the Taíno and the Guanahatabey. Then I expanded my reading list to include information about Indigenous People from the Caribbean islands and the Americas. During this time, I was also pursuing my doctoral studies and gravitated toward researching the language and literacy experiences of adolescent Ixil students (Pentón Herrera, 2018). The more I read about the history and present struggles of Indigenous communities from the Americas and the Caribbean islands, the more I realized the atrocious effects that colonialism and racism had, and continues to have, in societies. For me, learning with an open heart about the past and present histories of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean islands became the beginning of my decolonization journey.

My process of decolonization has been and continues to be deeply emotional. While reading the book *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (Las Casas, 1999), I learned of the ravages and atrocities of the Spanish *conquistadores* against Indigenous Peoples. One particular account that stayed with me was: “one woman, determined that the dogs should not tear her to pieces, tied her child to her leg, and hanged herself from a beam” (p. 73). “How cruel can people be?!” I often asked myself in disbelief while flipping through the pages in tears. While reading about Cuba, I felt a sense of guilt for not knowing the history of where I come from, for contributing to the invisibilization of the Taíno and the Guanahatabey, and for once believing in a romanticized version of the invasion, imposition, and genocide of Spanish colonizers. The process of decolonization—of breaking away from colonizer-centric history, rhetoric, and education—involves constant mental and emotional negotiations. As an individual who chose to immerse myself in decolonizing research to (re)learn the history of my ancestors, I often struggle with the emotional toll resulting from relieving colonization through my readings, and from the constant reshaping of the reality I thought I knew.

A couple of years ago, I received a DNA test as a birthday present. Up until that point, I had been taught by my family that our ancestors were from Europe (Spain and England) and Africa. “El que no tiene de Congo, tiene de Carabalí” (one who does not have something of Congo, has of Carabalí), is a common phrase we use in Cuba to acknowledge that all of us are *mestizos* (mixed-race). When I received my DNA test results, I was surprised. In addition to having Spain, England, and different African countries as part of my ancestry, I also learned that I had Indigenous blood in me. According to my DNA test, my Indigenous roots are from Cuba (identified in the test as Taíno) and from an area in Central America known today as the countries of Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.

My DNA test results clarified why some of my family members have distinct Indigenous physical features, but it also generated many more questions for me. To this day, I continue to search for any familial connections that may point me to my Indigenous ancestors, but it is a topic that is often avoided by older family members. When I try to engage in conversations about our family tree, my grandparents talk about their Spanish or English ancestors, and when I ask about our Indigenous roots, they respond with “no sé, Luisi, en mi tiempo no hablábamos de eso” (I don’t know, Luisi, in my time [during my childhood] we didn’t talk about that). As I write this article in 2021, I realize that the effects of colonialism continue to affect people like me who remain in search of their family roots, and who hope to one day know their ancestors’ names and words. Through this conscious process of uncovering the history of my ancestors, I often question my identity—*Can I consider myself Taíno? What does ‘being Cuban’ truly mean?* These and other questions remain unanswered to this day.

## **From Theory to Practice: Decolonizing Language Teaching and Education**

In the constant quest to reclaim knowledge about my ancestors, I often realize I speak two languages that were used to colonize cultures and extinguish other languages. As a speaker of English and Spanish, I am, thus, connected to their history and to the speakers who came before me. I do not resent or hold any negative emotions toward either of these languages, because I know they are not sentient beings. However, as a speaker, language teacher, and language teacher educator of both languages, I am conscious of how Spanish and English have been used and continue to be used to dehumanize and colonize others. Similarly to Motha (2014), I struggle with the knowledge I possess about the languages I speak and teach, and with the actions I take as a language educator. That is, I clearly understand how the globalization of English and Spanish “reinforces colonial divisions of power and racial inequalities” and contributes to “the extension of less-commonly-spoken languages and their inherent epistemologies” (p. xxi). At the same time, I acknowledge that, because English and Spanish will continue to spread, teaching them remains important, life-changing work (Motha, 2014).

Thus, I do my best every day to teach my language teachers and language learners through a decolonized, responsible, conscious, and ethical lens. Through this process of decolonization, I realize and recognize that I, too, am a learner. Exploring “alternate understandings of master narratives of what counts as legitimate language and transforming dominant language” (Phyak, 2016, p. 30) ideologies and discourses results in necessary tensions that I must face in my ideological becoming. As a speaker and teacher of these languages, I continuously engage in self-dialogues about my identities, perspectives, and ideologies, recognizing the many ways in which (linguistic) colonization has been systematically enforced in our societies and classrooms (see Seward, 2019). My goal with decolonizing myself and my teaching is not to reject or deconstruct dominant ideologies, but to center myself, my concerns, and my worldview to make better sense of my perspectives through a socially just lens (Freire, 1970).

In the following section, I share two examples of how my teaching has evolved since I began my process of decolonization. I do not intend to imply that these practices are, by any means, exceptional or free from errors. I recognize that decolonization is an ongoing—an unfinished (Phyak, 2016)—process; therefore, my teaching will continue to evolve and change. However, I do hope language (teacher) educators will find these two examples helpful in their own practice as they reflect my authentic, practical attempts to approach education using a socially just lens.

### **Theory to Practice #1: English Writing Class in College**

In 2019, I had the opportunity to teach an English writing class at the college level focusing on improving students’ critical reading and writing skills while exploring a given academic theme of my choice. The curriculum for this class was very flexible; as long as we learned the different types of essays (e.g., expository, narrative, etc.), I had the flexibility of including any topic of my choice. I divided the 15-week course into three main modules—(1) Module 1: Arts; (2) Module 2: Language; and (3) Module 3: Culture—and introduced all the content taught in our class through a socially just lens. That is, although my students and I were learning to read and write in English, the examples and readings I added to my course gave my students the opportunity to learn about the history and use of the English language in the United States and about the people, cultures, and languages affected by colonialization and forced assimilation.

Throughout our assignments, I gave my students the opportunity to research, learn, and write about topics that were important to them. For example, in our expository essay assignment, I asked students to research a painting, song, or work of art of their choice and explicate its meaning through

a socially and racially just lens. Among the many excellent essays I received, one that I particularly remember was titled “90’s Rap Contribution to the Community.” In this essay, my student explored how rap music—and the lyrics and language in it—affected the African American community, which faced numerous problems at that time, such as drug addiction, unemployment, and racial profiling by the police. In this essay, my student also compared and contrasted today’s rap music with the ’90s, firmly stating that the language used in today’s rap music degrades women, whereas 90s rap music (e.g., Missy Elliott and Queen Latifah) empowered them.

In addition to making space in our assignments for reflections about language use, I also created opportunities to engage my students in critical discussions while learning about the different Native Peoples, languages, and cultures of the United States. For example, in my introduction to the topics of *narratives* and *the narrative essay*, I shared an excerpt from Sellars’s (2013) book about Indian residential schools in Canada. I then took that opportunity to share a little bit more of history about Indian residential schools in the United States and also about some of the Indigenous languages and cultures that suffered as a result. During that time, I had recently visited a museum in Washington DC that had an exposition about Native American cultures. I shared some of the pictures I took from my visit, shown in Figure 1, and encouraged my students to visit the museum. During our conversation, some of my students confessed they had not seen Native American languages written (or in print) before our conversation. Also, most of my students knew very little or nothing about the cruel history of Indian residential schools in the United States. I ended that class with recommendations for further readings about the effects and legacy of Indian residential schools in Canada and the United States, including one of my most favorite books, a bilingual illustrated story titled *Kimotinâninwîw itwêwina / Stolen Words* (Florence, 2019).

**Figure 1.** *The Lakota Winter Count (Pictographs)*



## Theory to Practice #2: Language Teacher Preparation Programs

At the university level, my work has primarily focused on teaching in programs preparing ESOL and world language teachers, in addition to writing academic publications. In both teaching and writing, I have made it my purpose to make Indigenous and lesser-known populations of students visible. For example, in a recent Second Language Acquisition (SLA) course, we engaged in a discussion about the issues associated with assigning students an ethnicity and native tongue(s) based on their country of origin—a common practice in US schools. In our discussion, I shared my experiences teaching ELs who are from Indigenous or minoritized communities in their native countries, such as Uyghur from China, Afaan Oromo from Ethiopia, or Maya from Guatemala, and who speak a minority language as their first language (L1) and the country's dominant (or official) language as a second or additional language (L2).

In our discussions, I always remind my student-teachers that the languages they teach have a history and that it is their responsibility, as language educators, to learn it and pass accurate knowledge to their students. Further, I provide opportunities to reflect on how they, as speakers and teachers of those languages, may carry and reproduce unconscious biases dominant in the formal schooling culture. Certainly, hierarchical ideologies of monolingual, monocultural identity continue to prevail in formal schooling, often placing minoritized students, along with their funds of knowledge and linguistic repertoires, at the margins of inferiority and deficit (Coronel-Molina, 1999; Motha, 2006). This reality is not only replicated in US classrooms, but also in other nations of the Americas and the Caribbean islands where colonial languages and, by extension, their ideologies continue to reproduce feelings of linguistic shame and alienation in speakers of minority and/or Indigenous languages (Coronel-Molina, 1999).

To approach the topic of Indigenous People's invisibility (see Barillas Chón et al., 2021) and monolingual ideologies in formal schooling, I often include required readings in our courses that prompt us to engage in deep discussions (e.g., Civallero, 2020; Frydland, 2022; González Díaz, 2019; Kidwell & Pentón Herrera, 2019; Pentón Herrera, 2019c; Web del Maestro CMF, 2020). Also, we explore how they, as language teachers, can create opportunities in their schools and classrooms that contribute to the visibility of Indigenous communities and languages coexisting alongside the communities and languages they are teaching (for examples see Pentón Herrera, forthcoming). I know that this is only the beginning of what decolonizing language (teacher) education looks like for me as a language educator, but I am excited and hopeful of the possibilities in the future.

## Let's Continue Our Dialogue: Final Thoughts

I would like to end this article with a short account of an event I experienced at an end-of-year holiday gathering with friends and extended family in 2020. At this gathering, most of the people were Cuban, but one of the attendees was Mexican—Carmencita (pseudonym)—and was married to a young gentleman born and raised in Cuba. In my conversation with Carmencita, I learned that she was born and raised in Mexico, and somehow, we ended up talking about different Indigenous Peoples and languages from Mexico. Suddenly, her husband joined our conversation and shared, “*yo creo que los indios son buenas personas, pero son muy cabezones; donde trabajamos en la construcción yo les enseño a hacer las cosas, pero ellos lo hacen como ellos quieren*” (I think that Indians are good people, but they are very stubborn; where we work in construction I show them how to do things, but they do it how they want).

This young gentleman, who I do not consider to be racist, used the word *indio*—referring to Mexican workers—without knowing that this word is a pejorative term used in most of Latin America to refer to Indigenous Peoples. The use of this term quickly prompted me to correct him in front of

everyone: “*la palabra indio es una ofensa para las personas indígenas*” (the word *indio* is offensive to Indigenous Peoples). The people listening were surprised at my response and the young gentleman did not understand what I was explaining. Carmencita, aware of the awkward situation, began talking about an unrelated topic to shift the focus of the conversation. Through this very short exchange, I confirmed, once again, that schools in Cuba do very little to educate individuals about the history of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas and the Caribbean islands, and about the correct vocabulary to use to refer to Indigenous Peoples. I also realized that the antiracist and anticolonial knowledge I have gained as a scholar and educator about Indigenous Peoples has also percolated into my personal life, shaping my identity and causing tensions. I do not consider this young gentleman to be racist, and yet, he is using, reinforcing, and perpetuating racist language against Indigenous Peoples—this fact surprised me and has prompted me to engage in further cogitations.

In this article, I have woven my personal and professional stories with available literature to advocate for the necessity of decolonizing language education. I do not pretend to imply that the history and information shared in this essay are exhaustive in any way. On the contrary, the brief overviews shared in this manuscript about colonialism, racism, and linguisticism in the Americas and in the Caribbean islands are merely the tip of the iceberg. Keeping in mind that discrimination, racism, and dehumanization always start with language (Brown, 2017), I invite language teachers, language teacher educators, and those in the field of applied linguistics to continue this difficult but necessary dialogue with me in a different space and to continue decolonizing their pedagogy and the way they teach.

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