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'Juntos Somos Fuertes': Writing Participatory Corridos of Solidarity through a Critical Translingual Approach

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Changing demography in the Southwest USA has shifted the racial compositions of many neighborhoods that were once predominantly African American to majority Latinx immigrant communities (Orfield and Frankenberg 2014). Today, it's common for these two youth communities to learn side-by-side in urban and suburban classrooms where they are often positioned to share each other's cultural practices (Martinez 2017). However, language and literacy research often positions these two minoritized communities as mutually exclusive (Paris 2010). Moreover, while researchers have urged the analysis of these two youth communities comparatively few studies document classroom units that cultivate spaces for 'linguistic solidarity' (Martinez 2017). Drawing from an ethnographic study of an 11th-grade ethnic studies class, the authors explore how Arturo (third author) took up a critical translingual approach in his classroom where students—both Latinx and African American—collaborated through the cowriting of corridos (Mexican ballads) about their lived experiences with in/justice. The findings demonstrate the ways that this unit invited students to write across racial, ethnic, and linguistic borders and fostered language and cultural sharing, political consciousness, and solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship in applied linguistics is increasingly naming the social, racial, political, and economic conditions that are central to contemporary linguistic inequalities (Bhattacharya *et al.* 2020; Pennycook 2015). The field's growing attention to diversity, equity, and justice situates language activism within a larger critique of the inequitable impacts of capitalism, migration, epistemological racism, and socioeconomic injustice on minoritized communities (Block 2014; Kubota 2020). Flores (2017) argues that for language learning to be transformative in US schools, it must be part of a 'comprehensive approach to community transformation that addresses the . . . marginalization of minoritized communities' (567). One way that some communities are attending to

the marginalization of youth of color is through community-led advocacy for and the grassroots building of ethnic studies programs at the K-12 level, as these classrooms often seek to unpack, investigate, and problematize intersectional forms of linguistic and racial oppression.

Classroom-based studies have underscored how ethnic studies courses can challenge epistemological racism, cultivate critical literacy development, and teach counternarratives to hegemonic US curricula (Cuahtin *et al.* 2019). Ethnic studies courses center the lived experiences, perspectives, histories, and literary traditions of Indigenous communities and people of color in the USA. Over the last decade, an increasing number of school districts have implemented ethnic studies courses, especially in California after the 2016 signing of the California Assembly Bill 2016, which aims to support public school districts to implement these courses at the secondary level. As ethnic studies increasingly become part of US high schools, there remains limited information about the writing activities in these classrooms that center students' racialized social worlds.

In past work, the authoring team has explored how ethnic studies courses can be fertile spaces for translanguaging, participatory research, and the development of critical metalinguistic awareness for Latinx students (de los Ríos and Seltzer 2017; de los Ríos and Molina 2020; Seltzer and de los Ríos 2018). Here, we extend this work to explore the experiences of Latinx and African American students enrolled in a Chicanx/Latinx Studies course in California that served as a unique space for language sharing and solidarity building.

Moreover, homing in on these two racially minoritized communities is salient, as changing demography in the US Southwest has shifted the composition of many neighborhoods that were once predominantly African American to majority Latinx (Orfield and Frankenberg 2014). As a result, it is common that African America and Latinx students share classrooms in segregated schools where they are often positioned to share one another's language and cultural practices (Martinez 2017; Paris 2010). While research has amplified the urgency of analyzing these two languages minoritized and racialized communities comparatively (Martinez 2017), few studies document classroom teachers that cultivate spaces for linguistic solidarity through their pedagogies.

We draw from a larger ethnographic classroom study of an 11th-grade ethnic studies class, titled Chicanx/Latinx Studies, that centered Mexican American and Latinx histories and literature. We explore how Arturo, the teacher in this article, took up a critical translingual approach (Seltzer 2020) where Latinx bilinguals and African American students collaborated through the cowriting of folk ballads, inspired by the Mexican corrido tradition, about their lived experiences with in/justice. This article focuses on Arturo's one-week curricular unit to consider, 'What themes emerged when students were invited to co-author corridos that represented their learning in the Chicanx/Latinx Studies class?' We draw upon the theoretical contributions of translanguaging (García 2009), translanguaging pedagogy (García *et al.* 2017), and critical translingual approaches in English-medium secondary classrooms to

understand how such a space encouraged students to draw on their fluid linguistic repertoires as they wrote about the intersections of racialized people's sociopolitical experiences at a time of emboldened racial and xenophobic turmoil.

TRANSLANGUAGING PEDAGOGY AS SOCIAL JUSTICE IN LITERACY CLASSROOMS

Translanguaging breaks with traditional understandings about bi/multilingualism that have been reified within the field of applied linguistics (Canagarajah 2011; Li Wei 2018; Otheguy *et al.* 2015), asserting that bi/multilingual people are not the combination of two (or more) monolinguals, with separate, autonomous language systems, but deploy features from one integrated repertoire to make meaning and participate across contexts (García 2009; García and Li 2014). This integrated repertoire incorporates not just 'named languages' (Otheguy *et al.* 2015), but also language varieties and movement across registers. Thus, the notion of translanguaging is rooted in the linguistic flexibility and fluidity that is typical of bilingual families and communities.

A translanguaging pedagogy centers social justice as it coordinates instruction to afford racially and linguistically minoritized students the opportunity to draw on all their linguistic and semiotic resources at all times to make meaning (García *et al.* 2017). As outlined by García *et al.*, the three interrelated strands of a translanguaging pedagogy include the translanguaging *stance*, a teacher's beliefs about bilingualism and bilingual students, the translanguaging *design*, the teacher's instructional plan for the classroom that reflects and responds to students' language practices and bi/multilingual realities, and the translanguaging *shifts*, the teacher's unplanned 'moves' that adapt to the corriente, or current, of students' interests, languaging, and learning needs. Taken together, these strands work to create a more socially just learning experience for emergent bilinguals and *all* language minoritized students. It is this emphasis on social justice that is central to a critical translingual approach.

Building on this broader conceptualization of a translanguaging pedagogy, a critical translingual approach highlights the potential of translanguaging to draw explicit connections between language, power, and identity (Seltzer 2020). Grounded in translanguaging theory as well as scholarship in critical literacy and critical language awareness, a critical translingual approach extends this theory to *all* language minoritized students and views their language practices as interrelated and thus integral to their learning. This approach also understands students' translanguaging and translingual sensibilities as having the potential to counter those deficit ideologies that negatively shape perceptions of their languaging and literacies (García and Kleifgen 2020). As will be discussed, Arturo's translanguaging pedagogy was

inherently critical, as it enabled him to design a literacy experience that leveraged students' complex linguistic repertoires, drew on their sophisticated understandings of systems of power, and cultivated solidarity among students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

CORRIDOS

A folklore ballad of border conflict (Paredes 1958), the corrido is a justice-oriented literary genre originating in 19th century Mexico that has historically critiqued the status quo. As a resistant cultural form against white supremacy, the composition and performance of corridos 'instantiated the idea of a unified and legitimate subject whose life of struggle was worthy of being told' (Saldívar 2006: 153). As a running report of events, corridos narrate a story of local or national interest through the composition of 6–16 stanzas of 4–6 lines each, often up to 10 syllables per line.

Corridos generally center the destiny and political values of a larger community rather than those of the individual. With this feature of the genre in mind, Arturo regularly used this literary genre as a tool for social justice within the translanguaging design of his course. We extend previous scholarship (de los Ríos 2018) on utilizing corridos for literacy pedagogy by highlighting Arturo's approach, which fostered collective solidarity across racial and ethnic student groups in one urban classroom.

CONTEXT, POSITIONALITIES, AND METHODS

School context

This study took place in a California community that is known for its large Latinx immigrant population. Historically, however, there has been a long-standing African American community in the north side of town, making up approximately 12% of the entire city. According to the California Department of Education, the school demographics at the time of the study were 85 per cent Latinx, 11 per cent African American, and 3 per cent undisclosed. Approximately 81 per cent of the student body received free or reduced-price lunch; and about 42 per cent of the student body were classified as 'English Learners' (ELs), with Spanish as the primary language. We heed García's (2009) call to use 'emergent bilinguals' rather than ELs to more holistically honor students' sophisticated skill sets as they become bilingual.

The ethnic studies course was composed of first- and second-generation students, primarily of Mexican origin with several students of Central American backgrounds, and about a third of the students were emergent bilinguals. While the high school had offered Chicanx/Latinx Studies courses since 2008, the 2015–16 academic year saw the largest self-enrollment of non-Latinx students. When Arturo was asked why he thought that might be, he said 'it was mostly because of students' friends taking the course and my own personal

relationships with Black students on campus' (field note, 14 March 2016). This social context made this classroom an important site for studying the linguistic and cultural sharing between the participating Latinx and African American students.

Participatory corridos classroom unit

This week-long unit occurred in the spring prior to the 2016 presidential election, when Donald Trump's candidacy for president had significantly increased the already polarized political climate. Arturo's ethnic studies course fostered a space where concepts of race, colonialism, hegemony, and solidarity were explored. Through historical and literary texts, popular media, spoken word poetry, and music, the yearlong course examined how notions of power and privilege affect communities of color and inform their resistance practices, particularly within Chicanx and Latinx communities. Central to Arturo's translanguaging design was the use of multimodal and multilingual texts to explore issues of immigration and racism in the USA.

Prior to the collaborative writing of ballads, Arturo had students read excerpts from Paredes' (1958) foundational text that highlights the social justice history of corridos as both a literate and cultural practice against white supremacy and US expansionism. Arturo's PowerPoint presentation at the beginning of the unit included historical photographs, audio of significant corridos from the 1910 Mexican Revolution and the California Gold Rush, as well as sensory images, artwork, and symbols. Although hip-hop texts were not explicitly incorporated into this unit, Arturo made historical connections between the corrido and the origins of hip-hop music, both as literary genres that seek to narrate racialized lifeworlds from the margins of society. Once students had a grasp of the structure and content of corridos, they listened to and conducted a close reading of the corrido, 'Somos Más Americanos' [We're more American] by the norteño ensemble, Los Tigres del Norte, and then later 'El Inmigrante' [The Immigrant] by modern norteño group, Calibre 50.

Through evocative figurative language, 'Somos Más Americanos' questions *who* and *what* constitutes 'American' and American culture. Similarly, 'El Inmigrante' takes us into a first-person account of one immigrant's struggle with migration and the stereotypes that Mexican immigrants endure once in the USA. The songs' lyrics were provided in both English and Spanish. In small groups of six, students discussed the songs and then launched into writing corridos through the collaborative poetry exercise, 'Pass the Poem'. The participatory nature of the exercise invited students in small groups to each contribute one stanza to their group's larger ballad. The growing ballad was passed from one student to the next, which helped each participant to link and build their own stanza off of the previous one. Students' stanzas explored themes that situated their understandings of the imperative of accessing ethnic studies curricula in their lives.

After finishing their collective ballads, students read them aloud with their groupmates and began an editing process where one to two revisions were made by each group member. In this process, students deleted some words, slightly rewrote sections, or rearranged lines of their stanzas. Rather than correcting each other's formal grammatical or syntax errors, students massaged each other's wording and style. This was especially important because students of color are too often assumed to bring their language practices to the classroom in ways that need to be repaired (Baker-Bell 2020). After participating in this activity, students wrote a short reflection about the process, including what their stanza depicted and how it connected to the greater corrido and their class as a whole.

This kind of translanguaging design—from the use of metalinguistic mentor texts that spanned modes and languages and encouraged critical thinking to the collaborative, explicitly multilingual writing process—highlights how Arturo's critical translanguaging stance and related pedagogical choices helped to catalyze a space where students could break out of the monolingual confines of traditional school writing and narrate their multiracial and multilingual social worlds.

Researcher positionalities

When Arturo, a bilingual Chicano, began teaching at the school in 2010, Cati, a bilingual Chicana, was the former classroom teacher who taught and had institutionalized the course in 2008. In the year before Cati left to begin her graduate studies, Cati assisted Arturo as he prepared to take over the Chicanx/Latinx Studies courses that she had spearheaded years prior. Arturo has taught this course since then and their partnering has endured. The unit centered in this article was codesigned by Cati and Arturo. Aligned with the ethics of community-based research, Cati regularly invites Arturo to participate in cowriting, analysis, and presenting this research when he desires.

While Kate joined this research project once it was already designed and the data were collected, she brought an additional analytical lens to the dataset which has strengthened the research. Given Cati and Kate's similar commitments to translanguaging and critical literacy at the secondary level, we have coauthored manuscripts that take up a comparative case study approach, placing our individual research projects side-by-side to provide more complex understandings of translingual classrooms. Kate is a white bilingual researcher engaged in constant reflexivity about what her white privilege means and affords her when doing research alongside racially minoritized communities (Bucholtz *et al.* 2016). Cati and Kate's previous collaborations that highlight Arturo's pedagogy have also helped to highlight our individual biases and strengths across our comparative research. Together, the authoring team regularly embraces a critical introspective stance in our investigative efforts.

Methods

Our methodological approach was twofold. The first draws on participatory design research (PDR) (Bang and Vossoughi 2016) which links interventionist methodologies like participatory research and social design experiments to foster social futures rooted in relationality and justice. PDR works to unite those that have been traditionally kept apart—here, practitioners and researchers—to codesign transformative interventions. Particularly in the field of applied linguistics, (re)positioning such voices disrupts the disconnect between researchers and P-12 language teachers. This article presents some of de los Ríos and Molina (2020) longstanding PDR where they have codesigned curricula and research that centers social justice.

Our second approach draws on ethnographic methods. Cati spent the 2015–16 school year observing Arturo's classroom. Data presented in this article were collected by Cati and Arturo and includes Cati's field notes of Arturo's 55 minutes class period in which a double-column journal was used to document both descriptive notes of interaction and talk, and the other column was inferential (Emerson *et al.* 2011). Cati collected students' participatory corridos and their accompanying reflections about those corridos. Lastly, reflective journaling from ongoing discussions between Cati and Arturo about the unit was also incorporated to provide triangulation.

Data analysis

This iterative research combined both inductive and deductive approaches. Drawing from our previous research in Arturo's classroom and existing empirical literature, we developed deductive codes. We derived inductive codes from data analysis in which we adapted Luttrell's (2010) three-step analytic process across the three data sources—the participatory corridos produced during the unit, students' reflections on those corridos, and Cati's field notes. Cati and Kate led the first reading of data looking for recurring words, phrases, and metaphors. Cati and Kate met regularly for check-ins, exchanged notes and reflections, and listened to each other's initial insights. The second round of analysis included looking for a 'coherence among the stories' (262), through which the entire authoring team developed a codebook that we then drew on to engage in further rounds of coding. The third round of coding, drawing on our established codebook and concepts from our theoretical concepts, included the documentation of patterns and tensions in the data which led to the development of themes. During the third reading, the authoring team noted disparate interpretations and new insights, and engaged in triangulation through member checks, all of which helped to justify our analysis. Once our major themes were developed, we looked back at the corridos and chose one that we believed best represented these themes, namely translanguaging, solidarity, and an ethics of care. It is this corrido, 'Juntos Somos Fuertes', that we turn to next.

FINDINGS

Though all the corridos produced during this unit demonstrated the genre's tradition of storytelling and narrating lived experiences at the margins of society, this particular corrido reflects the three themes that emerged when students were asked to reflect on their year of learning: their fluid translanguaging and desire to engage in language sharing, their articulation of a heightened political consciousness, and their development of care for themselves and one another. We first reproduce the corrido in its entirety and then connect the stanzas to the three themes above.

'Juntos Somos Fuertes'

LaTiana

> We have to stand together and not let them stop us
> We'll be the ones to make the world a better place, trust
> They'll deprive us of our knowledge and all opportunities
> Like they did in Arizona and took away Ethnic Studies
> But that never stopped them, they kept fighting for their classes.

Edgar

> I keep my body like an Azteca
> away from these sicknesses
> with sabiduría [wisdom] and medicina [medicine]
> Leaving all you clueless
> Wondering how he do it
> Learned many lessons that I'll never forget
> Which is something I'll never regret.

Victoria

> I listen to tales of privilege
> And its many forms-straight, white, or male
> It comes from my very smart and wise peers
> Teaching the truth that's covered by a veil
> I'll take action and teach others too
> So we all learn to share this holy grail.

Monique

> En la clase de Chicano studies [In Chicano Studies class]
> Hay inmigrantes que son mis buddies [There are immigrants that are my buddies]
> Donald Trump no nos soporta [Donald Trump doesn't want us]
> Pero juntos nadie nos corta [But together no one will cut us]
> Latinos somos fuertes unidos [Latinos are strong when we're united]
> Porque nunca nos damos por vencidos [Because we never allow ourselves to be defeated].

Jose

Borderlands son fronteras [are borders] that ain't real
They give people a left out feel
They separate and destroy a family
We learned how our gente [people] feel agony
So now with this lesson I see
That people are different and you gotta fight to let them be.

Chris

This class helps students of color.
folks struggled for us to take this class like no other
Now I look at immigrants differently
They come just to make a living
This class has helped me in life.
It confused me but made me think twice
About the assumptions I used to make.

TRANSLANGUAGING TO ARTICULATE A POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND FORGE POETIC SOLIDARITIES OF CARE

The title of the corrido, 'Juntos Somos Fuertes' (Together We Are Strong[1]), is itself representative of how group members engaged in translanguaging and language sharing in ways that expressed their learning and their care for one another. LaTiana, an African American student who did not identify as a Spanish-speaker, first called the poem 'Somos Fuertes', borrowing from her Latinx classmates. Another Latinx student Jose added 'juntos', and thus the corrido was named (field note, 15 March 2016). This translingual naming process demonstrates students' interest in one another's language practices and a shared commitment to expressing their thinking across named languages. As we will show, the students in this group articulated their critical political consciousness and care for one another—sentiments forged through a year of dialogue about their lived experiences as racialized people of color—through a language of solidarity (Martinez 2017) which, in this corrido, was expressed through translanguaging.

LaTiana, who initiated the translanguaged naming of the corrido, begins the corrido by expressing her learning about the ethnic studies ban in Arizona and her feelings of collective resistance against an unnamed 'they' who attempt to 'deprive us of our knowledge and all of our opportunities'. Aligning herself with others who fight against oppression, LaTiana's stanza points to how her heightened political awareness connects her to her Latinx classmates, seeing herself aligned with them against these harmful forces. Similarly, Chris, also an African American student, describes his new thinking around immigration and immigrants. His first line describes the class as being for 'people of color'

and, through his use of 'us', Chris locates himself alongside his Latinx/Chicanx teachers and peers in their fight to preserve the ethnic studies program. Through his participation in the ethnic studies class, he writes that he has come to question 'the assumptions' he had previously made about immigrant and Latinx communities.

Like LaTiana and Chris, Victoria, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, credits her heightened criticality and political awareness to Arturo's class and, more specifically, to her peers. She writes that the course taught her about privilege, particularly around issues of gender and sexuality, and evocatively writes that this education is due, in part, to her 'very smart and wise peers', who taught her 'the truth that's covered by a veil'. Victoria ends her stanza by expressing her critical consciousness and calling herself to action on behalf of others who, like her, must be taught this truth and 'share this holy grail'.

Edgar's stanza, which seamlessly weaves English and Spanish, expresses his connection with the class's study of Mesoamerican remedies and care for oneself and one's communities. He writes that he keeps his body healthy, 'away from these sicknesses', with 'sabiduría and medicina'. Though he is referencing literal Mesoamerican remedies he learned about in class, one could read Edgar's discussion of healing as self-care and protection amidst the anti-Mexican sentiment that pervades our society. This idea of care for oneself as a form of resistance through 'wisdom and medicine', passed down from his ancestors clearly resonated with Edgar. Jose, who like Edgar, translanguages within his stanza, expresses his understanding of issues around immigration, especially noting how 'fronteras' (borders) can leave 'our gente' (people) out and destroy families. Jose ends his stanza with a plea to those who marginalize immigrants to tap into their humanity and care for others by letting them 'be'. Monique, writing almost fully in Spanish, also expresses her care and desire to protect herself and other immigrant students ('mis buddies') against Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Overall, we read in this corrido students' heightened consciousness of the political discourse around immigration and immigrants and, importantly, the impact of that awareness on their feelings of solidarity and care. This translanguaged corrido, rendered without translation by the students, transcends the linguistic, ethnic, and racial borders that seemingly divided students in the class by bringing their ideas and languages together in a collaboratively written poetic expression. In learning about immigration and tying the struggle of Latinx immigrants in the USA to the struggle of people of color and working-class people across history, students expressed solidarity, empathy, and new forms of cross-cultural understanding. 'Juntos Somos Fuertes' demonstrates that African American and Latinx youth who learn together can engage in powerful language sharing, which is itself a creative form of solidarity. This idea runs through the group's corrido and speaks to their collective testimony over institutional authority and their desire to care for themselves and one another as they resist oppression and seek truths about their lived experiences.

We want to note that one could read 'Juntos Somos Fuertes' and notice little obvious 'evidence' of students' uses of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (save, e.g. LaTiana's use of the word 'trust' in her stanza). This might lead to questions about what language practices were emphasized in the classroom—was Spanish more sanctioned than AAVE? Were students uncomfortable using AAVE? These are valid questions, but we would argue that, like students who translanguaged across named languages, African American students' languaging was an unmarked, constant presence in Arturo's classroom, invited into the discourse through Arturo's stance, design, and shifts that eschewed notions of 'standard' language and other deficit-laden concepts. We also argue that students' translanguaging is not—and should not be—a quantifiable phenomenon, nor should it always be conceptualized along 'common sense' ethnic and racial lines. Through his critical translingual approach, Arturo cultivated a space that enabled students to be themselves; as such, students wrote and talked about their learning on their own terms.

Lastly, while research has pointed to how racially and linguistically minoritized students have been targeted and bullied during Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency (Costello 2016), less research has captured how students engage in collaborative forms of dissent and solidarity. In this corrido, we see the youth expressing such resistance through what Martinez (2017) has called a language of solidarity, drawing on all their linguistic resources—as well as sharing those from their peers—to articulate a united front against oppressive forces. Critical translingual approaches like Arturo's can leverage this kind of language sharing and answer Martinez's (2017) call to design spaces that invite 'the Englishes, Spanishes, and other languages of our youth to make meaning, and create solidarity movements' (185).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The increasing racial and linguistic heterogeneity of US youth populations requires educators to rethink their literacy pedagogies in socially, politically, and culturally relevant ways that normalize the fluidity of students' language practices. Even within Chicanx/Latinx Studies classrooms, which center the experiences of Chicanx/Latinx people, African American students who have their own unique and historicized experiences with systemic racism can learn and unlearn alongside their Latinx peers. In order to take up a critical translingual approach with *all* of these students, teachers must design innovative literacy experiences that make space for students to engage in linguistic and cultural sharing in ways that promote solidarity and work toward collective social justice.

One way that language and literacy teachers can make space for sharing and solidarity-building among students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is to center multimodal texts by racially and linguistically diverse writers and artists who use translanguaging to voice their understandings

about language and its intersections with identity and systems of power. As students engage with these texts, they could make connections to their own lived experiences in ways that reveal both what they share and what is distinct about those experiences. By centering translingual texts, educators can expand representation to writers and artists of color *and* feature ways of languaging that counter monolingual, 'standard language' norms typically promoted in literacy classrooms. Teachers can also create opportunities for such sharing by designing activities that require students' collaborative creation of texts, be it poetic forms like the corridos featured in this article or other literary traditions that explore racialization and empowerment in students' lives. Through critical translingual instructional designs like these, teachers not only encourage students' to share their linguistic and cultural repertoires with one another; they work toward social justice overall by broadening the scope of classroom literacy learning and inviting *all* students' unique, and too often undervalued, languaging practices.

CONCLUSION

Because the corrido is narrative, reflexive, and poetic in technique, it readily lends itself as an instrument for analysis of larger sociopolitical experiences. As seen in Arturo's critical translingual design, the corrido can be a powerful tool for students to collectively share not only their personal destinies but also those of their larger multiracial and multilingual communities. Paris (2010) reminds us that Spanish is often viewed as 'The second language of the US' (153) due to its ubiquity and can be a resource—as can all students' language practices—for collaborative inquiry into students' racialized lives and can help to create bridges of understanding across racial and linguistic terrains. Cultivating translanguaging and solidarity within an ethnic studies curriculum that foregrounds students' identities and collaborative inquiries that destabilize whiteness, 'Americanness', and 'standard language' can transform the monolingual-white supremacy experienced by all racial and language minoritized students.

NOTES

1 All translations have been provided by the authors.

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