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## “Respetá mi idioma”: Latinx Youth Enacting Affective Agency

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### ABSTRACT

Although hegemonic approaches to education privilege rationality as the sole legitimate form of knowledge production and consumption, research on emotion in socially transformative learning demonstrates that it is only through affective investment that intellectual engagement takes place and leads to social change. Hence, the agentive action of racialized youth to produce knowledge challenging dominant ideological systems is also an affective agency, the production of social action informed by and involving embodied, emotional encounter with the world. The article identifies three key components of affective agency— affective encounter, mobilization, and persistence—through ethnographic interactional analysis in an innovative after-school program for Latinx youth. The analysis examines one student’s emotional response to linguistic racism in U.S. political discourse and how this affective experience moved her to speak out for sociolinguistic justice for Spanish speakers. The article concludes that educators committed to antiracism and social justice must interactionally support students’ affective agency.

### KEYWORDS

Emotion; interaction;  
Latinxs; racism; Spanish;  
youth

### Introduction: Education, affect, and social justice

While dominant forms of education focus almost exclusively on rationalist forms of knowledge production and consumption, in which learners are conceptualized as autonomous cognizing beings who gain insight via processes of logic and reasoning, scholars have increasingly recognized that reason alone is insufficient to produce the most profoundly transformative forms of learning and discovery (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). In approaches to learning centered around emotion, the cognitive processes valorized by traditional education are inseparable from more potent perceptual, emotional, and embodied—that is, affective—understandings. Far more than traditional rote or rationalist modes of education, such forms of learning have the potential to spark sociopolitical change. Hence, as a number of scholars have argued from feminist and critical race theory perspectives, educators and education researchers concerned with social justice must attend to affect as crucial to the reproduction of inequality as well as to the transformation of schooling and society (e.g., Ahmed, 2009; Boler, 1999; Matias, 2016; Zembylas, 2015).

An affectively grounded perspective is not guaranteed merely by a focus on antihegemonic pedagogies, which may also privilege rationalist forms of teaching and learning (Ellsworth, 1989). Furthermore, a social justice-centered approach to affect is distinct from uncritical notions of “emotional intelligence” and “emotional literacy” currently circulating in educational discourses, in which emotion is viewed as merely one more skill for students to master (Park, Haddon, & Goodman, 2003; Stough, Saklofske, & Parker, 2009). Such concepts position young people as emotionally deficient or deviant in the absence of appropriate instruction, while the neoliberal focus on individual self-improvement strips away the thoroughly social and political nature of emotional experience (Burman, 2009). Contrary to such assumptions, young people are affective

experts, particularly racialized and other sociopolitically subordinated youth, whose affective experiences are daily negated in hegemonic spaces such as schools. As Ana Ramos-Zayas (2011) points out, young people of color must master an “emotional epistemology” (p. 87), learning to manage their affects in relation to ideological expectations. In educational contexts, youth may suppress their emotional experience in order to challenge hegemonic condemnations of the “excess emotion” of racialized, gendered, and classed groups (cf. Anagnostopoulos, Everett, & Carey, 2013; Wilkins, 2012). More generally, the sociopolitical role of affect has been crucial in theorizing emotion in antiracist, feminist, and other social justice projects (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Diaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Gómez, & Meiners, 2014; Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012).

In educational settings, young people’s emotional epistemologies provide important yet often overlooked starting points for social change. Sara Ahmed’s (2004) bivalent phrase “just emotions” reveals that while affective experience may be dismissed as trivial or irrational, it is precisely through emotional encounter that justice can be achieved (see also Rys, 2018). One avenue for such transformational work in education is what Megan Boler (1999) calls a “pedagogy of discomfort” (p. 175), which in a consciously created environment of trust and openness can mobilize emotionally charged classroom encounters into political awareness and action. This approach may invite privileged students to recognize and bear witness to experiences of oppression both by fostering empathy across social difference and by acknowledging complicity in structural inequality (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Rohleder, Carolissen, & Swartz, 2010). Conversely, a pedagogy of discomfort can enable students from marginalized groups to develop new understandings of their lived experience by critiquing the ideological and sociopolitical processes that shape their worlds. A pedagogy of discomfort nevertheless has pitfalls: Educators must be attentive to minoritized students’ personal and collective histories of racial trauma and other forms of oppression in order to avoid simply reproducing or creating traumatic experiences in the classroom (Alvarez, Milner, & Delale-O’Connor, 2016). Moreover, white students—and teachers—may derail such discussions by shifting the focus from racialized trauma to white affects of guilt, shame, anger, resentment, and denial (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014). Thus educators, particularly those who are themselves white, must be strategic and reflexive in order to engage students’ affects in pedagogically and politically useful ways.

Crucially for social change, affect includes not only the experiences that social actors undergo but also the actions that they carry out; in other words, affect is intimately linked to agency. We and others conceptualize this relationship as *affective agency* (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2018; McManus, 2011, 2013): the production of social action informed by and involving embodied, emotional encounter with the world. As Susan McManus argues (2013), the idea of affective agency “facilitates a critical perspective that is attentive to the ‘micropolitical’, quotidian bodily encounters that are constitutive of, rather than secondary to, structural or social agential formations” (pp. 137–138). In short, it is the affective agency of social actors that produces larger social structures and processes through everyday embodied action and interaction. Affective agency, then, is not a new kind of agency, or a new kind of affect, but a conceptual tool for calling attention to the inseparability of agency and affect. Although space does not permit a full theoretical discussion of agency, following other scholars (e.g., Duranti, 2004) we understand agency as the set of actions that social actors perform, together with their effects, and, importantly, their affects.

In this article, we analyze the interactional enactment of affective agency in an educational program that we and others collaboratively created and implemented. The program combined research, a university-school partnership, and a commitment to sociolinguistic justice (Bucholtz et al., 2014). Program facilitators guided and collaborated with the Latinx youth participants to carry out a community action project on language, race, identity, and power in their lives. As with similar social justice-oriented programs (e.g., Cammarota, 2011; Irizarry, 2011; Martínez, 2017), students’ emotional investment in the issues they explored was crucial to their engagement in the learning process as well as to their agency in working toward social change. The program’s exploration of the interdependence of language and race called young people’s attention to issues that were familiar from their lived experience but were rarely if ever discussed in educational contexts; thus, the participants gained a

raciolinguistic perspective (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017; cf. Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016) that gave them a new lens on the racializing processes that permeated their daily lives.

Below, we examine how one young woman in particular drew on affective agency in order to counter racist discourses about the Spanish language. We focus on this student's story to illustrate three components that together produce affective agency in educational (and other) settings: (a) the initial emotional encounter as a site of affective action, (b) the further mobilization of affect as agency through reflexivity and critique, and (c) the persistence of affect across time and space. In calling attention to the important but often overlooked role of embodiment and emotion in young people's production and formulation of knowledge about social (in)justice, we argue that affect is a necessary component of both intellectual engagement and sociopolitical agency as interactional achievements.

### **Ethnography and interaction in an after-school academic program**

Our analysis is based on data collected in 2012 in a five-month-long after-school academic program at Mission City High School (a pseudonym), an urban California public school. At the time of the research, 54% percent of the students were of Latinx heritage and 14% were classified as English language learners, with Spanish as their home language; most other students were white monolinguals. The program, School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society, or SKILLS, creates partnerships among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and high school teachers and students in the local area (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2015). In 2012, Sebastián and Meghan were graduate teaching fellows at Mission City High School, along with another graduate student. Mary, the program director, did not participate in the after-school sessions but met weekly with the fellows to discuss their own and their students' goals, challenges, and successes in the program.

Despite their official titles, the graduate students positioned themselves more as facilitators than as classroom instructors, due to the way the program was implemented at the school. SKILLS collaborated with an after-school tutoring program for students who would be the first generation of their family to attend college; all students were low-income Latinxs of Mexican heritage. Twelve frosh, sophomores, and juniors elected to participate in SKILLS: ten girls and two boys ranging in age from 14 to 17. All students attended voluntarily and received no academic credit. Although affect was not an explicit focus of the program from the outset, the facilitators recognized that in order to distinguish SKILLS from school-as-usual and thus make it appealing to students, participants should be drawn into the material emotionally as well as intellectually. Students' attendance at SKILLS meetings, held in a computer lab or the school library, varied depending on their need for tutoring in their academic classes or other demands on their time, and so the graduate students designed the program not as a class with a set curriculum but instead as a series of weekly two-hour discussion and activity sessions with topics driven by participants' interests and goals. This approach prevented students from falling behind if they missed a week or two, while enabling all attendees to participate fully in discussions.

To keep meetings engaging, the facilitators created weekly opportunities for youth to critically discuss and challenge issues of linguistic racism in their everyday lives. Each session began with a group activity followed by a discussion or reflexive journaling session. Throughout the program, a variety of linguistic issues was introduced, including slang, bilingualism, accents, language shift, and translanguaging, as well as how these practices are framed within racialized ideologies and inequalities. The students brought their own experiences, insight, and expertise to each session, which led to lively discussions.

The participants often revealed highly personal, and at times traumatic, experiences regarding racial and linguistic discrimination. Thus the program was grounded in a sometimes emotionally difficult yet intellectually productive pedagogy of discomfort, in which youth of color, within the relatively safe space of the SKILLS meeting room, were encouraged to collectively confront and reflect on painful experiences using the tools of critical analysis introduced in the program. The idea of creating a language awareness campaign based on these experiences sprang from such discussions.

The resulting campaign materials addressed specific issues of language, discrimination, and identity of particular interest to each student.

Our own personal and professional subjectivities importantly shaped our affective encounters both with the youth participants and with the issues of race and racism that arose during the sessions. All SKILLS team members were strongly committed to advancing social justice for youth of color, and the three graduate students were fluent in Spanish, which enabled them to validate students' home language throughout the program. Sebastián, a first-year graduate student at the time, was still relatively new to teaching and learning how to facilitate potentially uncomfortable classroom conversations. However, discussions about race and racism were not new for him thanks to his academic training in Chicana and Chicano Studies. He was accustomed to talking about agency, the significance of personal narratives, and racism in these settings. Recalling his introduction to Chicana and Chicano Studies as an 18-year-old first-year college student (only a few years older than the SKILLS participants), Sebastián recognized the impact of these discussions on his own identity formation as a Latino, which informed his focus on youth affective agency.

Meghan, also a first-year graduate student, entered SKILLS feeling confident that her experiences as a teacher of English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language had adequately prepared her to lead discussions of antiracism with students of color. However, due in large part to her interactions with her SKILLS students and colleagues, she gradually became aware of the inadequacies of the colorblind brand of multiculturalism she had previously embraced. Alongside this uncomfortable set of realizations came a deepening sense of the importance of listening to participants' narratives and encouraging them to trust their emotions, which in turn reminded her that as a white person, her own emotional and embodied encounters with race and racism were different from those of the Latinx youth in the SKILLS program.

The third SKILLS facilitator, Eva Wheeler, a second-year graduate student in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, had just begun teaching Spanish courses. However, the language-learning curriculum took an apolitical perspective that was quite different from the SKILLS context; furthermore, Eva's previous legal training had taught her to privilege rationality over emotion. Nevertheless, as an African American woman who had successfully navigated hegemonic white spaces throughout her educational and professional career, she was comfortable discussing race and racism, including its emotional dimensions. Yet talking about her own experiences with these issues in conventional academic settings such as university classes made her feel vulnerable and uncomfortable, hyperaware of the white gaze of her fellow students and instructors. In light of these feelings, she was especially eager to contribute to making SKILLS a safer space for youth of color.

Mary interacted with the SKILLS students only at the beginning and end of the program when they visited the UCSB campus; her affective engagement with activities at the school was therefore at a one-step remove, limited to her weekly mentoring sessions with the graduate students. Moreover, the issues that the facilitators were encountering were largely new to her: As a white scholar in linguistics, an overwhelmingly white discipline that often valorizes "objective" scientific perspectives over political engagement, Mary had been socialized to view strong emotions as inappropriate and unsafe in academic settings. Yet as a researcher on language and race among youth (e.g., Bucholtz, 2011), she was struck by how engaged the SKILLS participants were in this richly affective setting compared to what she had seen both in formal classrooms and in previous iterations of the program. Our analysis aims to be sensitive to the ways in which our affective histories as teachers, researchers, and members of differentially racialized groups inform our understanding of the data, and we have collectively discussed and evaluated our individual interpretations, as well as sharing our analysis with the student who is the focus of this article.

In analyzing youth affective agency in SKILLS, we combine ethnography and video-based interactional analysis (e.g., Duranti, 1997; Goodwin, 1993). Both approaches have two advantages that make them especially well-suited to social justice research. First, they enable the systematic examination of sociopolitical processes and structures from the ground up, as these are constituted in the everyday lives of individual social actors both in the interactional moment and across larger

temporal spans. Second, both approaches prioritize the situated, embodied perspectives of participants over the analyst's viewpoint by focusing on how cultural insiders make sense of their social worlds. This emphasis on the meaning of lived experience is especially important in the analysis of affective agency, because affective action is often carried out via embodied engagement in ways that cannot be fully articulated through interviews or other cognitively framed reports of past experience.

Our analysis focuses on one student, Valeria, who explicitly and persistently enacted affective agency to challenge racist discourse about Spanish. (All student names are pseudonyms.) The examples analyzed below represent key moments in Valeria's initial encounter with and ongoing response to a particular instance of linguistic racism in U.S. political discourse; this longitudinal approach enables us to trace over time Valeria's itinerary of identity as an affective agent (Bucholtz, Barnwell, Lee, & Skapoulli, 2012; Wortham & Reyes, 2015). The analysis focuses on Valeria's affective agency as enacted through her linguistic and embodied interaction, with attention to how she displayed her emotion both through spoken and written language and through facial expression, posture, and gesture, as well as how her various addressees received and responded to her affective actions. By examining affect as a social act with interactional consequences, the analysis demonstrates the real-time workings of affective agency in the intersubjective encounter between a single social actor and her multiple audiences.

### **An interactional analysis of affective agency**

The facilitators did not initially foresee that it would be Valeria, perhaps more than any other SKILLS participant, who would be so powerfully moved to action due to her affective engagement with issues raised within the program. For the first three months, Valeria had been a very quiet student who participated in large-group discussions primarily through silently engaged listening and embodied responses rather than through on-record spoken contributions (Schultz, 2009), although she spoke up more often in small-group activities. During a session in the second half of the program, however, the facilitators and students began to witness a transformation in Valeria. The facilitators designed this session as a precursor to the discussion of the students' projects. Sebastián, Meghan, and Eva developed a set of activities focusing on what Flores and Rosa (2015) term *raciolinguistic ideologies*, including materials that expressed extremely offensive racist beliefs in opposition to minoritized languages. The facilitators were aware that the discussion would provoke strong emotional responses; their purpose was to tap into the learning potential of emotion in order for students to understand the urgent importance of their community action projects. While all participants reacted powerfully to the discussion, Valeria stood out not only for the strength of her emotional response but also for her mobilization of her affect beyond this session to identify and achieve her larger political goals. Over the next weeks, she emerged as an inspiring speaker and agent of social change whose affective engagement ultimately fueled her powerful call for racial and sociolinguistic justice. In the following analysis, we trace Valeria's affective agency around a specific instance of linguistic racism by examining, first, her initial emotional encounter; second, her continued mobilization of this affective experience through critical reflection; and finally, her political use of her persistent affects around this experience to call for social change.

### **Emotional encounter in a learning setting**

Affective agency begins with affective experience, as suggested by Laura Ahearn in her explanation of Raymond Williams's (1977) influential concept of *structures of feeling*. Ahearn (2013) defines structures of feeling as "inchoate, affective practices, experiences, thoughts, and feelings that have the potential (not always realised) to turn into new social and political formations" (p. 245). Thus, engaging young people's affective agency through socially transformative learning involves forging supportive conditions for students to encounter and make sense of ideas as embodied emotional experiences.

The SKILLS facilitators created the conditions for emotional encounter in the discussion of raciolinguistic ideologies by projecting a series of images and video clips containing language-focused racist



and xenophobic sentiments, such as a bumper sticker reading *I NO SPEAKA SPANISH. I SPEAK ENGLISH*, an image of Uncle Sam with the slogan *I Want You To Speak English OR Get Out!*, and a 2010 campaign commercial for Alabama Republican gubernatorial candidate Tim James, in which he declares, “This is Alabama. We speak English. If you want to live here, learn it” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEPH\\_KITyII](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEPH_KITyII)). These materials generated some derisive laughter and scornful comments, but no deeply unsettled emotional responses that we were able to observe either at the time or in the video recording.

The final item presented by the facilitators was a widely circulated and controversial recording from a speech that former Republican Congressman and House Speaker Newt Gingrich gave to the National Federation of Republican Women in 2007, when he was considering a run for the U.S. Presidency ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_rF694NzjPU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rF694NzjPU)). This clip, unlike the previous materials, elicited extremely strong affective reactions from students. In his speech, Gingrich declares, “We should replace bilingual education with ... immersion in English, so people learn the common language of the country and so they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto.”<sup>1</sup> This explicit devaluation of Spanish and the positioning of its speakers as “ghetto” dwellers revealed, in a more overt form than the previous examples, the raciolinguistic ideologies underlying hegemonic political discourse around Spanish.

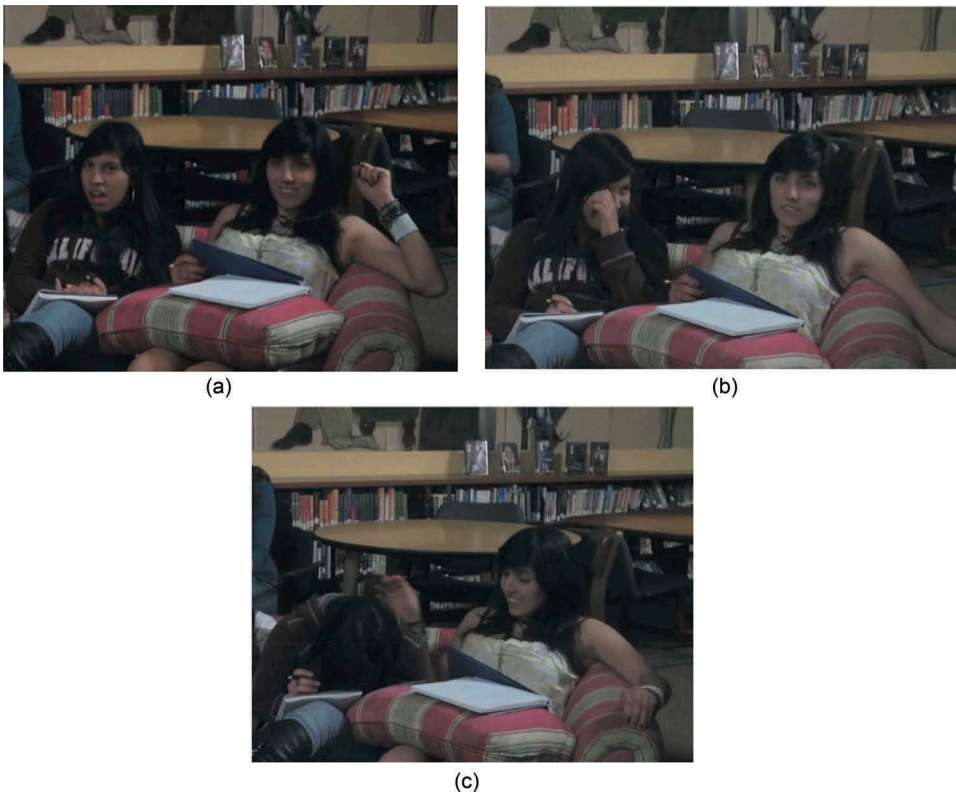
In response to this clip, the entire group displayed very intense emotions. Students and facilitators alike enacted moral anger (Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2007) through embodied and linguistic actions, including shocked laughter, smiles, and vehement imagined responses to Gingrich: “I would, like, boo at his face,” “You deserve a slap on the face,” “Lávate tu boca con jabón” (“Wash your mouth with soap”), “How dare you!” Meanwhile, Valeria stayed silent for several minutes, her mouth open as if in disbelief.

The three facilitators began to engage the students in a discussion about how their reactions might fuel their language awareness campaign. Valeria’s personal emotional encounter with Gingrich’s linguistic racism continued to play out quietly, separately from this discussion. Example (1) is taken from the middle of the discussion, as Valeria conducts a quiet side conversation with her friend Eli, sitting on a couch next to her. In the transcript, we present the two conversations side by side: Valeria’s embodied and spoken interaction with Eli in the first two columns, and the group discussion led by Sebastián, Meghan, and Eva in italics. The key embodied actions in the example are presented visually in [Figure 1](#) below.

(1) “Oh My God” (April 12, 2012)

<Valeria dabs her eyes>		<i>S: How would you maybe start to think of like a bumper sticker or a poster or a, like a short spot, or something that you could &lt;unintelligible&gt;</i>
<Valeria turns to Eli, smiling, and dabs her eyes>	V: Oh my god,	<i>M: Yeah, cause maybe like ...</i>
	V: I’m crying.	<i>You guys say</i>
<Eli turns to Valeria, smiling>	E: Oh! Are you okay?	<i>you want to boo them,</i>
<Valeria nods, smiling, her hand over her mouth, then laughs and wipes her eyes>	¿Qué te pasa? (‘What’s wrong?’)	<i>you want to slap them in the face,</i>
		<i>that’s like our emotional reaction, and that’s helpful to an extent, but then we want to address that ignorance that Eli’s talking about,</i>
<Valeria waves her hands in front of her face, smiling; then sniffles and flops over, laughing>		<i>S: Right. In a productive way.</i>
<Eli turns to Valeria and puts her hand on Valeria’s back>	E: Are you okay?	<i>M: and be productive.</i>
<Valeria raises her head and nods, smiling; Eli withdraws her hand>		<i>S: Right.</i>





**Figure 1.** (April 12, 2012). (a) Valeria's initial embodied affective response to Newt Gingrich's anti-Spanish comments. (b) Valeria shares her affective response with Eli. (c) Valeria shows that she is emotionally overcome.

Valeria's affective reaction to Gingrich's comment extends into the next part of the interaction, as the third facilitator, Eva, reminds the group of their previous discussions of "myths about bilingualism" and how they "combated those myths with evidence." As Eva speaks, Valeria points at the projector screen and whispers to Eli, "Is this for real?" In response, Eli nods and looks at Valeria, who whispers, "Oh my god," wipes away tears, and smiles.

In this example, Valeria enacts her increasingly strong affect through embodied action as well as verbalization. Her lengthy silence during the group discussion should not be construed as an absence of reaction but as an embodied expression of shock, as indicated by her open mouth and staring expression directed toward the screen at the front of the room (Figure 1(a)). She dabs her eyes, first with her fingertips and then, as she turns to Eli, with her knuckles. At this point she makes her personal affective experience more public, exclaiming to Eli as if in surprise, "Oh my god, I'm crying" (Figure 1(b)). After Eli asks, "Are you okay? ¿Qué te pasa?", Valeria downplays her affect by nodding reassuringly, laughing, and covering part of her face with her hand. Laughing while crying also enables her to explore how different affects will be received in this interactional terrain, evincing her high degree of affective self-awareness as well as her skill in managing her own and others' affects.

Following Eli's expression of concern, Valeria bodily displays her inability to repress her emotions: She waves her hands in front of her face, using a gendered gesture indexing tearfulness, and then snuffles and flops over with her head resting on her lap, as though overcome or embarrassed (Figure 1(c)). Although she is half-laughing as she does so, her laughter again seems designed to reassure her worried (and perhaps uncomfortable) friend Eli rather than enacting genuine lightheartedness.

Valeria's intense emotional encounter with linguistic racism in this example was supported both by the room's spatial arrangement and by the facilitators' discussion strategies. The intimate layout of the meeting space, including the couch on which the girls were seated, was more physically comfortable than the regimented rows of desks in regular classrooms; moreover, Valeria was seated between her friend Eli and another student (who did not observably react to her), but she was not seated near anyone else. Thus, students had more freedom to act and interact than in more formal school spaces. This arrangement enabled the side conversation between the girls as well as Eli's embodied expression of empathy by placing her hand on Valeria's back. Touch between students has long been negatively sanctioned in dominant forms of education as a "distraction" to or "disruption" of the official business of schooling (Schimmel, 2003). Yet this physical and verbal contact was a crucial component of Valeria's emotional encounter, as she affectively reacted to a national political leader expressing contempt toward her family's language.

The graduate students' pedagogical strategies were also designed to support Valeria emotionally. Sebastián and Eva, guiding the discussion at the front of the room, could see that Valeria was crying but did not want to call attention to this fact in front of the group. Meghan, seated behind Valeria, was unaware of her tears, but in her comments to the group she explicitly recognized the agentive force of affect by acknowledging students' moral anger in response to such ideologies ("you want to boo them," "you want to slap them in the face") and encouraging them to use their "emotional reaction" to "address that ignorance" in their public awareness campaign. Later in the session, Sebastián reinforced this connection between affect and agency with Valeria privately. She told him that her parents were both Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico and that listening to Gingrich's comments had filled her with feelings of shame and inferiority because she felt he was devaluing her and her family. Sebastián explained that feeling upset was an entirely understandable response and that the point of the campaign was to challenge such raciolinguistic ideologies. Following the group discussion, the SKILLS participants were encouraged to brainstorm possible project ideas in response to the ideologies reflected in the clip. After Sebastián checked in with her, Valeria began writing extensive notes about possible themes she wished to address. In his written daily report from that session, Sebastián noted, "I think what is happening is that there was a moment of realization for her and she seems very motivated to engage in a real dialogue about these issues with her project," thus recognizing this emotionally painful moment as having a productive potential for Valeria.

In various ways, Valeria was afforded the time and space to experience her emotions individually and at her own pace. Moreover, when she chose to share her emotions with Eli, she did so by verbalizing her embodied affective reaction: "Oh my god, I'm crying." By the time students reach high school, they are well aware of the risks of crying in front of peers or teachers. Hence, Valeria's exclamation may have been at least partly self-protective; her surprised tone implied that being moved to tears was unexpected and unusual for her. But given the ideological association of tears with vulnerability, Valeria's willingness to put her affect on record with her friend in this way was also an expression of trust as well as a form of agency in its own right. Further, reflecting on an emotion in the moment in which it is experienced involves a high degree of self-awareness. In this emotional encounter Valeria moved from the embodied enactment of moral anger to discursively orienting to her own affective state, a crucial step toward a more sustained form of affective agency.

### ***Mobilizing affect as agency***

The affective reaction produced within an emotional encounter is itself a form of affective action, but although affective experience can be intensely powerful, it may not extend beyond the initial encounter to participate in larger processes of social formation and transformation. As Ahearn notes above, not every emotional encounter leads to social change. Only when affect is mobilized as a resource can it be used by social agents to act upon the world in more sustained ways. This requires that affect not only be experienced but also critically reflected upon to produce new understandings.

Seeing the power of Valeria's initial affective encounter with Gingrich's raciolinguistic ideology, the facilitators encouraged her to use her emotions as a catalyst for further agentive action. In the following week, Sebastián, wanting to validate and support Valeria's affective experience, gave the students a copy of Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) classic essay on race and bilingualism, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," as an example of how raciolinguistic ideologies could be challenged. The profound impact of this reading on Valeria was clear three weeks later, when she and her colleagues began to create a set of posters for their bilingual social action campaign under the theme "Respect My Language/Respetá mi idioma." The facilitators distributed worksheets to help the youth plan their individual posters by guiding them to think through their topic, their main message, and the broader significance of their poster. In response to the worksheet's prompt for a "closing statement" for the poster that "should be powerful and leave an impact on the audience," Valeria wrote:

I value Spanish and English equally, just as other multilinguals value their languages equally. My languages make me who I am. I am my language. Respect my voice.

Valeria's words *My languages make me who I am. I am my language* were inspired by a powerful passage from Anzaldúa's essay: "if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to my linguistic identity—I am my language" (1987, p. 81). Anzaldúa forcefully reveals the political stakes that underlie individual emotional experiences of racialized linguistic inequality. In the same way, by linking her own multilingual identity to larger raciolinguistic ideologies, Valeria mobilized her personal emotional encounter to create a public political statement for sociolinguistic justice.

Affective experience inspired every aspect of Valeria's work in the language awareness campaign. In the physical process of completing her brainstorming worksheet, her embodied affect and her reflexive process of making sense and taking action can be literally read off the page (Figure 2).

In this document it is clear that even the task of filling out a worksheet can be a fully embodied emotional experience. Valeria's handwriting is large, firm, and rapidly produced, almost scrawled, and her answers overflow the physical boundaries allocated by the worksheet. In addition, she uses capitalization and underlining for emphasis in stating the message of her poster, highlighting the key word *all*, which she originally printed in lowercase and then capitalized:

My goal for this poster is to prove that ALL languages are important.

Completing the worksheet thus became for Valeria an opportunity to critically reflect on her emotions and to use them to move from personal affective experience to public agentive action.

The passion that Valeria conveyed in her brainstorming worksheet carried over into her poster, which she created in both Spanish and English. The language awareness campaign was primarily aimed at English speakers, and so Valeria is pictured holding a hand-lettered sign in English stating, "ALL LANGUAGES are created EQUAL." When the group later collectively decided to create Spanish-language versions of their posters to share with their parents, Valeria wrote both English and Spanish versions of the text around this image (Figure 3).

Not only did Valeria incorporate much of the powerful text from her worksheet into the printed text of her poster, but she also retained the emphatic capitalization of *all* in the statement *ALL languages are important*. The agentive force of affect can also be seen in Valeria's embodied stance in the photo of herself on the poster. Unlike the images of Valeria in Figure 1 above, which were captured more or less by chance during the research process, this image was produced through Valeria's own act of creative political expression. It therefore involves a high degree of reflexivity and self-representation.

As it happened, Valeria originally rejected this photo for inclusion in her poster, instead favoring a more conventional, smiling image of herself, until Sebastián pointed out to her that her serious expression would have a powerful effect on her audience. And although her choice to wear an

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SKILLS  
Session 17 - May 10, 2012  
"Respect My Language" Poster Text Guidelines

Each poster will have a title, photograph/image, and a written explanation of the two other items in a box at the bottom. The idea is for the text in the bottom box to give your audience a clearer, more focused idea of what your message is with the poster. While the message behind your title or slogan will be obvious to some, it will be helpful to provide the explanation for those to whom it might not read clearly.

The text should be a short paragraph (about 4-5 sentences in length). Since you only have a few lines, each sentence should be clear and to the point. Below is a guide to help you construct the text box for your poster.

- 1) **What is your topic?** (1 sentence) The first sentence should be your topic sentence or main idea behind the poster. What is it you are addressing?

There is no language that exceeds another.

- 2) **What is poster responding to?** (1-2 sentences) Here you will address what type of messages or stereotypes/misconceptions you are challenging.

My poster addresses the belief that other languages are of lesser value than English.

- 3) **What is the message of the poster?** (1-2 sentences) What is the goal of the poster? What are you hoping audiences will interpret from your work?

My goal for this poster is to prove that all languages are important + the more languages you know, the better you understand them and value them.

- 4) **What is the significance of your poster?** (1-2 sentences) Why might this topic be important to discuss? Why should people care about this topic? If people care about this topic, what will happen as a consequence (what good will arise from caring about it)?

This topic is important.

Prevent the judgement that some languages are better than others.

- 5) **Closing statement.** This is your final sentence. It should be powerful and leave an impact on the audience. Consider incorporating the name of your panel, which is in line with the major theme of your project and which ultimately ties back to "Respect My Language," the overall campaign title.

I value Spanish and English equally, just as other multilinguals value their languages equally. My languages make me who I am. I am my language. Respect my language.

Figure 2. Valeria's brainstorming worksheet for her language awareness campaign poster (May 10, 2012).

American flag T-shirt was, as far as we know, not a deliberate political statement, this detail further enhances the photograph's emotional impact. The flag image offers a rebuttal to the xenophobic and exclusionary rhetoric of conservative politicians by visually asserting Valeria's legitimacy as an American of Mexican heritage. In addition, it creates a semiotic resonance with the text of the handwritten sign she holds, *ALL LANGUAGES are created EQUAL*, which intertextually invokes the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Taken as a whole, Valeria's poster is an astonishingly rich, sophisticated, and concise multimodal critique of linguistic racism and a potent call for socio-linguistic justice.

Thus, Valeria's initial affective encounter was not simply a fleeting, "inchoate" emotional experience (to recall Ahearn's wording). Instead, it formed the foundation of her intellectual and political work, carried out in dialogue with the SKILLS facilitators and her colleagues in the program, as she critically reflected on her experience through reading and writing and then represented her insights both verbally and visually in poster form. The final part of our analysis illustrates Valeria's sustained affect and its agentic impact across time and space.





Figure 3. Valeria's language awareness campaign poster, in Spanish and English.

### *The persistence of affect*

The agitative action generated by and in affect can endure well beyond the initial emotional experience through an iterative process of reflexivity and critique. In this way, embodied affects continue to produce the action that drives social change. Emotion is particularly likely to realize its transformative potential when social actors share their experiences with others through talk, text, visual representation, and other communicative modes.

Valeria's affective experience extended temporally in two ways. First, her poster created a larger social impact when it was distributed, along with those of the other SKILLS participants, at Mission City High School as well as at UCSB. Second, the students formally presented their work both to their parents (in Spanish and in English with Spanish translation) and at the SKILLS Day conference on the UCSB campus (in English) to an audience of approximately a hundred UCSB faculty, students, and administrators and high school teachers, students, and administrators from three SKILLS partner sites. In preparation for the UCSB event, the students repeatedly practiced their presentations before their peers and the facilitators. This situation once again illustrates the persistence of affect: No matter how many times she spoke about her work and the racist comments that inspired it, Valeria was moved to tears. Example (2a) is taken from the middle of her first practice run-through of her presentation. She has just described Gingrich's remarks and goes on to discuss her affective response.

(2a) "It Made Me Cry" (May 17, 2012)

I became really angry, because I'm bilingual and I speak two languages, English and Spanish. It offended me, it made me cry, because it made me feel unimportant, compared to the people that speak only English. That any other language is inferior to English. Which is not true. Spanish is as valuable as English and as any other language in the world.

As she read aloud from her prepared text, Valeria appeared to be in increasing emotional distress. In describing her original affective response to Gingrich's words, she seemed to re-experience this reaction, speaking in a breathless voice quality that suggested the suppression of sobs. This was mitigated to some extent by a slight smile as she stated, "It offended me, it made me cry." Given the riskiness of public tears, her smile may have functioned as a face-saving device as her laughter did in Example (1) above. Thus, she managed to remain poised even as her voice shook with emotion.

Valeria's tearful embodied affect was also overlaid with anger, enacted through her firm delivery of the utterances *I'm bilingual* and *Which is not true*. These affects were in fact in close alignment, as indicated by Valeria's listing of her emotional responses: anger, feeling offended, crying. In this situation, anger was not an alternative to crying but a reason for crying: Her tears were the embodied manifestation of her moral anger and thus lent power to her words.

Nevertheless, crying is not expected in educational settings, especially in formal presentations. Unsurprisingly, then, one of Valeria's peers commented on her affect immediately after her presentation, as shown in Example (2b). (Overlapping speech is marked with brackets in the transcript.)

(2b) "Were You About to Cry?" (May 17, 2012)

Sebastián: Any ques[tions?]

Reyna: [Were] you about to cry?

Eva: <makes sound of mild disgust> That's your question, [Reyna?]

Valeria: [No. ]

[<Eva and others laugh>]

Reyna: [Cause that was— ]

Valeria: I was happy.

Reyna: Really? Okay.

Eva: That was sar[casm.]

Valeria: [No. ] That was—Yeah.

Eva: <laughs> I was like, "That was sarcasm."

Reyna: I'm like ... I'm sorry.

Eva: No! But ... And- and we were ... We- I- I think, you don't have to apologize for your emotional attachment to your poster. You can even make it evident, like before you start, you can tell everybody, like, you know, "This subject sometimes makes me emotional,"

Reyna: "I get a little [teary-eyed here.]"

Eva: [you know, "It's, ] it's really, it's because I'm so passionate, about what I'm saying." So, you know, just in case, you can like preface it that way,

Valeria: <nods> [Mhm.]

Eva: [Like, ] "I always get emotional when I talk about this, and it's because, you know, it means so much to me." And go into it.

Meghan: Yeah.

Eva: And, and people will respect that.

After Valeria's presentation, her audience of peers and facilitators responds with enthusiastic applause and cheers. As soon as Eva calls for questions, Reyna asks her classmate, "Were you about to cry?" The immediacy of this question indicates the salience of this issue for Reyna and perhaps other students. Her tone, however, does not align with Valeria's strong affect, suggesting curiosity more than the empathetic concern shown by Eli in Example (1) above. Her question therefore quickly receives moral sanctioning from Eva (*That's your question, Reyna?*), although she softens this response with laughter, which others join. Valeria likewise sanctions the question by responding sarcastically (*No. I was happy*), but the ironic force of her utterance is lost on Reyna until Eva explains it to her. Finally, Eva's advice to Valeria valorizes her affect as appropriate and even admirable: She says, "You don't have to apologize for your emotional attachment to your poster. ... And people will respect that." As Eva speaks, Reyna shows her agreement and support by offering her own suggestion.

In this exchange, much could have gone wrong: Valeria could have felt ridiculed for displaying emotion; Reyna could have felt attacked or foolish for asking her question. The episode's interactional delicacy is indicated by Eva's false starts and repetitions before offering advice to Valeria. But by this point in the program the facilitators and students had established a strong sense of mutual trust, enabling participants to express and explore ideas and feelings even when this led to discomfort. Together, the group members address this discomfort by working to validate Valeria's expression of emotion as appropriate, if unusual, in a public presentation. Thus, in the safe space of the SKILLS program, Valeria's emotions were supported rather than shut down. Legitimizing the persistence of Valeria's affect beyond the SKILLS space and in front of unfamiliar audience members, the participants collaboratively offered ways for her to frame her emotions as essential to her project.

Indeed, Valeria's powerful affect persisted even in her formal presentation at SKILLS Day a week later. As it turned out, she did not preface her presentation by telling her audience that she might "get emotional." In fact, in this public and rather intimidating setting, Valeria displayed even more emotion than in her practice presentations, and she paused several times to regain her composure. Despite Eva's advice, Valeria apologized after one of these pauses, which may suggest that she felt that her emotion was inappropriate. But she also enacted a stance of moral anger as in her practice presentations, particularly through the impassioned force with which she uttered the key line *Which is not true*. It was clear, then, that Valeria was not ashamed of her emotions. On the contrary, her persistent affect seemed to empower her by enabling her to re-experience the strong feelings that had initially led her to speak out against linguistic racism.

Valeria's moving delivery touched deep emotions among many audience members, who wept with her as she spoke. (We always do as well, no matter how many times we view our data.) Many praised her afterward for her courage, strength, and dignity and for the potency of her message. Youth and adults alike are often told that it is necessary to set feelings aside in favor of "rational" argument, yet Valeria's mobilizing of her emotional response to take public action against linguistic racism demonstrates the fundamentally emotional basis of knowing and acting in the world. It is precisely the persistence of her affect, her ability to bodily re-experience the original insult of Gingrich's words, that makes it so powerful as the basis of social agency (cf. Butler, 1997).

Although a pernicious ideology often links weeping to weakness in U.S. culture, Valeria's experiences and achievements in the SKILLS program demonstrate that tears, and the moral anger that they enact, can serve as a valuable form of affective agency to counter the emotions of hatred, contempt, and fear that feed racism (Ioanide, 2015). As Ahmed (2009) notes regarding Audre Lorde's reflections on Black women's anger,

Here, anger is constructed in different ways: as a response to the injustice of racism; as a vision of the future; as a translation of pain into knowledge; and as being loaded with information and energy. Crucially, anger is not simply defined in relationship to a past, but as opening up the future. In other words, being against something does not end with "that which one is against." Anger can open the world up. (p. 51)

Finally, it is important to emphasize that Valeria's affect-driven work to "open the world up" to greater sociolinguistic justice was entirely her own achievement and should not be attributed to some sort of "empowerment" produced by the SKILLS program. An empowerment perspective frames young people as lacking the self-awareness and agency to recognize and politically mobilize their emotional experiences without adult intervention (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2016). We instead argue that youth agency, and especially affective agency, functions as the basis of young people's socio-politically transformative action. As an agentive social actor, Valeria—like all of her peers within SKILLS—was already fully capable of using the affective understandings she had acquired through her life experiences to produce a compelling rebuttal to the racism of pandering politicians like Gingrich. Indeed, it was precisely these experiences that gave Valeria the affective authority to speak out against linguistic racism. The SKILLS program simply offered her a critical conceptual understanding of raciolinguistic ideologies and an outlet for action, as well as a learning context in which affects were interactionally nurtured and supported rather than suppressed or denied (see also



Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017). For young people of color, such spaces are crucial sites for collaborating in the uncomfortable and sometimes painful work of confronting injustice and taking action, a task that has continuing urgency in the openly racist and xenophobic political climate since the 2016 Presidential election.

## Conclusion

In this article we have offered affective agency as an important issue for educators concerned with social justice. Closely examining a single Latina student's affective actions in response to an encounter with linguistic racism, we have argued that affects exert a social and political agency both within and potentially beyond the initial emotional encounter, and we have identified three key elements that together produce affective agency as a force for social change. Our ethnographic and interactional approach thus follows the recent call by Ulla Berg and Ana Ramos-Zayas (2015) for researchers to examine what they term "racialized affect" through "a finer-grained exploration of an emotive self-fashioning, reflexive capacity and historical directionality of racialized and colonial populations" (p. 664).

Although our analysis has focused on a somewhat unusual learning context, the key insights are generalizable to other settings, especially those serving racialized youth. First, nurturing young people's affective agency begins by recognizing their ability to produce original knowledge and insights about their experiences. Pedagogical approaches that sustain racialized young people's culture and language are therefore the *sine qua non* of socially transformative education (Paris & Alim, 2017). Second, educators must honor their own and their students' affective experiences by inviting rather than suppressing emotional encounters in the classroom, while doing the crucial preparatory work for such encounters—from building trust and sharing vulnerabilities to anticipating and confronting toxic white affects—in order to avoid reopening racialized students' old wounds of racial trauma or inflicting fresh injuries. Creating a classroom that fosters such emotional experiences may require reconfiguring physical space to facilitate intimacy and private contemplation as well as supportive exchange. Finally, fostering affective agency involves expanding the learning experience from the classroom to other spaces and providing the resources for students to direct their affective insights into actions that have an impact on the larger social world, as well as preparing students for the negative hegemonic affects that may greet their work.

For educators and researchers committed to working with youth to "open the world up," advancing social, racial, and linguistic justice starts with an attunement to affective agency. Because emotions—and especially the emotions of youth of color—are often sanctioned in traditional classrooms, thoughtfully acknowledging and supporting emotions as valid in learning settings is itself a step toward social justice (Zembylas, 2007). Meaningful intellectual engagement requires an affective investment, and affective investment yields action toward social change. Hence under the right social, political, and interactional conditions, affective experience can provide a productive ground for transformative learning.

## Note

1. Gingrich's comment was widely viewed as a racial gaffe (Hill, 2008). The following week, he issued an apology in Spanish ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sg-0aB7jf\\_c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sg-0aB7jf_c)).

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