

## “We Don’t Have Physical or Mental Limitations”: Agency in the Discourse of Latinas in Oregon

### “No somos limitadas físicas ni mentales”: agencia en el discurso de mujeres latinas en Oregon

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#### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study analyzes the narratives of five *Latina* women living in the state of Oregon (United States) in relation to their social interactions in the service sector and public spaces of the communities in which they live. The objective is to learn about their experiences and observe if there is a critical sociolinguistic awareness that reaffirms an agency in the destination country. Drawing on a theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis and raciolinguistics, three common thematic axes were obtained: the absence of Spanish in public places, the white gaze in linguistic exchanges, and multilingualism in public life. These narratives show how critical awareness triggers the resilience and agency that has allowed these women to challenge racist and linguistic discriminations in the United States.

*Keywords:* 1. Latina women, 2. migration, 3. raciolinguistics, 4. United States, 5. Latin America.

#### RESUMEN

Este trabajo cualitativo analiza las narrativas de cinco mujeres latinas radicadas en el estado de Oregon (Estados Unidos) en relación con sus interacciones sociales en el sector servicios y los espacios públicos de las comunidades en las que viven. El objetivo es conocer sus experiencias y observar si existe una conciencia crítica sociolingüística que reafirme una agencia en el país de destino. Usando como marco teórico el análisis crítico del discurso y la raciolingüística, se obtuvieron tres ejes temáticos comunes: la ausencia del español en los lugares públicos, la mirada blanca en los intercambios lingüísticos, y el multilingüismo en la vida pública. Estas narrativas muestran cómo la conciencia crítica desencadena la resiliencia y la agencia que les ha permitido enfrentarse a dificultades racistas y discriminaciones lingüísticas en Estados Unidos.

*Palabras clave:* 1. mujeres latinas, 2. migración, 3. raciolingüística, 4. Estados Unidos, 5. Latinoamérica.

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INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

The United States has become one of the countries that receives the most Spanish-speaking<sup>3</sup> immigrants in the world. In 2020, the official census recorded a total of 62 080 044 Latinos/Hispanics<sup>4</sup> in the different states of that country. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n. d.), in 2020 the state of Oregon had a total of 588 757 Latinos/Hispanics as opposed to 3 169 096 white people, 82 655 of African heritage, 194 538 Asian, and 19 204 Native Hawaiian. After consulting data from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) on Spanish-speaking immigration in the United States over the years, the largest increase in the Latino population occurred between the 1990s and the second decade of 2000, since which this population increased significantly from 22 million to 35.2 million (Grieco, 2003).

Oregon is a state with a history of racism towards different immigration groups (Eisenberg, 2022; García, 2023; Lee, 2023; Nokes, 2024). It became the only state that, after the Civil War, entered the Union of Confederate States in 1859 with an exclusion law towards African Americans, in addition to which there is also a segregationist history with respect to Latinos.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as documented by García and García (2002), the development of the southwestern United States and its participation in the First World War created jobs in the agriculture, railroads, mines, and canning factories. The Latino population, especially the Mexican population, gradually grew in Oregon in these decades; however, these population was the first to suffer the economic consequences in which the country was plunged after the war, and was deported back to Latin America without taking into account the help provided.

Later, with the Second World War, the Bracero Program (1942-1964) was inaugurated; a bilateral agreement between Mexico and the United States. In this program, Mexicans were recruited to work in the agricultural sector during the war, given the scarce labor force. However, this resulted in clandestine hiring, in which many Mexican men without work visas endured not only ridiculously low salaries, but also conditions of labor exploitation and violation of their human rights. Because of this, political groups revoked the program in the 1960s; yet although this workforce was no longer officially employed, it continued working covertly (Durand, 2017).

Under this program, Oregon’s Willamette Valley was a significant location of migrant reception due to its large agricultural fields. The historical past, as well as these dynamics of exploitation and abuse by the dominant culture, are still perceivable today in institutions,

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<sup>3</sup> Label used to name people who speak Spanish.

<sup>4</sup> The census includes Latinos and Hispanics under the same category. However, it should be noted that the difference between the two has been a matter of debate for years (Lacomba, 2020). The term Latino refers to people whose origin is any country in Latin America, as well as those of Latin American heritage born in the United States. On the other hand, Hispanics refers those whose origin is linked to Spain, so there is a colonial connotation to the term. Throughout this work the label Latina and Latino is used, since it was the one used by the people interviewed.

businesses, or on the street, since many people in the Latino community experience situations of discrimination that lead them to isolation and generate fear in them (García, 2022).

An example of this was evident from the signing of the executive order that reinforced the application of former President Donald Trump's immigration law, causing the city of Woodburn, in Oregon, to experience raids organized by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Service (ICE) during 2017 and 2018, where public space was undermined. It is important to mention that Woodburn is characterized by being a city where the Latino community is a fundamental part of the social fabric, mainly carrying out agricultural work. During these operations, said community was at risk when satisfying their basic needs of going out shopping or going to work. In fact, ICE stopped some buses of workers who were going to harvest crops and arrested 11 people without work visas, who never came to work because they were intercepted. Woodburn was talked about as a ghost town for months. In an interview with César Mora (Parks, 2017), owner of a store in this town, he claimed that, due to these raids, the sales of his business had dropped 80%, and among the community there was a sense and talk of being afraid to even go shopping at the supermarket because ICE was lurking.

Now, the Latino community in Oregon has been investigated in works that address health issues, working conditions, or the experiences of migrants without a work visa (García et al., 2022; Stephen, 2007; among others). However, there are few studies focused on female migration and the agency of Latina women in the new spaces where they are received on this coast—one of the few examples is the doctoral work of Torres García (2009), focused on Chicana women in Washington—. Most research has focused on migrant masculinities; thus, Gil Tébar (1999) talks about how migratory studies, or those connected to these movements, were of an androcentric nature until the 1990s, because women had been identified practically within the domestic and private space. However, the vision has been expanded thanks to the strength gained by the gender studies that emerged around that time, and it has been confirmed that gender is also an integral element for studies on migration, since it to examine what are the structures of oppression affecting women, and how they operate (Unda & Alvarado, 2012; Morrison et al., 2008; among others).

This work focuses on the narratives of five Latina women in Oregon of a certain educational level—from high school to university—and answers the following questions: 1) what experiences do Latina women in Oregon undergo in the service sector and in public space?, 2) do they possess a sociolinguistic critical awareness in, or acquire it after, their experiences?, and 3) do these women show agency after these experiences?

From the application of critical discourse analysis, a sociolinguistic awareness was obtained based on language and race, observable in three common themes after the experiences related: 1) the absence of Spanish in public places, 2) the white gaze in linguistic exchanges, and 3) multilingualism in public life.

From raciolinguistics (Rosa, 2019; Alim, 2016) as a theoretical framework, these experiences are studied under the lens of critical discourse analysis, so as to understand the different actions taken by these women. They demonstrate an agency that empowers them and gives them a voice within the destination country, thus providing knowledge about the new identities that have emerged from the experiences lived in the United States.

## EMPOWERED WOMEN: GENDER AND AGENCY

Third wave gender studies intersected with different disciplines such as sociolinguistics, which studied the linguistic and gender ideologies of different communities (Mendoza-Denton, 2008), also showing how agency was exercised from different gender identities. Furthermore, such agency has been linked to empowerment, to the point that they have been merged, exchanged, and confused, although both terms have been explained and analyzed by different authors (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2000; Nussbaum, 2000).

Taking into account the subjectivities (race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, social class, educational level, etc.) of the Latina women interviewed in this work, Kabeer’s (2000) definition has been employed to understand that empowerment is “the ability of those who have an interest in challenging the status quo to confront a resistance that cannot be taken for granted” (p. 32). Thus, empowerment will be the agency process where power relations are altered at the hands of people or communities that are being affected by the dominant group.

On the other hand, Samman and Santos (2009) define *agency* as: “the capacity of an individual or group to make purposeful choices” (p. 23). It is important to take into account the nuance added by Sen (1990), who, when working with women,<sup>6</sup> explains that the molds, notions, and social obligations that the patriarchal system perpetuates in them should be kept in mind.

Thus, from a postmodern feminist approach of difference among women (Casado Aparicio, 1999), it is argued that the context where the actions are developed will be fundamental to analyze that agency. Furthermore, it will be decisive in understanding how women assume responsibility, intensify their voice, create knowledge in this new space, and consciously take actions, accepting both negative and positive consequences. According to Ortnet (1996), to talk about agency one must use a lens that, in turn, is sufficient to study structural forces: how these people resist those forces and how the social actors who change, or not, the system are constructed.

Agency is not something that can be polarized into whether one has it or not; it is not even univocal, since there are different ways of expressing it (Alkire, 2005). Thinking and defending the opposite would mean relying on a single lens subject to certain characteristics for the analysis of such agency. What is really important is that, in this case, women become actors able to effect change, not only be recipients of it (Sen, 1999; Mehra, 1997). However, one must be aware that the context will never be the same from one to another woman, and so not all of them will respond in the same way to the action of that agency. It would be even necessary to, as Casado Aparicio (1999) explained, break away from “the idea that consciousness precedes action” (p. 84), since, in many cases, it is not until after the latter occurs that awareness of a situation emerges.

Take for example at Mahmood’s (2005) ethnographic study on how Egyptian women’s agency is represented through discourses centered on religious devotion and subjectivity. The author demonstrates how the liberal and hegemonic feminist vision perpetuates the idea that

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<sup>6</sup> Binarism is discarded in this study; instead, gender is understood as a social construct and, therefore, as fluid.

having agency has to be demonstrated with actions that challenge power. She explains that *possessing agency* should not only be linked to breaking with traditions to finally stop being subordinate people. Agency does not consist of the *resistance vs. dominance* dichotomy. In fact, in Mahmood's work, this concept is deconstructed against white, Western, liberal feminist ideals, as these women have greater depth due to their intersectionalities (religion, race, gender). That is, liberal feminists have perpetuated an approach in which women have to rebel in the face of patriarchal structures, while in Mahmood's study, based on a different and appropriate theoretical approach that takes into account other social norms, the idea is problematized that it seems that, to show agency, women always have to free themselves from male hegemonic power. There it is shown that having agency can take place within power structures, because the moral and ethical actions of these women construct another type of woman, other subjectivities that differ from the dominant ones.

In this sense, freedom has sometimes been intrinsically connected with agency, seeming that, if actions are not truly liberal, the latter is lacking. However, feminists like Butler (1999) called into question this *liberalism* revolving around agency and action, emphasizing that there is a spectrum when it comes to analyzing both. The reductionism of defending a single form of agency, assessing whether actions are sufficient or not, or debating whether resistance or domination has won, only perpetuates a certain Western vision closely linked to white feminism, which would not respond to the subjectivities of intersectional women, and that he would ignore those that do not fit into such Western model.

Therefore, taking into account the transnationality that occurs with the migratory act, which causes new styles and hybrid daily practices to emerge, resulting in readjustments in meanings and values (Bobes, 2012), the feminine agency of migrant women cannot be understood without taking into account all the subjectivities linked to gender, religion, the languages spoken, social class, and race, among others, which may or may not match the context of the receiving country (Lázaro-Castellanos & Jubany-Baucells, 2012). The actions will not materialize in the same way nor will they achieve the same ends due to these subjectivities. Thus, in this work, the narratives of five Latin American immigrant women are studied as new discourses that appear in a multiple space that will help to better understand position and agency of these women in the context of the United States.

#### LANGUAGE AND RACE: RACIOLINGUISTICS

Raciolinguistics (Alim, 2016; Rosa, 2019; Rosa & Flores, 2017) is a field that is gaining ground in this third decade of the 2000s. Although the relationship between language and race has been already widely studied, the new approach that these authors propose brings into play another face of racism. Flores and Rosa (2015) explain that "raciolinguistic ideologies produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects" (p. 150). Thus, the discourse not only reproduces linguistic standardization and supremacy, but also represents the racialization of people due to dominant hierarchies.

To understand this, it is important to revisit two transcendent ideas. The first is the ideology of the standard; the monoglot ideas of the standard (Silverstein, 1998) have culturally portrayed

society with emblems such as *one language, one nation* since colonial times (Silverstein, 1996), and so migrant second and third generation bilingual speakers do not fit into this scenario and are stigmatized. The second is the so-called *white gaze*. This perspective privileges white dominant practices in communities and, therefore, is responsible for racialization in raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Thus, non-white speakers are expected to imitate the linguistic practices of the dominant (white) subjectivities. However, nothing happens even when they acquire the standard variety, since their bodies remain racialized and driven towards the margins.

Throughout the analysis of the narratives, this work will see how raciolinguistics responds to the experiences of these women, who are linguistically racialized in their daily interactions.

### *Ideologies: Critical Discourse Analysis*

This discourse is not innocuous; rather, ideologies and systems of power permeate it. Words mean more than what they merely state and, as Laclau and Mouffe (2004) explained, the discursive dimension is linked to the social one. Therefore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows for necessary social action (Fairclough, 1995). From its application, the aim is to reveal which ideologies, beliefs, and power systems are hidden in people’s narratives and, more specifically, how they are observed when examining the choice of comparisons or cognitive metaphors, for example (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Ehrlich et al., 2014).

In a certain way, CDA helps revealing what has been normalized and has become unmarked by the dominant culture, and that, many times, corners a part of society through racism, sexism, or classism. Thus, qualitative discourse analysis allows to observe and interpret what is hidden in the speakers’ words (Canales, 2006). The author has used critical discourse analysis to analyze the narratives of these women (Van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 1995; Blackledge, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), which has helped make social and power inequalities between Latina women and their American interlocutors visible, based on their interactions in the service sector and public spaces of Oregon.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

### *Positionality*

The author identifies as a woman, first-generation student, Spanish-speaking, of Spanish nationality. For 25 years, Spain shaped much of her linguistic and gender ideologies due to having been raised in the country. However, when she arrived in the United States to continue her academic training, at the age of 25, she began a process of problematizing and deconstructing many of those ideologies and knowledge acquired throughout her education.

As a Spanish speaker, she understands and has experienced the difficulties that arise in interactions in the service sector in a country where her native language is a problem for a part of the dominant population. However, she is aware that she has not experienced the same discrimination as the racialized Latina women interviewed, who have had to endure and overcome even more negative experiences.

Thus, this work arises with the purpose of understanding the linguistic and racial experiences of these Latina women in a community like Oregon. Although the author lacks extensive training in migration studies, her studies in sociolinguistics, personal experiences, and observations aim to show the great impact that this paper, focused on language and race, can have in societies that discriminate against migrant women.

### *Data Collection*

During the pandemic spring of 2021 (March-May), adults in the Latino community in Oregon were interviewed. The author worked with semi-structured interviews, since these allowed to obtain answers to the questions she previously posed, as well as provided freedom to the interviewees for them to offer broader and more open answers that would result in more details and information on the topics considered for the list of initial questions (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

Thus, the instrument designed begins with the demographic information of each participant, so as to identify their context.<sup>7</sup> Then, questions associated with two large blocks were asked: the first, connected to their linguistic ideologies with respect to Spanish, English, and *Spanglish*<sup>8</sup>—the variety that emerged from the contact of Spanish and English—and the second of them, focused on gender ideologies.<sup>9</sup> These questions resulted in fluid conversations that allowed new questions to be formulated at the time of the interviews, based on the answers.

The participants were recruited through contacts that the author established after teaching Spanish classes at the university, where she asked former students for the possibility of passing information about the study to family members. Others were reached thanks to the volunteer work that the author carried out in a non-profit organization that supports the Latino community in Oregon. From these first interviews, a greater number of people were reached through the snowball method (Noy, 2008), and so a large part of the participants attracted new people who also wanted to be interviewed.

Despite the pandemic,<sup>11</sup> all interviews were in face to face. As the topics addressed could turn intimate and/or sensitive, it was thought that trust would be greater if the researcher and the participants were to meet each other in person and not by video call. The interviews took

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<sup>7</sup> Such as age, the gender they identify as, the year they arrived in the United States, the language(s) they speak, etc.

<sup>8</sup> This aimed at identifying the stereotypes that they believed existed regarding the Spanish language in the United States, their experiences—positive and negative—in the service sector and other public places when speaking Spanish, the place where they believed that Spanish was most important in said sector, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Some questions delved into whether being a woman/man had affected their interactions in the service sector and other public spaces, whether migrating had changed their lives as a woman/man, whether they were feminists or not, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Safe distance was maintained according to COVID-19 protocols, and the main researcher kept the mask on at all times, leaving the participants to decide whether they wanted to keep their facemasks on during the conversation or not. After enduring a year of pandemic, several of the interviewees pointed out that it was nice to be able to see and talk to someone again after so long, which is another factor why long-term interviews could be obtained.

place both in the homes of the participants and in that of the author,<sup>12</sup> thus avoiding public places, which could affect the responses, as sensitive topics were discussed. As such, at no time were there other people in the room, only the person interviewed and the author. Only the audio of the interviews was recorded, so as not to make the interviewees feel uncomfortable with a video camera, and so ethnographic notes were also taken to complement the participants’ narratives. These decisions were made to evade, to the greatest possible extent, observer’s paradox (Labov, 1972); that is to say, efforts were made to ensure that the interviewees did not feel doubly and visibly observed, and to obtaining narratives free of the influence of said observation.

Thus, a total of 3 170 minutes (53 hours and 38 minutes) of recording were obtained, which were coded using the MAXQDA 2022 software. After three rounds of analysis, different labels were created depending on whether they would focus on linguistic or gender ideologies. These recordings were saved on the author's computer, to which only she had access with a password, and a pseudonym was assigned to each participant.

### *About the Participating Women*

This work presented here has its origins in a larger project, for which a total of 25 participants were interviewed: 20 self-identified as Latina women<sup>13</sup> and five self-identified as Latino men.<sup>14</sup> The only pattern found among all the participants is their identification as Latino or Latina. Otherwise, they are of different origins, age, educational level, English fluency, and years of residence in Oregon, chosen this way with the aim of achieving results not conditioned by any variable.

The results presented in the following section correspond to the analysis of the narratives of five women with a certain level of education—from high school to university—, in which it is possible to observe how language and race intersect in the service sector and in public space in Oregon. Furthermore, since there are not many studies that focus on migrant women with academic studies, it is important to show how they faced different situations and raciolinguistic stereotypes. Thus, Table 1 collects the ethnographic information of these five participants, who displayed a significantly critical sociolinguistic awareness:

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<sup>12</sup> Two of the women interviewed asked to conduct the interviews in the author’s apartment, since they did not want to talk in a public cafeteria, or in their own home, due to the presence of their husbands and children.

<sup>13</sup> Despite the binarism displayed here, this study does not follow binary parameters regarding gender; the labels *women* and *men* were used by the people interviewed themselves.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the interviews, both used *Latina/o* and *Hispana/o* as synonyms constantly. *Hispana* becomes more used if they are speaking about the Spanish language.



Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Pseudonym	Origin	Age	Education	Mother	Languages	Years in OR
Rocío	Guatemala	48	University	Yes (d, s)	English (85 %) Maya French	6
Sonia	Nayarit, Mexico	40	High School	Yes (s, d)	English (90 %) Mixteco	32
Luz	Michoacan, Mexico	35	University	Yes (d)	English (80 %)	10
Melisa	Michoacan, Mexico	46	University (1 year)	Yes (d, d, d)	English (60 %)	23
Lola	Mexico City, Mexico	42	University (2 years)	Yes (s, s, d)	English (85 %)	21

Note 1. In the *Mother* column, the abbreviations *d* and *s* refer to the number of daughters and sons each has, respectively.

Note 2. When asking the questions regarding the languages they speak and their level of English fluency, everyone responded by giving a percentage.

Source: Own elaboration based on socio-demographic data.

## DISCUSSION

After analyzing the narratives of these five women, it was decided to focus this work on the significant sociolinguistic consciousness shown by them. In turn, three themes explain this awareness: 1) language in public places, 2) the white gaze in linguistic exchanges, and 3) multilingualism in public life.

### *What About us? The Absence of Spanish in Public Places*

The vast majority of the questions presented to these women arose from observing the representation of Spanish, or its lack thereof, in the service sector and other public spaces in Oregon. Focusing on this space has a lot to do with Rosa and Díaz's (2019) assertion: "institutions become actors in the reproduction of white supremacy in its own right" (p. 121). Throughout all the interviews, this reproduction was observed in many of the women's experiences, such as the event that Melisa recounted:

When my daughter started school, in kindergarten, they called us to these meetings that the teachers hold monthly and well, one is used to it [...] we had meetings there in our country, the parents' room was filled... So you could notice the interest of parents in the education of children. I got ready and went to the meeting, and I went to the school office, to the cafeteria... no one, no one, no one [fathers and mothers]. There was just this one lady, the director, and the teachers. I think we were like four parents. So I sat down and said: ok, well, I'll stay. And the director started [speaking in English] [...] And I said to her: is there no one who speaks Spanish?, and she said: no. So I told her: but all the children in my daughter's classroom speak Spanish, their parents speak Spanish. So, had they come to the meeting, what would you have done? And the director says: oh, no, no,

I’m sorry, since they never come, well... They didn’t have a person who spoke Spanish, so maybe they didn’t go for that very reason!, because no one complained and said: hey, what about us? [...] So by the next meeting, they now sent a pamphlet that said: we invite you to the meeting, there will be information in Spanish and English. So I went: oh, how beautiful! Maybe I did this? [laughter] (Melisa, personal communication, February 26, 2021).

In this case, based on the experience related above, it can be seen how schools, despite being public educational institutions, can participate in sustaining white hegemony and naturalizing unequal treatment, which leads to a dehumanization that, in the case of Melisa makes her feel entirely as *the other*. If, as Bucholtz and Hall (2005) explained, language and identity are two coexisting concepts, the fact of not having a Spanish-speaking facilitator at a meeting for mothers and fathers, in a school where there is a significant number of Spanish-speaking families, denies their identity, and relegates them and other people in their community to societal margins. This explains the assessment that Melisa makes in her response, when she connects the non-attendance of Spanish-speaking families at these meetings with the absence of the Spanish language in an institution where many of the students are linked to this language.

Zavala and Back (2017) sustain that “race must be thought of as a social construction related to social inequality and power, which produces consequences in social practices” (p. 15). In the case of Melisa, as well as of the Latino population in the area, race is marked by the non-inclusion of the community’s language in the educational center. Hesse (2016) points out that racialization is not limited to the physical, but is a practice of violence, of segregation marked by the dominant, as can be observed in the event narrated above. Knowing or not the dominant language, and having the service in another language are elements that have perpetuated discrimination and, therefore, inferior treatment, as can be seen in the words of Melisa when she says: “hey, what about us?” (Melisa, personal communication, February 26, 2021).

Faced with this situation, Melisa’s sociolinguistic awareness is activated, and she raises her voice to ask if “is there no one who speaks Spanish?”, thus showing that she is capable of breaking that otherness marked by the lack of multilingualism in the center, thereby achieving the inclusion of Spanish, for Spanish-speaking families, in successive meetings (Melisa, personal communication, February 26, 2021). Awareness precedes action, and Melisa shows her agency not only through the sociolinguistic approach to the situation experienced, but also through the highly significant transformation achieved in subsequent meetings.

*“Such Hypocrisy and Abuse of Power”:  
The White Gaze Discourse*

The *invisible* white gaze has been able to see and mark everything that is not within its scope. Fairclough (1992) warns how the so-called white gaze involves discursive practices (such as language) or social practices (daily life routines) associated solely with whiteness, which perpetuates white supremacy. Saldaña and Omasta (2017) point out that in this world where a status quo prevails at the hands of a dominant group, routines, rules, rituals, or relationships between people are affected by the power of said gaze. Thus, in the case of these women, these new routines or social bonds will be racialized by the system of whiteness, that is to say, its

lens will judge them as inadequate. The white gaze has been able to create dichotomies such as what is valid vs. the illegitimate, what is acceptable vs. what is deviant, or *what is valuable* vs. *what is dismissible* (Ray, 2019).

This way that the white gaze has operated in the service sector and in the public spaces of the Latina women interviewed. Rocío, for example, recounted an event she experienced with the Oregon system after voluntarily entering a bilingual baby study program:

I called [the optional bilingual baby monitoring program] and they put me with a person who spoke Spanish very well, not a Latina, white. Oh, I had to say at first that I identified as Latina, of course. Well, when this person started talking to me and asking me questions, she told me: Well, you don't speak English, right? And I said: yes I do, and very well, but I prefer Spanish. Well, then more questions: so you work at home, right? I replied: no, I studied [major], although I work as a teacher. And then: so you're a single mother, right? And I said: [angry tone] no, I'm not a single mother and you know what? Don't count on me anymore. Too much: right? right? [mocking tone] ... So, never again (Rocío, personal communication, March 2, 2021).

In the case of Rocío, this dominant white gaze racializes her and distorts her reality, at the same time that it imposes stereotypes associated with *Latinidad* that perpetuate the idea that Latina women do not speak English, work at home and, oftentimes, they do not have a partner or the partner does not live with them. McCluney and Rabelo (2019) talk about *invisibilization* or *hypervisibilization* by the white gaze. Rocío's experience shows how the white worker makes her (Rocío's) border identity *hypervisible* and associates it with linguistic, academic, work, and relationship stereotypes. From the first moment, Rocío's critical awareness is activated, to dismantle the stereotypical racial and linguistic discourse. She begins with the linguistic prejudice received and goes on to contradict one by one the stereotypes to which she is exposed, revealing that she married a man from Oregon and had her children in the United States. Rocío's answers, blunt by using a "no", followed by detailed explanations about her identity, deny the information present in the worker's stereotypical question and empower herself by claiming an agency that responds to her true identity. That is how she dismantles the *hypervisibilization* of the white gaze, revealing a reality that is very distant from the stereotypes associated with many Latinas in the United States.

Rocío herself referred to an event that she experienced shortly after arriving in Oregon when she entered a cell phone store, and that serves as an example to understand the *invisibilization* set forth by McCluney and Rabelo (2019):

One day I walked into this store, mainly because they had an advertisement outside in Spanish. So I went in and the man who was there didn't understand any Spanish... And I asked if there was anyone else who did, but no one spoke any Spanish in that store [...] when I walked out I said in my English: "such hypocrisy and abuse of power, using our language", and from that day on I'm always alert for that. But now thinking about it... well they made me feel invisible, as if my language didn't exist, that I did not belong to this country... That's when I realized that there are places in this state that do provide service in Spanish, but not on purpose, or only if they can benefit from that... But every now and then, the person in charge at that moment speaks Spanish and can help you, but

not because it is a business policy. Suddenly, people perceive it as very aesthetic and they put advertisements in Spanish and English, even though there is no one inside who can speak Spanish to you (Rocío, personal communication, March 2, 2021).

In this case, the white middle-class gaze appropriates the language of minorities, to then erase it. Irvine and Gal (2000) and Gualtieri (2009) explained how this dominant gaze benefits those who come closest to the limits of whiteness.

Rocío perceived how people who speak Spanish are invisible in that business, generating in her that sense of not belonging, of constantly being a foreigner. Despite that feeling, the fact that she left the store muttering her discontent shows an action that not only sought to destabilize the white gaze, but also created a continued effect on her that has made her much more aware of how Spanish is used in the services sector. Rocío examines and judges how the dominant group appropriates and makes visible different elements of the subordinate culture, such as language in this case, when they perceive so as useful and beneficial for their purposes (such as attracting more customers to the business). However, in the case of Rocío, no one was capable of providing this service in Spanish, and so the language is made invisible, the raciolinguistic ideology that contributes to social stratification is perpetuated, and, of course, there is no reflection on the consequences of all this for the minority group. Thus, the dichotomy of *valuable* vs. *dismissible* persists, wherein the needs of identities outside of whiteness are completely dismissible.

*“It Is the Language and the Person”:  
Multilingualism in Public Life*

Throughout the interviews, many of the women pointed out circumstances where race and language intersected in different situations experienced in the service sector and in public spaces, resulting in their linguistic racialization.

It is important to keep in mind that one of the main objectives of the raciolinguistics framework is to make visible and destabilize the unmarked whiteness that affects on a daily basis all those people who are not in that same dominant group, redirecting the gaze and the problem towards *the subject who listens* and away from the racialized body that speaks. According to the definition provided by Flores and Rosa (explained in section 2.1), narratives such as those of Sonia, when referring to an incident in the supermarket queue when speaking Mixtec with her mother, illustrate these ideologies:

I think it’s because of the way we look, short, dark [...] then already look down on us at first sight. We were in the supermarket, my mother was talking and I... well, I’m not ashamed of speaking my language, I talk to her in my language and we were talking in the checkout line. A man [...] white, American, tall, and when he is with the cashier he begins to tell her in English: “what language are they speaking? Surely they from Mexico and don’t understand English.” I mean, all of the negative things one can imagine [...] and I heard the whole conversation, it did bother me, but I answered them. I told them in English: our language is called Mixtec. It is an indigenous language of the state of Oaxaca. We are from Mexico, and yes I speak English, I also speak Spanish. And the

man didn't know what to do. He turned red and didn't say a thing (Sonia, personal communication, February 26, 2021).

Due to racialization, multilingual practices are devalued and rendered illegitimate for the white listener in the American space. The problem is not the language spoken within the non-dominant community, but its social position in the host country and in the existing status quo.

Sonia's case illustrates these arguments. She came to the United States when she was just a few years old, and has spent her entire life exposed to the English language, which makes her just as fluent as any American person; in fact, in the initial interview she is one of the women who self-assessed the highest level of English (90%). However, a white individual racialized her by her phenotypic characteristics and by the language she speaks with her mother in the supermarket. The man's discourse responds to what Hill (1998) exposed about white public spaces, which reproduce, perpetuate, and continue to normalize, without marking, white hegemony. It is then that everything that goes beyond these limits is marginal, needing to be repaired because, in this case, it does not have the language of the dominant group.

Faced with this situation, Sonia did not become insecure (unlike other women, see Rosa, 2016) and responded, making it clear that she does not belong to the peripheral that the white speaker refers to, since the multilingualism that she possesses is a virtue to the benefit of her day-to-day life. Sonia's agency is made visible by reaffirming that she belongs to a mixture of three cultures of which she is proud, and she does so in a public space in the face of a raciolinguistically discriminatory situation.

Another of the women, Melisa, narrated something similar at the beginning of her interview:

It's not so much the language only, it's the language *and* [emphasizes and raises her voice] the person. Of course, sometimes they give you a nasty look and make you feel bad because you are not speaking *their* [emphasizes and raises her voice] perfect English, or they even dare to ask someone, a translator, to assist you in Spanish without me even opening my big mouth. It has happened to me, not much, yes it's true... but because when they see me, well dark-skinned, with black, curly hair... they right away go, "oh, she doesn't speak English, let someone else take care of her" and hey, maybe I already learnt. What does it have to do with how I look?! (Melisa, personal communication, February 26, 2021).

The first statement responds to the raciolinguistic theory, since not speaking "their perfect English," as Melisa said, positions her again as deviant, something that adds to the racial profiling that she occasionally has experienced. In this case, the system rooted in whiteness has a hard time valuing people's bilingualism, especially when it comes Spanish, due to the political events that have taken place in the last century. The white lens of people from the dominant group carefully analyzes the linguistic discourses of bilingual people to determine if they are illegitimate speakers.

Racial profiling, as explained by Weitzer and Tuch (2002), is a discriminatory practice that labels people who phenotypically display an assumed race as deficient. This practice is increasingly common, since it has managed to enter the public sphere. As Melisa mentioned at the end of her intervention, having traits stereotypically associated with *Latinidad* means that

she is not interpreted as a bilingual speaker. García (2009) explains how among those linguistically discriminatory practices towards the Latino community in the United States, that of interpreting that the English spoken by Latinos is not good enough can be found. Hence, the new generations, which are perfectly bilingual and highly fluent in English, can be seen enrolled in English as a second language classes, even when in many cases English is their first language.

This experience matches with something noticed by Luz in her daily life:

It’s like if you are a white person and you speak Spanish: wow, how cool, how cool, you speak two languages. But if you are a Hispanic, a Latino speaking Spanish it is like, oh, it’s just another wetback. They will not look at you and say, oh, you’re bilingual! No. But if the person is from here it’s like, wow! I think there is quite a difference. The last thing they are going to think is that you are an intelligent or educated person, no... if they are rude, I am rude, or look at them the way they look at me, let’s see if they don’t want to take it easy now (Luz, personal communication, March 16, 2021).

That the dominant society ignores the gradual bilingualism of speakers is not the only problem. Through her experience, Luz gives voice to what Zentella (2005) and Palmer (2017) presented in their works. Both explain how in bilingual classes there is an imbalance in the way certain students are treated. White Anglo-Saxon bilingual speakers are preferred over speakers whose native language is Spanish. While the former, no matter how minimal their bilingualism is, are celebrated, racialized students are in contrast punished and associated with stereotypes—such as not being really fluent in either language—that continue to negatively impact their lives in society, and perpetuate that image of them being deficient.

Likewise, the dominant society that follows these raciolinguistic ideologies sees itself with the power to condemn people for, supposedly, not speaking English fluently, since they perceive these people as rebels who do not integrate. Huntington (2009) is an example of this anti-Spanish sentiment, since he ascribes to this preservation of the native language of the Latino community an apparent unwillingness to assimilate into the United States. The author argues that preserving Spanish at home or in immersion schools creates a division between this and the Anglo-Saxon community, and ends up attacking the cultural and political integrity of the country.

In the aforementioned example, Luz, tired of living with stereotypes that minimize her, is proud of the bilingualism that identifies her, shows full awareness of the virtue that this implies, and questions linguistic illegitimacy, turning around the otherness experienced until now, where the dominant ones are *they*, while she and her community are *us*.

She grapples with tasks there where the white public space, and therefore her listeners, constantly racialize her and where, even before she displays her linguistic skills, she is marked as *the other*, *the deficient*, the non-native English speaker, the foreigner, regardless of their origin or personal context. In spite of this, these women are empowered by this transnational hybrid identity, and respond to situations of raciolinguistic discrimination, as in this case, gaining agency in the middle of an intersectional discrimination of language, gender, and race.

## CONCLUSIONS

The inequality that can exist in institutions on the part of workers, and on the rest of the population in public spaces, can result in patriarchal and racialized practices that push to the margins, in this case, Latina women from the Oregon community in their interactions. Macro structures exert institutionalized structural violence, which manifests itself in acts of racism (Jiménez Bautista & Muñoz Muñoz, 2004). Face with this state of things, it is worth studying what actions the interviewed women took when they were excluded, not only because of their race with its phenotypic characteristics, and/or gender, but also because of the language or accent perceived when interacting in the service sector. From these actions, one could talk about how agency is expressed in these women who, after crossing the border, begin to develop a double identity (Anzaldúa, 1987/2016).

It should be mentioned that the Latina woman has been portrayed on numerous occasions through Marianism (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Stevens, 1973), that is, seen as the Virgin Mary: dependent, subordinate, devoted to the family, and responsible for the home. However, the women interviewed show agency, and remove themselves from that Marian vision through the different actions of resistance they undertake against the dominant system.

By examining part of the narratives of Latinas after their interactions and experiences in the Oregon service sector, it is discovered how they are committed to a struggle within the system that oppresses them based on their race and gender. The narratives of Rocío, Lola, Sonia, Luz, and Melisa have exemplified how they exercise agency in their discourse and contribute to destabilizing the status quo of their environments, while dealing with the white gaze that stigmatizes them. Sonia argued:

We deserve equal service from those who speak English. I pay in dollars, I pay my taxes. All Latinos who go to shopping centers pay in dollars, they do not pay in any other currency, and we contribute to the economy of all those centers and the country. We deserve a service of the same quality as the others receive and not a service by signs, we don't have any physical, or motor, or mental limitations, or anything. We need a service just like everyone else (Sonia, personal communication, February 26, 2021).

As evidenced by the narratives discussed here, the five women in this work have displayed sociolinguistic critical awareness in the face of raciolinguistically discriminatory acts. All of them have revealed their discomfort in the face of an unequal treatment that has labeled them as illegitimate and of being *the other*, from the lenses of the dominant group. Thus, the actions and agency shown are aimed at equal treatment, as claimed in their narratives. To think that women are not going to resist and raise their voices in situations of racism or sexism is to nullify their capacity for action and their power.

The subjectivities of these women have played a double role at the macro and micro level where, first, they have been attacked and, secondarily, they have realized how to resist and respond to said attacks. Spivak (1998), based on the notion of *subalternity*, explained how epistemic violence after colonization has shown *the other* as a nullified and voiceless being. Nonetheless, the Latina women in this study have shown that, even though they are clearly *the other* within the system, they are empowered to record the different realities that exist in the



United States. All of them manifest themselves as active agents that make a decision that generates a change and alters the status quo (Sen, 1999). It is important to highlight that the actions they take are diverse, and can be positioned along a continuum (Butler, 1999) that moves away from the polarization of *resistance vs. dominance*, mentioned by Mahmood (2005) in his study.

Therefore, there is a prevailing need in current works to talk about women (in plural). Only in this way will it be possible to break with the paradigm that erases the singularities of each of them, thus truly embracing their subjectivities.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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