Using young adult fiction to interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies in schools

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Abstract

This article reports on an UKLA funded study which is working with young readers to explore the use of fictional texts to interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies in schools. We draw on data generated from workshops where young students read and responded to *Front Desk*, a 2018 novel by the Chinese writer Kelly Yang, which centres around a young immigrant girl who is the target of systemic language discrimination. We describe how literary texts might serve as an entry point into examining the pervasive, intersectional, institutional and systemic nature of language discrimination, focusing on how schools can be hostile spaces for speakers deemed to not conform with 'standard' language practices amidst raciolinguistic ideologies which construct racialised speakers as inferior, deficient and unwelcome. We show how students used *Front Desk* and the workshops as a space for (a) describing the surveillance, stigmatisation and erasure of their own language practices through tracing raciolinguistic contours between fictional and real worlds; (b) interrogating the raciolinguistic ideologies and punitive listening practices of white authoritative subjects; and (c) conceptualising language discrimination as intersectional and institutional.

Key words: Language ideologies, Language discrimination, Raciolinguistics, Young adult fiction, Standard English

"Who gets to say what type of English is broken? I mean we all have different ways of speaking; we all have different ways of saying what we want to say so who gets to decide 'Oh, that English is broken. This English is fine. This English is good.' Who decides that? No-one. […] Honestly, I do not think anyone should decide which way you speak. No-one. Not even if it's someone high ranking. You decide how you speak, that's fine." (Ana)

"For me, sometimes I've been made to feel like my way of talking is not right, like it does not sound right, the way I speak English you know, like it's wrong." (Hamza)

Introduction

This article reports on an UKLA-funded study which is working with young readers to explore the use of fictional texts to interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies and racialised language stigma in schools. We are motivated by the fact that language discrimination is embedded into the fabric of national and local education policy in England (e.g. Cushing, 2021a), crafting conditions which privilege so-called 'native' speakers of 'Standard English'. Our starting position is that 'Standard English' is a tool of colonial governance which is underpinned by raciolinguistic ideologies and the maintenance of white supremacy, with schools being one space designed to normalise white, middle-class ways of talking (Agha, 2007, pp. 221–223; Flores and Rosa, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012; Malsbary, 2014; Von Esch et al., 2020). We explore how fictional texts offer one entry point in exploring how language discrimination is intersectional, institutional and systemic, with a focus on how schools can work as hostile spaces for minoritised speakers heard to not conform with 'standard' or 'academic' language practices. This is illustrated initially by the quotations above, spoken by Ana, an 11-year-old student originally from Romania, and Hamza, a 13-year-old British student with Pakistani heritage. Ana and Hamza here point to the raciolinguistic ideologies and listening practices of authoritative bodies (Flores and Rosa, 2015), as part of a discussion about *Front Desk*, a 2018 young adult (YA) fiction novel by the Chinese writer Kelly Yang, which centres on a young immigrant girl of Ana and Hamza's age who is also the target of language discrimination in school (Yang, 2018). This article reports on workshops we (Ian, an academic, and Anthony, a teacher) carried out in which Ana, Hamza and other young readers in school read *Front Desk* in order to interrogate language discrimination in their own and others' lives. We begin by exploring how nonstandardised language practices are stigmatised under the logics of standard language and raciolinguistic ideologies, before arguing for the role

of literary texts in challenging these beliefs. We then describe and interpret data generated from the workshops, where students discussed *Front Desk*, and examine how students traced the raciolinguistic contours between fictional and real worlds.

From raciolinguistic ideologies to stigmatised language practices at school

Schools are spaces where certain language practices are racialised, unstandardised, delegitimised and stigmatised, leading to the hierarchical ranking of linguistic and racial categories and the co-construction of language and race (e.g. Flores and Rosa, 2015; Von Esch et al., 2020). Although racialised language discrimination can be enacted through individual events (such as a disparaging comment about an accent), we emphasise its structural nature and how it is crafted into the foundations of educational policy – purposefully designed by policymakers to perpetuate inequalities through the upholding of white supremacy (Gillborn, 2005). We insist that any discussion of language stigma needs to be understood in relation to its broader historical processes of social stratification which discursively ranks and il/legitimises certain bodies amidst the ongoing logics of European colonialism (Rosa and Flores, 2020). We are informed by a long history of anti-racist scholarship which has exposed the violent erasure of nonstandardised language practices in educational spaces (e.g. Hooks, 1994; Paris and Alim, 2017; Lyiscott, 2019; Baker-Bell, 2020).

Racism and racialisation sit at the centre of language discrimination. Charity Hudley (2017) defines three types of language discrimination along the lines of race. *Internalised racism* is "the acceptance by members of stigmatised races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic value, characterised by their not believing in the worth of their culture" (p. 382). Examples include speakers feeling hesitant to speak because of the internalised perception that their language is 'inferior' or 'broken' and that this will be judged and punished by listeners. *Personally mediated racism* is "the specific prejudicial attitudes involving differential assumptions about abilities, motives, and intentions of others according to race" (p. 382). Examples include stereotyping, exclusion, lack of respect, suspicion, surveillance and acts of microaggression which question the very worth of racialised speakers' language practices. Finally, *institutional racism* is "the ways in which government, corporations, religious organisations, and other entities have racist practices that allow for differential access to goods, services, and opportunities of society" (p. 383). Examples include school segregation policies, the historical links of standardised testing

with fixed intelligence and eugenics (e.g. Au, 2009), and educational policies which work to eradicate entire languages or racialised features (e.g. Cushing, 2021b). These modes of discrimination are all intersectional, in how they are co-enacted with other axes of social variation such as class, dis/ability, gender, age and economic status.

Key to the mechanics of language discrimination are raciolinguistic ideologies (e.g. Flores and Rosa, 2015; Alim et al., 2016; Rosa and Flores, 2017a), a set of beliefs which render the language of racialised speakers' as deficient, incomplete and in need of remediation. Raciolinguistic ideologies position 'Standard English' as the "norm to which all national subjects should aspire" (Flores and Rosa, 2015, p. 151), despite this idealised, disembodied form of the language evading any empirical identification and observation. One way of challenging such ideologies is through taking a raciolinguistic perspective, which shifts attention away from the stigmatised practices of minoritised speakers and towards the listening practices of white ears. A raciolinguistic perspective examines how the language practices of racialised groups are structurally stigmatised by white listening subjects, in ways which are not based on discrete language practices but on modes of perception shaped by whiteness, white supremacy and the ongoing legacies of European colonialism.

Although a rich body of US-based scholarship has shown how raciolinguistic ideologies operate in US schools (e.g. Rosa, 2018; Seltzer and de los Ríos, 2018; Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores, 2020), there is little work which has applied raciolinguistic frameworks to the UK. However, work has clearly shown how racism is deeply embedded within cultures and policies of UK schools – not just as individual events, but as an institutional structure which shapes and limits the lives of racialised bodies (e.g. Gillborn, 2005; Tomlinson, 2008; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). These racist ideologies concerning the perception of language are a long-standing feature of schools and broader UK society – for instance, Fryer (2018) describes how in the 1600s white listeners in England perceived 'African' speakers as a mixture of human and animal, perceptions which continued into the 1950s and the racialisation of West Indian migrant children in schools, who were described as "ignorant and illiterate, speaking strange languages, and lacking proper education" (p. 280). In English schools, linguistic racism is exacerbated by the emphasis that historical and contemporary policy places on 'Standard English', a social and colonial construct which is abstracted from the speech and hearing patterns of the white middle-classes. Successive governments have designed education policy so that standardised English is granted elevated status, with racialised speakers

asked to modify their language practices in line with such standards as to be heard as conforming and legitimate. These dense webs of mechanisms include language tests, curricula, standards for teachers and the schools inspectorate (see Cushing, 2021a), buttressed in part by conservative UK media discourse which frames critical educational linguists as 'race radicals' (e.g. Phillips, 2020). Such policies and ideologies work to erase the home language practices of racialised speakers whilst reifying notions of the 'native', 'ideal' and 'standard' speaker (e.g. Leung et al., 1997; Gundarina and Simpson, 2021).

Literature and language discrimination

Literature has long been an instrument in the coloniser's toolbox, used to create and reinforce racist ideologies, with education being a key implementational space (e.g. Fanon, 1952; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Conversely, literature can also be deployed as an anti-racist tool which challenges the violence of linguistic discrimination and the erasure of nonstandardised varieties (e.g. Gilmour, 2020). Although work has shown the transformative power that literature can have in challenging discrimination, including xenophobia (Coban et al., 2020) and homophobia (Wickens, 2011), *language* discrimination has received relatively little attention (although see Baker-Bell, 2020; Charity Hudley and Mallinson, 2014). These studies have illustrated the potential of using literature to dismantle language discrimination in the pursuit of racial justice. For example, Baker-Bell (2020: 102–117) uses *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) to interrogate 'the intersections of language, race, racial violence, Anti-Black linguistic racism, and power' (103), providing a rich description of anti-racist pedagogies and activities which use the events in the novel and film as an entry point.

Kelly Yang's *Front Desk* and raciolinguistic worlds

This article focuses on research which used Kelly Yang's, 2018 novel *Front Desk* in workshops with young readers. *Front Desk* is a biographically inspired YA novel which centres around 11-year-old Mia Tang and her family, recent immigrants from China to the USA who run a motel and covertly provide free accommodation for immigrant families in need. Narrated through the eyes and ears of Mia, *Front Desk* describes how her family represent a set of stigmatised, racialised and classed bodies, with their own economic status, physical appearance and language practices being subject to institutional and intersectional discrimination from other characters such as the motel

owner, the police, the principal of Mia's school, and Mia's classmates. Mia and her family are perpetually positioned as illegitimate members of society who must navigate various hostile spaces where they are made to feel unwelcome. Raciolinguistic ideologies are a key organising logic of this hostility, with a perceived lack of competency in English at the ears of authoritative bodies leading to Mia and her family doubting their own place and citizenship status within American society.

Front Desk provides a suitable text for interrogating language discrimination and raciolinguistic ideologies given that Mia's language practices are linked to her racial positioning within society. For example, Mia's multilingualism is consistently perceived as a problem and obstacle to her learning, rather than a strength. Her accent is stigmatised as 'broken', and her apparent failure to meet so-called 'standards' in her academic writing is met with public shaming from her teachers and peers, despite her being a skilled creative writer with rhetorical deftness. These linguistic abilities go largely unrecognised, with her teachers and classmates enacting racist stereotypical assumptions about her high ability in mathematics and supposed lack of competency in English. Through schooling, Mia comes to internalise a raciolinguistic ideology which "frame[s] the home language practices of racialized communities as inherently deficient" (Flores, 2020, p. 24). Under this raciolinguistic ideology, Mia's language is seen and heard as the problem, and she comes to accept her language as inadequate, believing that the "roots of racial inequalities lie in the linguistic deficiencies of racialized communities and that the solution to these racial inequalities is to modify their language practice" (ibid., p. 24). In response, and as a way of managing her stigmatised identity, Mia feels compelled to modify her English and physical appearance through Westernising her ways of talking and behaving, eventually winning a writing competition crafted in 'beautiful' standard English – here understood as a proxy for whiteness – which she is lavishly praised for by her teacher and classmates. This praise, however, is simply another manifestation of a raciolinguistic ideology, where her newly articulated language is deemed to be 'remarkable' by white eyes because it originates from a racialised body.

In the author's note to *Front Desk*, Yang writes about her own family's lived experience of economic exploitation and racial discrimination in the USA, referring to the poverty levels of Chinese immigrants in the 1990s when her family first moved to America (see Lee, 2016). The discrimination Mia faces is a familiar one in terms of how conservative discourse frames immigrants' language practices in need of remedial intervention. Language ideologies in America have been historically co-constructed with race and nationhood,

in which standardised English was/is crafted to protect the interest of the white middle-classes and further marginalise immigrant populations (Bonfiglio, 2002). Lo (2016) shows how Asian Americans are racialised by white Americans through language, positioning them as racial others and perpetually 'foreign' whilst positioning whiteness as more central and 'native'. This, the model minority stereotype, portrays Asian American immigrants as hard-working, entrepreneurial and aspirational, who gain middle-class status due their assiduousness rather than financial government support. This myth perpetuates anti-Asian racism through the ideology that minoritised communities can and should enjoy socioeconomic stability without assistance from the state (e.g. Lee, 2009).

Front Desk is a historically representative narrative of the struggles that marginalised Asian American communities continue to navigate, made even more apparent in the increased reports of anti-Asian racism since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in schools (e.g. Gao and Sai, 2020). Yang is active on social media, regularly sharing messages of support and criticism, especially around issues of Sinophobia. For example, in October 2020, she shared a complaint she received from a parent that their child's school were reading *Front Desk* and this was teaching them to be anti-racists,[1] and in September 2021, she shared a letter from the parents of a fifth grade student who refused their permission for their child to be present in the room when *Front Desk* was being read. The following section describes our approach to using *Front Desk* with young readers in school as an entry point to facilitating conversations around race, language, immigration and inequality.

Methodology

Our approaches were informed by culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) (Alim and Paris 2017; Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2017), an assemblage of anti-racist practices which "seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Similar to a raciolinguistic perspective, CSP demands a "critical, emancipatory vision of schooling that reframes the object of critique from our children to oppressive systems" (Paris and Alim, 2017, p. 3), decentring whiteness and attending to the structures which produce and exacerbate the

marginalisation of racialised speakers. This involves asking critical questions around the everyday barriers that such speakers face as a result of the political, educational and economic systems which are actively designed against them.

We acknowledge some of the limitations in our workshops – for example, all discussions took place in English, although students were welcome to talk in their home language(s) and to translanguage. Although we used multimodality as a pedagogical method (for instance showing videos and images in the workshops, and with students responding in their reading journals through writings and drawings), this article focuses on oral discussion which took place in the workshops. Additionally, we are two white men who have only *learned* experience of discrimination, having to actively educate ourselves (including by being involved in this research) whereas some students had *lived* experience which they drew on extensively in the project. We explicitly spoke about our own whiteness, positionality and power in the very first workshop and drew immediate attention to this, such as in how throughout history, white speakers have typically been the instigators of language discrimination. Our aim was to create a safe space where students' voices and experiences were foregrounded, recognising and naming our own privileges as part of our commitment to enacting socially-just pedagogies (Hackman, 2005; Lyiscott, 2019). Ethical approval was granted by Ian's institution and all documents were co-produced with Anthony's school, and signed off by senior management. Students and caregivers signed consent forms and were free to withdraw from the workshops if they felt uncomfortable – especially important given the sensitivity of the topic and them being asked to draw on their own potentially traumatic experiences.

Eight students from Anthony's school participated. This involved reading *Front Desk* independently over a month, completing a reading journal and taking part in four 90-minute workshops, facilitated by Ian, Anthony and other teachers in the school. An outline of the content and aims of these workshops is provided in the Appendix. The only selection criteria were that students were aged between 11 and 14 (about the age of Mia in *Front Desk*) and enjoyed reading. We recognise this second criterion especially as a potential gatekeeping mechanism, but are pleased to report that Anthony is now using *Front Desk* and the workshop materials in his everyday teaching with all students. *Front Desk* was used as an entry point to foster critical discussions on race, power and systemic language stigma, and in the workshops our overall aim was to draw contact points between the fictional world and the real world. Our conversations ensured that students saw the events of the book located within a

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[1] See https://twitter.com/kellyyanghk/status/1317130273809592321?s=20. We looked at this tweet and the responses during the final workshop. Students said that if adults were not ready to dismantle institutional racism, then this would only encourage them further to take anti-racist stances in their own lives.

broader socio-political context, such as the long history of anti-Asian racism in the USA (e.g. Lee, 2016) and the 'hostile environment' immigration policies of contemporary Britain (e.g. Khan, 2018; Goodfellow, 2019). It quickly became clear that participants had often been the targets of numbing and silencing language discrimination, particularly in schools, prompting us to draw on students' own personal experiences and tracing raciolinguistic contours between fictional and real worlds. A sketch of each students' linguistic identity is provided below, collated from their reading logs and discussions during the workshops (Table 1).

All workshops were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. We then read the transcripts closely, first independently and then as a team, developing a coding framework over several months. The final framework was built using a blended model of a priori and emergent coding (see Elliott, 2018, p. 2855), drawing on our first-hand knowledge of designing the materials and being in the workshops, and being driven by the central research aims. Our initial a priori codes used Charity Hudley's (2017) taxonomy of racialised language discrimination as discussed above (internalised racism; personally mediated racism; institutional racism), with a top-level tripartite distinction used to signify whether participants were talking about the fictional world, the real world, or making connections between the two. We remained open to additional codes emerging through the analysis, adding and refining as we coded and re-read the data. In the analysis that follows, we discuss data which were coded under some of the more prominent codes

from our framework. This analysis is organised into three sections. In the first, *internalised raciolinguistic ideologies and pressures to conform*, we examine the normalisation of raciolinguistic ideologies and the everyday experience of language stigma that some students and fictional characters from *Front Desk* faced. In the second, *interrogating listening practices*, we explore data where students used the events of the novel to challenge raciolinguistic ideologies, adopting a raciolinguistic perspective which shifts the focus to the white listener rather than the racialised speaker. In the third, *institutional and intersectional stigma*, we focus on how schools work as particular spaces which foster language discrimination.

Internalised raciolinguistic ideologies and pressures to conform

There was a collective agreement that language discrimination was something that students previously had little opportunity to discuss, even though some of them had lived experience of it. Some students highlighted how language discrimination can be obfuscated by society's lack of awareness of what it is and how it works. For instance, Sanjiv, whose home language had been policed and prohibited in classrooms, discussed how he "hadn't really had the chance to talk about it before" and how it was "something which doesn't normally get mentioned", whilst Eva commented on how for some people it was

Table 1: Students' linguistic profiles

Ana	Age 11. Identified as a white Romanian immigrant who moved to England when she was 6. Talked openly about her experience of language stigma from teachers and other students, often being 'shunted off to the side' because she was perceived as 'less able'. She was bullied in primary school for the way she spoke and being perceived as 'not fitting in'.
Danielle	Age 12. Identified as white British and Ashkenazi Jewish. Did not explicitly report any lived experience of language discrimination.
Eva	Age 12. Identified as white British. Her language had been pathologised from a young age and she had experience of the speech and language therapy system. Talked about being made to feel ashamed of her pronunciation patterns.
Hamza	Age 13. Identified as British with Pakistani heritage. Reported experiencing negative comments on his ways of talking (pertaining to his accent and his lisp), and the policing of his use of Urdu in classrooms.
James	Age 11. Identified as white British. Did not explicitly report any lived experience of language discrimination.
Marius	Age 13. Identified as a white Eastern European immigrant who moved to England when he was 4. Talked about his experience of language discrimination in primary school and feelings of people thinking he wasn't able to pronounce words 'properly'.
Niamh	Age 12. Identified as white Irish. Did not explicitly report any lived experience of language discrimination.
Sanjiv	Age 11. Identified as a Bangladeshi immigrant who moved to England when he was 5. Described how his home language had sometimes been 'banned' from school classrooms.

"something they had to face everyday, even though people don't really always think of it as a type of discrimination". This was supported by Hamza, who suggested it had become 'normalised' – an idea he located in reference to his own experience of raciolinguistic stigma, describing how it captured "the way I've had to deal with that in my life, comments about my race, speech and things, those things are all connected". He compared this to the experiences of Mia in *Front Desk*, who he said was "forced to accept it so she doesn't feel it anymore". From early in the process, students described language discrimination as being 'connected' and intersectional – for instance, Sanjiv suggested that

> "[it] is about things other than language too, like sexism and homophobia, and racism, it's definitely about racism because how you speak and your race, they are so connected I think, just like Mia experiences." (Sanjiv)

Although three of the white students reported no lived experience of language discrimination, they used the events of *Front Desk* as an entry point for developing their own raciolinguistic literacies (see Seltzer and de los Ríos, 2018) and a critical awareness of raciolinguistic ideologies. For instance, in the final workshop, James reported on how having had the opportunity to read, think about and discuss race, language and inequality, this would "make him talk to other people about it because people need to know". Similarly, Niamh described how she "hadn't realised the seriousness of language discrimination" and "for some people, how it was an everyday thing they had to deal with", whilst Eva spoke of how the experience had "changed the way she would see and hear different people and the way they spoke". Eva's comment is particularly powerful because she attends to how her whiteness has the potential to enact a racially hegemonic mode of perception. She does this despite her own language having been pathologised by the speech and language therapy system, which has been criticised for propagating raciolinguistic ideologies, discourses of deficit and linguistic benchmarks based on white ways of talking (e.g. Blum, 2017). Eva commits to modifying her own way of listening rather than asking others to modify their speech (see Rosa and Flores, 2017a, p. 628), adopting a raciolinguistic perspective which enables her to begin interrogating her privileged position as a white listener.

Throughout the workshops, Ana talked frequently about her own experience when she moved to England from Romania, where other peoples' deficit perceptions of her multilingual abilities led to her questioning her own legitimacy within the monoglossic culture of school:

> "Well, I spoke a different language. […] so sometimes I struggled to understand people and a few of my friends did need to translate things for me. I remember that a lot of people made fun of me when they thought I could not understand, even though I could, and that I had a funny accent […] and so I felt out of place, not quite sure who I was." (Ana)

Marius, also from Eastern Europe, spoke of being bullied in primary school when he was first learning English as an immigrant, with other students telling him he was pronouncing words the 'wrong way' and how he was 'constantly corrected' by teachers, leading to him feeling that he was 'completely wrong' and "not welcome in school, and in England too". Ana and Marius's experience of language discrimination matched Mia's experience in many ways, especially in the hostile treatment of immigrants to the UK and the USA, driven by xenophobic policies which stigmatise and erase language practices heard to be 'foreign'. As Ana said:

> "When I told someone I immigrated from Romania to England, like in the book they started speaking to me as though I did not know the language which kind of upset me because who are you to tell me that? It's just not okay. So at some points I felt as though I could cry with them or I could laugh with them." (Ana).

This opened conversations around language discrimination and the immigration system, documented in work such as Khan (2018) which shows how ideologies around citizenship have historically worked to de/legitimise speakers of certain languages, and how language 'competency' operates as a border control technology for institutional access and international movement. Immigrants to England from Eastern Europe, such as Ana and Marius, face increasingly precarious and hostile environments in schools and broader society, especially since the outcome of the EU Referendum in 2016. For instance, in focus groups and interviews with young people from Eastern Europe, Sime et al. (2020) describe how participants reported an increase in xenophobic bullying in schools, with perceived deficits in language skills being one factor which contributed to this stigma and sense of illegitimacy.

Hamza talked about how people had been 'programmed' by society to internalise and reproduce raciolinguistic ideologies. In detail, he described how language discrimination was part of a broader socialisation process in which racialised bodies – including his own – are categorised and ranked according to how they look and sound. He related this to his own experiences and the fictional world of the text, describing how him and Mia had both been

peripherally positioned as "not a member of society" and an illegitimate citizen, through the way that he was made to feel that his "language, accent and general way of speaking wasn't right, wasn't normal". He spoke of how the listening practices of teachers had made him feel like "my way of talking isn't right, like it doesn't sound right, the way I speak English you know, like it's wrong", how other students had 'mocked' his accent, and how "you are punished if you don't live up to society's expectations". With his Pakistani heritage and multilingual abilities, Hamza is a racialised student who continues to endure the ongoing legacies of British linguistic imperialism since the partitioning of colonised India. His continuing stigmatisation at the ears of white British teachers in England illustrates how present-day listening practices continue to be shaped by monoglossic ideologies and structures of the 'past' (see Durrani, 2012; Fortier, 2018). For Mia in *Front Desk* and some students in the workshop, the consequences of not adhering to normative linguistic expectations are very real, carrying risks of alienation, marginalisation and punishment which are exacerbated by the logics of raciolinguistic and standard language ideologies.

Interrogating listening practices

This section discusses student responses which challenged raciolinguistic and standard language ideologies, interrogating the listening practices of authoritative bodies who are able to exercise judgement (see Rosa and Flores, 2017a). An extract from *Front Desk*, which we used in workshop 3, provides an initial illustration of how asking questions of the listening subject can expose judgements which frame racialised speakers as a pathological problem which require fixing and treating. This extract shows Mia's first encounter with Principal Evans, described by Mia's mum as a 'powerful white lady' (Yang, 2018, p. 18). Mia's mum tells her they have recently migrated from China:

> *"Of course, as soon as my mother said the words, Principal Evans started talking to me like I was a turkey. 'Reaaaalllly. Woooow. Hooooowwwwdoooo youuuu likkke thissss couuuuuuntrrrrry?' she asked. 'I really like it,' I quickly answered. Principal Evans put her hand to her chest and exhaled in relief. 'You know English! Oh, that's great. I have to admit, we don't get too many Chinese kids here. There's only one other Chinese kid in fifth grade.'"* (Yang, 2018, p. 18)

Principal Evans embodies and enacts a raciolinguistic ideology in her deficit assumptions about Mia's language practices based on her appearance, her immigrant status and her own racialised folk perception of Mia as an Asian body (see Reyes, 2009). In the eyes and ears of Principal Evans, Mia's bilingualism is seen and heard as a problem rather than a strength, expressed by her physical and audible reactions of relief when learning that Mia 'knows' English. A raciolinguistic perspective asks what if the problem is not Mia's language practices but the "racialisation of her language use and the inability of the white listening subject to hear her racialised body speaking appropriately?" (Rosa and Flores, 2017b, p. 184). This was a guiding question used to design the materials and then to facilitate conversations in the workshops, and one that we returned to multiple times when thinking through how a raciolinguistic perspective might help to understand and interrogate racialised language stigma. We framed this question in different ways – for instance "What if the problem is not the speaker but the hearer?" and "Instead of focusing on how students' language is 'broken', what happens if we focus on 'broken' ways of listening?". In response to the extract above, students used these questions as a way of thinking through how Mia's multilingualism and Chinese heritage was routinely perceived in racist ways – Marius, for example, described how teachers in the book "had written her off just because of the way she sounds and looks", and Danielle spoke of how people "made racist assumptions about her purely based on the fact she speaks Chinese [...] they just automatically think she doesn't belong in school".

Five of the students in the workshops were multilingual, often talking about how this ability had gone unrecognised – and even punished – in school. Hamza described how his 'mixing' of Urdu and English had often been heard as 'improper' by white teachers, reflecting exclusionary policies which surveil racialised bodies' language practices and valorising schools as monoglossic spaces. Sanjiv described how he had experienced teachers policing languages other than English, such as him and his close friends who "were made to feel that they aren't allowed to use our language in school", and that "our language was kind of banned". A number of UK schools who have implemented 'English only' or "Standard English at all times" policies also reproduce these ideologies, reproducing racially hegemonic modes of perception, the supremacy of whiteness and white ways of talking (see Cushing and Ahmed, 2021; Cushing, 2021b). In workshop 3 and as a way of situating our discussion of the book within the broader socio-political processes which foster raciolinguistic ideologies, we examined and interrogated some of these prohibitive policies and the deficit assumptions they propagated about language. Relating it to his own experience, Sanjiv interpreted them as saying "that there is only one way of talking allowed here, and if you don't talk like that, you'll be punished for it", whilst James described

how they "sent a message that your language isn't welcome in school".

In the workshops, Mia's multilingualism was recognised as a 'gift' and an 'amazing thing', especially by students who were multilingual themselves. Students questioned how Mia's multilingualism and other linguistic abilities went unrecognised. For example, Niamh argued that this provided evidence for her racist treatment both inside and outside of school, talking of how "the fact that she could speak Chinese automatically made people think that she couldn't speak English, even though she could, and so she was made to feel unwelcome and that she didn't belong in the school". Together, we drew up a list of Mia's linguistic skills which are overlooked by white subjects – including her abilities as a creative writer, her secure knowledge of the pragmatic functions of local forms (at one point creating a "Book of American Phrases and Customs" for her uncle), and her use of rhetorical strategies to expose acts of racism in the motel and defend other racialised guests. These *social* abilities in terms of language are never acknowledged by the perpetrators of language discrimination, choosing instead to police superficial aspects of Mia's language which symbolise linguistic capital and 'academic language' in mechanical models of Western education, such as nonstandardised grammar, phonological features and spelling (see Flores, 2020).

In workshop 2, students discussed various adjectives to describe language which represent a raciolinguistic ideology and are used by authoritative bodies in *Front Desk*, such as 'native', 'correct', 'academic', 'proper', 'poor', 'standard', 'appropriate' and 'broken'. These framings, which also saturate historical and contemporary education policies in England (see Cushing, 2021a), work to construct crude dichotomies of language which naturalise nonstandardised English as deviant and illegitimate. Extracts which used these adjectives were used in the workshops to generate discussion of how raciolinguistic ideologies can be propagated through descriptions of language itself. Using these extracts as a starting point, students challenged the listening practices of authoritative voices who position themselves as linguistic gatekeepers, exploring issues of power, control and identity. For example,

> "Who gets to say what type of English is broken? I mean we all have different ways of speaking; we all have different ways of saying what we want to say so who gets to decide, 'Oh, that English is broken. This English is fine. This English is good.' Who decides that? No-one. […] Honestly, I do not think anyone should decide which way you speak. No-one. Not even if it's someone high ranking. You decide how you speak, that's fine." (Ana)

> "It's like, if someone says that someone's language is poor or broken then they are just passing judgement on that person. But that might be just how you speak, but someone has just like basically invented what counts as poor or broken or good or whatever. Like imagine saying 'I can speak English better than you'. Like, what does 'better' even mean?" (Hamza)

Ana and Hamza turn their attention towards oppressive structures which attempt to regulate language, asking questions which challenge the silencing and surveillance of marginalised voices. These questions were rooted in their own lived experience of linguistic oppression: their multilingualism, 'broken English' and perceived lack of competency in 'academic language' had been the source of stigma in school, *despite* the fact that Anthony identified them as highly intelligent and engaged young people. We suggest that Ana and Hamza are simply intelligent enough *not* to conform with practices that they do not identify with, and that they see their language as 'whole' rather than 'broken'. However, a raciolinguistic perspective argues that the white listening subject will *still* code and hear racialised bodies as linguistically deficient regardless of the way they speak and how well this is deemed to align with standardised English. For Ana, who is white, her nonstandardised English is more likely to be heard as acceptable in school by white teachers, but for Hamza, a person of colour, his racialised body means that even if he modifies his speech to align with standardised English, he will continue to be heard as deficient. These double standards apply even to people who occupy positions of political and economic power, illustrated by Alim and Smitherman's (2012) discussion of Barack Obama and his time as US President, who still had his speech perceived and denigrated as deficient by white listeners – even when using features typically associated with standardised English.

The final part of this section turns attention to the listening practices of Mia's mum, which generated intense discussion in the workshops. As well as being economically exploited and subject to emotional abuse by the motel owner, Mia's mum is assaulted during a violent robbery and repeatedly told by white Americans that her language is inadequate. Mia's mum often reproduces language stigma towards Mia. For example, in reference to her English, she tells her that she is a 'bicycle' whilst her classmates are 'cars' (Yang, 2018, p. 145), and makes Mia feel like her tongue is a 'limp lizard' (p. 6). She reproduces raciolinguistic ideologies of nativeness and linguistic ownership, telling her daughter that

> "You heard Mr. Yao. You gotta be native at English. And I'm sorry, but we're just not." […] "You're not getting it, are you?" she said. She sat down on the bed and

looked me in the eye. "You just can't be as good as the white kids in their language, honey. It's their language." (Yang, 2018, pp. 89–90, original emphasis)

Students agreed that Mia's mum's listening practices were shaped by her feelings of responsibility for her child, with both Danielle and Niamh suggesting her actions were to 'protect' Mia because she was so badly treated herself. James talked about the relentless pressure Mia's mum was under, arguing that "she's frustrated, and she thinks there's no way out, she feels that language discrimination is unstoppable and there's no point in trying to stop it", and that her behaviour was simply a way of her managing her own stigmatised identity. Some students felt that Mia's mum's reproduction of language stigma was grounded in her acceptance of social inequality and the exhaustion she had to manage after years of living in poverty and the stigma she endured at the eyes and ears of white listening subjects and the immigration system, pointing to the following lines as a good example:

"My mother sighed. She walked over and put a hand on my shoulder. 'We're immigrants,' she said. 'Our lives are never fair.' (Yang, 2018, p. 68).

Again, something that was particularly noticeable during these discussions of challenging raciolinguistic ideologies was how students exhibited a critical awareness of the intersectional nature of language discrimination, talking of how race, social class, immigrant status and gender all work craft cultures of stigma in which racialised bodies are heard to speak in deficient and incomplete ways. We continue this discussion in the following section.

Institutional and intersectional stigma

This section discusses the institutional and intersectional nature of language discrimination. It was agreed that schools play an active role in in the production of inequality and can be hostile places for bodies who are deemed to be 'different', much like Mia, with racialised speakers often being pushed to the peripheries of a community when their language practices are deemed to not conform with the normative expectations as prescribed within policy.

As discussed above, students talked about how schools were sites of socialisation and inculcation, with *language* being a particularly salient factor through which some bodies come to be appreciated and others silenced. In discussing both her own and Mia's experiences, Niamh said that school can be a space where people are made to feel that their language practices are 'not good enough', whilst Ana suggested that in school "we get taught the 'right' way of saying things and when you do speak, when you do try, obviously people will judge you", alluding to how talking in front of other students and teachers was something that she felt conscious of.

The watchful eyes and listening ears of teachers were deemed to be important mechanisms of visual and sonic surveillance. Hamza described how his Pakistani accent had been the source of pathological discrimination in school, with teachers telling him that he needed to pronounce words 'differently', which he remembered being as 'quite forceful sometimes'. Hamza recalled how he had 'trouble' pronouncing certain sounds, something which he was 'always criticised for' and often publicly shamed by teachers for. Reflecting on this, Hamza talked about how he felt under pressure to 'match' his language to white speakers, with the institutional cultures of school leading him to internalise raciolinguistic ideologies built on rewards and punishments. As he put it, "there is a correct way to do it, if you do it, you'll get praised, if you don't, you'll get criticised". This pressure to conform with and assimilate towards so-called 'academic standards' was a clear theme in the workshops, as well as in *Front Desk* (see also Flores, 2020 for how 'academic language' works as a raciolinguistic ideology in which 'social language' comes to be heard as deficient and unsuitable for school).

However, all students agreed that language stigma was never just about language – and sometimes not even about language at all – and was about managing people and other components of social identity. Talking about the intersectional nature of language discrimination was a key aim of the project, especially given that this is so fundamental to *Front Desk* and the experiences of Mia's family. From the very first workshop, students highlighted the intersectional mechanisms of language discrimination, with Sanjiv saying that Mia's stigma is 'always about race', and Hamza talking of the 'mixture of things' that Mia faced prejudice about, including race, gender, poverty and age. Marius said that

"I think that language can often be linked with race or culture and things like that. That may also lead to discrimination based on maybe cultural practices. […] So maybe let us say someone's speaking like in this case Chinese or they originate from China, maybe some people may find the cultural practices strange or different and may discriminate against that too along with some other things." (Marius)

Ana once again drew parallels with Mia's experience and her own life, in terms of the intersectional

discrimination she experienced during her first months in England:

> "Well, she still faces language discrimination. Why? Because one she's young, two she's a female, and three because she's Chinese. And so many other things, but I can definitely relate to this because I remember in Year 3, my primary school teacher, she said that I could never make it to a Year 6 standard level because of how young I was and how little experience in English I had […] and it kind of crushed me, it really crushed me because I never thought that a teacher would say that to me or would ever do that to a student […] but now looking back I realise that I did not need to be told who to be or what to sound like." (Ana).

In describing how nationhood, immigration, gender, age and language discrimination have worked against herself and Mia, Ana talks about her own experiences and sadness which 'crushed' her, but how on reflection, she has come to resist language ideologies which attempt to impose assimilative ideas onto her speech. These mature, critical and personal responses to the stigma that Mia and her family face in *Front Desk* are reflective of a group of young people talking openly about their own experiences of institutional and intersectional discrimination. As per the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogies, these responses are firmly rooted in the lived experiences of bodies who have been systematically surveilled, silenced and erased through punitive schooling practices.

Conclusion: Futures of linguistic justice

Despite decades of work which has challenged deficit perspectives of minoritised speakers' language, local and national educational policy in England continues to perpetuate raciolinguistic ideologies in which certain ways of talking are seen and heard as 'better' than others, and that schools are places in which racialised students must conform with the expectations of white listening subjects and so-called 'standards' (Cushing, 2021a). This article has shown how fictional texts can be used as an entry point for young people to discuss, make sense of, and interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies, tracing the contours between fictional and real worlds whilst questioning the listening practices of authoritative bodies and policies. We suggest that, with appropriate teacher knowledge and support from school management and parents, the kind of materials we designed can be scaled up to incorporate larger and longer classroom discussion time, embedded as part of an explicitly anti-racist school-level curriculum which rejects the conservatism and confines of the current state designed curricula in England.

Our work builds on US-based scholarship examining raciolinguistic ideologies in education (e.g. Flores and Rosa, 2015), and research which uses fictional texts to challenge raciolinguistic ideologies and language stigma in schools (e.g. Baker-Bell, 2020 pp. 102–117). Although a relatively small study which has its limitations, we argue that our work contributes to recent arguments which call for centring discussions of race and literature on school curricula in England (e.g. Chetty, 2016; Elliott et al., 2021), as well as an ever-increasing need for teachers and teacher educators to draw on anti-racist pedagogies (e.g. Paris and Alim, 2017). A cluster of factors leads us to believe that it is a critical moment for embedding this kind of work on language discrimination into school policies and practices. Apart from the standard language and raciolinguistic ideologies which are written into historical and contemporary policy in England, this is a time where the UK government make widely rebutted claims that there is no institutional racism in Britain (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021), and the UK Department for Education promote a model of education built on punitive discipline mechanisms which disproportionally police the language practices of students of colour.

For the students of colour who participated in this research, the experience opened a space where they were able to discuss, reflect on and make sense of why and how they had been targets of structural, intersectional and institutional language discrimination. Whilst the discussion in this article has mostly focused on these voices, we feel it is also important to highlight that the white students – three of whom reported no experience of language discrimination – described their processes of learning as transformative. Given that a raciolinguistic perspective places attention on the listening practices of white bodies, it is white listeners who have particular responsibility to modify the way they hear to play a role in dismantling the structures which create and foster racialised language discrimination. This shift in attention away from racialised ways of speaking and towards racialised ways of listening is, we argue, a fundamental prerequisite of social and educational transformation and a future of linguistic justice. Reading, thinking and talking about literature offer one way of facilitating such change.

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and willingness to talk about linguistic racism and how it shapes their everyday lives.

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Appendix A

Session	Aims	Overview of activities
1	• To introduce students to the researchers, the research project and for them to introduce themselves. • To elicit students' own backgrounds and profiles.	• Welcome students and invite students to introduce themselves. • Talk students through the research and explain their involvement and what participation requires. • Talk students through the principles and ethics of the research, highlighting the need for sensitive and culturally responsible discussions about language, race and social class. • Clarify that students are free to take a pause, leave or ask further questions if they feel uncomfortable at any moment. • Present a brief overview of Kelly Yang and how *Front Desk* is based on the lived experience of the author (based on the *author's note*) of the novel (Yang, 2018: n.p.). • Students discuss the phrase 'language discrimination', including questions about its meaning, examples, their own lived experiences, and how/why/when language discrimination happens. • Overview of the research project and participants' expectations. Students invited to ask questions about the research. • Students are provided with a copy of *Front Desk* and the reading journal.
	Students given 4 weeks to read the novel independently, with support from the researchers available if necessary.	
2	• To establish general responses to the text and provide students with opportunities to share their own reading experiences. • To begin to identify language discrimination at an individual level.	• Students welcomed to the workshop and asked to share their general responses to the book. Students share 'key moments', using their reading journals and annotations. • Students consider a working definition of language discrimination and think about whether this is adequate in capturing some of the experiences that Mia faces, discussing some of the examples of language discrimination included in the book. • Using a series of extracts (including ones identified by students), students discuss how particular moments in the book represent instances of language discrimination. These include scenes from Yang (2018, pp. 6; 53; 72; 121; 146). • Students explore different types of language discrimination, e.g. in terms of accent, grammar and whole-language prejudice, relating this to the experiences of Mia and her family. Students asked to consider whether this is 'just' about language, or other things too.

(Continues)

Session	Aims	Overview of activities
		• Students asked to consider how language discrimination is created through the 'filters' of listeners – what happens if we turn our attention away from the language of suppressed speakers and towards oppressive ways of listening?
		• Students presented with a list of phrases which describe language from Front Desk (e.g. 'broken English'; 'correct English'; 'native language') and asked to consider how these descriptions might play a role in perpetuating language discrimination.
3	• To explore language discrimination at an institutional and intersectional level, and to further trace connections between the events of the novel and students' own lives. • To think about how language discrimination might intersect with race, class and nationality.	• Begin by revisiting what was meant by language discrimination and by recounting specific instances of where Mia experiences this. • Discuss school and how this can be a space where power imbalances are at work. Students are asked whether they have ever been 'corrected' on the way they use language in school, and if so, how this felt, and why they thought it might have happened. • Students shown extracts of school policies which have policed and 'banned' nonstandardised language (see Cushing 2020). Students invited to share their thoughts on these, and whether they saw examples of these ideas about language in *Front Desk*. • Using their reading journals and annotations, students are asked to share extracts where language discrimination seems to be anchored to other social variables such as social class, race, age and gender. Other extracts provided by the researchers, such as Yang (2018: 18) • Researchers provide a definition of intersectional language discrimination, and students are asked to talk about what this means to them, and whether this helps them to 'think through' their own experiences of stigma, as well as ones in *Front Desk*. • Students asked to consider how Mia's experiences of language discrimination – and their own – are never personal to her not individual events, but are part of a larger structure which systematically oppresses particular social groups.
4	• To create a space where language discrimination can be challenged and resisted. • To explore Kelly Yang's history and her own words on language discrimination. • To further contextualise *Front Desk* in relation to US and UK immigration policies.	• Students shown a tweet from Kelly Yang (https://twitter.com/kellyyanghk/status/1317130273809592321?s=20) where she shared a complaint she received from a parent that their child's school were reading *Front Desk* and this was teaching them to be anti-racists. Students asked to share their thoughts about this and whether racism, anti-racism and language should be a feature of school curricula, and to consider how they would respond to such a tweet. • Students are shown a short video of Kelly Yang (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LH_WZ7IKwGU) talking about discrimination and ways of challenging it. • Students return to asking questions of the ways that Mia's language is heard as deficient. Students asked to compile a list of Mia's linguistic skills which go unrecognised in the book, and to consider *why* these might go unrecognised. • Students asked to think critically about how Mia is forced into managing her stigma and examples from the book where she Westernises her identity. Students asked why she might have done this, and whether this is something they recognise in themselves at all. • Information about Kelly Yang and Chinese immigration policies in the US are shared with students, followed by a discussion of how

Session	Aims	Overview of activities
		greater contextual detail about the book helps to make sense of its events. Students asked how these histories might relate to the UK, such as the hostile treatment of Chinese communities in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 'hostile environment' created under the Conservative government in 2012 (Khan, 2018; Goodfellow, 2019) and racism following the EU Referendum result (Sime et al., 2020). • Students asked to think about what they have learnt during the process, and the key things they will remember from our discussions.

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