Racial Justice in Multilingual Education

The AfroMetaverse online virtual reality platform as Black placemaking for racial justice in multilingual education

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Abstract

Hunter, Pattillo, Robinson, and Taylor (2016) introduced the framework of Black placemaking referring to how "urban Black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance through social interaction" (p. 32), which Tichavakunda (2020) and Halkiyo and Hailu (2023) extrapolated to educational settings, and Murphy (2022) applied to global Blackness across the Americas through the concept of aquilombamento or "the act of creating or meeting in a maroon community" (p. 236) for relief, resistance, self-determination, and joy. This conceptual paper proposes as a site of Black placemaking the

AfroMetaverse online platform of cultural exchange between Black adolescents in the US, Canada, Colombia, and Brazil featuring educational English, Spanish, and Portuguese language virtual reality (VR) experiences based on the history and cultures of Afrodescendants. AfroMetaverse positions Black students at the forefront of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) while prioritizing a critical race pedagogy for world language teaching (CRPWLT, Anya, 2021). This article describes how the AfroMetaverse project demonstrates CRPWLT and responds to Austin and Anya's (2024) call for Black Linguistic Reparations in world languages (WL) and racial justice in multilingual education. The paper also details AfroMetaverse collaborations with community partners, plus, prospects for empirical research.

Introduction

Conceptual papers propose new models and perspectives to advance theoretical understanding within a field and promote new directions for research. In this paper, we present Black placemaking—a concept and research framework originated in sociology by Hunter, Pattillo, Robinson, and Taylor (2016)—as an approach we can utilize in the field of world languages (WLs) to broaden our understanding of how Black students can grow, thrive, and, ultimately, succeed in language learning. We propose as a site of Black placemaking the AfroMetaverse, which is an online platform where African American and Afro-Canadian middle and high school students meet, chat, and collaborate with Black South American teens in Colombia and Brazil sharing their lives, making global connections, and playing educational English, Spanish, and Portuguese language games virtual reality (VR) experiences based on the study of the history and cultures of Afrodescendants throughout the Americas. This conceptual paper describes how the AfroMetaverse project prioritizes a critical race pedagogy for world language teaching (CRPWLT, Anya, 2021) and responds to Austin and Anya's (2024) call for Black Linguistic Reparations to address the history of harm against Afrodescendants in WLs by centering the experiences and success of Black students to inform curriculum, instruction, policy, and teacher training for racial justice in multilingual education. The paper details AfroMetaverse collaborations with community partners in racial justice and global education, plus, it outlines the diverse prospects AfroMetaverse offers for empirical interdisciplinary research.

Black people's lives are fundamentally shaped by race, and experiences in learning a new language are no exception to this reality. Of course, in terms of universal cognitive processes, we do not learn languages any differently than anyone else.

However, the individuality of the Black experience makes for unique sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives in language learning, which should be taken into consideration to encourage the participation and success of Black students in WLs. Austin and Anya (2024) called attention to the history of Black erasure; anti-Black policies, instructional materials, and classrooms; monolingual and imperial language ideologies; and segregation among the many challenges faced by African descended learners studying WLs in U.S. schools. They noted how Black students can be found among the introductory and required language courses in numbers commensurate with their overall population at a given school, but then, their presence drastically reduces, or they entirely disappear at upper-level language learning and prestige programs like dual language immersion and study abroad (Anya, 2020; Gatlin, 2013; Palmer, 2010; Poza, 2013; Pratt, 2012).

This underrepresentation originates from a history of systemic exclusion and marginalization in U.S. education, because Black students at the K-12 level are more likely to attend schools or be tracked into programs where world languages are not available, and they complete the fewest number of high school credits in this subject (Baggett, 2016; Finn, 1998; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). Schools that many Black students attend also map onto indexes of broader socioeconomic disparities between neighborhoods and districts, and they typically struggle with the availability of funding for language education. In schools that do offer languages, Black students are frequently placed in academic tracks without them, and institutional gatekeepers (e.g., teachers, counselors, administrators) with deficit notions of their linguistic and intellectual abilities encourage Black students to pursue "more practical" subjects (Davis, 2000; Palmer, 2010; Pratt, 2012; Schoener & McKenzie, 2016). In addition to these systemic and institutional failures, what happens in the instructional environments where Black students learn WLs has great bearing on their underrepresentation in our field. Although research shows them as motivated and bearing overall positive attitudes toward learning new languages, Black students routinely report negative classroom experiences, poor instructional environments, unfavorable (and racist) teacher and classmate attitudes and perceptions, low expectations, and curriculum and materials they deem unappealing to their interests and cultural identities, contextually inappropriate, and irrelevant (Anya, 2021).

Anya (2017) demonstrated how this stark reality of the marginalization and outright mistreatment of Black students in WLs does not have to be the norm by describing how they engage in profound experiences of personal transformation, broaden their perspectives and career prospects, and gain a much greater sense of international belonging through intercultural and multilingual studies that include contact with other Black people in the communities where languages they learn are spoken. She

introduced the critical race pedagogy for world language teaching (CRPWLT) framework for promoting antiracism, equity-mindedness, and inclusivity, showing how language programs can identify and address problems of racism and systemic patterns of exclusion of Black people in their materials, policies, and practices. Also, to remedy this injustice of systemic marginalization, Austin and Anya (2024) proposed that WLs serve as a site of Black Linguistic Reparations through three Rs: redistributing resources in the field; repairing our concepts and practices in multilingual education to more effectively prepare students for communication in a pluralistic society; and recreating the "world" as narrated through a global, not White Western, lens. All of this can help fulfill the desire Black students have consistently expressed: to see more explicit links between their ethno-racial backgrounds and classroom materials, topics, and curricula, and more relevant, personally significant connections made between their experiences and the cultures and people who speak the languages they study.

Responding to Austin and Anya's (2024) call to action, we ask the question: How might learning differ if Black students were taught new languages using the histories, experiences of and interaction, collaboration with individuals who share their racial background and cultural affinity? Furthermore, how might Black students use their space and place in WL education when their Blackness and shared community goals of racial justice are at the forefront of their learning? This inquiry undergirds the arguments made in our conceptual paper wherein we introduce to WLs and the broader field of applied linguistics AfroMetaverse, a multifaceted interdisciplinary project of Black placemaking (Hunter, Pattillo, Robinson, & Taylor, 2016) for Black youth in the U.S., Canada, Brazil, and Colombia that utilizes CRPWLT to work toward Black Linguistic Reparations and promote racial justice in multilingual education.

What is AfroMetaverse?

Our project gathers Black middle and high school students ages 12-17 in the United States, Canada, Brazil, and Colombia to meet on an online platform called AfroMetaverse for immersive intercultural exchanges and collaborative learning. On AfroMetaverse, Black students engage and collaborate with international counterparts for mutually beneficial multilingual learning and community expansion, which highlights two key values that undergird our Black placemaking endeavor to promote justice in multilingual education: 1) reciprocity and 2) the rejection of exploitative and extractive academic research practices. A main goal is for project participants to learn about Afrodescendant communities and cultures across North and South America, which will contribute to their greater participation and success in WLs, and thus, prepare them for a more impactful presence in world communities. Following Austin and Anya's (2024) call for Black linguistic reparations, AfroMetaverse provides a

culturally and ethno-racially affirming place for Afrodescendants where their identities and unique needs are prioritized through the project's three components:

1. a virtual reality (VR) multilingual educational gaming platform
2. an online social network community
3. a repository of multilingual interaction data for interdisciplinary research

On the AfroMetaverse VR platform, Black adolescents, ages 12-17, in the US, Brazil, Colombia, and Canada participate in an afterschool program where they gather for two hours a week to chat and collaborate while playing educational English, Portuguese, Spanish language VR games based on the history and cultures of Afrodescendants throughout the Americas. An example of such a game is the immersive experience "Black Liberators of the Americas Quest" where the youth form multilingual and multicultural teams to go on missions to liberate enslaved people guided by freedom fighters Benkos Biohó from Colombia, Zumbi dos Palmares from Brazil, Harriet Tubman from the US, and Mary Ann Shadd from Canada. Players win badges unlocking knowledge and making strategies, they solve language and communication problems, collaborate to gather intel to stay safe and evade capture, and create paths for other liberation fighters who follow. On the AfroMetaverse online community space, the African American, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Colombian, and Afro-Canadian youth program participants have access to a mini social networking platform to interact with peers outside the structured weekly gaming activities. In this community space, they play asynchronous games, chat, post pictures and videos, share memes, play music, and engage in an environment created for sustained interaction. Here, they can build global connections and friendships, with the future possibility for project-organized short-term educational travel abroad to meet AfroMetaverse friends in person. All live and asynchronous activities and interactions in which program participants engage are monitored and recorded for safety and IRB compliance due to their status as minors. Thus, the VR educational gaming and social networking platforms will be a repository of multilingual interaction data, which the AfroMetaverse project director, applied linguist Dr. Uju Anya, and her team will utilize for research. The AfroMetaverse data repository can also be accessed by other IRB-authorized scholars from multiple disciplines to conduct studies on game-based educational experiences in the metaverse; explorations of language education in the metaverse; CALL and TELL studies; discourse analysis and conversation analysis studies in applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA); language and social studies pedagogy and curriculum design studies in education; racial justice in multilingual education studies; Black placemaking studies in sociology, and more. All with the goal of centering Black people and Blackness in both pedagogical and epistemological practice.

A Critical Race Approach to World Language Teaching for Black Linguistic Reparations

Flores and Rosa (2019) and Kubota and Motha (2025) argued that language learning is not independent of the racialized and intersecting identities of the learners, nor can it be experienced or investigated outside of material conditions and ideologies in which the same linguistic practices can be interpreted in drastically different ways depending on the languager's race and social status. Rooted in such raciolinguistic ideologies is the devaluation of African Americans' lived experiences and language skills. These ideologies associate Blackness with linguistic deficiency, rendering Black people to a perpetual condition of languagelessness and ignoring the institutionalized racism that marginalizes Black learners and their considerable linguistic endowments. Consequently, based on the positioning of Afrodescendants—especially African Americans—language learning is inaccessible and significantly gatekept, replete with systemic barriers and racism that reinforce hierarchy where the cultural contributions of African American and marginalized students are neglected, perpetuating exclusion and erasure. Kubota and Motha (2025) and Daniel (2023) emphasized how the lack of representation of Black individuals in language teaching materials and classrooms contributes to the erasure of their linguistic identities, just as Talmy (2010) critiqued the superficiality of multicultural curricula that fail to account for the multifacetedness of students' identities. These conditions and the narrowly conceived ahistorical teaching approaches reduce students to essentialist stereotypes, erasing their backgrounds, lived experiences, alongside their investment in the language of study. The disconnect between students' realities and the curricula they encounter creates an educational environment that is not only unsuitable, but also, detrimental to Black and other minoritized language learners.

In Austin and Anya (2024), Anya's commentary on never having a Black colleague throughout her training as a language educator and Austin's reflection on the decontextualized and isolated experiences during her preparation and practices as a Spanish teacher powerfully situate the exclusion and anti-Blackness experienced by African Americans in WLs studies. Inequity in funding and resource allocation reduces the population of Black students in the language classroom, which, over time, results in fewer Black language educators and researchers in the WL field. Hence, if such investment in (Black) human capital is restricted, it becomes apparent that the underrepresentation and overall injustice Afrodescendants experience in WL teaching is not just educational and cultural, but also, impacts their economic advancement. Therefore, we borrow from Fraser's (1995) conceptualization of remedying injustice to argue for the recognition of Black identities in WL teaching and the redistribution of resources for the success of Black language learners. Fraser (1995) argued that redistribution remedies economic injustice by reorganizing the division of labor and democratizing investment decisions, while recognition remedies cultural injustice by

revaluing disrespected identities, valorizing cultural diversity, and transforming societal patterns of representation. Previous work in WL studies has addressed the need to recognize Black students' identity in the learning ecosystem by showing what African American students endure in WL teaching (Willis, 2015). However, few researchers have taken a critical race-based stance toward evaluating and proposing concrete steps to redistribute resources for Black students in the field of WLs, and these resources to be redistributed are economic, social, and pedagogical. Furthermore, there has been little institutional effort made to right the wrongs, and this is a significant reason why Austin and Anya (2024) called for reparations in all that is owed to Black language learners.

To address this redistribution of WL teaching resources, we must reexamine the harm of underrepresentation and outright exclusion that Black students face. Teachers and school leaders attribute the underperformance of students of color to supposedly inherent deficits such as cultural inadequacies, linguistic deficiencies, or lack of motivation, blaming Black students, their families, and their communities for the students' lack of advancement in language study. For example, school administrators and dual language program instructors interviewed in Palmer (2010) claimed that Black students from an African American language-speaking background need remediation services in English more than anything, therefore, it is unfair to burden them with the additional work of learning a new language when they have not even mastered their own. This distorted and racist view of Black people as languageless, which assumes their purported incompetence in their native language renders them unable to gain expertise in others, is sadly common among educators, who are largely ignorant of the fact that African American Language is its own language, not an incorrect or bastardized English, and those who speak both actually demonstrate clear multilingual abilities and should be actively encouraged to learn additional languages, not kept away for their supposed good. The view is also embedded within the structure of the U.S. educational system, especially in the field of English language arts and reading and writing instruction, which motivates scholars of Black linguistic justice (see: Baker-Bell, 2020; Johnson et al., 2017; Smitherman, 2006; Young et al., 2014) in their advocacy on behalf of African American students and other Black languagers whose languaging practices are stigmatized and utilized to justify educational and psychological harm against them.

Furthermore, no matter how well-meaning the intentions of those who make arguments of the supposed linguistic poverty of Black students, they are rife with raciolinguistic ideologies that praise normative Whiteness and the supposed brilliance of middle-class and elite White children who learn new languages but problematize the linguistic heritage of Black people as a hindrance to their WL learning potential.

Even worse, the arguments promoting the racist fallacy of Black people's linguistic poverty ignore the documented success of African American students in WL when they are taught in contexts and with curricula that positively engage their identities and experiences, and the research in which Black students express their desire for more meaningful connections between the cultural content in the WL curriculum and their identities as members of the African diaspora. Anya's (2017) study on a 10-week study abroad program in Brazil showed that African American students' linguistic expertise grew in classrooms and target language communities where they felt connected, comfortable, respected, and included. Specifically, she found that their language learning was more successful when they could see themselves in what was being taught. This realization calls for a social justice-oriented WL pedagogy that creates space to center Black identities, cultures, and languages while combating their underrepresentation and marginalization, such as, the open access Spanish language curriculum focusing on Black language learners and Blackness in Latin America created by Baralt et al. (2022) that has been wildly successful and downloaded more than 10,000 times indicating the great need and demand for such material.

Language pedagogy for racial justice has its roots in critical pedagogy, which challenges social inequities, oppression, and marginalization in the policies, curricula, and classrooms (Crookes, 2021). It is also in line with similar equity and justice-minded approaches in education, such as the engagement of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017; Perales Fernández de Gamboa & Orcasitas-Vicandi, 2025; Sun, 2025). As we discuss race, racism, and anti-Blackness in the field of WLs, we are mindful of the current political climate in the United States and the coordinated, multifaceted attacks against social justice and equity. For decades, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies have championed the interests and advancement of marginalized groups in education and other sectors. However, with the elimination of these policies at the federal level, plus a drastic turn toward fascism and White nationalism in all areas of U.S. society, researchers and theorists must ramp up our work addressing the impact of race in language learning and anti-Black racism in WL. The "social justice turn" in multilingual education is needed now more than ever along with the creation of systems that encourage inclusion and equity, because, as shown in Anya (2025) and Von Esch et al. (2020), WL curricula that evade race by prioritizing a supposedly "race neutral" color-evasiveness end up not promoting equity, but instead, they uphold normative Whiteness and White supremacy by portraying White individuals, families, and cultures as the standard while at the same time excluding considerations of Blackness and ignoring Black people as both language learners and principal cultural agents in target language communities. Hence, regardless of any active intent to engage in racism and anti-Blackness, a WL curriculum promoting race neutrality or color-evasiveness inevitably contributes to systemic racism.

We, therefore, acknowledge that our AfroMetaverse project is built on the reality of racialized experiences and racism in WL teaching with our main goal to address Black exclusion and erasure in our field. We utilize a critical race pedagogy approach for language teaching that evaluates educational practices and challenges existing inequitable ideologies to equip learners with the agency to problematize, deconstruct, and produce anti-oppressive counternarratives that transform society. We draw on Austin and Anya's (2024) three Rs framework of Black Linguistic Reparations— redistribution, repair, and recreation—to propose AfroMetaverse as a site in WL education where Blackness, Black communities, and Black language learners thrive. These entail:

- **Redistribution**: increasing Black perspectives in curricula and acknowledging the linguistic diversity of Black communities by hiring more Black language teachers and Black language learning curriculum designers, addressing disparities in participation in study abroad, and promoting Black self-determination and continuous learning opportunities in language education.
- **Repair**: resistance against linguistic supremacy and normative Whiteness by implementing critical race pedagogy and recognizing the historical contributions of Black educators, with the goal of enabling an inclusive learning environment that rectifies the misrepresentation and erasure of Black languages and cultures.
- **Recreation**: transforming WL education to challenge exclusionary practices by breaking down ideological barriers and developing locally informed curricula with the goal of elevating Black humanity and creating a more inclusive and representative language learning environment.

Language instruction must indeed transcend color-evasive cultural representations to engage with issues of racial identity and power dynamics (Kubota & Lin, 2006). Anya (2011, 2021, 2025) highlighted how Black students often feel alienated in language classrooms, leading to decreased motivation to engage in world language learning, and also how epistemological and institutionalized racism cause language educators who do not actively identify and challenge this status quo to unwittingly perpetuate racial injustice in language classrooms. While we may partially blame the underrepresentation of Black students in WL on the alienating curriculum and instructional practices built within the White supremacist ideology, Anya's (2021) framework on critical race pedagogy for world language teaching (CRPWLT) responds to the ongoing systemic racial disparities and marginalization experienced by Black students in language classrooms by giving teachers and students agency to dismantle the power structures in language education that mirror and reinforce societal racial

hierarchies, especially against Black students. In the practice of CRPWLT, language educators and program administrators are encouraged to:

1. conduct critical race theory-informed inquiry to assess language program in terms of antiracism, equity-mindedness, and inclusivity;
2. promote language educator self-reflexivity to examine power, inequity; and
3. engage in liberatory practice in language teaching for antiracism, social justice

The problems of racism and anti-Blackness addressed by CRPWLT are deeply ingrained in multilingual education as the norm evident in curriculum content, lesson materials, activities, and representations that continually disempower and discourage Black learners. They are also present in the avatar and environment design of certain off-the-shelf virtual worlds, that is, the metaverse (Kafai et al., 2010). We respond to Black underrepresentation and erasure in real and virtual WL teaching by creating a space that serves Black people. Our project, AfroMetaverse, is an effort of Black placemaking to create a platform and materials built on the reality, diverse perspectives, and lived experiences of Black people, and for the success of Black students.

Creating space for Blackness and Black People in Language Study

Black placemaking provides a valuable framework for addressing the experiences and needs of Black students in educational settings, particularly in multilingual education. Hunter et al. (2016) defined Black placemaking as the ways "urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance" through social interaction (p. 2). They offered Black placemaking as a counterstory to traditional urban narratives, emphasizing the meaningful, creative, safe, and transformative nature of Black spaces. In their study of Black Chicagoans, the authors underscored how Black individuals and communities design their spaces and drive their narratives, even in the face of systemic oppression. At the heart of Black placemaking are four components: resistance, resilience, community, and identity. Resistance creates sites of endurance and belonging against systemic challenges. With resilience, Black people develop creative and celebratory spaces despite external assaults, and, within their Black community, they create social interactions that bind individuals through shared identities, experiences, and collective well-being. Ultimately, their Blackness can be expressed in various forms through social interactions and collective practices even in the context of global Blackness across the Americas as Murphy (2022) presented through the concept of aquilombamento or "the act of creating or meeting in a maroon community" (p. 236) for the life-giving purposes of relief, resistance, self-determination, and joy. Hunter et al. (2016) argued that Black placemaking happens "within a context of racial residential segregation, high unemployment, bad schools" (p. 3). Thus, extending Black placemaking to educational research, Tichavakunda (2020), Halkiyo and Hailu (2023), and Golden and Tichavakunda (2025)

conceptualized Black placemaking as how Black communities collectively persist and thrive in the face of racism within larger academic fields and communities. Tichavakunda's (2020) framework allowed for a closer examination of how Black students and educators create spaces of belonging and resistance within racist institutions.

In WL education, Black placemaking can be a powerful tool to address deeply seated issues of discrimination and marginalization by creating spaces for Black students' success. Black placemaking can allow Black educators and students to co-opt contested spaces, such as curriculum design, teaching approaches, cultural and linguistic inclusion, as sites for success. Through Black placemaking, learning environments where Black students' identities and experiences are not only acknowledged, but also, appreciated and validated, can be achieved. Furthermore, when this concept of Black placemaking is extrapolated to the practice of CRPWLT, we see its alignment with a commitment to: critical race theory-informed inquiry for antiracism, equity-mindedness, and inclusivity; the close, critical examination of how power and inequity functions in our field; and a liberatory practice in language teaching for antiracism and social justice. We also see how a Black placemaking project promotes Black Linguistic Reparations for redistribution, repair, and recreation. To those ends, the AfroMetaverse project exemplifies a space that serves marginalized Black populations—an initiative of Black placemaking in language education. The platform and its materials are built on the reality, diverse perspectives, and lived experiences of Black people, and they leverage virtual spaces to create inclusive and empowering learning and multicultural exchange that challenge the erasure of Blackness we often see in traditional educational settings.

Leveraging Technology for Black Placemaking in World Language Education

Technology has become an important aspect of language learning in recent years. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and technology-enhanced learning (TELL) bridge the linguistic and intercultural learning gap through virtual exchanges, multimodal resources, and critical digital discourses. Chun et al. (2016) accentuated the importance of technology for teaching cultural and language norms through embodied and disembodied language use. Language learning, in recent times, has been facilitated by computer programs. CALL and TELL have significantly impacted learners' motivation, engagement, and cultural learning (Berti, 2021; Dooly et al., 2023; Lin & Lan, 2015). They simplify interaction with peers and other people beyond one's space and time, but CALL and TELL programs are also shaped by context, because technology is not neutral and reflects social hierarchies, inequity, ideologies, and biases present in their contexts and creators (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023; VanderLeest, 2004).

While researching this project, the second author—a Black woman— signed up for a VR language learning platform where she had to choose an avatar. However, there was no avatar in her color or shape. All the avatars were White, straight-haired blondes. While we do not aim to overgeneralize, there is a considerable level of erasure of Blackness in the metaverse. In this example, we certainly understand that technology could mediate social ideologies, providing opportunities for identity construction, negotiation, and cross-cultural understanding. We also see that technology, especially in Western contexts, can be designed to suppress, oppress, or erase Black and other minoritized identities in accordance with how it promotes the bias, eugenicist ideologies, and systemic racism rampant in areas such as the new Wild West of artificial intelligence (Gebru & Torres, 2024). Hence, virtual spaces are inherently contested and oppressive territories; however, we recognize they can also bear fruit in the form of digital placemaking (Halegoua & Polson, 2021) efforts that utilize digital media affordances to create and nurture a sense of community and belonging, such as in Fernández Labayen and Gutierrez's (2021) case of Black sub-Saharan migrant digital self-representation and anti-border control activism at the Moroccan-Spanish border and Black women college students' digital counter-spaces at White institutions chronicled by Golden and Tichavakunda (2025). To benefit underrepresented and marginalized language learners, we leverage technology and CRPWLT to address the history of harm against Afrodescendants in the WL field to redistribute, repair, and recreate space and place for Blackness. Through AfroMetaverse, we create a virtual world for Black youth from North and South America to meet in a maroon community for relief, resistance, self-determination, and joy (Murphy, 2022). Using VR technology as a mediator, we center the experiences and success of Black students to inform curriculum, instruction, policy, and teacher training for racial justice in multilingual education.

The digital spaces of VR create a sense of immersion and presence, which allows users to psychologically feel a sense of "being" in the unreal reality (Berti, 2021, p.63). VR's simulated environment enables authentic language use in an immersive, interactive, and contextualized simulated environment (Berti et al., 2020), therefore, the immersive experience of VR offers a perfect affordance for placemaking, because it ensures that language is not separated from culture, and learners can actively contribute to meaning-making, identity construction, and negotiation through interactions within their chosen communities. In their study of EFL learners in Spain, Dooly et al. (2023) noted that learners engaged more with the target language in VR environments, and low-engagement students became more involved later in the learning process. The underrepresentation of Black language learners can be reduced through immersive technology. In an investigation on VR's potential to facilitate cultural understanding and alter stereotypes and biases among students enrolled in a beginner-level Italian course, Berti et al. (2020) reported that students gained more

cultural understanding in VR environments, leading to more engagement with the target language and culture. While the traditional classroom is permeated with fixed cultural norms and erasure of race, online VR platforms can be developed to enable Black learners to explore authentic target cultures and environments in real time and in ways that are specifically designed not to erase and alienate them. AfroMetaverse is an example of such purposeful design with great potential to drive authentic community building, Black placemaking, and multicultural understanding undergirded by our agenda to promote racial justice in multilingual education.

AfroMetaverse as Black Placemaking

As previously mentioned, AfroMetaverse has three main components: 1) a virtual reality (VR) multilingual educational gaming platform where Black youth in the US, Brazil, Colombia, and Canada gather for two hours a week to chat and collaborate while playing educational English, Portuguese, Spanish language VR games based on the history and cultures of Afrodescendants throughout the Americas; 2) a mini social network community where program participants play asynchronous games, chat, share memes, music, post pictures and videos about their lives and interests building global connections and friendships, with the future possibility for educational travel abroad to meet AfroMetaverse friends in person; and 3) a repository of multilingual interaction data for interdisciplinary research in education, CALL and TELL, applied linguistics and SLA; sociology, and more. All envisioned with the primary objective to center Black people and Blackness in language and cultural learning, teaching, and the production of new knowledge.

AfroMetaverse is an exemplary project of Black placemaking that addresses the erasure of Black students, Black experiences and knowledge production, Black target language communities, and Black agency in language study. It is both a community and pedagogical approach that counters the inauthenticity and ahistoricity of the normative Whiteness in language teaching. Instead, it creates a site of agency for the relief, resistance, self-determination, and joy of Afrodescendants, where students can socialize easily without being the minority or the minoritized. Through this platform, we position Black students at the forefront of the latest technological advances in CALL and TELL while prioritizing a critical race pedagogy in language instruction. The AfroMetaverse project engages CRPWLT and works toward Black Linguistic Reparations to address the history of harm against Afrodescendants in WLs by centering the experiences and success of Black students to inform curriculum, instruction, policy, and teacher training for racial justice in multilingual education.

We use a tandem approach (Cziko, 2004) in AfroMetaverse to connect students in the United States and Canada to their counterparts in Colombia and Brazil. In the

AfroMetaverse, students will solve quests together and navigate through linguistic barriers. While gamification for language learning focuses on ensuring students learn in a "fun" environment, AfroMetaverse extends this into learning language, culture, and history without explicit trappings of traditional "language learning" such as grammar instruction and vocabulary memorization. We achieve this through Afrocentric instruction and game design that allows participants to mobilize multilingual skills among mixed proficiency-level collaborative groups and also access online translators to solve communicative problems. The platform is surrounded by Blackness, helping students to do Blackness. We do not stop at creating a feel of being inside a Black metaverse; we design quests and characters based on Black history. For example, we chose Black liberators and freedom fighters from our program participants' countries through whom the youth can learn about the histories and cultures of Afrodescendants across the Americas. We argue that these liberators exemplify—in this order—resistance, self-determination, relief, and joy. The gamification of AfroMetaverse achieves two primary goals. First, students unlock new knowledge on the journey of collaborative multilingual and multicultural learning. Second, participants strategize with peers who share similar heritage and cultural affinity without having their identities erased, suppressed, isolated, or minoritized. All the while, the students are developing global awareness, intercultural competence, collaboration, and communication skills.

Collaboration and partnership with Black community organizations and majority Black schools are the cornerstone of the AfroMetaverse project. So far, this multifaceted initiative involves a primary research team of faculty and graduate and undergraduate students from two U.S. universities (Carnegie Mellon University and Northwestern University); U.S. partners from three Pittsburgh schools (Obama Academy, The Neighborhood Academy, Propel Montour High School); and international partners from five non-profit organizations in Brazil (Instituto Steve Biko in Salvador, UneAfro in São Paulo); Colombia (Institución Benkos Biohó in Palenque, Centro de Estudios Afrodiaspóricos in Cali); and Canada (Find Your Path in Toronto). Without these community partners, the project would not exist, because they are responsible for recruiting and supervising the Black youth participants; hosting the weekly afterschool program wherein the middle and high school students physically gather in the AfroMetaverse project-equipped activity labs to participate in the game-based virtual reality educational experience component and create podcasts, videos, and other content for project web components; and organizing all the administrative and supervisory work to run the program. These responsibilities include providing a space for the activity lab with secure storage and care for computers, tablets, cameras, microphones, VR headsets, and other equipment; coordinating participant selection, transportation, stipends, snacks; providing on-ground instructional supervision and technical support; supporting and educating project participant families; and

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administering and accounting for project funding. The AfroMetaverse project also counts on an array of independent contractors to provide services in VR platform and social networking app development and maintenance; game-based educational curriculum/instruction design; VR game design and digital artistry; and content production for social media and public-facing project components.

As a project in not just multilingual learning and community building, but also, academic knowledge production, AfroMetaverse centers the experiences and success of Afrodescendants in WL learning to inform research and practice in curriculum, instruction, policy, and teacher training for greater diversity, inclusivity, racial equity, justice, and excellence in multilingual education. AfroMetaverse, as the first VR Black placemaking project, provides numerous research opportunities. In focusing on Black students' experiences through CALL and TELL, researchers in diverse disciplines can explore game-based education in the metaverse and the relationship between the Afrocentric learning environment and students' developed competencies, multilingual and multicultural discourse, and interaction. Additionally, beyond the quests and curated collaborative, interactive learning experiences, students also socialize, play unstructured games, message one another, and share their lives and personal interests on the AfroMetaverse social media network. Studies of such interactions could track what students are learning while collaborating and communicating with each other in the metaverse and how students are using that knowledge outside the metaverse. As critical race pedagogy and WL teaching and learning for equity and justice are at the core of this project AfroMetaverse, we envision it as a site for studies on racial justice in multilingual education. We also aim for studies investigating the real experiences and narratives of how Black youth engage in AfroMetaverse to contribute to alleviating the paucity of research on Black people and Black experiences in world language learning while providing counternarratives that reject the pervasive deficit view of Black people's interest, capacity, and potential for success in our field.

Conclusion

When critically examining the impact of race, racism, racial inequity, and specifically, anti-Blackness in WL education, we return to the original questions guiding our inquiry and this conceptual paper: How might learning differ if Black students were taught new languages using the histories, experiences of and interaction, collaboration with individuals who share their racial background and cultural affinity? And, how might Black students use their space and place in WL education when their Blackness and shared community goals of racial justice are at the forefront of their learning? In response, we position AfroMetaverse as a Black placemaking resource for critical race pedagogy in world language teaching and racial justice in multilingual education that

contributes toward Black Linguistic Reparations and ensures that Black language learners' identities, lived experiences, and success are at the foundation of the world language learning environment and curriculum. Empirical investigation of the AfroMetaverse project and participant experiences within it will be welcome and conducted once the project is fully underway, and we look forward to reporting results that answer our questions. Visit the project website at www.AfroMetaverse.org to learn more.

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