

Odeniyi, V. (2025). Book Note. Nelson Flores, *Becoming the system: A raciolinguistic genealogy of bilingual education in the post-civil rights era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 124. Pb. £20. [Language in Society](#) DOI: [10.1017/S0047404525100924](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404525100924)

Becoming the system charts the rise and fall of bilingual education in the US from the race radical activism of the 1960s up to the 2010s and the neoliberalisation of multilingualism into a global skill for the middle classes. Flores documents in meticulous detail the consequences of community-led challenges to legislation over language education policies and practices impacting diverse Latinx communities. The power of the book is in the genealogical method that educates readers on the consequences of migration, poverty, ghettoisation, deindustrialisation and 'white flight'. It offers a panoptic analysis of specific communities, their schools and children, enabling Flores to argue persuasively that raciolinguistic ideologies are central to the new political order. Flores reflects on their own complicity in the institutionalisation of the civil rights movement, their proximity to whiteness and acceptance that Latinx and other communities were deficient, inferior and needed to be fixed. This they argue is how they became implicated in a system based on colonial logic.

Even though much of the book is explicitly written about Latinx communities, it provides compelling evidence for a system which 'proved politically [too] controversial' for working class African Americans. At times, however, I wondered whether Flores could have gone further to deepen understanding of the dehumanising effects of raciolinguistic ideologies on those communities. That said, it is the concept of languagelessness that lingers, capturing powerfully how African Americans were framed as 'having no legitimate native language that could be utilized' within the context of the Bilingual Education Act (1968), implying that low income African American communities were linguistically unique; yet, without a language, they were rendered less than human evoking Fanon's 'zone of nonbeing'. The result is an ontological erasure linking language and race to colonial structures of power. I am reminded of Brice Heath's seminal research from the 1980s that challenged the culturally and linguistically impoverished view of low-income African Americans; and, since I am writing from the UK, I am further reminded of Bernstein's body of work on the educational consequences of the 'restricted' language of the primarily white working classes due to the wrong kind of verbal stimulation at home. Uniting these contexts is the belief that the problem of inequality lies within racialised and economically deprived communities and not with class hierarchies, race relations or colonial hierarchies of power.

Similar debates about the damaging effects of home languages continue today: empirically disproven, yet persistent. Linguistic hybridity is seen as a danger, not as a resource. Published just months before the US administration's March 2025 executive order designating English the official language of the US, Flores' book linking educational policies and practices informed by colonial logics in the maintenance of white supremacy is timely. How to speak back is not always clear in the current political climate and perhaps it time for us to speak loudly about the role that a deeper and wider understanding of the politics of language and its consequences might play in reshaping a future that challenges the view that the problem of racialised communities always lies within.

