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local talk: The discursive production of Spanish in  
a 'new' US Latino community

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**National narratives, institutional ideologies, and local talk:  
The discursive production of Spanish in a “new”  
US Latino community**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the figuration of “Spanish” as a sociocultural discourse within the context of a middle school in North Carolina, where immigration from Latin America is new, yet quickly accelerating. The school-based discourse is analyzed in terms of everyday ways of talking among students, as well as institutional ideologies and practices, which mediate national discourses about US Latinos and reinforce tropes circulated by students. Everyday ways of talking among non-Latino students suggest that Latinos—both immigrants and US born—are Spanish monolinguals who “choose” to be segregated from the English speakers. The use of Spanish by Latinos is constructed by non-Latinos as secretive and dangerous, linking local tropes about Spanish to national discourses. Consistent informal pressure against Spanish at school links to broader pressures against Spanish in the community and beyond. The discourse problematizes Latino identity formations and limits the types of identities available to Latino students. (Discursive production, Spanish, US Latinos, Latino threat narrative)\*

INTRODUCTION

National discourses about US Latinos, immigration, and Spanish have proliferated in the United States over the past two decades, ebbing and flowing in both quantity and vitriol, as Chavez (2008:34) points out, with global and national economic conditions, the broader political climate, and the demand for cheap labor. These discourses construct US Latinos, both immigrants and the US-born, as Spanish monolinguals, unable or unwilling to learn English, who, “flood,” “invade,” or “infect” the US (Santa Ana 2002), depleting local budgets and draining resources from cities, states, and the nation. Intersecting with ideologies of English monolingualism (Macías 1985; Wiley & Lukes 1996; Wiley 2000; Santa Ana 2002) and standard language (Lippi-Green 1994, 1997; Silverstein 1996), U.S. popular discourses about Spanish have, over time and with great repetition, come to constitute hegemonic ways of thinking and talking about US Latinos, and produce as their

effect the daily “foreignization” (Santa Ana 2002:291; Chavez 2008:50) of US Latinos, as well as the erasure of the collective and individual EXPERIENCES of Latino immigrants. As they intersect with ideologies of language, the body, and the nation (Bourdieu 1991; Gal & Irvine 1995; Blommaert & Verschueren 1998; Heller 1999), US popular discourses about Latinos—and the local instantiations of these discourses—result in what Foucault (2003) calls “regimes of governance,” which produce “subject types,” such as “Latino” or “Mexican” or “immigrant,” which, in turn, limit the types of identity work available to US Latinos, as described by Chavez (2008:41) and Santa Ana (2002:17, 2013). Thus, what it means “to be” Latino is very much at stake as popular discourses play out in local settings, leaving individual Latino subjects to make sense of essentializing narratives (Agha 2007:74) that marginalize and devalue their ethnolinguistic identities.

Scholars in Latino and Chicano studies have written extensively about US popular discourses that construct US Latinos negatively, and linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists (e.g. Barrett 2006) have examined local inflections of these discourses in a variety of ethnographic and regional settings in the US, paying attention both to the ways in which everyday talk reproduces negative depictions of Latinos, as well as the institutional practices that support these figurations. The great majority of this work, however, has taken place in regional settings where Latinos have a longstanding historical presence. Emerging discourses about Spanish in “new” US Latino communities<sup>1</sup> remain for the most part understudied. The goal of this work is to sketch the discursive figuration of “Spanish” in the context of a middle school located in central North Carolina, where immigration from Mexico and Central America accelerated at historic levels throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Marro 2011).

I begin by outlining the nature of US popular discourses on Latinos, focusing on four basic premises of what Chavez (2008) has called THE LATINO THREAT NARRATIVE, (henceforth, LTN), a set of culturally entrenched discourses that constructs US Latinos as linguistically and culturally dangerous. In the following section, I introduce the ethnographic context where this work is set. The bulk of the analysis examines the instantiation of LTN discourses in the school setting, focusing on what I am calling the DISCURSIVE FORMATION OF SPANISH. This discourse is comprised of interlocking institutional ideologies, practices, and structures, as well as everyday forms of talk, which together problematize Latino identity formations in the school as “racist,” “separatist,” or “dangerous.” I call this a DISCOURSE OF SPANISH rather than a “discourse of Latino identity” for two reasons. First, language is the link between everyday forms of talk among students, institutional practices, and US popular discourses about Latinos. Second, ‘Spanish’ is the discursive fulcrum uniting disparate ideologies about language, the nation, the body politic, and ethnicity that co-produce this discourse within the school. That is, ideologies attendant to the discourse of Spanish get articulated through various anxieties about language. The analysis comes in two parts. In the first, I describe the ways in which the institution mediates the basic premises of the LTN including the promotion of an

“ideology of choice,” which underwrites the notion that Latino students “choose” to be isolated from the school by refusing to learn English, as well as explicit and implicit language policies. These include the assignment of Latino students into ESL and vocational tracks, the overall absence of bilingual education, racialized policies toward the use of Spanish on campus, and the grafting of English onto positions of power and prestige, and Spanish onto positions of shame and stigma. In the second part of the analysis, I describe the everyday ways of talking about Spanish among students at the school, focusing on the way these forms of talk are supported by the institutional structure, and inflected by the premises of the LTN. Finally, because part of my claim is that the school-based discourse of Spanish limits the type of identity work Latino students can do, I conclude by focusing on the inter-subjective (Bucholtz & Hall 2004) effects of the school-based discourse of Spanish in two identity contexts: crossing (Rampton 1995) and silencing.

I am interested in bringing much needed critical attention to “new” US Latino communities where the linguistic, cultural, and personal experiences of Latino adolescents, both those who immigrated with their parents and those born locally, are being effaced by essentializing public discourses about US Latinos. In this regard, I am committed to Zentella’s (1996:13) call for “anthropolitical” linguistic engagement in US Latino communities, the goal of which is “to understand and facilitate a stigmatized group’s attempts to construct a positive self within an economic and political context that relegates its members to static and disparaged ethnic, racial, and class identities, and that identifies them with static and disparaged linguistic codes.” Zentella’s call for sustained anthropolitical engagement in US Latino communities is now urgent in parts of the country where immigration from Mexico and Latin America is only recently underway, and where the sociocultural meanings of “Latino” are still very much open to contestation, especially for the first generation to be born in these communities. Sociolinguistic ethnographies that pay attention both to the linguistic practices of ethnolinguistic minorities, as well as the discourses and institutional practices that derogate and efface them, offer an important way for critical language scholars to answer Zentella’s call.

#### SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT OF US LATINOS AND SPANISH IN THE US

In this section, I turn to work in Latino studies and linguistic anthropology to help sketch a broad picture of the national discursive environment around US Latinos, Spanish, and immigration. I should begin by noting that when I refer to US popular discourses about immigration, I am at the same time referring to US popular discourses about Latinos and Spanish. This is true because Spanish is an icon (Irvine & Gal 2000) of *Latinidad* in the US, as has been shown by linguistic anthropologists (e.g. Hill 1993; Urciuoli 1996; Barrett 2006) working in a variety of ethnographic and regional contexts. Thus, I use the term “US popular discourses on immigration” as shorthand for the ways in which a constellation of terms (i.e.

Latino, immigrant, Spanish) are imbricated in the public imaginary and effectively operate as cover terms for one another. I choose “immigration” rather than “Spanish” or “Latino,” since much of the public discourse about US Latinos is filtered through national and state politics of immigration and the various rhetorics that attend it (e.g. immigration reform, illegal immigration, etc.). In contrast, I use the parallel term discourse of Spanish to refer to the collection of institutional practices and everyday ways of talking in order to draw attention to the fact that, within the ethnographic context I study, the issues seem to cohere around language rather than immigration status. Of course, “immigration” and “Spanish” are always pointing to each other, and simultaneously to the national and local constructions of “Latino.”<sup>2</sup> Here it is worth keeping in mind Santa Ana’s (2002:53) notion of “multiply embedded communities”—the idea that community forms of talk are never disarticulated from the forms of talk in the larger communities that embed them. Therefore, to speak of a local discourse of “Spanish” is in a certain sense to also speak of a national discourse of “immigration”; they are always bound to each other, even as discourses are refracted and recontextualized as they move interdiscursively across national, regional, local, and institutional scales (Silverstein 2005).

#### *The Latino threat narrative*

A variety of popular US discourses construct US Latinos as “invaders,” “criminals,” and “Spanish monolinguals” whose intractable dislocation from mainstream American culture is “self imposed.” Chavez (2008) has termed the constellation of these discourses THE LATINO THREAT NARRATIVE. In the public imaginary, the LTN constitutes a “real” way of understanding a range of complex issues related to US Latinos, including immigration, demography, ethnicity, and language. As a coherent narrative, it works effectively because “its basic premises are taken for granted as true” (41). These premises, outlined below, are not only widely and uncritically accepted by non-Latinos, but also get internalized by US Latinos. This is especially true for adolescent immigrants, who may adjust their behavior and construct identities in ways that attempt to circumvent, cautiously maneuver through, or accept the narrative premises. A break in the transmission of Spanish from parents to children—a potential effect of LTN—has been shown to result in negative psychological and educational consequences for Latino adolescents (e.g. Tseng & Fuligni 2000; Oh & Fuligni 2009). In addition, the LTN effectively forecloses the possibility of staging conversations around a range of complicated issues, such as the global economic and historical conditions that have produced recent patterns of immigration to the US, the diversity of the people consolidated under the term “Latino,” the long history of Latinos in the US, the realities of Spanish attrition among second- and third-generation Latinos, and above all, the positive contributions made by Latinos to US society. The LTN achieves its status as “real” through the constant repetition of its premises in a range of popular media (e.g.

Santa Ana 2009, 2012, 2013), including television news, newspaper and magazine stories, and popular books.

The LTN consists of five basic premises, four of which I observe in the ethnographic setting I study.

*Latinos are unable or unwilling to learn English.* The idea that US Latinos are unwilling to learn English is a foundational part of the LTN, as it provides an explanation for the marginalization of Latinos from mainstream, English-speaking society. As Spanish is constructed to link US Latinos to *barrios*, which are figured as spaces of Spanish monolingualism, it simultaneously links Latinos to a culture of poverty.

The notion that US Latinos—particularly those of Mexican origin—do not learn English has gained traction in a variety of popular media, including popular books written by scholars and political pundits. Books such as *The death of the West*, by political pundit Patrick J. Buchanan (2002) and *Who are we*, by former Harvard professor Samuel Huntington (2004, and others by noted scholars such as Arthur Schlesinger and David Kennedy, promote the idea that Mexicans have no incentive to learn English. Language is a central theme in the genre of popular immigrant-as-threat books, particularly, as Chavez (2008:32) notes, the idea that “Spanish keeps Latinos separate.” For example, Huntington (2004:232) claims that Spanish/English bilingualism “is likely to become institutionalized in the Mexican-American community” by the third generation. No empirical studies are cited in support of any of the claims about language use in Mexican-American communities. On occasion, the use of Spanish has risen to the level of national controversy, such as in 2006, when *Nuestro Himno*, a Spanish language version of the Star Spangled Banner gained popularity on US Spanish-language radio stations. In the wake of the controversy, President G. W. Bush told reporters that “people who want to be citizens of the United States should learn English and ‘ought to learn to sing the national anthem in English’” (Vandehei 2006). The *Nuestro Himno* controversy aligns with the LTN by constructing US Latinos as disinterested or unable to sing the national anthem in English.

The published literature on the maintenance of Spanish in the US paints a completely different picture of the maintenance of Spanish in US Latino communities. Countless empirical studies from a variety of disciplines point to widespread shift from Spanish to English during the second and third generations (e.g. Veltman 1983, 1988, inter alia; Alba 1999; Alba & Nee 2003; Perlmann 2005). Yet, because the basic premises of the LTN are taken to be factual, empirical evidence need not be recruited in their support, and, therefore, the notion that Latinos in the US do not learn English remains pervasive and widespread.

*Latinos are unable or unwilling to integrate into the larger society.* Popular media, including popular scholarship, continually construct Latinos as “separate” from mainstream US society. Though related to other moments of US

xenophobia and anxiety around immigration, the LTN “posits that Latinos are not like previous immigrant groups, who ultimately became part of the nation” (Chavez 2008:2). Here again, Huntington (2004) is especially explicit in claiming that Mexicans are different from previous groups, in that they have not assimilated in such broad areas as language, education, occupation, citizenship, and identity. The “inability” to integrate could lead, in his view, to a nation “bifurcated” along linguistic and cultural lines (19).

*Latinos are homogenous and immutable.* The LTN constructs US Latinos as an immutable, monolithic group, unmoored from history and the social conditions around them. Zentella (1996) has referred to the erasure of cultural and national origin differences among Latinos within the US imaginary as the “Chiquitification” of US Latinos. This erasure is likely reinforced by US news media, whose rare reporting on US Latinos presents them as a single, undiversified group. In a study of US network news coverage, (Santa Ana 2013:82) finds that news organizations “operated with indifference or ignorance about the diversity of Latino communities and individuals.” Even within North Carolina, the overwhelmingly Mexican population has changed dramatically over the past thirty years. While prior to the 1990s, North Carolina was a destination for migrant farm workers, immigration patterns since the 1990s have resulted in more stable communities. Whereas there were few signs of Mexican culture in North Carolina in 1990, today Mexican-owned business populate the state (Marrow 2011). These changes are clearly related to global economic conditions, as well as to socioeconomic conditions in Mexico and North Carolina. Differences among US Latinos, and the multiple local, national, and global conditions that connect them to history are submerged by the LTN, which instead constructs US Latinos as monolithic and immutable.

*Latinos, especially Americans of Mexican origin, conspire to reconquer the southwestern United States.* The LTN constructs Latinos, including the US born, as “invaders” from the South, whose immigration and patterns of reproduction constitute a new *Reconquista*. Further, because immigration is subject to categorization as “legal” and “illegal,” immigrants are construed as “criminals,” based only on their status as immigrants. Since all Latinos are stereotyped as immigrants, the assumption of criminality can be metaphorically extended to Latinos born in the US. Thus, “Mexican immigrant” has been discursively conflated with “illegal alien,” as described by Dick (2011). The construction of US Latinos as “criminals” based on “illegal” entry, of course, elides the fact that Latinos have been living in what is currently considered the United States since at least the end of the sixteenth century. As sociologist Tomás Jiménez (2010:29) has described, the salience of immigration from Mexico means that immigration constitutes a permanent force shaping Mexican-American identity, not only for recent immigrants, but also for those with

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ancestry dating back many generations who “have experienced an appreciable degree of structural assimilation as measured by education, occupation, residential location, and intermarriage.”

### BEDLINGTON MIDDLE SCHOOL

Data presented here come from an intensive ethnographic study<sup>3</sup> conducted during the spring semester of the 2008–2009 academic year at “Bedlington Middle,”<sup>4</sup> a public school located in an ethnically diverse metropolitan area (“South City”) in central North Carolina. Like much of the US South, North Carolina’s population has historically been comprised of a majority white, minority African American population, though in recent years Southeastern states such as Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina have experienced tremendous growth in their respective Latino populations (Chavez 2008; Marrow 2011). For instance, North Carolina’s Latino population grew 394% between 1990 and 2000, faster than any other state, with the Mexican-origin subpopulation growing 655% (Marrow 2011:3). In 2000, North Carolina reported the highest percentage of monolingual Spanish speakers as a proportion of its overall Spanish-speaking population in the United States (2000 US Census), a reflection of the recency of immigration to the state. It is within this context of rapid sociological and demographic change that this study takes place.

Like most schools in the district, and reflective of the ethnic profile of the greater South City region in general, Bedlington is a “majority-minority” school, where African Americans comprise about 60% of the student body, Latinos about 15%, Asian and Pacific Islanders about 3%, and “multiracial” about 3%. At less than 20%, White students actually comprise a slightly higher percentage of the overall student body than at most other schools in the district. This is because Bedlington has special status requiring an application for admission. Bedlington’s Latino population is slightly higher than the recorded city population, which was around 10% at the time of the census in 2000.

Bedlington has struggled to integrate its growing Latino population, both immigrant and US-born, into the school, and has done little to utilize the culture and knowledge of its Latino students in its curriculum or institutional identity. Despite conducting its very first Spanish-language open house for the parents of Latino students, Bedlington still struggles with the most basic language issues. The only Mexican-origin staff members are two custodians, Graciela and Alma. The Spanish teacher, Señorita Wilson, has little in common with the Mexican-majority Latino population at Bedlington. She is of Afro-Latino descent and from a country that is culturally, ethnically, and linguistically quite different from Mexico. She has what is best described as a tense relationship with Bedlington’s Latino students, which I describe in the following section. A part-time ESL teacher from Honduras was hired during the course of my study; the full time ESL teacher was a White woman, as were most of the teachers in the school.

Graciela, Alma, and I were regularly called upon to work as impromptu interpreters in a variety of sociolinguistic situations, ranging from parent-teacher conferences, medical care, and phone conversations with parents and other family members.

*Bedlington Middle and the broader sociocultural moment*

The decade prior to the moment in which this research took place saw the proliferation of media coverage about immigration, and an explosion of what Santa Ana (2002) calls “dehumanizing” public discourses about US Latinos. North Carolina’s “new” experiences with immigration from Mexico and Latin America and its changing demographic profile during the 2000s made the LTN discourses especially salient in the South City region. Although only some of the media moments that garnered national attention during this period were actually located in North Carolina, the public discourses comprising the LTN circulated (and still do) within South City through talk radio, newspaper and television reporting, and letters-to-the-editor throughout the 2000s. During the same period, the participants in this study were experiencing the earliest part of their childhoods, either as young immigrants to North Carolina, or as children born to immigrants who became part of the first generation of North Carolina-born Latinos. Corresponding to the changing demographics of the region, schools such as Bedlington articulated, if implicitly, policies to address the linguistic, cultural, and racial/ethnic changes underway. Institutional policy is not created in a sociocultural vacuum, of course, and therefore part of what is at stake is understanding how institutions mediate public discourses as they create policy. Before moving to an analysis of the data, I want to first provide a sense of the sociohistorical development of the LTN during the 2000s, the decade that shaped the subjectivities of the participants in this study and the policies and practices of the institution where they studied. I begin with the first major media spectacle of the decade having to do with immigration, which took place in Durham, North Carolina, not far from South City and Bedlington Middle.

2002–2003. Not long after the 2000 census reported that North Carolina witnessed the fastest-growing Latino population in the United States between 1990–2000, the state became the backdrop for a national debate over immigration and healthcare. In 1999, a teenager named Jessica Santillan, her mother, and her siblings became some of the roughly 315,000 people to move to North Carolina from another country during the 1990s when they relocated from the outskirts of Mexico City to Durham, North Carolina (Chavez 2008:124). According to news reports, the Santillan family moved with the intention of finding treatment for Jessica’s terminal heart defect at Duke University Medical Center. Though a community organization raised funds for her surgeries, vitriolic debate nevertheless ensued around the decision to allow non-US citizens

to benefit from the organ donor registry. As Chavez notes, this debate situated North Carolina at the center of the LTN in the early 2000s.

2005–2006. In addition to the *Nuestro Himno* language controversy described in the prior section, the mid 2000s saw the proliferation of media coverage of another spectacle involving US Latinos: the Minutemen Project. The Minuteman, a vigilante group of mostly White males who conducted surveillance of “illegal” border crossings in Arizona, received a great deal of press attention, including in the US Spanish language print and television news media. Chavez (2008:145) notes that media coverage of the Minutemen was high not only in the Southwest, but that coverage “saturated newspapers nationwide.” Indeed, 592 newspaper articles reported on the Minutemen in April of 2005 alone, and coverage continued at a rate of around 50–200 articles per month throughout 2006 (147). These reports included coverage about “hunting” immigrants and ending water service to immigrants walking across the desert, the same desert many of the students in this study crossed to eventually end up in North Carolina.

2007–2009. This research took place in the wake of the 2008 presidential election, which saw the election of the first African American president in US history. While this was a major source of pride for many African American students, who wore t-shirts, buttons, jackets, sweatshirts, and other articles of clothing bearing Obama’s image and campaign slogans, the protracted campaign season that preceded the election brought up vitriolic discourses about Latinos and immigration, including the moment in 2007 in which former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich said, “We should replace bilingual education with immersion in English so people learn the common language of the country and so they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto”<sup>5</sup> (Hunt 2007).

In the years before the moment in which I entered Bedlington for the first time, South City had already been continuously linked, at times with direct reference, to US national discourses about Latino immigration and the basic LTN premises. Though the relationship between the LTN and individual students of course varies, in general, the students in this study were experiencing their childhood in North Carolina during a period of vitriolic debate. For the students who were born in South City in the late 1990s, the LTN was a normal part of their experience of being Latino in the state. For the students who immigrated during the first decade of the 2000s, elements of the LTN likely shaped first impressions of their new home. In both cases, the messages of the narrative were clear for Latinos and non-Latinos alike: “illegal” immigrants in North Carolina take resources away from citizens (Jessica Santillan), the promise of full inclusion in the nation state requires English fluency, and Spanish is traitorous (*Nuestro Himno*), Latinos should be constantly surveilled (Minutemen Project), and bilingual education

and other programs that respect the language and culture of US Latinos should be limited or abolished (2008 election).

DISCURSIVE FORMATION OF SPANISH:  
INSTITUTIONAL IDEOLOGIES AND PRACTICES

In this section, I provide a sketch of the discursive environment at Bedlington, focusing in particular on institutional ideologies, practices, and structures that promote the basic premises of the LTN. I have chosen an approach that examines institutional practices, ideologies, and structures, in addition to talk, as critical discourse analysts and linguists studying language ideologies have shown these to be imbricated in the discursive reproduction of inequality. As van Dijk (2000:92) puts it “both racism and ideology are prominently reproduced by social practices and especially by discourse.”

Bedlington does not have an official language policy with respect to the use of Spanish on campus. However, a “discourse,” comprised of talk about Spanish by teachers, administrators, and students, as well as institutional structures and policies enforced diffusely by some teachers, functions in place of policy. I hope to show that institutional structures and talk about Spanish are mutually reinforcing, and the discourse they coproduce mediates and reinscribes the basic premises of the LTN.

*Institutional ideologies, practices, and structures*

In this section, I describe the ways in which the institution contributes to the discursive formation of Spanish within the school by mediating US popular discourses about Latinos and effectively underwriting the LTN. I focus on two interlocking institutional conditions involved in this discursive production: (i) explicit and implicit language policies, and (ii) the ideology of “choice.” Hill (2008:123) notes that “informal pressure against Spanish is a ubiquitous fact of American life.” This informal pressure against Spanish corresponds to what Zentella (1997:76) calls “the symbolic domination of English.” I argue that, despite the positive intentions of many individuals (e.g. administrators and teachers), the school institution adds to the pressure against Spanish and its speakers, while contributing further to the symbolic domination of English and its speakers. It does this with policies and practices that segregate Latinos from non-Latinos; vitiate, demote, and prohibit the Spanish language; and limit the types of identity work that Latino students can perform by underwriting the LTN and interlocking, damaging language ideologies. These policies and practices include the tracking of Latino students, including the US-born, into the school’s ESL (English as a second language) program, the corresponding lack of support for bilingual education, the double figuration of Spanish class, in which Spanish is promoted for non-Latinos and prohibited for Latinos, and an implicit employee hierarchy, in which monolingual

English speakers are in positions of administrative power, while monolingual Spanish speakers are relegated to the least prestigious jobs.

A basic premise of the LTN is that US Latinos are unable or unwilling to integrate into mainstream US society and, as I describe in the following section, the most widely circulating conversational trope about Latino students in the school has to do with Latino exclusivity, that is, the idea that Latino students “separate themselves” from White and African Americans. To the extent that this is true, structural conditions, not individual choices, are responsible. These conditions include the general absence of Latino students from advanced classes, the overrepresentation of Latinos in remedial classes and in-school suspension, and the effects of ESL tracking. Of these, the tracking of Latino immigrant and US-born Latino students into ESL has the greatest effect on the spatial marginalization of Latino students at Bedlington, as it reduces the possibility of matriculation in elective courses, creates scheduling conflicts with core curriculum courses, and segregates Latino students from the rest of the student body, spatially and in terms of curriculum. As Santa Ana (2002:207) describes, ESL is ideologically posed against the normal, mainstream track: “In contrast to a popularly supposed ‘normal’ (middle-class monolingual) child, for whom English is a fluid medium that speeds him or her through school, Latino children found their educational path blocked—by their language.” Paradoxically, this is also true for Latino students at Bedlington who are native speakers of English and are nevertheless assigned to ESL on the basis of surnames or presumed home language. The placement of native English speakers into ESL—and the related problem of nonnative speakers who acquire native fluency but are unable to “test out” of ESL—is, as Santa Ana (2002:221) notes, related to the popular conflation of literacy with spoken language. ESL placement tests that focus on literacy skills effectively keep Latino students with strong oral language skills tracked in ESL, while non-Latinos with the same literacy skills are not subject to tracking; they are already, by default, “mainstream.” Santa Ana (2002:217) points out that “the problem” that ESL is ostensibly designed to remediate is, finally, “fabricated by an ideology of English monolingualism.” That is, the poor literacy skills of Latino students in ESL are attributed to bilingualism at home, which then also becomes the justification for continued tracking, even for Latino students who are native English speakers and may struggle to communicate with their parents in Spanish. For White, African American, and Latino students with the same literacy and spoken language skills, only the Latino students are subject to ESL tracking and its limiting linguistic, educational, and social effects. The arrangement in which Latino students who are “native” English speakers are tracked similarly to those who are Spanish “dominant” demonstrates that the educational categories involved in tracking are anchored in race and class, rather than in language. As Woolard (1998) points out, language ideologies—such as those that produce ESL as a space for racialized “native” English speakers—are never just about language, but always about power relations.

The ESL/mainstream divide at Bedlington organizes Latino and non-Latino students not only into different curricula and forms of sociality, but also organizes them into differently RANKED curricula and forms of sociality, such that “mainstream” accrues more institutional value than “ESL.” Indeed, at Bedlington, ESL is synonymous with both “remedial” and “Latino”; very few non-Hispanic students are ESL-tracked. Further, because of the constraints of scheduling, enrollment in ESL tends to co-occur with enrollment in remedial core courses and “vocational” elective courses. This co-occurrence of ESL with vocational classes, as well as the linking of ESL to in-school suspension is realized in the physical layout of the school. The ESL classrooms are located along a hallway that houses only two other programs: special classes for the deaf and hard-of-hearing and in-school suspension. Whether or not the location of in-school suspension as maximally distant from the “mainstream” students and maximally proximate to ESL-tracked students is by design, these spatial arrangements nevertheless reinforce the popular discursive link between Latinos and criminality.

The ESL track at Bedlington is structured in a way that tends to filter its students through a parallel vocational track for elective courses, a pattern also noted by Santa Ana (2002:180). The spatiality of the classroom locations is once again telling. The vocational hallway, which runs parallel to the ESL hallway, houses two vocational electives: life skills, known elsewhere as home economics, and technology, known elsewhere as computers, and the only “foreign” language offered by the school: Spanish. At the end of this hall, a poster read, “Make Spanish, life skills, and technology your passion!” Both sides of the vocational/Spanish corridor are lined with small laminated posters that promote various career outcomes, presumably tied to specialization in the vocational track. Each poster listed the name of the career at the top, featured a color picture in the center depicting some attribute or symbol of the career, and a list of information (e.g. salary, education required) in a box at the bottom. Each of the following careers was featured in a separate poster: bus drivers, foresters, bricklayer, computer office machine repair, engineering manager, fire fighters, dental hygienists, plumber, marine engineer, bank teller, retail sales, plasterers, travel agent (starting salary \$12,900; ten years experience, \$ 25,000), stock handling, refuse collectors, jewelers, aircraft mechanic, broadcast technician and construction laborers. Just around the corner, a large banner titled “10 most wanted careers” hung outside the entrance to the “technology” classroom. Among the top ten careers were medical assistants, medical record technicians, physical therapy aides, veterinary technicians, aerobics instructors, and dental hygienists, which are for the most part support positions corresponding to white-collar careers that were not featured in the list. The students who inhabited this space were overwhelmingly minority students, especially ESL-tracked Latinos. The only time mainstream students entered the vocational hall was to go to Spanish class.

The ideological link between Spanish, ESL, vocational classes, and behavioral remediation (in-school suspension) are all underwritten by the ideology of English monolingualism that attributes deficit to (certain) bilinguals. This set of ideological arrangements gets manifested spatially in the school in terms of the layout of classrooms, which become indexical for problematic curricular hierarchies. The effect is that Latinos are seen to exist “apart” from the rest of the school, and this apartness is attributed to their Spanish-speaking, or, by metaphorical extension, to their ethnicity, in the cases when students do not actually speak Spanish. Thus, the LTN is reproduced by institutional policies that track Latino students, including native English speakers, into an ESL track that physically separates them from the “mainstream” students.

ESL tracking at Bedlington effectively replaces the possibility of bilingual education programs that support the maintenance of Spanish and promote respect, education, and understanding of Hispanic cultures. This replacement is made possible by a hegemonic narrative of language in the US in which “English is more than just a language, it is the normal and natural medium of human communication...” (Santa Ana 2002:238). The absence of bilingual education means that there is no space at Bedlington—discursive or physical—that values the home language and culture of nearly one fifth of the student body. Correspondingly, the structure of the school’s language programs for Latinos promotes a language ideology that ranks English monolingualism above bilingualism. Santa Ana (2002:228) notes that in “contemporary public discourse on education, ‘speaking a language’ in addition to English is effectively taken to be as much an educational barrier as non-English-monolingualism.” In Zentella’s (1997:262) study, the presumed lack of English of Puerto Rican students was invoked as the “root cause” for a range of sociological and educational problems. Indeed, the literature on Spanish in the US describes many educational contexts in which success for Latino students is predicated on an ostensibly equal and unproblematic exchange (Zentella 1997; Santa Ana 2002; Wolford & Carter 2010): the trading in of bilingualism for English monolingualism and home culture for “mainstream” school culture. Of course, the trading in of Spanish for English does not guarantee later educational and economic success, as Zentella (1997:263) has noted.

While the institution promotes the English monolingualism of its Latino students,<sup>6</sup> it maintains the fiction that it values “foreign” language experiences for those who are presumed to be English monolinguals by birth (i.e. non-Latinos) by offering “Spanish” as an elective course. This contrast points to the double figuration of Spanish described in the literature (e.g. Urciuoli 1996; Zentella 1997; Hill 2008), in which Spanish figures as a productive resource for Anglos and as cultural baggage for Latinos. Paying attention to this double standard, Zentella (1997:283) asks, “Why is the bilingualism of the well-to-do a source of linguistic security and a sought after advantage while the bilingualism of the poor is a source of insecurity and a disadvantage? How do we explain the fact that

bilingual education is looked down upon as remedial program while many mainstream adults pursue second language studies?" I observed this double figuration to play out at Bedlington, where Spanish is seen as a social problem in need of a solution for Latino students, but as an advantage for non-Latinos (e.g. college applications, job market). The pejoration of Spanish through secondary-school Spanish classes is described by Santa Ana (2002:229), who notes that, "In the Spanish classes, Latino students (many who were Spanish-speaking preschoolers) enroll along with their Anglo peers. Both sets of students sit mute during the greater part of the class." Fishman (2004) discusses the ways in which US schools work to undermine immigrant languages, at the same time it struggles to teach them to nonnative speakers. Indeed, I never observed non-Latinos, including those enrolled in Spanish class, to take advantage of the opportunity to practice Spanish with their peers who were "native" or heritage language speakers. This was not an opportunity that the institution valued. In fact, Latino students reported to me that Señorita Wilson, Bedlington's only Spanish teacher, was also the only teacher to habitually and expressly forbid speaking Spanish OUTSIDE of the classroom, in spaces such as hallways, the cafeteria, and outside courtyards. The double figuration of the Spanish at Bedlington corresponds to the double figuration of Spanish in public discourses, examples of which abound in national politics. George W. Bush admonished Latinos for singing the national anthem in Spanish, at the same time he used Spanish slogans (e.g. *juntos podemos!* 'together we can!') in his campaign speeches. During the 2012 Presidential race, when asked about the role Spanish should play in the US, Mitt Romney responded by saying "Spanish is the language of our heritage, English is the language of opportunity." He then mentioned that his son, Craig, has learned to speak Spanish "fluently," a claim that met with great applause from the audience. I have never known of a Latino in the US to be applauded for knowing English.

The symbolic domination of English and informal pressure against Spanish is also reflected in the ways in which language grafts onto the structure of employment in the school, such that monolingual English speakers occupy the highest-ranking positions, while monolingual Spanish speakers occupy the lowest-ranking positions. In addition to Señorita Wilson and a part-time ESL teacher, there were only two other Spanish speakers employed by the school: Alma and Graciela, full time custodians. These women played an invaluable role in the school, providing advice to the most recent immigrants in Spanish and translating for Spanish-speaking parents, though they were never compensated for their translation services. Alma and Graciela were also egregiously mistreated in public by some non-Latino students, who taunted them by purposefully spilling drinks and food to make them clean up, and by baiting them into speaking English, which they then ridiculed. Both women were disaffected, and Alma, in particular felt dehumanized by her role in the school. She told me, "Tienen un día para todos—menos nosotras. Un día para los maestros, para las secretarias, para los jefes. Lo que es un privilegio para ellos es más trabajo para nosotras." 'They have a day for

everyone—except for us. A day for the teachers, for the secretaries, for the principals. What is a privilege for them is more work for us.’ The conflation of institutional value, rank, and language was unremarkable within the school context; it simply reflected and reinforced what were seen as “natural” conditions in which English was inherently more valuable. In fact, the dominance of English was produced by the policies and practices of the institution, which simultaneously participated in the double construction of Spanish.

I also observed regular, informal prohibitions of Spanish on the part of individual teachers, a practice described by Hill (2008:122), who notes that “The right of students to speak their home language even in the halls and on the playground is under attack in some districts.” I first heard about the regulation of Spanish from Milk, a popular seventh grader, and his friends, Eric and Jorge. The following text comes from a conversation about the use of English and Spanish at Bedlington and provides an example of the prohibition of Spanish in life skills class. In line 10, the event that Milk refers to is an outdoor Pep Rally.

- (1) 1 Eric: Yeah but then they say get back to work cause they think that we’re  
 2 talking about something bad or something.  
 3 Milk: Yeah. Like life skills, she doesn’t even want us like, to say a word  
 4 in Spanish.  
 5 INT<sup>7</sup>: Really? What does she say?  
 6 Milk: She’s like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, but we speak  
 7 English so can ya’ll please speak Spa-um English, not Spanish.’  
 8 INT: Really?  
 9 Milk: And that’s sorta how we can’t go to the-tomorrow to the-to the um,  
 10 what’s it called? What are they doing outside?  
 11 INT: So but for the whole Life Skills thing they said that you can’t...  
 12 Milk: Speak Spanish. She said it’s dangerous.  
 13 INT: It’s dangerous?  
 14 Eric: Yeah cause uh [we’re sew]  
 15 Jorge: [She bein’ racist]  
 16 Eric: Yeah we’re sewing, and she wants to know that we know the parts in  
 17 English cause she doesn’t know if we know them if-we do know them.  
 18 I don’t know them in Spanish but now I do in English.  
 19 INT: But I don’t understand why she thinks it’s dangerous.  
 20 Milk: Because um maybe you don’t know how to use the machine and you  
 21 don’t speak-you’re speaking Spanish, and she doesn’t know, like  
 22 you know, you might like, put your hand in it.

Rationales for the prohibition of Spanish are framed differently by different teachers. Whereas Mrs. Fowler frames her prohibition on Spanish in terms of “safety,” Mr. Houston, the teacher of “college prep” frames the matter in terms of “respect.” The following excerpt comes from an interview with Hector and Mateo, two sixth grade Latino students. Hector reports on Mr. Houston’s claim that “no one knows Spanish.”

- (2) 23 INT: I've heard that some teachers don't like it for students to speak Spanish  
 24 Hector: Yeah, but they say it in a good way. Like they tell us, how would you  
 25 like it if someone speaking in Chinese and you don't know if they're  
 26 talking about you.  
 27 INT: Oh really, someone said that to you?  
 28 Hector: Like I have a teacher, Mr. Houston, he says that we have to talk in  
 29 English because like no one knows Spanish.  
 30 Mateo: And you could be talking about them and they don't know. Know what  
 31 you're saying.  
 32 Hector: Yeah.  
 33 INT: Hmm-hmmm.  
 34 Hector: So like, I understand. Like at lunch or when we go outside or  
 35 something sometimes we talk in Spanish but like in class we rarely  
 36 talk in Spanish

In line 28, Hector indicates that Mr. Houston participates in the circulation of the idea that Spanish is a secret code that allows Latinos to “talk about” non-Latinos. The trope of suspicion recurs frequently in talk about Spanish by non-Latino students, as I describe in the following section. These informal prohibitions on Spanish at school are not isolated, insignificant moments. As Zentella (1997:148) notes, the anti-Spanish attitudes of teachers impair bilingualism and the maintenance of Spanish outside of school. But beyond the obvious effect of limiting the practice and expression of Spanish, public prohibitions of Spanish on the part of those in positions of power contribute to the broader, negative discursive figuration of the language. Insofar as Spanish is iconic for Latino ethnicity (Urciuoli 1996; Barrett 2006), statements linking Spanish-speaking to a “lack of respect,” “suspicious behavior,” or other negative traits, also link those traits to Latinos. These prohibitions, and the more general insistence on the use of English-only for bilingual children, can also be considered a form of linguacism, which, as Santa Ana (2002:237) describes is “an ideology and a set of institutional operations used to legitimate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources among groups—on the basis of language.”

### *Ideology of “choice”*

The LTN suggests that not only are US Latinos “separate” from mainstream society, but also that this segregation is chosen. Within the school context, it is clear that institutional structures, not the choices of individuals, relegated Latino students to the physical and discursive margins of the school. Why, then, are non-Latino students quick to assert that ethnic segregation for Latinos is a choice? Extra-institutional LTN storylines are involved; that is of course the point of this article, but these storylines are buoyed by an “ideology of choice,” what Santa Ana (2002:180) has called “education as path narrative,” which rests on the EDUCATION AS PATH metaphor. This narrative posits that “purely by the dint of native abilities and personal efforts, each person makes his or her way along the path. Thus unequal educational opportunities, dissimilar socioeconomic factors, and

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institutional racism are backgrounded and ignored, especially in elementary school, when the efforts of structural inequality most effect these vulnerable children.” To be a student at Bedlington is to inhabit a never ending series of “choices,” and a chorus of reminders to “make the right decision” and “choose wisely.” Thus, gang membership, poor attendance, scholastic failure, and their opposites (freedom from gangs, good attendance, and scholastic success) are seen as being derived from discrete decisions. Although the impetus to choose is institutionally instantiated and reproduced in countless interactions, school policies, and material reminders, individual teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors admitted to me in private conversations that they are personally aware of the tremendous hurdles faced by some students. To suggest that the will to choose is institutionally instantiated is not to suggest that it determines how individuals apprehend choice; it means simply that “choice” is an educational ideology articulated by the institution. The discourse of choice is represented materially on school grounds in the form of motivational signs and posters. For example, a laminated poster hung prominently above the main stairway connecting the first and second floors reads:

CHOICE...  
GOOD  
OR  
BAD,  
IT’S YOURS!!!

You are

WHAT YOU THINK YOU ARE...

At Bedlington, the pervasive “ideology of choice” underwrites elements of the LTN. That is, students invoke “choice” in talk to explain not only perceived “behavior,” (e.g. “they don’t want to learn English”), but also social structure (e.g. “Mexicans keep to themselves.”).

A variety of policies, both explicit and implicit, cohere to reinforce elements of the LTN within the school. These include the promotion of English monolingualism, most notably through the absence of bilingual education and the symbolic linking of English monolingualism to prestige and success, and the corresponding linking of Spanish monolingualism to stigma and failure.

### DISCURSIVE FORMATION OF SPANISH: STUDENT TALK

In this section, I describe the discursive tropes that circulate about “Spanish” among students at Bedlington. As Hill (2008:122) has claimed, “explicit

attacks on Spanish are part of everyday practices among Americans of English-language heritage across a wide front.” These attacks, she continues, are perpetuated not only by Whites, but also by African Americans, a phenomenon borne out in this study. The discursive tropes circulated by students link up with a range of US popular discourses about Latinos that circulate in the community and beyond, and often explicitly articulate the basic premises of the LTN, or invoke anti-Latino metaphors in public discourse (Santa Ana 2002). While these ways of talking are inflected by extra-community discourses, they find traction and gain credibility in the context of the institutional structure described above.

The most widespread trope about Latinos at Bedlington is that they choose to be socially isolated from non-Latino students and the “choice” to speak Spanish is commonly invoked by non-Latinos as an explanation for this isolation. These notions link explicitly with two of the basic premises of the LTN: “Latinos are unwilling to learn English” and “Latinos are unwilling to integrate into larger society.” The school effectively mediates these discourses by segregating Latino students into ESL and vocational tracks and through myriad policies and practices that demote the value of Spanish and its speakers. Both LTN elements emerge in a conversation I had with the most popular African American girls group in the seventh grade. The group consists of Mia, Pink, Diamond, and Montana, all of whom are African American, except Montana, who is Guatemalan but considered “Mexican” in the tripartite system of racial formation<sup>8</sup> (Omi & Winant 1994) in the school. Here, I follow up on an earlier claim that “the Mexicans don’t mix.”

- (3) 37 INT: So, why do, why do all the Latino kids hang out with each other and not mix?  
 38 Mont: Cause basically they they, I think they—  
 39 Mia: They just speak Spanish, they don’t speak English.  
 40 Pink: They racist.  
 41 Mia: The problem is they don’t accept us. We can’t speak that, they can speak our  
 42 language, we can’t speak they language, I don’t know what they talking about.  
 43 Mont: Some of them can’t though, some of them can’t though.  
 44 Mia: I mean like, they in America. They need to learn it.  
 45 Pink: Mia, you’re so rude!  
 46 Mont: I know, severe.  
 47 Mia: I mean like seriously.

As Santa Ana (2002:289) points out, “Latinos do not speak English” is a foundational part of “the Anglo American narrative” about US Latinos. Though it is the case that the most recent immigrants at Bedlington are (temporarily) monolingual Spanish speakers, Mia’s claim that “they just speak Spanish, they don’t speak English” is empirically false, as the overwhelming majority of Latino students at Bedlington are proficient English speakers. But, as Chavez (2008:41) points out, LTN discourses need not be substantiated by empirical realities since they are already taken for granted as true. The

presence of any Spanish at school is apparently enough to reaffirm the premise that Latinos are Spanish monolinguals. And while the range of language skills for Latino students includes English monolingualism, Spanish monolingualism, and many types of bilingualism, the use of personal deixis helps to construct two discrete groups: Spanish-speaking Latinos, and English-speaking non-Latinos.

(4) **They** just speak Spanish, **they** don't speak English / **They** racist / **They** don't accept **us**

The use of personal deixis in this way, where “they” equals “Mexican” and “us” equals “American,” is related to the *NATION AS HOUSE* metaphor (Santa Ana 2002:94) that divides American society into “native” and “nonnative” constituencies. This partition, in turn, helps to construct immigrants as “invaders” of “our” house. The fact that Spanish is the longest continually spoken European language in the United States, and the fact that English and Spanish speakers have cohabited in many parts of the US for over 200 years (Santa Ana 2002:291) are lost in this figuration. Even in North Carolina, where permanent immigration from Latin American is “new,” Spanish itself cannot be considered a new language, given the presence of migrant farmworker labor throughout the twentieth century (Marrow 2011). The nation as house metaphor is also evident in Mia’s claim in line 44 that “they in America, they need to learn it,” a trope described elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Urciuoli 1996). “They in America” implies, again, that Spanish is not already an “American” language, and is undergirded by the Herderian notion of “one nation, one language, one people” ideology (Hobsbawm 1990; Bourdieu 1991; Woolard 1998), which in the US context, figures American English as the only “true” language of the state. Since speaking English is tied to American nationalism, the act of speaking Spanish constitutes a type of “sovereign betrayal” and “a symbolic threat to the social order” (Santa Ana 2002:237), not only because English is an emblem of the state, but also because Spanish is an emblem Latino ethnoracial identity, which is already also problematized. This is true even though many Latino students were born in North Carolina, pointing to the stereotyping of Latinos as “perpetual foreigners” (Devos & Benaji 2005). Montana’s defense of Latino students who speak Spanish in line 43 (“some of them can’t [speak English]”) does not question the premise that they should, and is supported by the *EDUCATION AS PATH* metaphor in which success is understood as the result of either individual choice or natural ability.

Spanish is also the discursive lynchpin in Pink’s claim in line 40 that “they racist.” Given that the school mediates the basic premises of the LTN by demoting the value of Spanish on campus and by promoting an ideology of choice that effectively erases structural explanations for inequality, non-Latino students can apprehend the conditions leading to the segregation of Latino students as being the result of a simple choice to speak Spanish rather than English. Hill (2008:7) remarks that Whites can now speak of “Black racism” by invoking

self-segregated seating patterns in school cafeterias (see also Tatum 1997). Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (2003) found Whites to make claims of racism when talking about African Americans, a pattern I found among African Americans when talking about Latinos. The accusation that Latinos at Bedlington are racist is sponsored by racial ideology through which racism is metaphorically personified (Santa Ana 2002:152), and understood as negative behavior perpetuated by INDIVIDUALS who say or do bad things. In this view, Latino students can be “racist” simply by choosing to speak Spanish, which is understood as exclusionary.

Despite her strong attitudes about Latinos and Spanish, Mia nevertheless has a strong interest in learning Spanish.

- (5) Mia: I’m trying to, I’m trying to learn Spanish, like for real.  
 INT: Uh huh. Uh huh.  
 Mia: For real, for real, for real.

Mia’s interest in learning Spanish, despite her dismissal of it for Latinos, is possible because of the double figuration of Spanish discussed previously. The double figuration of Spanish is so complete that there is no contradiction in wanting to learn a language she finds problematic for those who speak it “natively.” This is consistent with Hill’s (2008:152) discussion of “knowing a little Spanish,” a refrain of Whites who take pride in having learned some Spanish, while at the same time “projecting a very negative image of the Spanish-speaking world, its language, and its citizens.”

Of course, Montana is not the only student in this exchange navigating identity constraints. Mia and Pink must both make sense of and position themselves vis-à-vis the various LTN storylines, which have been refracted through mass media encounters, mediated by institutions, and recontextualized within the local community. Mia, subject to her own forms of ethnoracial and ethnolinguistic stigmatization, can be seen as taking an evaluative stance (Du Bois 2007) that is as much about her own positional subjectivity than it is about the empirical validity of her claims. Voicing a normative, “mainstream” position toward Spanish/immigration/Latinos may have provided Mia a way to manage her own stigmatization.

I found that non-Latino students were aware of prohibitions on Spanish, and easily and uncritically participated in the circulation of their logic. For example, Shawny is an African American seventh grader who spends much of his time in in-school-suspension with Latino students. In one conversation with Shawny, I asked if he noticed different types of talking around Bedlington. Immediately he mentioned “the Mexicans” who “talk their own language,” eventually describing Ms. Fowler’s prohibitions on Spanish in life skills class.

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- (6) 48 INT: I'm interested in learning from you if you think there are different  
49 styles of talking at school?  
50 Shaw: yeah, I guess you could say that. Like some people, like the Mexicans,  
51 they talk their own language to other Mexicans. We really don't  
52 understand them, so. We just like "hi" or something like that, but we  
53 don't really hang around with them.  
54 INT: You said the Mexican kids kinda stick together. Tell me about that.  
55 Shaw: They just hang around each other; they don't go around nobody else  
56 but them. Their own ethnic group. And just talk Spanish. Except in  
57 Mrs. Fowler class, you have to talk English in her class so she can  
58 understand.  
59 INT: How does she enforce that? What does she do?  
60 Shaw: She just says, if you speak Spanish you're not safe.  
61 INT: What does that mean?  
62 Shaw: Like, well, not, if you speak Spanish in her class, like, you're not safe,  
63 because we have stoves and stuff. Really just everybody talks English  
64 but if you talk Spanish, like the Mexicans be talking Spanish, then, um,  
65 you probably deemed unsafe. [pause] because, you don't know what  
66 they're saying. So, she doesn't really know what they're saying, so she  
67 don't know if it could be good or bad or what they could be doing. So  
68 she just tell everybody just to speak English and everybody can  
69 understand each other.  
70 INT: Do you think that's a good policy?  
71 Shaw: Yeah, cause they speak Spanish, we don't know what they saying. We  
72 don't know they could be plotting something.

The idea that Latinos used Spanish to “talk about” non-Latinos is reminiscent of Barrett’s (2006:178) findings, in which Anglo employees in a Mexican restaurant believed that the use of Spanish among Latinos provided a way to be “intentionally secretive” and was cover for “saying something bad about a White co-worker.” In line 72, Shawny extends the trope of suspicion to its limit by suggesting that Latinos could be “plotting something” when speaking Spanish. The use of the word “plotting” is noteworthy, since one of the central themes of the LTN is that Latinos are “plotting” a *Reconquista* ‘reconquest.’ While this narrative usually situates the reconquest in the US Southwest, the language of “suspicion” and “plotting” is broadly available through mass media encounters, thus extending the notion of plotting through interdiscursive recontextualization (Silverstein 2005) to regions of the US where Latinos are a small and relatively powerless minority.

In addition to the idea that Latino students use Spanish to talk about others, a competing trope has also found traction in talk about Spanish: Latinos actually speak “perfect English,” which they conceal by speaking Spanish. This counter-trope helped to construct Latinos as having a “special advantage,” in that they were seen as being able to avoid punishment by “pretending not to understand.” Non-Latinos had no such “privilege.” While “pretending not to understand” was an actual strategy of resistance used by Mexican restaurant workers in Barrett’s

(2006:198) study, I did not directly observe Latino students at Bedlington to engage this strategy. The trope of “perfect English” would seem to discredit the opposing narrative of Spanish monolingualism, but instead they seem to reinforce one another, producing the figure of Spanish speaker whose Spanish speaking is, at once, evidence of racial exclusivity and secrecy, while “perfect English” is thought to be possessed yet concealed by Spanish as a way of avoiding conflict and punishment. This dialectic between trope and counter-trope within the school corresponds to a broader cultural pattern described by Dávila (2008) in which Latinos are constructed in contradictory ways, both as problem (i.e. immigrant) and asset (i.e. consumers, voters).

The trope of perfect English emerged in several conversations I had with three seventh grade girls: Sakina, Dashawna, and Jenna. Sakina and Dashawna are African American, and Jenna is a White crosser. In one conversation, Sakina described the popularity structure at Bedlington, rattling off the names of popular African American girls, then popular African American boys and, when asked, the names of popular White boys and girls. When asked about popular Latinos, she replied, “Them Mexicans, ain’t nobody’s, like, popular, don’t nobody like the Mexicans.” I followed up on this topic in a subsequent conversation.

- (7) 73 INT: And we were talking about the Latino kids and Spanish?  
 74 Sakina: Oh.  
 75 Dash: Hmm?  
 76 INT: Yeah, and you were saying something about that. What were you?  
 77 Sakina: They annoying!  
 78 Dash: They’re have, they have attitude problem.  
 79 Sakina: They annoying, they, look this girl on the bus—  
 80 Jenna: They be like, ‘me don’t speak English!’  
 81 Sakina: I was just like, who you callin retarded? Yeah, and they be like, ‘me no speak no English.’  
 82  
 83 Jenna: And then they be speaking perfect English. I said—  
 84 Sakina: I know they act like they can’t understand when they about to get in trouble  
 85 Dash: And then they can’t say nothing to your face, they got to be like speaking Spanish.  
 86  
 87 Jenna: I know, they speak in Spanish.  
 88 Sakina: Yes, they all speaking Spanish. I just see them, ‘ka ta ta da da da, Sakina!’  
 89 I’m like, what you talking bout?  
 90 Dash: They don’t be saying anything about me.  
 91 Sakina: OK, come, come here.  
 92 Jenna: Come, come here-a.  
 93 Sakina: Say to me in English. Yeah, say it to me in English.

The Spanish and the English of Latino students at Bedlington are characterized by conspiracy. Latinos speak Spanish to gossip, and even “plot,” but their English is also brought under scrutiny, since, by “pretending not to understand,” they can avoid conflict with monolingual English-speaking students, teachers, and administrators. The scrutiny placed on the full linguistic repertoire of Latino students

relates to the LTN, which constructs Latinos as already-always criminal, since their very presence as “illegals” marks their criminality (Santa Ana, Treviño, Bailey, Bodossian, & de Necochea 2007; Chavez 2008:3). This scrutiny is not limited only to spoken language, but also to orthography and other semiotic domains (e.g. clothing and jewelry) thought to index gang affiliation, which was a topic of great hysteria in the school and seen as mostly a “Latino” problem. Thus, the specter of gangs allowed for orthographic and nonlinguistic semiotic displays to be positioned alongside spoken language as emblems of potentially dangerous identities.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

An effect of the LTN is that the experiences of US Latinos are effaced and replaced by misinformation that circulates on a constant loop. For ethnolinguistic minorities, this effacing is as much about survival as it is about “mere” representation. As Zentella (1997:13) notes, “linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics often fall short of capturing the way language is linked to issues of survival, that is, the *language for survival* dynamic that permeates verbal behavior in oppressed ethnolinguistic communities.” In this section, I am interested in capturing the identity effects of the discursive formation of Spanish at school that render “Latino” a toxic identity category. I focus on two identity strategies: (i) attempts to authenticate (Bucholtz 2003; Bucholtz & Hall 2004) non-Latino-based ethnic identities, and (ii) silence.

Montana, a student I introduced in the prior section, is one of a few Latino “crossers” (Rampton 1995) at Bedlington whose primary friendship group is comprised of non-Latino students. While the presence of Latino students in non-Latino social networks could pose challenges to school-based discourses that suggest that Latinos are racially exclusive, monolingual Spanish speakers, Latino crossers at Bedlington are, instead, subject to additional critiques about authenticity, while at the same time remaining vulnerable to harmful school discourses about “Spanish.” Latino crossers get figured as a particular “type”—racially and culturally inauthentic subjects—whose putative inauthenticity is circulated by Latinos and non-Latinos in the general form, “He [she] doesn’t want to be Mexican [Latino/Hispanic].” While we could imagine that crossing provides some social distance from a charged ethnic identity (“Mexican”), and, as a result, some insulation from harmful school-based discourses, Latino crossers, instead, find themselves in an impossible double bind: assailable as racially inauthentic, even as the purported inauthenticity provides no cover from the interpellative force of local discourses.

Bucholtz (2003:410) has commented that speakers and hearers rely on the notion of authenticity in constructing and evaluating identities. Ethnic authenticity is a matter of deep importance in Bedlington student culture; the structure of social

organization depends on transparent ethnic identities. Thus, all crossers are subject to critiques of authenticity. For Latinos, Spanish becomes the discursive ground on which polarized identities (Bucholtz 2003:409) are articulated. “Authentic” Latinos speak Spanish, while “authentic” non-Latinos do not; ipso facto, Latino crossers are “inauthentic” by virtue of their English monolingualism. Of course, most noncrossing Latino students at Bedlington rarely speak Spanish, but their authenticity is nevertheless not in question since their primary social group is comprised of other Latinos. Therefore, for crossers such as Montana, the question of knowing or not knowing Spanish is THE crisis of identity since knowing Spanish means “being” Latino, which is deeply problematized, but not knowing Spanish brings the scrutiny of inauthenticity. The following excerpt illustrates the uncomfortable balancing act Montana must perform, even with her best friends Mia and Pink. Here Montana must carefully negotiate her commitment to her non-Latino identity claims, on the one hand, with the need to be read as racially authentic, on the other.

- (8) 94 Mia: They just in their own little clique.  
 95 INT: Mm-hmm.  
 96 Mia: Yeah, you try to push you just cling to different people and she just cling to us.  
 97 Pink: And I be messing with them, they always in the bathroom.  
 98 Mia: If you don't speak Spanish, you don't be in their group.  
 99 Mont: I do speak Spanish!  
 100 INT: Really?  
 101 Mia: That's basically it. That's basically what it is. If you don't speak Spanish, you  
 102 not in they group  
 103 INT: Oh, so you have to know Spanish?  
 104 Mia: I guess so, don't nobody else talk to them. That's what they speak.  
 105 Mont: No, cause I know Spanish and they don't let me in their group.  
 106 INT: But are there any kids who are not Latino, who speak Spanish, who are in the  
 107 group?  
 108 Pink: No.  
 109 Mont: No.  
 110 INT: No, uh-uh?  
 111 Mia: They all over each other.  
 112 Mont: No, yeah, you see.  
 113 Mia: They alllll: hang with each other. Sixth, seventh and eighth graders.  
 114 INT: Uh huh. Why, why does—  
 115 Mia: They sit at one lunch table together, don't sit at nowhere else.  
 116 INT: Uh huh.  
 117 Mont: They sit at the same breakfast table.

With Mia arguing in line 101 that knowing Spanish is necessary in order to hang out with Latinos, Montana must justify not having Latino friends, without appearing to be a race-denier. In other words, Montana cannot agree unequivocally that knowing Spanish is coextensive with membership in a Latino friendship group, or she would find herself in the uneasy position of being read as

inauthentic precisely because she is known to be a Spanish speaker. Instead, she constructs an argument in line 105 in which she is “not let into their [Latino] group,” for reasons she does not enumerate. Earlier in the conversation, Montana attempted to deny knowing Spanish altogether, a move that backfired when Mia and Pink reminded her that they have overheard her speaking Spanish with her mother. Eventually Montana can agree that Latinos are racially exclusive without tying that exclusivity to Spanish by signing on to Mia’s claim in line 115 that “they sit at one lunch table together.” That White and African American students also “sit together” (i.e. sit with members of the same racial group) apparently does not invalidate the argument.

Despite projecting a monolingual English-speaking identity at school, I nevertheless observed Montana’s friends to interpellate her as a Spanish speaker, which subtly denaturalizes (Bucholtz & Hall 2004) her English-speaking identity projection. This interpellation (Althusser 1971) clearly made her uncomfortable, putting her, once again, in an identity bind, and adding the burden of explaining her own legitimacy. Thus, Montana’s friends authenticate her African-American-oriented identity by not calling into question her use of AAE grammar and phonology, for example, but at the same time denaturalize it by naming her as a Spanish speaker. In the following excerpt, Pink and Mia tell a story about “catching” Montana speaking Spanish.

- (9) 118 Pink: Now, Montana, Montana she be fronting.  
 119 Mia: One time Montana told me she didn’t speak Spanish. And then I caught  
 120 her. She was on her—  
 121 Pink: Her mama was just speaking Spanish!  
 122 Mont: I said I don’t, I don’t really understand big words.  
 123 Pink: Her mama, full blast Hispanic. Her mama: “*Eló!*” Holler.  
 124 Mia: “*Ello!*”  
 125 Pink: I was like may I speak, “OK!” ((Laughter))  
 126 Pink: All right. Yeah!  
 127 Mont: I told her, I told them I don’t really understand big words, like, I don’t know  
 128 how to be sophisticated in Spanish.  
 129 Pink: Montana but yo momma was on the phone, she was like “*bluh bluh luh-*  
 130 *luh-luh*” and you was like “*bluh bluh luh-luh-luh.*”  
 131 Mont: No I was not, that was only a little bit.

In line 122, Montana tries to reframe her earlier claim about not knowing Spanish by instead saying that “I don’t really understand big words.” Rather than taking any interest in Montana’s linguistic ability by asking follow-up questions to learn more about her experiences with language, and rather than reassuring her that speaking Spanish is in any way desirable, Mia and Pink instead transition into mocking the language. Although this seemed to be a lighthearted, jocular interactional moment for Mia and Pink involving light “teasing” of a close friend, the burden was clearly on Montana to manage and explain her identity projections. Mocking Spanish was a

common way for non-Latino students to talk about the language, and mock representations (Hill 1993, 1998, 2001, 2008) draw on stereotypes about Spanish phonology, including its “machine-gun” rhythm and simple consonant-vowel syllable structure. For example, Sakina, in demonstrating how she overhears her name in Spanish conversations, represents the language with [ka-ta-ta-da-da-da]. The syllable-timed prosodic rhythm of Spanish is, apparently, linguistically salient to non-Spanish-speakers and is therefore available for social parody. In addition to Pink’s mock rendering of Spanish (“bluh bluh...”), she also represents the English of Montana’s mother as overly accented. It is possible that the mother answered the phone in Spanish, but this is not clear in Pink’s representation, which uses both English and Spanish phonology—[ɛ] from the English word *hello* and the monophthongal [o] from the Spanish word *aló*. Mia, who was not actually involved in the phone call, responds by adding “ello,” (phonetically [e-jo]) a hyper-Hispanicized (and unrealistic) rendering of the salutation. Finally, Pink represents the agreement marker “O.K.” with “Hispanicized” phonology, including a hyper-backed, monophthongal [o] and short, monophthongal [e]. These renderings jointly produce a context in which the power of representation lies with subjects who do not actually know Spanish (i.e. monolingual English speakers).

Part of what I am claiming here is that the types of identity work that Latino students can do is limited by US popular discourses about immigration that get mediated by the school and taken up in a local discourse about “Spanish.” Montana’s situation illustrates this point. She has made an agentive decision to join an African American friendship group and to promote a non-Spanish-speaking identity, but her identity projections must always be weighed against the school-based discourse around Spanish and its linkages to national discourses. Bucholtz & Hall’s (2004) notion of intersubjectivity is useful here, as it shows how identifications are constituted in language through the balance of individual choice and social processes. They put it this way: “On the one hand, the subject is the agent, the subject OF social processes; on the other, the subject is the patient, subject TO social processes” (2004:493–94). The second of these—subject-as-patient—is an especially powerful part of identity-making for Latino students in North Carolina in light of the ubiquity and strength of the LTN and its analogs in the community and school.

While Montana struggles to inhabit an identity category that distances her from “Latino,” some of the most recent immigrant students struggle to be seen or heard at all. I learned about “silent” students from an assistant principal who asked me to translate during a parent-teacher conference for the mother of a student who does not talk. I later discovered that there was an unarticulated crisis of Latino immigrant students who did not speak—in English or in Spanish. A group of Latino seventh graders discussed these students and the reasons for their silence.

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- (10) 132 Andrea: Algunos hispanos no hablan.  
 ‘Some Hispanics don’t talk.’
- 133 INT: ¿Qué has dicho, que algunos hispanos no hablan?  
 ‘What was that, some hispanics don’t talk?’
- 134 Andrea: No, no hablan, como
- 135 Alfonso: [They’re nervous.]
- 136 Milk: [embarrassed]
- 137 Alfonso: They’re nervous.
- 138 Andrea: Porque, nunca hablan, yo nunca  
 ‘because they never talk, I never’
- 139 Alfonso: Like they’re afraid [that]
- 140 INT: [ni en español ni en inglés?]  
 ‘not in Spanish or in English?’
- 141 Andrea: Uh-huh, no hablan.  
 ‘Uh-huh, they don’t talk.’
- 142 Alfonso: [cause they’re afraid.]
- 143 Andrea: Cuando le habla, cuando le habla la maestra pues [apenas]  
 ‘When [the teacher], when the teacher talks to them, well [they] just’
- 144 Alfonso: [they’re they’re]
- 145 afraid that that people are really gonna like, that know, like, English
- 146 really well, they’ll make fun of them.
- 147 INT: You mean kids who aren’t Latino?
- 148 Andrea: [Yes]
- 149 Rubi: [yeah]
- 150 Alfonso: That’s what they heard last time.
- 151 INT: Really, does that happen? Do people make fun of them?
- 152 Alfonso: Yeah, and like when we speak Spanish, they’re like, “speak English,  
 153 this is America!”
- 154 Andrea: And some people are racist.
- 155 Rubi: Sometimes they be like “go back to Mexico.”

Evans-Winters (2005) describes an African American student, Zora, who was believed to have a language disability because she did not speak, though it was eventually determined that she was scared into silence. One way of dealing with harmful subjectivizing forces (e.g. language ideologies, popular discourses, limiting identity categories, etc.) is through some degree of conformity to or rebellion against those very forces. For most students, this work involves the USE of language. For the Latino students who do not speak, SILENCE may be doing similar kinds of situational work by operating as a form of conformity or rebellion. That is, silence may provide a way to avoid the shame of speaking English with a “foreign” accent, as well as distance from Spanish, which already-always links Latino students to problematized identities. At the same time, silence might be perceived as the safest way to experience a certain kind of academic success, without the complicated identitarian burdens of language.

## CONCLUSIONS

The effects of pernicious public discourses about US Latinos are especially damaging to immigrant minority children in “new” US Latino communities, where

anxieties about immigration status are high, access to basic educational, medical, and legal resources are low, and the pressures to assimilate are immense.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the marginalization of minority immigrant students in “new” US Latino communities is already overdetermined by pre-existing social structures, and exacerbated by the dehumanizing effects of public discourses around immigration, which frequently cohere around language. It is incumbent on scholars working in ethnolinguistic minority communities to pay critical attention to the dehumanizing and marginalizing discursive practices that devalue immigrant and ethnolinguistic minority languages, denaturalize (Bucholtz & Hall 2004) nonethnic identity claims, and in general limit the types of identities available to ethnolinguistic minority subjects.

An important piece of this project is to track the ways in which local institutions mediate national discourses, which at first glance may seem at such a distance as to be irrelevant in local communities. Despite being a “good” school, and despite employing many caring individuals, Bedlington nevertheless participated in the broader vitiation of Spanish and the marginalization of its speakers by making available and reinforcing elements of the LTN. Institutions are important links between national discourses and local ways of talking, and can therefore contribute to constructing productive discursive environments for ethnolinguistic minorities. In the case of schools, this effort cannot be limited to castigating individual students for the use of overtly racist language, which, while damaging, amounts to the tip of the discursive iceberg. Zentella (1997:16) writes that adolescent bilinguals “must be allowed and encouraged to construct an identity that does not pit a mainstream, standard English-speaking identity against their primary ethnolinguistic identity.” Unfortunately, institutional structures, such as ESL tracking, may block the good intentions of individual teachers, staff, and administrators.

Finally, it is imperative that those of us working in immigrant and ethnolinguistic minority communities continue to be sensitive not only to the localized ways in which the communities we study are marginalized and disenfranchised, but also to national discourses, which link to the local through what Agha (2007:10) has called “semiotic encounters” and also contribute to the erasure of minority experiences and identities. Santa Ana (2002:300) reminds us that in national discourses about immigration, “each immigrant is linked to fearful movements of people, by which this human being’s life, history, and dreams are effaced.” Therefore, it is valuable to think about the way that discourse moves interdiscursively (Silverstein 2005) across national, regional, local, and institutional scales. Ethnographies that highlight the language practices and identity challenges of ethnolinguistic minorities (e.g. Zentella 1997; Bailey 2002; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Rosa 2010) are an important step in the recuperation of effaced identities. This work is urgent in “new” US Latino communities, where the proportion of unauthorized immigrants is higher than in historically established communities (Marrow 2011:7), leaving adolescent immigrants vulnerable to pernicious US popular discourses that

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efface their experiences, problematize their languages, and construct them as dangerous and inferior.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Marrow (2011:7) reports that because changing US immigration policies since the 1960s “have actively shifted the primary routes of entry among Mexican and other Latin American immigrants away from legal and temporary avenues toward unauthorized ones... new destinations now post a higher proportion of unauthorized immigrants among their total foreign-born population than do traditional destinations.”

<sup>2</sup>It is important to note that Latino ethnolinguistic identities are not constructed in isolation, but rather in relation to other ethnolinguistic and ethnoracial categories. The salience of the White/Black “racial” dichotomy in the US South means that the ethnolinguistic construction of “Latino” is always involved in a dialectic with local articulations of Whiteness and Blackness. I encourage readers to see Carter (2013) for a description of the ways Latino students at Bedlington make use of grammatical structures commonly associated with African American English. I direct readers to Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich (2008) and Golash-Boza & Darity (2008) for work on the ethnoracial construction of Latinos in the US.

<sup>3</sup>I spent between five and eight hours at school every day throughout the entire semester, and made regular follow-up visits throughout the next semester. The first month was devoted to strict observation, consisting of ethnographic fieldnote taking. The next phase involved talking informally with students between classes, at lunch, and before and after school. Finally, sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with forty-seven students whom I had observed in the prior research phases.

<sup>4</sup>Bedlington Middle and South City are pseudonyms. The names of participants are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

<sup>5</sup>Gingrich did apologize for these remarks. In advance of the 2012 presidential election, Gingrich ran campaign advertisements in Spanish.

<sup>6</sup>Sociolinguists studying Latino language practices in the US have stressed that proficiency in English and Spanish varies greatly among individuals depending on myriad sociocultural and psychological factors. (See Fought 2003 and Bayley & Bonnici 2009 for an overview.) However, the situation at Bedlington is somewhat different on account of the newness of the Latino community in South City. Though some Latinos never speak Spanish at school, most Latino students live with Spanish-speaking families in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods and, correspondingly, have some degree of Spanish fluency.

<sup>7</sup>INT: interviewer

<sup>8</sup>Omi & Winant (1994:56) describe racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”

<sup>9</sup>For example, an administrator once pointed out to me a concrete wall in the ESL classroom that had been “tagged” with SUR 13, the name of a gang operational in the area, in block letters no larger than two inches in height and two inches in width. This was considered a grievous offence, which led to an “investigation.”

<sup>10</sup>The assimilatory pressure on Latino students at Bedlington is not a straightforward matter. While the institution is interested in assimilation to “mainstream” norms, as evidenced by the data provided here, certain students perceive pressure to assimilate to African American cultural norms. For example, a seventh grade student named Joel describes the value attached to African American material culture: “Supposedly like the blacks be like having like more cooler stuff, like the clothes, the shoes, Air Forces and all that stuff. We only wear Converse, Cortez. And yeah some other shoes we don’t even know.”

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