ABSTRACT

THORN, MARY KATHERINE. “We all have to stick together, you know?”: The Creation of Transnational Space among Latino Youth in North Carolina. (Under the direction of Dr. Risa Ellovich).

Changes in immigration policy and border control have altered the level of access Central American immigrants have to their home countries. Lacking the ability to cross national borders with the relative freedom that past generations experienced, young Latino immigrants perform their transnational identities by seeking and creating transnational spaces in their cities and towns in the United States.

This study follows the growth and development of a Latino youth group in the small town of Claxton, North Carolina during eight months of field research. The town has seen an influx of Latino immigrants over the past two decades, and the town is now 50% Latino. This demographic change has created tensions among the Anglo, Black, and Latino populations, even as it has created a cultural borderland for the youth who interact at school.

The researcher gained access to the Latino youth group through a local nonprofit organization that provides social services to the Latino community in Claxton. She used participant observation and formal and informal interviewing as her research methods. This study finds that group members cross cultural borders by performing their transnationalism in the physical and digital spaces of their lives.

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1 Claxton is a pseudonym.
“We all have to stick together, you know?”; The Creation of Transnational Space among Latino Youth in North Carolina

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Anthropology

Raleigh, North Carolina

2012

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Gabriel Thorn, who has given me the gift of his unwavering support through the craziness of the past two years.
BIOGRAPHY

Mary Katherine Thorn is from Birmingham, Alabama and now lives in Fayetteville, North Carolina with her husband. She attained her undergraduate degree in English and creative writing in 2008 from Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama. She decided she wanted a Master’s degree after watching an online video about cultural anthropology and realizing the video was describing an interest she did not know she had.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the youth and the staff at El Centro Latino (ECL)\footnote{A pseudonym} for their friendship and for generously sharing their lives and work with me; my family who have always supported me; my committee members Nora Haenn and Tim Wallace for their guidance; and especially Risa Ellovich without whom this thesis would not exist.
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CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to the Claxton\textsuperscript{1} Youth

On a sweltering Friday afternoon in August 2011, Angel and I drove up to Claxton High School for the first fall 2011 meeting of El Centro Latino/ECL (The Latino Center) youth group. Several boys filed out of the school to help us carry a stack of Pepperoni and Hawaiian Pizzas and two liter bottles of Coke and Sprite into the blessedly cool English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom that Angel had requisitioned for our meetings back in January. The youth, highschoolers from all four grades, were not in a business mood, still in summer mode, dressed in shorts and tank tops and t-shirts, laughing and talking while they ate their pizza and greeted each other.

I sat at a desk, quiet and listening, as was my custom. After saying hello to all the youth, I liked to let the sounds of their chattering wash over me. In all the months I spent with them, attending meetings, helping to organize trips and events, and going over homework assignments and college essays, I never grew tired of listening to them talk, moving back and forth between English and Spanish without a thought. It was the very first thing I noticed, and, not being a linguist, I spent months trying to understand how it worked and whether or not Spanglish was an important marker of their identities.

Angel is director of the youth program, so he stood before the rowdy group to talk about his agenda for the coming semester. It was a losing battle. He managed to outline his

\footnote{Claxton is a small town in central North Carolina. All proper names in this thesis are pseudonyms, including Claxton, Claxton High School, El Centro Latino (The Latino Center), and those used for informants.}
plans for field trips, college workshops, and cultural presentations before abandoning the work of the meeting and giving in to pizza and catching up with the youth. After about half an hour, the youth began trickling out, catching rides from friends or walking home, in groups of three or four. A handful of students including Carmen, the president of the club and her sister Patricia, council member Belinda, social butterfly Ivan, and a few others were still there when the principal of the school walked in the room. He had been keeping track of our group, which had not been idle over the summer. We had traveled to Washington D.C. with 28 members of the group, won a grant for an environmental project which the youth had applied for themselves, kicked off the resulting environmental campaign, and carried out a couple of workshops. The principal had come to congratulate us for our progress, then, he did something surprising.

“I want to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month this year,” he said. We all stared at him for a moment before smiles broke out on faces and the teenagers launched into a brainstorming session with their principal. We could hire a dance troupe from Durham that he had been impressed with. Many of the group’s members are good dancers. Perhaps they could demonstrate dances from their countries too. We could have a banquet to get the parents to come out (which can be difficult), and each person could bring his or her favorite dish. We could expand on the youth group project to educate each other about our heritages, and present posters to the school. Perhaps we could even make this part of homecoming activities.

The principal made it clear that he wanted to start celebrating the diversity in the school, and I think he was surprised and pleased by the students’ enthusiasm for the project.
As we cleaned up and prepared to leave, Carmen came over to me with wide eyes, stammering that “Nothing like this has ever happened before. Nobody has ever cared before.” She was having trouble articulating what she meant because she was so excited, but I understood. This school and the Anglo community rarely go out of their way to recognize—much less celebrate—their Latino youth. Sure, Claxton High School has ESL classes and a handful of dedicated teachers who work hard for Latino students, but nothing on the scale of a school-wide celebration. I had been watching these youths try to carve out a place for themselves in Claxton and their wider central North Carolina county area all summer. Perhaps someone was finally paying attention.

I began visiting Claxton in January 2011 thinking I would find evidence of a cultural borderland due to the large Latino population living there. I went to El Centro Latino (ECL) seeking volunteer work that would allow me to interact with the Latino population. I worked in the basic needs program, helping clients fill out applications for the food pantry in a nearby town. It was about all I could do with my limited Spanish. I sat at a side desk inside the warm orange and yellow walls of ECL’s front office, and said over and over again to very accommodating women and a few men, “mi español no es muy bueno, lo siento” as I collected their names, addresses, ages, children’s ages, weekly income and then made appointments for them with the food bank. I could feel my face flaming in embarrassment each day when I had to ask people to spell out their names because I could not work it out on my own. My Spanish improved slowly, but it was mostly in the realm of clerical tasks. I was not getting any closer to building relationships with people—my summer field research was rapidly approaching—and I certainly was not finding the cultural borderland I expected. I
was working with first generation adult immigrants, primarily from Mexico, who spoke almost no English and interacted as little as possible with people outside of the Latino community. I learned that the mere existence of two or more cultures in one town does not automatically produce a cultural borderland.

However, in late January I began volunteering with ECL’s Latino youth program which meets weekly at the local high school, and I started meeting and getting to know teenagers and young adults. Unlike many of their parents, these young people have friends and acquaintances outside the Latino community. They interact with non-Latinos on a near-daily basis, due especially to their attending school. All children, including undocumented immigrants, not only have the federal right to free public education (Plyer v. Doe 1982), but are required by law in North Carolina under G. S. 115C-378, and in many other states as well, to attend school from age 7 until 16. Latino youth attend public school with other non-Latino youth. For these young people, Latino and other, a cultural borderland exists in the town of Claxton.

Gradually my work with the youth group surpassed my work in the Basic Needs program. I was more useful to youth director Angel than I was to the director of the Basic Needs program and I had discovered my research population. The Latino youth in Claxton are, by and large, bilingual, bicultural, and engaged in an interesting struggle to find or make a place for themselves in a community that would sometimes prefer they were not there at all.

At first I thought I was there to learn about how the youth’s transnational status affected their thinking about their futures—did they want to go to college, and did they want
to stay in the United States or return to their country of origin? What was their perception of home? These questions proved useful and interesting, but the answers that appeared did not support my initial hypothesis. The young people in the group are quite diverse. They or their parents hail from at least six different countries. Some of the youth were born in those countries, and some of them were born in the United States. The immigrants came at different times in their lives, and were socialized to different degrees in the United States. And they all had different answers to my questions. However, over time I realized these multicultural, transnational youths had been busy seeking and creating spaces for themselves, physical and digital, permanent and temporary, in a community that did not have any spaces ready-made for them.

From February to September 2011, I acted as a volunteer for the ECL youth program, with a more intensive period from May to August. This gave me many opportunities to be a participant observer, my primary method of data collection. I became Angel’s assistant and aided him in planning and implementing his projects. This meant I had the opportunity to be around the members of the group as a whole at least weekly, and sometimes more frequently. I attended fieldtrips, workshops, retreats, and a 2 day trip to Washington D.C.—which I planned—with the youth. I cooked for and ate with them on retreats, road on busses and stayed in hotels with them, and helped them solve problems whenever I could. I had the status of a volunteer/chaperone, so I was never a true participant in the group. However, acting as a volunteer through ECL gave me a place, a job, and legitimacy. It gave the youth a familiar means by which to relate to me. It also meant that I was not privy to certain information. The young people treat me like an adult, usually with respect, sometimes as
someone who can do things and solve problems that they cannot. But given the short time frame of the research project, this volunteer position was beneficial in giving me the ability to interact immediately with group members. In turn, my experience was enhanced by the youths’ acceptance of my place in the group.

It is important to note that nearly everything I did occurred within the framework of the group. I have been given the occasional glimpse into the lives of these young people outside of the group. I have attended parties and *Quinceañera* celebrations. I have gone into some youth members’ homes to help with homework and subsequently found myself paging through massive photo albums and speaking in halting and apologetic Spanish to the parents. These moments have been important and special, and the frequency with which I experience them increases as time passes. However, most of what I know about the youth members has come from my experiences within the group.

This situation is, of course, limiting. I have only been exposed to a sliver of these young people’s lives. I have not been in their schools or in their neighborhoods for long periods of time, and, for the most part, I do not know their families. But getting to know the youth this way has been a unique opportunity. The youth program at ECL has existed for about 15 years, but the current incarnation began in January 2011, the same time that I started volunteering at ECL. In years past, the group had been very small, due to the previous director having a “they will come to me” approach. The current director, Angel, engaged in outreach from the moment he took the job in January, so I watched the group grow from 12 students at our first meeting to 20, 30, and 40 members. We now have over 80 total members, 40 of whom are quite active. They come from all over the county and attend the
area’s three high schools. I spent most of my time with the Claxton youth, but I have interacted with youth from the two other schools during trips and workshops. I have been with the current group since its formation, and I have watched the youth form a community of sorts, or “a family,” as they call it. I believe this made my fieldwork experience different than if I had come into an established community or even an established youth group. I got to know them as they got to know each other.

In addition to participant observation, I relied heavily on informal interviewing as a data collection method. Throughout my fieldwork I engaged in a constant stream of conversation with the youth, chatting with them and asking them questions about their lives. As young people on the cusp of adulthood, the topics of the future and their place in the world were on their minds so often I did not have to direct the course of the conversation. I also conducted formal, unstructured interviews with 5 youth members over the age of 16. I would have liked to have done more formal interviews, but I found I got better data from participant observation and informal interviews. The young people enjoyed talking about themselves in the formal sessions, but it was hard to get teenagers to commit to time and place. More worrisome was that, I felt they focused on telling me what they thought I wanted to hear when I sat across from them, pen in hand. But in an informal capacity, the pressure was off and the conversation flowed more freely. Two students—Carmen and Belinda—were especially adept at expressing themselves and had an incredible amount of self-awareness when it came to my topic. These students became key informants for me; however, I cannot claim that my key informants speak for everyone. No single student can speak for the group because it is so heterogeneous. Thus, while my key informant interviews and interviews with
the other students were valuable and certainly very useful to me, participant observation became my primary research method because it allowed me to observe the group dynamic. I use the data gathered from the formal interviews to inform my analysis of my participant observation experiences.

When I started this project I understood transnationalism to be the process by which immigrants build and maintain connections with their home and host countries (DeJaeghere & McCleary 2010; Glick et al. 1995; Vanoudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret 2006). I found this reflected in the behavior of the young people I know. They call their abuelas on Sundays using the calling cards they purchase at one of the many tiendas in town. They send gifts to cousins and friends, and, significantly, they are able to keep in touch via social networking. Facebook use is a near universal among the members of our group, and the youth use it both to communicate with friends in town and to keep in touch or get reacquainted with, and sometimes meet for the first time, relatives abroad.

Young Latinos are also transnational in the sense that they are part of two cultures here in the United States, the culture of their home country and/or of their parents and the culture of their schoolmates. We can see one manifestation of their transnational status in young Latinos' high rates of bilingualism—they speak the languages of their parents and of their non-Latino peers. All the youth in our group speak Spanish at least to a degree, and most of them are fluent in English.

These things make the youth transnational in the way I understood it. But in the past several decades, changes in immigration policy and border control have changed the level of access immigrants have to their home countries. Border security tightened severely after
September 11, 2001, making the frequent back and forth trips that many migrants experienced much more difficult. The parents of the young people with whom I work are not guest workers or migrants. They have settled in Claxton and elsewhere in the county, perhaps not always for life, but for long enough to have year-round jobs, raise their children, and even buy property. Of the young people I know, some have never been to their parents’ home countries and others have not returned since they immigrated to the United States as children. Having crossed the border once, many do not wish to take the risk of doing so again. I learned that, for these youth, transnationalism is manifesting itself in new and different ways. Lacking the ability to cross national borders with the freedom that past generations enjoyed, they cross cultural borders by performing their transnationalism in the physical and digital spaces of their lives.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review:

The False Dichotomy in Youth Culture Studies As Revealed by Transnational Youth

Much of the anthropological literature on youth immigrants is related to education due to the overwhelming importance of education in these young peoples’ lives. Education is the primary way immigrants and their children achieve economic mobility; ironically access to education is one of the most significant ways by which young immigrants and other minorities are marginalized (Fry 2002, Gill 2010, Martin 2012). The amount of literature in this arena is vast but it is also limiting as it tends to fall into one broad category—assimilation versus resistance—which often uses the lenses of academic success and failure or Bourdieu’s concept of social capital to explain why youth behave a certain way. This study is informed by literature on assimilation and resistance, but seeks to show that transnational youth are able to transcend these limitations through space creation. Therefore this study is also informed by literature on transnationalism and immigrants’ construction of and perception of space.

Education and resistance applies not only to immigrant youth, but youth culture generally. Much literature of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s focuses on youth resistance to mainstream cultural norms in order to preserve or foster a particular youth identity and build social capital in that particular milieu, at the cost of losing economic and social opportunities on a larger scale (Cammarota 2008: 4-5). For example, sociologist Paul Willis’ ethnographic study about young men or “lads” in west central England concludes that the young men
reject schooling and remain working class as a means of resistance to a society that is built on class stratification (1977). Other examples include Alejandro Portes who argues that the “segmented assimilation” of non-white immigrant children in the United States increases their likelihood of facing continued marginalization (1995: 96), and John Ogbu who suggests that academic success for American minorities rests on three issues:

“first, whether the children come from a segment of society where people have traditionally experienced unequal opportunity to use their education or school credentials in a socially and economically meaningful and rewarding manner; second, whether or not the relationship between the minorities and the dominant-group members who control the public schools has encouraged the minorities to perceive and define school learning as an instrument for replacing their cultural identity with the cultural identity of their "oppressors" without full reward or assimilation; and, third, whether or not the relationship between the minorities and the schools generates the trust that encourages the minorities to accept school rules and practices that enhance academic success” (1987: 334).

Cammarota calls these “nonconformist, anti-assimilationist subjectivities of youth” and suggests that they reflect the perception that much research on youth culture seems to take: “that one’s primary life choice boils down to either preserving an identity unique from the dominant group, or assimilating to the dominant norms to achieve academic success or economic solvency” (2008: 5).

Some more recent literature explores youth motivations and youth understandings of their culture. Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, for example, uses a cultural ecological approach to examine how recently immigrated Central American youth fare in school: what motivates them and how they respond to discrimination. His central question is, why, given the discrimination and difficulties they face in the public school system, are many of the students he worked with motivated to stay in school? He concludes that they see schooling as the most
immediate path to bettering themselves. They position their current lives against a backdrop of violence and suffering that they “escaped” in immigrating. He writes:

“That reality overshadowed many of the subsequent hardships and marginality encountered in the new land. For many informants the sacrificing life of family members and the folks ‘back home’ remained the most significant point of reference against which to check more current developments. … Schooling emerged as the most helpful avenue to make it in a new land and, in turn, to help their less-fortunate relatives” (Suarez-Orozco1987: 298-299).

Pamela Anne Quiroz also studies youth perspective in her account of Latino middle school students. In doing her fieldwork, she discovered that a school counseling office had files full of narratives written by 8th graders about school and the social and academic problems they faced. The school counselors used these narratives to gain insight into “problem” students’ behavior. Otherwise the autobiographies were kept in drawers, never read. Quiroz saw these stories as having much more value, and decided to analyze them and learn about Latino youth in this way. Her article looks at the ways in which the students define success rather than the ways the students live up to a predetermined school-defined concept of success. She finds that, as students got older, they lost their youthful optimism and responded to failure—brought on by the frustration of having an unsupportive school system—through silence or through resistance to schooling (2001: 344).

The above examples show researchers trying to gain an understanding of Latino youth from an emic perspective. However, other literature uses an administrative perspective, focusing on the programs and plans that schools can implement to foster student success. Jeannette Abi-Nader’s “A House for My Mother: Motivating Hispanic High School Students” ethnographically examines a program called “Programa: Latinos Adelantaran de
Nuevo” (Program Latinos Shall Rise Again) or PLAN, a college preparatory program at a high school in the northeastern United States. Abi-Nader seems to have started with a desire to write about the youth perspective, but the article is really about the charismatic personality of one of the teachers in the program. Abi-Nader admits this, noting that the instructor is the central figure and that he is the one who helps the students turn their “vague desire to go to college” into a tangible plan (1990: 49). Similarly, Ricardo Stanton-Salazar and Stephanie Spina, in their article on urban, Mexican-origin youth from San Diego, show the ways informal adult mentors can help youth build social capital and succeed in school and work (2003). Again, this article focuses more on the mentors and the program than on the students.

All of the above examples fall in the assimilation/resistance category that is so common in studies involving immigrant youth. Taken as individual publications these studies are a reasonable and useful way of exploring and understanding immigrant youth culture. The problem is, taken together, much of the literature consistently paints a dichotomy between success and failure or between assimilation/integration and resistance. I believe this is a false dichotomy. As Cammarota says,

“some youth may not perceive a contradiction between heterodoxy and social advancement. What about a young person who prefers not to make this choice, or for whom choosing is just not an option? What if he or she covets self-authenticity while simultaneously striving for academic success? Most research on youth culture tends to avoid these questions, but they have special import for young Latinas/os” (2008: 6).

I am arguing that the ECL youth are transnational, meaning they neither slough off their cultural identity in order to assimilate, nor do they exist in the insular world of their parents. Their actions as space creators do help them build social capital in-group and in the
greater community (see Chapter 5) even as they simply create a space where they can be themselves. Their transnationalism allows for this—and for integration into the host society—without forcing the youth into the assimilation/resistance dichotomy.

But why use the world “transnational?” Why not “bicultural?” I choose transnational because as a concept it is fluid and open. Bicultural sounds static, as though the two cultures rest side-by-side within a person, as though two countries stand border-to-impenetrable-border, and of course, this does not reflect reality at all. The word “transnational” implies movement, yes, but it also implies change, conflict, and overlap, and better expresses the lives of these youth who do not have two always-separate identities, who are not two monolinguals rolled into one person.

Much of the earlier literature on transnationalism in general frames it as a painful process by which immigrants uproot themselves from their home countries and assimilate into their host societies. More recent studies, however, abandon the assimilationist perspective and focus on transnationalism as the process by which immigrants build and maintain connections with and between their home and host countries (DeJaeghere & McCleary 2010; Glick et al. 1995; Vanoudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret 2006). Glick et al. write that transmigrants

“settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country in which they reside, however, at the very same time, they are engaged elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated” (1995: 48).

Young Latinos in the United States are transnational in the sense that they build and maintain
connections with family and friends back home (see Cuadros 2006; DeJaeghere & McCleary 2010; Gill 2010). All of this activity is facilitated by advances in telecommunication which allow for ongoing interactions in and to both host and home countries. With ECL youth, this happens primarily through the use of Facebook and other social media. In addition, some scholars argue that transnationalism is “more likely to arise in conditions where immigrants form a considerable proportion of the nation, e.g., North Africans in Western Europe and Hispanics in the United States” (Vanoudenhoven, Ward, & Masgoret 2006: 647-8).

Changes in border policy are another crucial part of ECL youths’ form of transnationalism. Since September 11, 2001, border security has become the heart of the immigration debate. On April 18, 2011 I interviewed Dr. Josiah Heyman, Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at The University of Texas at El Paso, an expert on immigration and border issues, who works to influence border policy with the advocacy group Border Network for Human Rights. He told me that the violence at the border that is so widely reported in the media is greatly exaggerated and that demographic changes in places like North Carolina, where the Latino population has more than doubled in the past 10 years, are being projected back onto the border (Heyman Interview 2011). This is reflected in a May 2010 newspaper article which reports that crime rates in border towns had remained “essentially flat” for the past decade (Wagner 2010, The Arizona Republic online, accessed February 2012). Despite this, politicians from both sides of the political aisle, including Senators John McCain and Representative Gabrielle Giffords have made statements about increased rates of violence at the borders and criticized the government for failing to do enough. John McCain said that failing to secure the border between Arizona and Mexico
“has led to violence—the worst I have ever seen” (Wagner 2010, The Arizona Republic online, accessed February 2012). Shortly after the Arizona SB 1070—the 2010 Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act which made it illegal to be an immigrant in Arizona without carrying registration documents—was signed, Giffords issued a press release condemning SB 1070 but calling for increased border security, including deployment of the National Guard, more Border Patrol agents on the ground, the establishment of Border Patrol forward operating bases, greater use of high-tech surveillance systems, and improvement of cell phone reception to facilitate communication between enforcement agencies and rural residence (Giffords 2010, press release, April 30).

As of 2004, the United States government had tripled its spending on border security over the previous decade. This has done little to stem the current wave of immigration. As Heyman writes,

“The ‘deterrence model’ does not work—people find ways to cross anyway. Most people who are spotted and arrested voluntarily return to Mexico to try again. Eventually they succeed. Spotting people and arresting them thus has little point except for a small number of violent criminals” (Heyman 2005, website accessed February 2012).

Increased border security and increased panic, warranted or not, on the parts of many Americans have made border crossing for Latinos fraught with fear and danger. Many of the young undocumented immigrants I know crossed the border with their families after 2001. Their fathers had been migrant workers for years, but as crossing became more difficult, many decided to settle in Claxton. They do not make many trips back to visit family as in the past. If they go back, they usually return to their country of origin for good. It is just too risky to cross often. The inability to cross national borders necessitates a rethinking of the term
“transnationalism” to include ECL youth and others like them. I argue that ECL youth perform their transnationalism by crossing local borders and by creating and seeking transnational spaces for themselves.

Space, one of the oldest concepts in anthropology, was described as transnational in Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s landmark essay, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference.” The authors’ primary goal was to question the anthropological understanding, or lack thereof, of culture, but in doing so, Gupta and Ferguson also argued for the reconceptualization of space to include people in the borderlands. They write to problematize the connection between identity and place, saying, “The fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 7).

The term “borderlands” often refers to a geographic place, most commonly—in the United States—the area along the two thousand mile long US-Mexican border. Much border theory is written specifically about these physical places. Cynthia Bejarano’s book ÑOnda? Urban Youth Culture and Border Identity explores the lives of Mexican-American/Chicana/o youth on the physical border. Bejarano encourages the reader to engage “border thinking,” understanding that border theory “does not reside and was not created within one rigid, strict academic discourse, but grew from people’s ‘border narratives’ and from the streets and geopolitical spaces that describe the daily experiences of people on the borderlands” (2005: 25).

ECL youth have a place in this discourse as many of them have crossed the border themselves, and if not, their immediate family members have done so. They now live fifteen
hundred miles from the border, but I maintain that they continue to live in a borderland—not only a physical one because they cross borders every day around town when traveling from their neighborhoods to school to ECL office in town, but also and primarily a cultural borderland.

A cultural borderland is both a physical and a cultural space which can emerge whenever two or more cultural groups exist in close proximity to each other (Anzaldua 1987: 7; Foley 1995: 119). A borderland can be a place in which “ethnic groups actively fuse and blend their culture with the mainstream culture” even while preserving the “old ways,” creating complex cultural identities (Foley 1995: 119). Claxton is a cultural borderland for its youth who cross borders and who are bilingual, transnational, sometimes transient residents of their town. They create the borderland and the transnational spaces they inhabit. Gupta and Ferguson write,

“Something like a transnational public sphere has certainly rendered any strictly bounded sense of community or locality obsolete. At the same time, it has enabled the creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space where contiguity and face-to-face contact are paramount” (1992: 9).

The Gupta and Ferguson article indicates that transnational flows have, in the past several decades, made the whole concept of natural divisions questionable and that transnational identities make it hard to categorize people ethnically, even though their ethnicities are still important to them (1992: 10-11).

Scholars handle concepts of space and immigrants in different ways. Joan DeJaeghere and Kate McCleary examine Mexican youths’ civic identity construction in the transnational spaces of their lives: school, the English as a Learning Language (ELL) classroom, the
school hallways, the soccer field. In effect their article acknowledges the creation of space through language use/choice by saying that the ELL class “created a space, in part, for their cultural identity as Spanish-speaking Mexicans” and that the youth used Spanish “in the transnational spaces they created” outside of school when Spanish was not welcome within the school (DeJaeghere and McCleary 2010: 238-239). However, this article is primarily about self-making in existing spaces rather than the act of space making.

In a rather personal essay, Patricia Sánchez actually argues that schools obscure transnationalism: “Though schooling was a public space, it did not give my (nor other transnationals’) lived experiences a public face (2001: 277). Sánchez views consistent movement across national borders as a requirement for the label of transnational, which I find too limiting, but she sees distinct differences between herself and her “Latina sisters in diaspora” (2001: 378). It is notable that this article was published in 2001 before border crossing became so difficult.

The article that comes the closet to addressing space creation is Cristóbal Mendoza’s “Transnational Spaces through Local Places.” Mendoza examines Mexican migrants’ constructions of and sense of macro (national) and micro (local) places: “Migrants create fluid, transnational spaces, which are defined as both a social terrain that reflects migrants’ bi-culturality and a fragmented, diffused geographic reality” (2006: 539). He writes that the “construction of place plays a vital role in preserving (or not) traditional ties as well as influencing immigrants intentions to stay (or return)” (Mendoza 2006: 541). But the article in effect is not about space creation but about the perception of space, specifically migrants’ perceptions of Albuquerque, their host city. Mendoza argues that “sense of place” is
important in identity construction as “space” which Mendoza sees as a vast general term, becomes “place,” a specific local term (2006: 541-542).

The literature discussed above is about how immigrants conceptualize or feel about the spaces they inhabit. But in this paper, I am arguing that these youth are actually creating and carving out spaces for themselves. I believe this paper, therefore, addresses gaps in youth immigrant literature by rejecting the false dichotomy of assimilation/resistance. Instead it addresses the ways in which ECL transnational young people actually create space, building their social capital and possibly increasing their chances of future success, yes, but also giving them a place to simply be in the present.
CHAPTER 3

Claxton, North Carolina: A Contested Space

Claxton, North Carolina, population 7,887, is one of four incorporated towns in a largely agricultural central North Carolina county. Surrounded on all sides by pastures and farmland, Claxton is a town of interconnected neighborhoods, with small locally-owned shops and art galleries making up its historic downtown area, and a booming commercial area north of downtown along the main highway, with a Walmart, fast food restaurants, grocery chains, and gas stations (see Figure 1).

Historically a railroading town, Claxton has long been a place where people come to find work. The town got its start in 1884 when the railroad between Sanford and Greensboro was completed, and the town’s namesake, a grandson of German farmers, donated the land for the train depot (Hadley 1987). Eventually, the depot became Claxton Station, and the railroad led to the growth of merchandising and agricultural business in the area (Burritt et.
al. 2004). In 1887, the state’s General Assembly incorporated the town of Claxton, population 254. Industry soon followed, especially the rabbit market; Claxton was the largest shipping point for rabbits in its county in the late 1800s. Claxton’s population grew, doubling between 1900 and 1913, spurred on by the poultry and egg industries (Hadley 1987).

Claxton grew steadily throughout the 20th century as manufacturing, meatpacking, and poultry processing became important and locally-owned businesses took root (Burritt et. Al. 2004). In A Home on the Field, Paul Cuadros describes how in the 1990s, meatpacking and poultry processing industries became more vertically integrated and required large, cheap workforces to keep up with the pace of demand. Many factories began recruiting Latinos across the border and would even provide transportation for workers to the towns where the factories were located (2006: 4). In her book The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina, Hannah Gill writes about getting on a bus in her hometown of Carrboro and travelling to a town in Mexico where she found busses leaving daily for North Carolina towns, carrying people to fill spots in high-turnover factory jobs (Gill 2010: ix).

Things are changing now in Claxton. The last poultry processing plant shut down in October 2011, putting 550 people out of work, and terminating contracts with about 200 chicken farmers. This is the second plant the town has lost in four years. An article in a statewide Latino newspaper, Que Pasa, featured speculation on whether or not Claxton will become a ghost town now that the plant has closed (Soto-Hernández 2011: A5). This conjecture is not surprising. The Latino migration boom of the 90s created a demographic shift in Claxton, lowering the median age of the population significantly and spurring
economic growth in what was an aging and dying town. This is especially true after 1996 when immigrants started bringing their families to and settling in Claxton.

However, as Paul Cuadros explains, meatpacking and poultry processing tend to be “gateway industries” for migrants in search of work. These jobs are difficult, dangerous, often painful, pay little, and most people want to get out of them as soon as possible (Cuadros 2000: 5). David Griffith describes a similar trend when looking at the declining tobacco industry in North Carolina. He expected to find that the downturn was hitting Latino farmworkers especially hard. Instead he found that “Latinization of rural North Carolina has created a cultural context for Latinos to leave agriculture and access employment in other economic sectors” (Griffith 2009: 34). Tobacco, like meatpacking and poultry processing, is a gateway industry. Latinos in Claxton no longer rely solely on these jobs to support their families. As the director of El Centro Latino (ECL) says, “Claxton will not become a ghost town. In reality, 200 Latinos who worked in the factory will be unemployed [because the other 350 employees are from other communities and do not live in Claxton]” (Soto-Hernández 2011: A5). Latinos now make up 50% of the population in Claxton. Chicken plant or no, they will continue to make a strong showing in this part of North Carolina.

Trains to busses, rabbits to chickens, white settlers to black workers to Latino immigrants, Claxton has seen many transformations in the past 120 years and has become an ethnically diverse, culturally divided borderland, a contested space. David Griffith gives us a context for these changes when he explains how the “Latinization” of North Carolina took place:
“The first Latinos to come to the state tended to be young, single males, many of whom traveled together, shared temporary housing, and were either related to one another or from the same communities in Mexico or Central America. After four to seven years, beginning in the early- to mid-1990s, this population began to undergo a transformation, including more women and children, settling out of migration streams at higher rates, and establishing a more permanent presence in rural North Carolina. With more women and children in Latino communities, there has been more interaction with schools, health care systems, churches, and other institutions and a concomitant increase in the number and range of service providers providing educational and other services in Spanish” (Griffith 2009: 36).

While this transformation allowed for the broadening of the Latinos’ economic base in North Carolina as described above, it also created a demographic shift in North Carolina, especially in towns like Claxton, that left many long-term white and black residents feeling displaced. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson say, “…it is not only the displaced who experience a displacement. For even people remaining in familiar and ancestral places find the nature of their relation to place ineluctably changed, and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and culture broken” (1992: 10). Long term residents felt as if the Latinos had appeared overnight. Nobody had really noticed or paid much attention when the majority of migrants were young single males; those people seemed transient, temporary. But when women and children came along, families started to settle in, and people suddenly began to see more Latino faces on the streets and in the grocery stores, it led to tensions (Cuadros 2006: 37 and Valadez 2003). Gill explains,

“The swift pace of demographic change in rural locales that attach importance to ‘tradition’ and conservative values has evoked a strong reaction in many places. In North Carolina, reactions reveal concerns about expansion, encroaching urbanization, allocation of resources, and the incorporation of a population unfamiliar with U.S. society” (2010: 8).
In Claxton, anxiety about the Latino population manifested in schools especially. The schools could not handle the influx of children who often could not speak English, and it took time to adjust the curriculum, add ESL classes, and find the right teachers, a process that I see as far from complete in the schools in the area today. But especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, anxiety about the changes and lack of cultural understanding led white and black parents to fear for their children’s safety and worry about their ability to get a good education. Paul Cuadros documents school board meetings from 2000 in which panicked parents complained that too much class time was spent helping Latino students who did not understand English. White flight of teachers and students from Claxton’s schools was high and a permissive transfer policy allowed for students to be placed in predominantly white schools (Cuadros 2006: 38-41).

Tensions in Claxton reached a breaking point in February of 2000 when former KKK grand wizard David Duke led an anti-immigrant rally on the steps of City Hall in Claxton. He lambasted the local poultry industry for providing jobs to undocumented people, and he also condemn the documented and undocumented immigrants themselves for bringing crime and drugs to Claxton and for making it an unpleasant place for European Americans to live. Duke was invited to Claxton in 2000, and a few hundred people came out, some supporters, some just to see what all the fuss was about.

I do not think he would be invited to Claxton today. Feelings have changed in the last decade. For one, Claxton residents were embarrassed by the negative national attention that the David Duke episode brought to their town, and it may have been an impetus for change (Biewen and Watson 2008). Also, with time has come a level of acceptance of the town’s
Latino population and has seen members of the town’s population working to build bridges among one another.

Paul Cuadros, the investigative reporter who wrote *A Home on the Field*, describes his work creating and coaching a boy’s soccer team, the Jets, at Claxton High School. He did this in the early 2000s, during the time when David Duke could still be welcomed to town. It was a struggle to get permission from the school administrators—who saw Cuadros as trying to wrest away resources from the football team—to even start the team. But Cuadros eventually led his team to win the state championship, and even saw the community embrace the team’s mostly Latino boys as local heroes. When I spoke with Paul Cuadros in October 2011, I asked him how he would characterize Claxton today in comparison with 2000 when David Duke came to town. He said, “Of course things are better in many respects. The town overall has become more accepting.” But when I asked about the Jets, the soccer team that he lobbied for and created and coached and fought for over a decade ago, he looked grim. “The Jets still exist, but we’re fighting to keep the team alive. Those with the power are still trying to defund it.”

Race relations in Claxton have certainly improved from the days of David Duke. There are fewer overt expressions of racism and more outward acceptance of the current situation, and many people, white, black, and Latino, seek to make overtures to each other. However, there are still underlying tensions, discomfort, and a laissez-faire style racism that tends to blame a marginalized group’s culture for its social status. I believe the following examples illustrate the way Claxton’s non-Latino population feels about and relates to its Latino neighbors.
One day I went to the public library in the county seat, which is a town 20 miles east of Claxton. While waiting to find out if the library would grant me a temporary card (they would not), I spoke with a young library technician, about thirty years old, and we started talking about where we were from. He told me he had grown up in Claxton, and I said I had been working there, spending most of my time with teenagers at El Centro Latino. He was careful to keep his expression neutral, but he said, “Well, my family has been there for years; we’ve been farming the area for generations.”

He did not mention the Latino population, but the implication was clear: my people have legitimate claim to this area, and the Latinos are the interlopers. He, like others I have spoken to in Claxton, seemed to be experiencing grief over the loss of the way things were “before the Latinos came.” This man, like the others, was conscious of saying anything that might appear racist. But he did want to assert his family’s legitimacy and claim over Claxton.

The Claxton website also seems to be harkening back to a time “before the Latinos came” rather than celebrating the place it is now. The homepage rhapsodizes about the town's family-friendly nature, calling it a “prime spot to put down roots” (Town of Claxton Website, accessed March 2011). There are pictures of historic buildings, green fields, burning sunsets, and white smiling faces. Nothing in the website suggests that Claxton's population has become 50% Latino over the past two decades. There is no mention of the ethnic diversity one might encounter while walking through downtown, passing by the Latino-owned tiendas and beauty shops, which are tucked in next to the art studios and the old General Store. The
website’s representation of the town is a source of frustration for the Latino youth I know who have seen it.

There are those in Claxton who do embrace the Latino population—or would if they knew how. Claxton is an artists’ town. Across from El Centro Latino is the Artists’ Conservatory, a nonprofit network of Artists’ studios and galleries, a coffee shop, and a gift shop. On the third Friday of each month, the galleries open their doors and invite people in for art, food, and music. It is fun, but it is also very white. One afternoon I went into the coffee shop and sat down to chat with some of the artists who were sipping on their coffee or tea. I asked, “Are there any Latino or Latina artists involved in the Artists’ Conservatory.” The artists spoke enthusiastically about Jasmine Collins, a native Costa Rican who has a studio at the Conservatory. They pointed to a portrait on the wall done in various shades and tones of brown. “She paints with coffee!” they said.

When I pressed for more, the artists looked at each other uncomfortably. “We would love to have more Latino artists here in the Conservatory,” one woman said, “but there doesn’t seem to be much interest. We would certainly welcome them and provide a space for them if they came.”

These artists mean well, but they just are not sure what to do, how to relate, and especially how to reach out to people who seem so different from them. One young man, a local artist and local eccentric, tried to engage the youth in art, which makes sense because the youth are much more accessible to the English-speaking population. They worked on a few art projects together, but that is about as far as any crossover has gone. The Conservatory
folks and the Latino community may as well live in separate towns, even though their
galleries and *tiendas* are right next to one another.

A final example that illustrates the ongoing balance between tensions and inroads
being made is El Centro Latino’s attempt to integrate the youth with local law enforcement.
The results have been mixed, and not terribly encouraging. ECL wanted to start a “Lunch
with A Cop” program, and began with the police chief coming by and speaking at one of the
youth meetings in February 2011. The youth director Angel had some concerns that Chief
Jackson would not be well received by the youth. He told me that many of the Latino youth
see authority as the enemy—understandable, especially for undocumented youth who must
avoid the law in order to stay in the United States. But this means that the youth and their
parents are reluctant to seek out the police if they need help from law enforcement.

Chief Jackson strolled into the group’s Friday meeting with the goal of discouraging
that attitude. He is tall, with an affable and booming voice. He is the first black police chief
Claxton has ever had, and has been chief since 2007. I was struck by the thought that if the
youth and Chief Jackson could give each other a chance, they would probably get along well.
He walked into the room with confidence, but once he heard the youth director introduce him
in Spanish, he wilted a little, looking uncomfortable.

“Hello,” he said. “I'm Chief Jackson. Do you speak English?”

After the youth nodded and gave their chorus of “yesses,” he relaxed and launched
into his spiel with practiced ease. The youth seemed to respond positively to him, answering
his questions and laughing at his jokes. He wanted the youth to know—and to report to their
parents—that he is “everyone's police chief. Documented or undocumented, it doesn't matter. You got a problem, you can come to me.”

At this, some of the youths nodded, but most just sat quietly. Chief Jackson opened the floor for questions, and Belinda, one of the senior girls, raised her hand to tell a story about something that happened to her and her father one night. She said they had been driving home and were behind the school, nearing her house when they were stopped by a cop. When her father rolled down the window, the cop began shouting at them asking, “Do you have bazookas? Do you have guns?” But the cop posed the questions to Belinda’s father, and her father could not answer because he does not speak English. Belinda stepped in and tried to act as interpreter for her father, but the cop would not let her speak. He yelled at her repeatedly to shut up and continued to question her father. She wanted to know what she and her father should have done differently.

After Chief Jackson heard this story, he looked disturbed. He asked Belinda if she knew who the officer in question was, and she said she did not. He said, “This is exactly the sort of thing that people should come to me about. I can't make things right if I don't know there is a problem.” Belinda smiled politely, but after Chief Jackson left that day, she told me it was absurd to think of her family seeking help from the police.

We moved on to other questions. Carmen, another senior girl, raised her hand and asked, “How do you decide where to set up the traffic stops?”

Chief Jackson replied, “Well, we have to look for a safe spot. We need a place that isn't on a curve and isn't on a hill. Otherwise we could be putting our officers in danger from getting hit, or other people in danger from rolling on the hills.”
Carmen pressed a little more, “But how do you decide where—like, what neighborhoods to set up in?”

“We go to the places where there are the most problems,” he said. And he rattled off statistics about how much drunk driving and speeding through various areas had decreased since the traffic stops had been instituted. I got the impression that he knew what the youth were really asking, but that he was also genuine in his belief that the department was targeting “problem areas.”

Finally, Laura's hand shot up and she asked what everyone really wanted to know. “Why do you target Hispanics?”

“Claxton is 50% Latino!” he said, half laughing, half defensively. “No matter where we put up a traffic stop it's going to look like we're targeting Hispanics! We don't set out specifically to target one population. And we don't set them up on Sundays when everyone is going to church.”

Most of the group expressed dubiousness at this claim. “We've been stopped on the way to church,” Belinda said, shaking her head. Others piped in in assent. “So have we.”

“Are you sure about this?” he asked. “We don't do it on Sundays. It may have been the highway patrol.”

Most of the youth did not look so sure, but they did not press the issue any further. Chief Jackson wrapped up his talk and the youth applauded him. As we left, the youth director asked me how I thought it went.

“All things considered, I thought it went pretty well. Chief Jackson and the youth were respectful towards each other and seemed to enjoy bantering back and forth.”
But some things did not add up, obviously. I believe Chief Jackson is not the “bad guy” here. I think he is doing his job in a difficult place and making difficult decisions. But the youth made it obvious that the Latino community feels victimized by the police force. I do not know enough about what actually goes on to say whether that accusation is warranted or not. However, there are enough bad feelings between the police force and the Latino community that suggest there is a rift that needs mending.

The youth director Angel drove Belinda and Carmen home, and I rode with them in the front seat. He asked the girls what they thought. They both grumbled a little bit about how they really had been stopped on the way to church, and Carmen added, “We know the difference between the police department and the highway patrol. We know the differences between their cars.”

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The above examples paint a picture of Claxton as a contested space, a space that is both shared and disputed by people on all sides of the cultural divide. While I would not describe the situation in Claxton as volatile, I would say that it is uneasy. And it is in these contested, uneasy waters that the Latino youth are trying to navigate, to make sense of their own lives and of their own multicultural identities. They also must contend with gang violence which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4. El Centro Latino’s youth program exists to provide resources to the youth and educational and social opportunities they may not have had otherwise. The program is meant to be a tool they can use to stay out of trouble and
plan for their futures. But the youth use it in another way—as a tool by which they claim and mold physical spaces in order to express themselves and perform their transnationalism.
CHAPTER 4

El Centro Latino Youth: Divided and Unified

North Carolina is becoming increasingly Latino. Recently published figures from the 2010 Census show that the Latino population in North Carolina has more than doubled in the past ten years, growing from 378,963 in 2000 to 800,120 in 2010. Much of this population is young; in fact Latinos make up the largest and youngest minority group in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center 2009: 1). Forty-one percent of all young Latinos age 16-25 are bilingual in Spanish and English. This number increases when referring to second generation—born in the United States—Latinos. Ninety-eight percent of native-born Latinos are proficient in English and 79% are also proficient in Spanish. A full 70% of young Latinos use “Spanglish,” a hybrid form of English and Spanish, when speaking with friends and family (Pew Hispanic Center 2009: 9-10). Often times they act as translators for their parents or for newcomers to the community, behaving as cultural brokers or ambassadors and facilitators of integration (Gill 2010: 147, 157). Jennifer Reynolds and Marjorie Orellana write, “The youth stand at the intersection both literally and figuratively as they serve as linguistic and cultural mediators within particular spaces of multilingualism” (2009: 212). El Centro Latino (ECL) youth are no exception to these statistics. In Chapter 5, I will argue that the youth all fall on a bilingual and a language choice continuum, language choice being an especially important part of their transnational performances.

Most of the youth come from one of three generations of immigrants: second generation, meaning they were born in America to immigrant parents; what is known as the
1.5 generation, those who were born in Latin America and emigrated as minors; and first generation, those who immigrated as older adolescents or adults (Reynolds and Orellana 2009: 214; Tovar and Mendoza-Denton 2009: 202). They often come to the United States because their parents believe they will have better opportunities here, only to discover that they can be stymied by their undocumented status or by the cost of higher education (DeJaeghere & McCleary 2010: 234). Many Latinos, especially Mexicans, are applying for dual citizenship for their children, so many of the second generation youth will be dual citizens of the United States and Mexico (EFE 2011, accessed February 2, 2012). They may be unlikely to experience the upward mobility that the European immigrants of previous centuries enjoyed, due in part to a backlash against illegal immigration and a backlash against the sheer number of Latino immigrants who are part of the current wave of immigration to the United States (Pew Hispanic Center 2009: 4). They may be unlikely to experience upward mobility due to current economic conditions as well. Economic insecurity is particularly acute for young Claxton Latinos. Many of the opportunities that brought their parents to Claxton in the first place have drastically diminished in the past few years, especially since the last chicken processing plant closed in 2008.

In Claxton the Latino population is not homogenous, having representatives from many national and personal backgrounds. The same is true of El Centro Latino (ECL) Youth Group. The youth come from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, California, and North Carolina. They have different generational and documentation statuses. It would be a mistake to make too many generalizations about them, given the differences among their backgrounds. This was illustrated to me in conversations I had with different
group members about how they self-identify. For example Laura, a seventeen year old senior girl who was born in Los Angeles, told me that as a second generation immigrant, she insists on being called American. “I was born here,” she said. “My family’s culture is important to me, and being Latino is an important part of me. But I am an American. Plus, it’s funny to see people’s reactions when I say I’m American when they think I’m about to say I’m Hispanic.”

Like Laura, some of the youth were born and spent their whole lives in the United States. Gill writes about a North Carolina middle school class that was having a discussion on immigration. The teacher asked the class if anyone had immigrant family members or ancestors. The students began answering, but they kept looking at the one Latino girl in the back of the room, waiting for her to say something. Finally she said, “My family is from Mexico, but I am not sure where. But I am not an immigrant. I am from North Carolina” (Gill 2010: 175-6).

Other youth firmly identify as Mexican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Guatemalan or Honduran. In their study about the civic identity-making of young adult Mexicans in the U.S., DeJaeghere and McCleary write about the different ways young Mexicans identify themselves. Some call themselves Latino or Hispanic. Some identify as Mexican or Mexican-American. Very few call themselves simply “American” (DeJaeghere & McCleary 2010: 235-236).

In this study self-identification depends on context, generation, and gender. Context refers to the words the youth use to describe themselves. Carmen, a seventeen year old Claxton girl, primarily identifies as Mexican. She does not call herself “American,” however,
she can identify the cultural influence that growing up in the United States has had on her: it is like having “two brains, a Mexican brain and an American brain.” She said, “I think in Spanish at home when I’m with my family, and I think in English at school. It depends on the situation. But sometimes the two brains get mixed up, and my American brain gets into an argument with my Mexican father.”

Carlos, a senior boy who migrated from Honduras as a very young child said that he calls himself Hispanic or Latino. For him, it is more important that people know he is not Mexican than that they know that he is Hondureño. I heard over and over again in my conversations with the youth that many of them will identify as Latino or Hispanic when they are talking to white people or black people, but they will use the terms Mexicano/a, Nicaragüense, and Salvadoreño/a when speaking to other Latinos.

These youth are also divided by generational differences. As I have mentioned before, the youth in this group are either first, 1.5, or second generation immigrants. The generational differences can have a big impact on ECL youths’ lives, most obviously in access to education. Therefore before discussing generational difference, an understanding of Latino youths’ relationship to the American school system must be established.

In her article on the integration of Mexican girls into Southwestern schools, Elizabeth Meador writes, “Schooling in the United States has long been a socializing force that legitimizes inequality through practices such as tracking, culturally biased curriculum, pedagogy that privileges middle-class discourse patterns, and funding inequities” (2005: 149). For example Arizona House Bill 2281, which was passed in January 2011, led to the dismantling of an ethnic studies school program in Tucson. The bill prohibits Arizona school
districts and charter schools from including programs or classes in their curricula that

“1. Promote the overthrow of the United States government.

2. Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.

3. Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.

4. Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals” (House Bill 2281).

In December 2012 the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal, who helped write House Bill 2281, declared the Tucson Unified School District’s Mexican-American Studies program to be in violation of the law. He explains, “To tell young kids that they can't get ahead, that they're victims in a country in which Barack Obama's president, it defies what we know. We know that you can engage in America. You can get ahead. That these kids can succeed” (Martin 2012, NPR website accessed February 17 2012). An administrative law judge agreed with Huppenthal and enforced the law by ruling that the state could withhold ten percent of the district’s funding until it complied which it has done (Billeaud 2011, website accessed February 17 2012).

Adelita Grijalva, a Tucson school board member who supports the Mexican-American Studies program, claims that their courses were not out of compliance with the law and that they did not promote overthrow of the US government or resentment toward a race of people. However, she says “one of the reasons why these programs were initially created was a response to the mandates of No Child Left Behind, to basically address the issue that minority children have lower academic success than their non-minority counterparts.” She adds that the data show students in the Mexican-American Studies program were more likely
to attend and graduate from college and seek higher education than those who were not in these programs (Martin 2012, accessed February 17 2012). If Grijalva is correct, House Bill 2281 is certainly an example of “a socializing force that legitimizes inequality” (Meador 2005: 149).

Latino youth experience problems in schools because of systemic inequality as in the case above, but also because of language barriers, cultural conflict, and the lack of a model in a parent who has successfully navigated the system before (Gill 2010: 164). As a result, Latinos continue to have the lowest high school completion rates and are overall the least educated of any major group in the United States (Fry 2002: 1). A 2002 Pew Hispanic Center report asserts that on average, Latino males average 10.6 years of schooling, compared with 13.3 years for white males and 12.2 for black males (Fry 2002: 1).

Despite the problems present in secondary education for Latino youth, all children, documented or undocumented, have not only the right to attend school but are required to attend by law (Plyler v. Doe 1982). However, nobody has the guaranteed right to higher education, and this is where generational difference becomes particularly important. The 1.5 generation youths grew up surrounded by the discourses of equal opportunity and the American Dream. But these youths are often stymied by their documentation status. Enrollment policies for undocumented students vary by state and by institution. Gill describes the North Carolina education policy roller coaster of the past decade; laws granting and revoking admittance for undocumented immigrants were passed almost annually. People could not be sure if they would be allowed to stay in school or to apply the next year (2010: 164-167). As it stands now, undocumented people can attend college at two and four year
institutions but must pay higher out-of-state tuition rates. North Carolina House Bill 1183, which would have allowed in-state tuition be granted to undocumented immigrants, was fervently shot down by the state legislature in 2005 (Gill 2010: 165).

This means that undocumented North Carolina youth must fight to attend college and may fight hard and still be barred. Several ECL students as of January 2012 have been accepted into local colleges and universities and find themselves trying to piece together enough scholarship money to be able to attend. Their families cannot afford to send them to school, and at out-of-state tuition rates, these youth have a significant amount of financial aid to find. This is a common story for many undocumented youth.

The first generation youth are those who immigrated in adolescence or adulthood. They have all of the problems of the 1.5 generation, but these problems are compounded by age. They have passed the age of socialization when picking up a second language is fairly easy for children. They are shunted into ESL classes taught by teachers who often do not speak Spanish. They are treated punitively for speaking Spanish in school, though that is the language in which they are best able to express themselves. They have big dreams too. During a summer anti-gang workshop, I listened while the youth went around the room and talked about their dreams for the future. I listened especially hard to the first generation youth, curious about what they would say. “I want to be a lawyer,” said Simon from El Salvador. Everyone—including Simon—laughed at this impossible dream.

Second generation youth were born in the United States and, despite some grumbling by anti-immigration activists, they are United States citizens under the 14th Amendment. This means they qualify for government benefits, from food stamps to federal financial aid for
college, unlike their undocumented counterparts. They cannot be denied admission to college by their immigration status, and they can receive in-state tuition. They can legally work and are protected by anti-discrimination laws in the workplace.

None of the above means that second generation Latino youth have the same access to resources and the same opportunities as their non-Latino peers. In her study of 10 Mexican-origin border families, Guadalupe Valdés writes that one noteworthy problem is that Mexican parents do not always understand the school system that their children are trying to navigate. They are often embarrassed by their lack of understanding and say nothing while teachers assume their silence indicates that the parents do not care about their children’s education (1996: xiv). In addition Mariella Espinoza-Herold argues that, while Latino parents may have a different perception of what constitutes a “good education”—namely that it must include the attainment of both academic and cultural wisdom—they are by no means uninterested in their children’s academic education. She writes, “Current educational policies must move beyond the assumption that there is only one universal model of parental and community involvement and a monocultural curriculum and pedagogy” (Espinoza-Herold 2007: 274).

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1 Undocumented Children and Public Benefits: “Undocumented children are eligible to receive some public benefits but not others. They are legally entitled to public education from kindergarten through high school; to some emergency medical care; and to child and school nutrition programs under the Woman, Infants and Children (WIC) legislation. They are not eligible for many other federal programs that provide a safety net for children, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the food stamp program), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), non-emergency Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Also, undocumented students are not eligible for federal Pell grants for postsecondary education and in most states are not offered in-state tuition at public colleges and universities” (Fry and Passel 2009: 2).
Cynthia Bejarano explains that Latino youths’ “success” in the school system “depend on the amount of social capital they acquire,” and that “Many of these youth, therefore, have a disadvantage compared to others who have social and cultural access (i.e., knowledge of American culture and job and educational opportunities)” (2005: 14-15).

There are forces at work beyond documentation status that often keep these youths out of college and in low-paying jobs, namely laissez faire racism.

A common consequence of limited access to education for those of all three generational statuses—though more pronounced for undocumented youth—as Gill points out, is dropping out:

“Teachers acknowledge a contradiction in a system that invests in students for twelve years before cutting them off from further education. The dropout rate of foreign-born students is high nationwide; in 2000, nearly 25 percent of teen school dropouts were born outside the United States” (2010: 171).

Similarly Cuadros writes of boys on his soccer team who left school because they just did not see the point in staying in and trying to make good grades. What could good grades or a high school diploma do for them in the future if they could not go to college or get a good job (Cuadros 2006:). Dropping out is risky for young people. Dropouts are at greater risk for drug use, gang involvement, depression, and a host of other negative consequences (Gill 2010: 171). But the consequences do not stop with a single individual. Education is important because it allows immigrants and future generations to improve their economic standing.

“Education and its proven link to upward mobility is a critical step in incorporating immigrants and their children into North Carolina communities and giving Latinos voices in important policy decisions made on local, state, and national levels” (Gill 2010: 163).
The youth do not discuss their generational differences with each other very much. It is the silent divider in our group. A few of the youth are quite candid about their status. Others I know about through discussions with Angel. Some, I am not sure about their generational statuses at all. Regardless, we all go out of our way to avoid discussing what makes undocumented Carmen’s future options so different from documented Laura’s. Right now, they are on more-or-less equal terms, protected by their roles as minors and students. It is after they graduate from high school that these differences will manifest themselves as they struggle with the questions of the future.

Gender also plays a role in these questions about the future. Cammarota looks at “gendered pathways” of resistance, comparing young Latinas’ and Latinos’ responses to education. He writes,

“How young Latinas/os assess the role of education in their resistances—whether they perceive education as helpful or hopeless—has much to do with the intertwining of multiple sociocultural forces defining their societal positions and thus the uniqueness of their struggles to impose their own definitions of identity and status. (Cammarota 2004: 53-54).

He finds that Latinas view getting a good education as a form of resistance; they see it as a way out—a way of becoming somebody who is not bound by stereotype and economic circumstance. In fact, the number of Latinas nationally who graduate high school and go on to college is rising. In the past 20 years, they have become “higher achievers” than Latino boys, though they still have much higher attrition rates (26 %) than girls of other backgrounds (Cammarota 2004: 53, 55).

But though Latinas have a more favorable view of education than boys, there are still forces that keep them from succeeding in school. For example, Cammarota writes,
“Latina mothers sometimes provide their daughters with mixed messages that simultaneously tell them to become self-reliant yet place primary importance on becoming mujeres de hogar (women of the home). Gándara (1995:92) also suggests that the ‘peer culture’ of some Latinas, which places higher values on pursuing the traditional gender roles of ‘girlfriend, wife, and mother’ over professional or career success, undermines or attenuates their educational achievement. Thus, the real challenge facing Latinas’ academic success lies in managing the contradiction between gender advancement through educational attainment and the preservation of gendered cultural norms.” (2004: 55)

This conflict is evident in many of the young Latina women I know from the ECL group. Carmen, for example, spoke fervently and poetically about her passion for education in several of our conversations. She wants to “be somebody,” and she has wanted it since she was a little girl in Mexico, trying to learn English from the books her father brought her whenever he came back to Mexico from the United States. She wants to get an education in the United States because, “America is the home of my educational dreams and Mexico is where my dreams for my family live. … Spanish is the language of my heart, English is the language of my mind. …I want to learn in America and then go back to my hometown with that knowledge. I want to show everyone that I made it! And then I want to make my home a better place.”

When I ask her what she wants from life, she talks about her education. But when I ask her what is most important, she says family: family who have both supported her in her dreams and held her back, and who will probably continue to do so; the family that she wants to have someday as a wife and mother; the family that she does not ever want to leave, but that she will probably have to leave in order to go to college. Those “two brains” in her head are often in conflict.
Boys, especially the more recent immigrants who are still in ESL classes, tend to feel marginalized at school and around town. People expect them to fail or to join gangs, and they are targeted by law enforcement and the school administration. Like the soccer players in Cuadros’ book, many question the need to stay in school when they expect they are going to have limited opportunities in the future. The boys in the ECL group are probably doing better than many boys in their school. They attend class regularly and come to group meetings. They are making efforts to stay out of gangs. But they definitely talk less often about college, less often about school than their female counterparts.

In May of 2011 I ran into a teacher who asked Angel and me if we had heard from Ivan. Apparently he was supposed to come in to school and make up a test. The teacher had gotten assurances from Ivan that he would be there and even sent him text messages to remind him, but Ivan did not show up. I have never talked to Ivan about this because I did not want to put him on the spot, but I imagine he did not feel like this make up test was going to be important enough to him to come into school on an off day.

The boys also face interesting problems when it comes to fights. Many of these boys come from cultures where physical fighting with other boys is accepted as the norm. But at Claxton High School, there is a no-tolerance policy for fighting. It does not matter the reason or the justification for the fight. If a boy gets into a fight, he gets in trouble; the school calls the cops; suspension is the usual punishment. One day Daniel, an 18-year-old, recent immigrant from El Salvador got into a fight with a black student. Daniel was defending a smaller Latino boy who was being picked on by the other student. Daniel got suspended for a few days and placed on probation. He did really well avoiding fights for a few months, but
eventually got kicked out of school for fighting again. He is now employed and trying to get his GED.

Boys like Daniel have to work hard to stay out of gangs. Gangs are a powerful draw for boys who feel out of place and marginalized. Cammarota describes the cycle that can ensue: “Many male participants [of my study] spoke of how they were policed, contained, and treated as criminal threats in multiple locations, including their schools and neighborhoods. A common response to criminal treatment at school was to resist and cut class” (2004: 54).

Daniel did not drop out, he was kicked out. Regardless, we know from Gill that young Latinos who are not in school are high-risk for gang involvement (2010: 163).

Some of the ECL boys were members of gangs or peripherally involved in gangs before joining the group. Gang involvement is a risk for girls too—they can be recruited as drug dealers or could have a romantic relationship with a gang member. However, boys are at a much greater risk, and most of ECL Youth Group’s grant money is earmarked to prevent gang involvement among these boys. ECL boys have successfully avoided gang involvement for the past year as members of the group. But that does not always stop them from being treated as criminals and targeted by the school administration and law enforcement, making them less likely to stay in school.

I have established some of the ways in which these youth are different from one another, but what brings them together? What keeps them coming back to ECL youth group meetings? What unifies them?
Summer 2011 was a time of action for the youth group. There were teenagers flooding the offices of El Centro Latino every day, working on their Clean Up the World projects, planning a performance for National Night Out\(^2\), and sometimes doing summer reading work and escaping the heat by being indoors. Angel and I conversed with the youth on a wide range of topics during the summer. One day he and I got into an argument. He had asked me previously to look for places we could take the youth—museums and similar places—where we would find Latino achievements represented. It was proving difficult, but I had found some celebrations surrounding National Hispanic Heritage Month from September 15 - October 15, once the kids were back in school.

I was reporting my findings to Angel when he cut me off. “National Hispanic Heritage Month is a joke,” he said. “The word Hispanic was invented by the American government in the 1970s so that they could group us all together and deal with us more easily.” He sounded bitter so I just let him continue. “What connects me as a Peruvian with a Mexican besides language? It isn’t culture. My culture is very different.” I understood his point. Americans are quick to lump all Latinos together, and the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” encourage that grouping. The American media also encourage this grouping when they say things like “Hispanics/Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States.” Angel’s point in that moment was that Latinos/Hispanics do not make up a single ethnic group. But in his frustration, he was prone to hyperbole and would argue for extremes when, in less-frustrated times, he made the best of this arbitrary grouping by his

\(^2\) The youth won a local grant to carry out an environmental project in Claxton with Clean Up the World. National Night Out is an anti-crime block party that Claxton participates in every year. See Chapter 5 for details on these projects.
work with the youth group. It was he, after all, who had asked me to find examples of Latino role models for the youth. I stammered something indistinct about there being “some commonalities, some common experiences,” and Angel, rightly, scoffed at me.

Just then, Ivan, a 19 year old Hondureño walked into the room. “Ivan, what do you say you are?” Angel asked. “Are you Latino or are you Hondureño?”

“Well, I’m both,” he said, flinging himself into a chair.

“But what makes you Latino?” Angel asked. “What makes you the same as someone from Mexico.”

Ivan hesitated, “Well, we speak Spanish. And some of the food is the same.”

Angel pressed, “Well, Mary here thinks you are the same as Mexicans or Salvadorans. She thinks you’re all the same.”

Ivan looked horrified, and I was suddenly furious. I had spent months building rapport with these young people, and I was afraid Angel was going to destroy it all in a moment of existential frustration.

“No,” I said. “No.” I said, pleading with Ivan to understand. “I know you aren’t the same. I know better than a lot of non-Latinos that you are not all the same. I’ve been hanging out with you for months, haven’t I?”

Ivan smiled, “Yes, and we are not all the same. But we have some similarities.” He struggled for a little while to articulate what he meant. “I mean, we have to stick together, you know?”

Even in his struggle to explain, Ivan got to the point. The grouping of Latinos is arbitrary. It is something the United States government began doing in the 1970s to track
people from South and Latin America in the census. Gill explains that the word “‘Latino’ homogenizes groups that are stratified in many Latin American countries according to race
and class …When people from these countries immigrate to the United States, they become
part of broader racial classifications that can be confusing or contradictory” (2010: 153-154).
Angel has a valid and important gripe. But the kids in our group do not come together
because of some arbitrary designation by the U.S. government or the media. They come
together because in a society that oppresses them it is a strategic maneuver that helps them
create social capital in-group and better circumvent or take on the oppression they face from
the outside. To use Spivak’s phrase, they “strategically essentialize” (1988: 420) themselves
to advance their interests, to resist oppression, to create spaces for themselves where before
there were none. “We have to stick together, you know?”

Within the group the youths’ relationships among themselves can be problematic and
tangled. Bejarano says,

“The borderlands create stumbling blocks for Latina/o youths and the identity
roads they travel as part of their borderlands experiences. The negotiation
process of these youth crossing between Mexican and American cultures,
along with their youthful experiences and respective popular cultures, makes
their tensions and identity-seeking cumbersome” (125).

Their relationships are fraught with usual teenage anxieties. There are fights and tears. But
they constantly refer to the group as a “family.” There is no doubt that they feel a sense of
unity as a group and with other Latinos. We will see more examples of this unity in Chapter
5.

Since 2009 it has been illegal for undocumented people in North Carolina to obtain
driver’s licenses. This means that many of the youth’s parents do not drive. And those who
do, legally or otherwise, work and cannot pick up their children who have missed the bus due to youth meetings. As a result, I often drove several students home from the high school or ECL after meetings. At first I made many last-minute and entirely missed turns because I did not understand the directions the youth gave me. The youth do not know the names of the streets in Claxton, the town where many of them grew up. Or perhaps they know them, but they do not use them. This is a point of pride for them. They navigate using landmarks that mean something to them: neighborhoods, friends houses, tiendas, ECL, and grocery stores. I have heard variations of the phrase, “You don’t know the street names, but you know where your best friend’s house is,” almost every time I’ve been in the car with several of these young people.

During their Clean Up the World campaign, the youth had a clean up day. They stuffed their pockets with rolls of orange trash bags and set off to pick up trash around town in groups. Angel and I tracked the groups in his car so that we could catch up with them and take pictures for our grantors to encourage them to continue funding the program. The second group we were trying to photograph had covered nearly a mile on foot, and we were having trouble finding them. Angel was trying to get their location from one of the boys via cell phone but he was not having any luck. Their directions—“pretty far from the school” and “behind that gas station” and “past Luz’s house”—were not getting us any closer. Finally Angel asked one of the boys to hike over to the nearest intersection and read the street sign to us. We had been driving in circles for about 15 minutes, and it turns out we were only about two blocks away. But Angel and I had been navigating in a completely different reality of streets and blocks from the group which collectively did not use these prescribed methods of
navigation. The thought of reading the street signs had never occurred to the youth. Instead, as Angel said, “They move through their Claxton. Not White Claxton. Not their parents’ Claxton. Their Claxton.” Beyond all their differences, these youths have and continue to successfully build a culture which unifies them and makes them distinct. The next chapter documents some of the ways in which these young people move through and create their Claxton and beyond.
CHAPTER 5
Making Spaces

In this chapter I am demonstrating that ECL youth create or claim space as their own by going into that space and performing their identity, be it dancing or goofing off while collecting trash around town with the stated intent of being seen by their community, by hollering “viva la raza” at the top of their lungs on a bus in Washington DC, communicating online, or even by speaking Spanglish.

Late in May of 2011 Angel, the President of the ECL board, 28 teenagers, and I arrived at the MegaBus stop in Washington DC for a two-day field trip around the nation’s capital. I was excited for the youth, but worried that we were going to lose someone or that law enforcement would target our band of rambunctious, obviously Latino teenagers. I feared the cops would see their baggy pants, back-facing caps, and heavily logoed shirts and think: “gang.” I was concerned the youth would be targeted for their brown skin and for speaking Spanish. Some of our boys were 19 and undocumented, no longer protected by their status as minors. Angel even told me—only half joking—that since I am white, I should go in front everywhere we planned to go like an ambassador. We kept any venue which might require identification to enter off our agenda. We carried letters written by ECL’s executive director and the president of the board that stated the group was in DC for an educational visit, and that we were willing to cooperate with the police. The letters had contact information for the executive director and were intended to help facilitate any contact with law enforcement.
We never had to use these letters. We never got into trouble with anyone. I think we were all a little surprised by how few ripples our little group made in multicultural, multiethnic Washington DC. The youth were surprised too, to see people who looked like them everywhere in this big, and as Laura calls it, “white” city.

On our first full day, we took several taxis to Union Station and climbed into the big, red double decker tour busses that cart tourists around town. The youth all immediately went up to the top and spilled out into the breeze and hot sun. We started off, and quickly the youth noticed that there were brown-skinned people milling about along streets, in front of museums, tugging rolling briefcases behind them, dressed in suits and in touristy garb. The excitement was palpable. Outgoing Ivan first took up the call “Viva la Raza” in solidarity to anyone we passed who might possibly be Latino. Some people stared back placidly. Others scowled. Some—several Filipinos, I think—were confused. But the youth received enough
smiles and waves and return calls that soon at least half of them were hollering and waving too. The game lasted for two days straight. We were probably driving the few other tourists who had squeezed into the top of the bus with us absolutely nuts. We were probably making the white tourists on the streets a little uncomfortable. But I never could bring myself to ask them to settle down. Every face was alight with the realization that *there are people like me here in DC!*  

A few weeks later I asked Laura, a second generation 17-year-old, about the game, and she laughed as she remembered:

> “When you think of Washington DC it seems like a really white city, and when you see other races, it’s like: ‘Wow, they exist over here?’ I dunno, it was just really awesome to see other Hispanic people there, you know? You see Hispanics [in Claxton], but they aren’t really successful, you know? [There are] Hispanic people who were born here who haven’t done anything at all. And it would make me wonder, when I was little, you know, like why should I be somebody in life? These are my role models, you know? Why should I be someone? … Then I saw the Washington people, you know, like the people in the museums. And they were actually working. And I was like, ‘Oh my God, I need to move over here.’”

This sentiment was reflected in conversations I had with other youth. They were excited to see people who looked like them in a space where they expected the exact opposite. They claimed the space on top of that double decker bus and then they claimed Washington DC by practicing what DeJaeghere and McCleary call “discourses and practices of inclusion” (2010: 236) by grouping themselves with other Latinos in Washington DC. However, they also practiced discourse of exclusion, by excluding the white tourists who sat on top of the bus with us, and again in the following incident.
As our bus passed by the Museum of the American Indian in the late afternoon, there was a troupe of performers standing, dressed in sarapes and rebozos. Ivan spotted them first. “Oye, hay Mexicanos!” He shouted to the rest of our group. They began screaming—in order to make sure their voices covered the distance—“VIVA LA RAZA! VIVA LA RAZA!” The performers turned and waved and bowed, smiling at the youth. The bus started up again, and we passed by the sign for the museum. The youth realized where we were for the first time. Ivan gasped and pointed to the sign. “Ellos Son Indios” he said in an intentionally dramatic, low voice, using the pejorative term for Indians. “Son Indios,” he cried louder, waiting for it to sink in—they had accidentally hailed Indians! The horror! Never mind that many of the youth probably have indigenous backgrounds. DeJaeghere and McCleary explain that these sorts of inclusive and exclusive discourses reflect the struggle of young immigrants who are themselves excluded while trying to find and build spaces for their transnational selves (2010: 41).

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When we returned to Claxton from Washington DC, the youth still had most of the summer ahead of them and they immediately started working on several projects. The first project was an environmental campaign for which the youth won a $1000 grant from the Alces Foundation in conjunction with Clean Up the World, a community-based environmental campaign that works to mobilize local groups’ environmental projects (Clean Up the World, website accessed February 2012). Two of the group members—Carmen and Belinda—actually defended the grant proposal themselves in a conference call with the Alces Foundation. I listened as they spoke about wanting to use the money to help clean up
Claxton, yes, but what they wanted to do most was work to dispel stereotypes about young Latinos in Claxton. “[Non-Latinos] think we’re all dirty,” Carmen explained to me later. “We want to show them that we want a nice town, and we want them to see us making it nicer for all of us.”

The youth spent most of the summer working on the planning phase of the project, making posters and other promotional materials, and creating a photo-documentary which chronicled places around town that needed to be cleaned up. The action phase occurred in three parts during the fall.

On September 21, 2011 the youth went door-to-door around town, promoting their clean-up day, inviting people to a promotional fair, and explaining the goals of their project to residents. The fair happened downtown two days later in partnership with the Artists’ Conservatory. The Conservatory allowed ECL youth to set up tables and projector screens in the gazebo outside and inside the photography gallery. Friends, neighbors, and UNC students came to hear the youth speak about the project and see the video they made.

On October 1, a chilly, sunny Saturday, 25 ECL group members arrived at the Liaison office at 7 o’clock in the morning to begin the final part of their environmental campaign described briefly in Chapter 4. Armed with orange trash bag and bundled up for the cooler weather, the youth split into teams and set out to pick up trash on the streets downtown and in

![Figure 3: ECL Youth picking up trash around town](image)
neighborhoods all over Claxton. When they gathered several hours later at a local park, they had collected twenty bags of trash, and one group even thought to keep a separate bag for recycling. They celebrated with a picnic of homemade quesadillas and empanadas prepared by a mother of two of the youth group members.

During the summer the group also prepared for National Night Out (NNO), which is, according to the NNO website, “a unique crime/drug prevention event sponsored by the National Association of Town Watch” designed to “heighten crime and drug prevention awareness; generate support for and participation in local anticrime programs; strengthen neighborhood spirit and police-community partnership; and send a message to criminals letting them know that neighborhoods are organized and fighting back” (NNO website accessed February 2012). In Claxton the event takes the form of a block party. Local organizations set up booths, ECL passes out hot dogs and snow cones, and neighbors come out to interact with each other, play games, and enjoy the music. The participants are often over half Latino because ECL heavily promotes the event, but white and black neighbors, especially those who are involved in the fire and police departments, the Artists’ Conservatory, downtown businesses, and other local nonprofits also turn out.

The youth were part of the 2011 NNO entertainment. Nine of the young people spent hours every week preparing and practicing a dance routine under the intense summer sun. They choreographed it in parts, first dancing the *bachata* to “Te Extraño” by Xtreme, an American *bachata* band with members of Dominican descent; they borrowed the middle

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1 *Bachata* is both a dance and a type of music that originated in the Dominican Republic but which has spread throughout the Latin world.
dance, a hip-hop and Latin-inspired routine to Nelly’s “Party People,” from their high school’s dance team; and they finished with LMFAO’s electro pop “Party Rock Anthem,” using the dance from the band’s music video. On August 2 they came to the block party dressed in a rainbow of colored t-shirts and performed to a cheering crowd of their parents, neighbors, and fellow youth.

In terms of strengthening Claxton’s “neighborhood spirit and police-community partnership,” NNO was a bust; cops showed up armed and in uniform with body language that suggested they were pulling security duty rather than trying to build bridges with the youth. It did not matter, however, because the youth stole the show. Their town saw them in a “white public space” (Reynolds and Orellana 2009) performing a dance that drew from multiple languages and cultures.

In the above examples youth are performing their transnational identity in spaces around Claxton and beyond. Language is an important aspect of their transnational identities, and, therefore, language choice is often part of space-making. For example, they use the phrase “Viva la Raza” on top of the bus to recognize all Latinos in Washington or choose songs with Spanish and English lyrics for their National Night Out dance performance. There is plenty of linguistic literature that examines the connection between language and identity and the connection varies by group. Saskia Stoessel investigated the role of social networks
in language maintenance and shift in a 2002 study of ten educated, bilingual, immigrant women in the United States from Greece, Germany, Poland, Japan, Taiwan, Argentina, Spain, Finland, China, and Peru. She found, unsurprisingly, that women who maintained their first language (L1) had a local social network in which they used their L1 regularly and/or were deeply invested in a social network in their home country (Stoessel 2002: 106). All of the women had different levels of emotional connection with their L1. Some of the women had a profound emotional connection to and identified strongly with their L1. They also tended to maintain fluency in their L1. Others identified more strongly with English. One woman, for example, saw her L1 as the language of her childhood and English, her L2, as the language of her present and adulthood. She was less interested in maintaining her L1 than some of the other women, and was shifting to English (Stoessel 2002: 110-111). For the women in this study, identity was often an important factor that led them to maintain their L1 or shift to L2.

Abdelâi Bentahila and Eirlys E. Davies’ study on language shift in Morocco shows that identity and language are not always necessarily connected. For example, the Berber community in Morocco in 1992 was shifting to Arabic and rapidly losing Berber. However Bentahila and Davies conclude “the ability to speak Berber is … evidently not felt to be a necessary condition for self-identification as a Berber; and, indeed, this view was upheld by 83% of the informants, who replied negatively to the question ‘Is it necessary to speak Berber to be a Berber?’” (1992: 202).

The above two studies show that language can be an important marker of identity, or not, and that whether or not a language is connected with identity in the minds of the group
in question can have an effect on whether that language is maintained. ECL youth often demonstrate that language is an important marker of identity for them, but it is neither solely Spanish nor English that is the marker, but both languages, often taking the form of “Spanglish.” The youths use this term to describe their speaking a combination of the two languages together in the course of a single conversation. I should note that while the youth often speak Spanglish to each other, most of them are functionally bilingual in both languages, meaning they can carry out a conversation with monolingual English or Spanish speakers, and they do this every day with their parents, teachers, and monolingual peers.

In terms of Spanglish, there are two things that could be happening linguistically. Gloria Anzaldúa writes about embracing a “New Mestiza Consciousness” that accepts Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, Spanglish and others as legitimate languages (1983: 57, 77). The ECL youths’ Spanglish could be one such language with its own grammatical and syntactic rules. Or the youth could be code switching. Code switching is “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange or passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” (Gumperz 1982: 59)—in other words, switching back and forth between English and Spanish. This can happen in several ways; the two most common ways that ECL youth appear to employ code switching is by beginning a sentence in English or Spanish and then ending the sentence in the other language, or by using mostly English or Spanish and then inserting occasional words—often nouns—from the other language into their sentences.

I am more inclined to believe that the youth are engaging in code switching than speaking in a separate language with its own rules. I think the idea of “switching” better describes the ways they move between the languages, however, I am not a linguist, and this
is not a linguistic thesis. I am more concerned with the ways in which the youth create space through language choice. To clarify, I am using the word “Spanglish” to describe all the types of transitions and switching that the youth engage in, because that is the word they use to describe their speech; Spanglish is an emic term.

When I first started spending time with the ECL youth, their bilingualism made a distinct impression on me. Though I grew up in a Greek-American bicultural environment, language choice was not an important marker of identity for my family, except in certain contexts—mainly at church and in the use of a few types of words like exclamations, insults, and in cooking. Even to each other, my grandparents spoke English. I had never been around a group of people who regularly spoke two languages and who could transition between two languages the way ECL youth do. I should not have been so surprised. More than half of the world is functionally bilingual. It is monolingualism that is in the minority (Grosjean 2010: 13-15). But as someone living in a country that often seems proud of its staunch monolingual bias, ECL youths’ bilingualism seemed unique to me.

My first field trip with the group was to El Foro Latino (The Latino Youth Issues Forum) with El Pueblo in Greenville, North Carolina which discouraged youth smoking among other things. To get there we piled into a 24 passenger rented minibus. It was hot and stuffy. We could not open the windows because it was raining. Condensation built up on the windows, melted down, and clouded over again, so I could not even see outside. Instead, I closed my eyes and listened to the conversations; the language washed over me. Spanish

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2 See, for example, the 2010 television ad (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEPxKIfTyII) by Alabama gubernatorial candidate Tim James who argued for ending the practice of offering driver’s license exams in twelve languages, saying, “This is Alabama. We speak English. If you want to live here, learn it.”
words jumped in the middle of otherwise English sentences. Sentences that began in English finished in Spanish, and vice versa. Over time, I began to understand that language choice is an important manifestation of the ECL youths’ transnational identity. The youth express the importance of Spanglish to me in conversations and interviews.

Laura, a seventeen year old senior whose family is from Guatemala, but who was born in Los Angeles, speaks of her father’s insistence on his children learning and speaking English and the value she places on maintaining Spanish. She says she came to Claxton when she was six years old and did not know any English.

“The first year I went [to school in Claxton] I was in ESL until I learned to speak English better. … The elementary school said, ‘You’ve got to learn English. And my dad said, ‘You’ve got to learn English more than Spanish so you can be somebody in the future.’”

Laura’s father is not alone in his beliefs about English. A study on language shift among Tamil communities in Sri Lanka show parents encouraging their children to adopt the hegemonic language while discouraging the children’s first language (L1), because they believe doing so will give their children more opportunities (Canagarajah 2008).

As a result of her father’s and her school’s emphasis on English, Laura says she now thinks in English and that it has become her primary language. She confesses this makes her sad; she regrets the partial loss of Spanish. She brightens when she tells a story about her father reading a Bible story in Spanish to her every night and then making her read it back to him. She says she thinks that is why she can speak Spanish with some fluency while many of her friends do not speak it as well or speak it with an accent.

“Sometimes the teachers will ask us, ‘When you have your own kids, what is going to be their fluent language?’ And, well, I want to keep the Spanish
heritage, so I was like, I would stay with Spanish. Because if I’m losing my Spanish right now, like the whole world is probably going to lose Spanish! I want to teach my kids to speak Spanish and [they can] learn English at school or something. But Spanish at home only.”

Laura is doing what she can to maintain her Spanish now. She takes a Spanish class at school for native speakers and speaks Spanish/Spanglish with her friends in fourth block (at Claxton High School, the day’s classes are divided into several blocks). But it can be difficult:

“I have first block Spanish, and the rest of the classes are English. So I go from my house in English, to Spanish, to English. And sometimes the [Spanish] teacher will be like, ‘En Español, Laura.’ And when I try to explain [to] her things, I try to say in English. And she says, ‘No, no, no, no, say in Spanish.’ But I don’t know how to say it in Spanish!”

“Then I go to second block and I’ll be speaking Spanish, and people will say, ‘Why are you saying [words in Spanish]?’ And I’ll be like, you got to understand, I just came from Spanish class! Then in fourth block I sit with Hispanic people—four people—and I talk to them only in Spanish. I talk to them in English, but that is rare.”

I ask her if it is hard to switch back and forth. “Yes, for me it is. Because if I have been speaking too much Spanish and then I go back to English, it’s hard.”

Carmen, a seventeen-year-old senior girl who is the president of the ECL youth group similarly finds herself dividing up her English and her Spanish:

“When talking to someone who speaks Spanish and English, I will speak Spanglish. Even though they are bilingual, I will speak to them in mostly Spanish, one, because I feel more confident and two, because my family is always saying you should never forget where you come from. And you should never forget your first language is Spanish. The third reason would be, even though my dream was to learn English, I still feel Mexican. I am Mexican.”

In this passage we see that Carmen strongly connects Spanish with her Mexican identity, but English also has a place:
“I do both languages. But sometimes I think like in the American way. …When I’m home I think Mexican. But when I’m out—when I’m on the streets—I have to think English because that’s where I am … I have to act the right way. Some liberal\(^3\) stuff I think as an American because Mexican is really strict. At home, you have a curfew. But in the American way, you can do more activities. So I try to balance that because I like to do a lot of activities.”

The youth often must divide their language use in this way; they cannot speak Spanglish, because the people to whom they are speaking would not understand. In this case, Carmen uses Spanish at home and English when she is away from home while Laura uses English at home with her siblings and Spanish in a particular class and with certain friends. When the youth are speaking to me they use mostly English because they know I communicate best in English. When they speak to Angel, they use Spanish because that is his preference. Sometimes the choice of which language to use depends on the person to whom the youth are speaking. However, even when speaking to a particular monolingual person there is not necessarily a strict division between the two languages. Carmen explains:

“Sometimes the conflict is when [I], thinking as an American, and my parents, thinking in Mexican, [try] to solve a problem…I try to think Mexican, but I have an education in American. …Being bilingual gives you benefits, but it’s also difficult because people expect you to think the way they do, and sometimes, you have to translate. … I don’t want to argue with my parents like Americans argue with their families. But sometimes I think the same way those Americans do! My parents want me to think as Mexicans…Here at home, sometimes I’m talking to my Dad in Spanish and some word comes out in English. And sometimes he gets mad. He says, ‘Oh, you’re speaking English.’ And I say, “Dad, it just happens. It’s not conscious.”

\(^3\) In the use of the word “liberal” Carmen is referring to her understanding of American culture as being more permissive than Mexican culture, hence the mention of curfews and activities outside the home.
When the youth are talking to each other or to other people who speak both English and Spanish, they typically default to Spanglish. The exception to this practice is when the youth are talking about a subject that they associate heavily with one language or the other. For example, the youth often talk about soccer in Spanish, in person and online, posting “GOL!” on their Facebook pages whenever their teams score. I saw one online conversation about soccer that went on for 110 comments, almost entirely in Spanish, including posts from people like Laura whose primary language is English. For the most part, however, they speak Spanglish to each other, and doing so is an obvious relief. These youth, for most of their school day, are required to speak only English. At home, many of them are encouraged to speak only Spanish. On Friday afternoons when we have our meetings, they burst into the ESL classroom talking loudly in rapid Spanglish, finally able to speak with others who are bilingual.

I have been discussing language choice, and to speak Spanglish is a choice, but choosing which words to say in which language and when is not necessarily a conscious decision. We know from linguistic literature that this is common in casual conversation:

“to ask a bilingual to report directly on the incidence of particular switched forms in a conversational passage is in fact equivalent to and perhaps no more effective than asking an English speaking monolingual to record his use of—for example—future tense forms in messages referring to something that is about to take place” (Gumperz 1982: 62).

For example, I asked Laura if there were any words she usually preferred to say in Spanish over English. She thought and said:

“¿Que Queres? [What do you want?], ¿Qué quiere decir? [Literally: What means? Or What does ____ mean?] Tengo hambre [I’m hungry]. There are words that sound too harsh in Spanish that I say in English, but there are some
words that I prefer to say in Spanish. But it’s hard for me to tell you what. They just come out when I’m speaking Spanish.”

I also asked Belinda, a 17-year-old senior girl and ECL Youth Council member when she speaks Spanglish:

“When I’m speaking to someone who is bilingual, I speak Spanglish. But if it is like an adult or someone who I know speaks Spanish, then I speak Spanish to them. But my friends, Spanglish, yeah.”

She gives me an example:

“I don’t actually know how to say ‘ride’ in Spanish. We say ‘raite,’ but that’s not Spanish. That’s Spanglish. It’s like a mixture of both—slang, I guess. I constantly change my words.”

Sometimes language choice is a strategic, if not always conscious, choice. For example, Anna De Fina describes how an Italian-American, all-male, card-playing club uses strategic code switching—namely using Italian words that describe food or the game itself in otherwise English conversations—in the construction of their ethnic identity (2007: 371). Carol Myers-Scotton and Agnes Bolonyai similarly describe how code switching has “local functions” for speakers, as in the example of a child who asks to pour water in English to assert his authority, then apologizes and offers an explanation in Hungarian to appease his parent who prefers Hungarian (2001: 15-16).

The ECL youth do this too. Gloria’s family, for example, is from Nicaragua, but she was born here. She has more trouble understanding Spanish than many of the other youth. She typically chooses to speak English over Spanish and sometimes has to ask her friends to interpret when Angel is speaking before the group. However, when Gloria wants to make a point to Angel, either to be sure that he hears her or just to emphasize what she is saying, she will switch to Spanish, even if it is just a word or two.
ECL youth are part of a bilingual and language choice continuum. I cannot say definitively where on the bilingual scale these youth are positioned—I just know that some of the youth are more comfortable in English, others in Spanish, and some are pretty evenly matched. However, I can speak to the language choice continuum which, in my opinion, is far more important in terms of space-making. The choice to speak Spanglish is a key aspect of claiming space for these youths.

I spent some time informally noting the language choice continuum, then I decided I wanted to be able to see how often the youth were switching in their conversations with each other. Over the course of several weeks I made a list of 21 ECL youth members and observed each of them in conversation on three separate occasions. For each conversation, I recorded how the person was speaking and assigned their speech a number based on the amount of switching they engaged in:

1) Spanish
2) Spanish with 1-2 switches to English per paragraph
3) Mostly Spanish with 1-2 switches to English per sentence
4) Even switching between English and Spanish (usually beginning the sentence in one language and ending in the other)
5) Mostly English with 1-2 switches to Spanish per sentence
6) English with 1-2 switches to Spanish per paragraph
7) English

Table 1 (below) shows the results, and at first, they do not appear especially conclusive. Some of the youth lean toward the Spanish end of the continuum and others toward English.
Some of the youth have a significant range from mostly Spanish to mostly English. Many factors can go into language choice in any given situation. For example, across three conversations, Ivan vacillated between mostly English with 1-2 switches to Spanish per sentence, and mostly Spanish with 1-2 switches in English. In these cases, Ivan was matching his language choice with the preferences of the people with whom he was speaking. We also see high variation in Rosa’s conversation, but she is a bit of an outlier as she is one of the few ECL youth who rarely code switches, rather speaking solely in English or solely in Spanish for the most part.

### Table 1: Conversational code switching among ECL youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Conversation1</th>
<th>Conversation2</th>
<th>Conversation3</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.3316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simón</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomás</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briana</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>María</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, when I calculated the percentages of type of switching or lack thereof, a trend emerged. The pie chart shows that 86% of all conversations I observed contained some switching, and over half contained even switching or 1-2 switches per sentence.

![Language Choice Among ECL Youth](image)

**Figure 5: Language Choice Pie Chart**

The fact that the youth engage in switching so often with each other speaks to the importance of Spanglish in their lives. As I have previously stated, Spanglish is a marker of identity for ECL youth. Therefore, I believe language choice is one of the methods they use to create space. When these youths speak Spanglish—be it in the ESL classroom, the ECL offices where they set up shop over the summer, the streets of Claxton, or the top of a double decker bus in Washington DC—they claim that space for themselves and they make it their
own. Spanglish can be a “discourse of exclusion” like the practice of calling out “Viva la Raza” on top of the bus, because any monolinguals who happen to be nearby may not know what the youth are saying. However, when the youth are including monolingual speakers in their conversations, they try to use the language that is likely to be understood by the most people. The choice to use Spanglish is often a relief for them and a way of making a space for themselves to simply be themselves. They express this every Friday in that ESL classroom.

For these youth, language choice also takes place in digital spaces. Like most American teenagers, ECL youth are wired. They have cellphones, digital music players, and, thanks to the Golden Leaf Foundation’s Laptop Initiative Program4, most of the students have MacBook laptops they get to keep and use during the school year. They use the computers for school and ECL projects, but they also use them to organize their music collections, surf the Internet, and most significantly, participate in social media.

Facebook is the world’s largest social networking site and is a popular means of communication for ECL youth. I saw and was told how important Facebook is in these young people’s lives, especially for talking with those left behind in their home countries—grandparents, aunts, cousins, old friends—people who many of them have not seen since they immigrated and people who some of them have never met. Carmen says:

“We have Facebook, cellphones. Now, with technology, I can see my family. I can talk to them, I can still follow my dreams [to go to school in American and have my family in my life]. Even though some of them are far away, I can

4 The $800,000 Golden LEAF grant, awarded in 2008, provided about 800 ninth-twelfth grade students enrolled Claxton High School with individual laptops.
feel them like they are next to me. I have family and a lot of friends surrounding me. For me my family is everything.”

Rosa appreciates the speed of communication on Facebook:

“I have a great aunt and cousins. I keep in touch with them through Facebook or MSN Messenger. When I first got here I would write letters to my cousin and they would send [letters] over here. But now it’s so much easier through Facebook. It’s easier to have a relationship when it’s quick.”

Belinda likes that she can chat with her family in Mexico and see pictures of them:

“[It’s] pretty cool now because I have Facebook, but I didn’t know my aunts and my cousins have Facebook until they sent me friend requests! I see pictures and everything; I always get tagged in their pictures. … My cousins, even though we don’t talk [every day] on Facebook … if they have problems they always come to me on Facebook. That’s how we talk.”

The youth keep in touch with their families, but they also use it to talk among themselves, to handle ECL youth group business, to argue, laugh, help each other, pick on each other, and do all the things they would do in person. Facebook is a special space for these youth because it is not preordained as a white space for speaking English or a Latino space for speaking Spanish. It is a place where they can maintain their transnational connections and use constant Spanglish.

The passages below were taken from the ECL Youth Group page on Facebook. For the Spanish in these passages, I have put translations into brackets, and additional clarifying words into parentheses. I also standardize the English spellings that I think could be confusing to the reader. Though Spanish was the L1 for almost all of these youth, they went to school and learned to write in English. This is sometimes reflected in the Anglicized spellings of the Spanish words, in this case,
“aser” for “hacer”. The first passage is from July 2011; the youth were planning the practices for the dance they wanted to perform at National Night Out on August 2, 2011.

July 2 - July 4:

Isabella: Can i joiinn??? [Can I join?]

Irene: si! claro que si! [yes! of course!]

Isabella: Okiiss am i gonna need anything? [Ok am I gonna need anything?]

Angel: Tomás, Simón, Daniel, Mario……..ayuden!!! [Tomás, Simón, Daniel, Mario……..help!!!]

Irene: isabella por horita no [Isabella, not right now]

Javier: Can i join??

Angel: alli un voluntario!!!! bravo [there (is) a volunteer!!!! bravo]

Irene: yes you can!

María: i would lyk to join pero I need to kno cuando van aser los practices? Cuz i also guna have practice for mis 15 so I need to kno. [I would like to join but I need to know when they go to do the practices? Cuz I also gonna have practice for my 15 (Quinceañera) so I need to know.]

Barbara: Me avisas please xxx-xxx-xxxx [Let me know please xxx-xxx-xxxx]

Luz: yeah! Since somos serve girls, lets ask da guys, dey prob dont anything at home, so lets tell dem to help out como dijo Angel, Tomás, Simón, Daniel, Mario!! [Since we are several girls, let’s ask the guys, they prob don’t (do) anything at home, so let’s tell them to help out like Angel said, Tomás, Simón, Daniel, Mario!!]
In this example, we see examples of switching taking place within a single sentence, especially in posts by Maria and Luz. They are using English but switching regularly into Spanish. The next example shows switching between sentences in a June 28, 2011 discussion about the youths’ environmental campaign:

Carmen: *Aqui le interesa participar en el comercial de Youtube. Por favor mesage o escribir comentario o llamam para poner en la lista.* Who will like to participate in the Youtube commercial. Please inbox me or write a comment or call. *Mensaje de la Senorita Presidenta y De Ivan :) ASAP…Lo pronto posible ;)* [Carmen interprets for herself in this one so that she can include English-only and Spanish-only speakers]

Irene: De que se trata? [What’s it about?]

Carmen: Para el environmental campaign que vamos a hacer :) [for the environmental campaign that we are going to do]

Irene: Oh okay cool. When will it be?

Carmen: well we r trying to arrange the stuff already to have everything plan..we dont have a date yet :) but it will be soon :

Irene: Ok well that sounds fun! I’m interested! Message me when you have more info! =]

Carmen: Ok thanks :)

Luz: Yo kiero!!! :) [I want!!!]

Carmen: gracias pero tambien necesitos chicos :) [thanks but I need boys too :)]

Luz: Umm, tomás o Simón???

Mario: Sí, tomás, simón y yo [yes, Tomás, Simón and me]

Carmen: ok :

Luz: Sii gran idea!! Mario, Tomás y Simón!! [Yes great idea!! Mario, Tomás y Simón!!]

Laura: I wanna b in it 2! I want 2 [g]et more famous! lol!

Carmen: Ok we will release information :) soon

The above examples provide us with distinct examples of the linguistic switching the youth engage in on a daily basis, in which the space claimed is digital, rather than physical. In this
chapter, we see that switching back and forth between English and Spanish is an important marker of identity for ECL youth. Their ability to speak Spanglish in a given space is a crucial part of staking out that space for themselves, along with performing their identity in other ways: through dance, practicing discourses of inclusion/exclusion, and working to be seen around Claxton.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

From September 15 – October 15 of 2011, Claxton High School celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month officially for the very first time. The celebrations culminated in a potluck banquet; the youth and their parents came to the school on a fall evening and brought some of their favorite dishes to share. I was unable to attend, but from what I hear, the evening was considered a great success with plenty of good food, dancing, and fellowship. I believe the administration’s interest in celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month came as a direct result of the ECL youths’ activities over the summer. The youth did not have to assimilate in order to achieve this recognition, nor did they reject integration all together. Instead, they were their transnational selves, and in being so, they created and continue to create space for themselves in this ever-more-accepting cultural borderland.

Their principal’s interest in highlighting Latino culture at the high school is a reflection of several things. He felt Claxton High School needed to do more to recognize the culture of the Latino students. This professional stance indicates that 1) the community is coming around to recognizing the distinctive Latino culture in its midst and 2) the Latino youth have succeeded in conveying that they have a separate culture, a separate identity that is all theirs.

My fieldwork did not encompass gathering much data from the community about its knowledge and/or acceptance of Latino culture. However, my research demonstrates that Latino youth with whom I worked continue to create an identity separate from their parents’
and separate from their fellow non-Latino high school students’ as well. They have done this in several ways.

First, the youth make strategic use of Spanglish, English, and Spanish in order to meet their communicative needs and express themselves across local and national borders. Second they perform their identity in “white public spaces” in order to create social capital in their community—the success of which is demonstrated by the Hispanic Heritage Month celebration—and simply to create space for them to be themselves, be able to speak Spanglish, be bicultural. The youth do not fit into the assimilation/resistance dichotomy. They reveal the limitations of earlier literature that says “one’s primary life choice boils down to either preserving an identity unique from the dominant group, or assimilating to the dominant norms to achieve academic success or economic solvency” (Cammarota 2008: 5) by refusing to choose or by choosing to use elements of each.

Future research could develop along several avenues, some linguistic, others not. One of particular interest to me is the youth choice to use or not to use certain pejorative words—“cholo” and “wetback,” for example—to refer to themselves and each other. I have a feeling use of these words is fairly common, but I do not know their nature or to what extent the youth use them. I did not feel I could explore this topic further in this research project because Angel was trying to discourage use of these words among group members.

One summer afternoon Luz, a 16-year-old sophomore, sat at a desk in a cubicle in the back of the ECL office. She was working on a pamphlet for the youths’ Clean Up the World campaign on an ancient desktop computer. It was one of the nooks around the office that the youth had claimed for their summer projects and for just hanging out. There were old art
projects and banners pinned to the blue padded walls, and we all had to move as best we could around the stacks of boxes containing items for ECLs weekly food pantry distribution. We were taking a break from the work. Luz sat at the desk while Angel and I lounged in sunken couch across from her. The conversation turned to school, and Luz mentioned that the school kids divide themselves up before the morning bell. In the entryway where the students gather, apparently there is an unofficial “white corner” and an unofficial “beaner corner.” Beaner, of course, is a pejorative term that is often used to describe Mexicans, but in this case, it seems to apply to Latinos in general, and to be embraced by the students who stand in the “beaner corner.”

Angel started asking questions, trying to get at the creation of the beaner corner, the reasons why that name is used, and whether the Latino students themselves use that name. Luz was not sure about the answer to Angel’s questions. It just was. It is the way it has always been. In trying to get at the answer to these questions, the talk turned to stereotypical words/phrases in general. I asked if the white and black kids ever used terms like beaner or other terms in a way that upset the Latino youth. Luz said that it happened sometimes and launched into a story about a friend of hers who had been called a “wetback” by some other students.

“They were calling her wetback, even though she isn’t a wetback—”

At this Angel interrupted her, “What do you mean ‘even though she isn’t a wetback’?”

“Well, she didn’t cross the river…”
After this there was no hope of my figuring out Luz’s feelings toward the term “wetback” or whether or not she and her friends use the term because Angel immediately started telling her why she should not use the word at all, regardless of whether or not the person being described had crossed the river. I did not want to disrespect his decisions on the matter by going behind his back and talking with the youth about these controversial terms, especially since he was trying to eradicate their use and foster a sense of respect regarding differences among the youth.

“Cholo” is another term around which there has been controversy in the group. I heard from Angel that someone in the group got in trouble for calling another one of the boys a “cholo.” The word has quite a history, beginning with the *criollos* in colonized Mexico and Latin America. It was derogatory then and it is derogatory today, but now it is used to refer to “low-class” Mexican-Americans. It is often used in conjunction with a particular style of dress, and in Claxton it has gang connotations. Who is allowed to use the word and under what circumstances is somewhat complex. In this case the person who was called a “cholo” in the group was upset, and the person who used the term got in trouble with Angel. But sometimes, this same term has a positive connotation—one of the girls in the group had a digital banner on her Facebook page that proclaimed “I ♥ Cholos” for all her friends to see.

I did not feel comfortable exploring this topic because I did not want to encourage the use of these words against Angel’s wishes, and I had plenty of other avenues to explore. However, it would be interesting to see if these youth are “reclaiming” any of these terms and exacting agency by using these terms and how and when the use of them offends.
Beyond the linguistic arena, studies that examine immigrant youth space-making are important because the population of Latinos in North Carolina has doubled in the last ten years. By all accounts, this population is going to continue to grow in North Carolina and throughout the United States. The American response to Latino immigration took a downward turn after 9/11 and has since become even more negative. Arizona's Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, SB 1070, which makes a crime of failing to carry federal immigration documents for non-United States citizens, has sparked a wave of proposed anti-immigration legislation throughout the country, including North Carolina. The DREAM Act, introduced in Congress a decade ago, which would help certain undocumented minors work towards achieving citizenship, was blocked again in the Senate in December 2010. Anti-immigration, particularly anti-Latino, sentiment is everywhere in the media. Young Latinos are coming of age in an environment in which tensions will likely grow and space will become more contested.

A third avenue of potential research is the NGOs that serve immigrant populations. They must make choices about expending their limited resources. Which part of the immigrant population should they focus on? While no one would dispute that adult immigrants and families warrant assistance from NGOs, as a consequence of this research project, it is clear to me that supporting adolescent immigrant youth is equally important.

Organizations like El Centro Latino give Latino youth certain avenues for space creation. I believe the youth would make spaces for themselves regardless, but ECL undoubtedly gives them more resources with which to do so. These youth have shown that space creation is a way for them to build bridges with their surrounding community without
assimilating and to have a space to simply be themselves in a sometimes hostile environment. It is my hope that studies like this one will encourage schools, youth groups, and other organizations that deal with Latino youth to embrace programs like those of El Centro Latino—giving the youth room to be transnational, speak Spanglish, and, in doing so, create spaces for themselves.
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