

**“What language are you?”  
Children racing and erasing identities in a linguistic contact zone**

**Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Gloria-Beatriz Rodriguez, Andréa C. Rodríguez-Scheel, Michael Oshiro and Taylor Johnson**

**UCLA**

**(Forthcoming.) In H. Samy Alim and Arnetta Ball (Eds.) *Racing Language, Languaging Race*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.**

Tell me something,” read a mysterious note taped to a pillar in the center of a Los Angeles middle school cafeteria, where “B-Club” has met every Monday and Thursday afternoon for the last three years. First grader Dolphin giggled and whispered with her partner Q.T. Then she picked up a felt-tip marker and wrote: “Dir X. Wat lagwich ar you?”

B-Club is the afterschool program we run, where undergraduates and researchers from UCLA play and learn with and alongside elementary school kids. “Dolphin” is the Club nickname that this exuberant six-year-old, whose first (real) name is an Arabic word, chose for herself. X is a mysterious entity who communicates with the kids only in writing.

Miss Triz (a doctoral student, and second author of this chapter) asked: “Do you think X will understand what is that word, ‘lagwich’?” Dolphin turned again to the poster and offered more: “I am spanish and erabic.” Then she posed another question: “Wat food is yor fabrit?”

In this chapter, we consider the meanings behind this question: “What Language Are You?” More generally, we probe how B-Club kids - mostly immigrants or the

children of immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, Lebanon, the Philippines, and Bangladesh - explored language as a marker of identity for themselves and for new entrants into the space. We illustrate how they at times used language-based categories to express something about themselves and their knowledge of the world, to ask that others share their own experiences with them, and to establish relationships. Attending to both the presence and absence of such markers, as well as when and how they were named or questioned, we consider how kids variously recreated, resisted, challenged, ignored, and reworked the racialized and ethnicized categories of power that operate in their multilingual school, neighborhood, and larger social world.

As part of our analyses, we also probe the understandings and experiences that were brought into this space by the research team, visitors to the program, and undergraduates (referred to as “Ugs” in the program and in this manuscript). We analyze our own attempts to grasp kids’ views of the linguistic, cultural and racialized landscapes of their lifeworlds, both in our actions at site and in the analyses that led to this chapter. We further consider our efforts to create a space where new understandings could emerge, with limited imposition of adult ideologies, perspectives, and interpretations of kids’ activity. We discuss some of our responses and creative approaches to pedagogy here, considering how these may have unsettled and complexified the notions of social categories that we *all* brought into the space.

To develop the analyses we present in this paper, we listened hard to kids’ words as they navigated the linguistic and cultural contact zone (Pratt, 1991) of our after-school program. Filtering our analyses through the lenses of our own diverse linguistic, racialized, ethnicized, and cultural experiences, as well as through theories of

contemporary racialization processes (e.g. Omi and Winant,1986; Alim, 2012; see also the authors of this volume), while also trying to *escape* adult-centric frameworks, we grappled with kids’ meanings. Through our reflections and dialogue, we came to deeper understandings, as well as new questions. We continuously asked ourselves: what do *we* learn from listening to kids, and how do their answers and activity challenge adult/ understandings and interpretations of the forms and qualities of kids’ labeling of categories?

### **B-Club Kids, B-Club Digs**

The heart of B-Club are the kids themselves. They know so much and are highly curious about the literacy and play activities we animate in the space, building them in their own unpredictable and improvisational ways, from which we also “riff” to make relevant and exciting our approaches to literacy and language. B-Clubbers play instruments, dance, write, and sing with great enthusiasm; they are masters at inventing and imagining across their play. They speak bits or more of many languages (Spanish, English, Korean, Tagalog, Bangladeshi, and hybrids of these and other languages and slanguages), and are quite unanimous in their love of the Club.

Across our three years at this school site we have built a Club tradition of name self-selection foundational to our understanding of these children, their identities and competencies, and ourselves. B-Clubbers (including Ugs and researchers) are guided through a process of play with letters, sounds, personal interests and identities to generate names that are meaningful to them, and that also then serve as pseudonyms for research purposes. In this chapter you will meet Dolphin, Stely/Cece/Princess Bubblegum,

Monkey/Tarzan/Waza, Kibu/Quiboo, Fina, Magical Music Magenta/Magical Honey Bee Panda, Cassie, Black Widow, and Miss Vicky, as well as the authorship team: Yesi, Miss Triz, Dré, Big Daddy and Tay-tay. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to unpack the many meanings behind the kids' often multiple names (only one of which we will use for each in this manuscript), this naming bears noting as a rich organizing practice of our everyday activity and exchange.

Every day at B-Club is distinct, with varying assemblies of the 30+ student members, 15-30 Ugs, and eight research/teaching team members engaging in multiple forms of pre-planned and improvised indoor and outdoor play. We enliven our otherwise-drab cafeteria setting with colorful tablecloths and decorated portable walls that display our group agreements, or "Acuerdos," and offer prompts for written literacy and play activities. A multi-pocketed canvas shoe-holder that serves as a mailbox system is set out daily for letter exchanges between friends, Ugs, and X, and the tables and chairs are subject to regular creative rearrangement into "stations" where we tinker, draw, build, and invent, both individually and collectively, with a range of ever-changing papers, stickers, stamps, found objects, and writing tools. A laptop computer, iPads, and iTouch technologies are also available for play, alongside hula-hoops and balls of various sizes for outdoor movement. We begin our afternoons of fun in the Cipa (Spady, Alim, & Meghelli, 2006), our community circular formation, where we set off activity through song, dance, rhythming with instruments, playing games, and sharing and discussing issues of relevance to the Club. On an average day you might find kids and undergrads clustering around the writing center, penning letters to X, making instruments and sculptures out of household items, holding hula hoop competitions, catching ladybugs in

the nearby garden, dancing merengue, creating PowerPoint presentations, videotaping each other (“grabbing” we have come to say, from the Spanish “grabar:” “to record”), drawing colorful and elaborate name pieces, delivering speeches from atop a soapbox, playing a freezetag game we call “Zombies,” and inventing all form of game play. Our analyses of fieldnotes, videotapes, audiotapes, artifacts and personal reflections reveal how this collaborative and collective free-form model sparks kids’ imagination and creates many opportunities for learning, building relationships, and exploring ideas in and through language.

The Club is a dynamic, hybrid language space where kids are free to spell, utter, write, draw, speak, dance and invent language in their own ways. By not correcting kids in standard usages (as in the introductory vignette), and by inviting in and celebrating our collective linguistic repertoires, we build tools that help us understand what kids hear and how they make sense of language, how they read and write their worlds with all their senses and idiomas. B-Club activity has been structured significantly around Hip Hop cultural practices and pedagogy (Rodriguez, forthcoming) where Language is viewed openly and recognized for its “variability” and essential “biographic” qualities (Blommaert & Backus, 2010; KRS-One, 2009). While we have made efforts to make the Club a multi-lingual space, we must also recognize the predominance of English in the Club, as in the larger school (despite the fact that it offers two dual language programs, Korean/English and Spanish/English) and society. Spanish is certainly inflected significantly across talk, most commonly in small group activity and one-on-one, and occasionally, bits of Tagalog, Korean, and other languages can be heard; we also play

with language, asking how to say things in different ways, offering translations, and playing with the sounds and features of our collective linguistic repertoires.

### **Racing and Erasing Identities**

The Club is set within the larger context of a school that serves approximately 1000 students in grades K-12. School records track race and ethnicity based on families' self-selection into categories that use a combination of pan-ethnic, national origin, and racialized labels, much as the U.S. Census does: American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Filipino, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, and White. Using these categories, the school is predominantly Hispanic/Latino (75%), followed by Asian (15%). Filipina/o students make up just over 3% of the school population, but about 17% of our after-school club population. The school indicates there are about 2% Black/African American students, while in Bruins they comprise upwards of 20%. Less than one per cent of students in the school identify as White (Ed-Data, 2013); to our knowledge none of the families of children in our program identify as White.

It is important to note that while the school uses these terms to describe the population of the school, students in B-club rarely if ever used them when referring to themselves and other club participants. The notable exception to this are a group of four girls who are often referred to by the Ugs as "the Filipina girls," and who do sometimes claim the label "Filipina" for themselves. In other work we are analyzing the ways in which these girls sometimes get racialized (i.e. viewed and treated as a group, marked and distinct from the other kids) in our program and in the school at large, and how they

responded to that racialization; for now is worth noting that “Filipina” is one of the only social categories offered by the school that is based on national origin rather than a pan-ethnic identity. Listening for self-identifying information in kids’ talk to each other and to the UGs, in their writings and drawings, and in their responses to pre- and post- survey measures, we saw that national origins (e.g. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador) was the principle “ethnic” category named by kids.

In our most recent cycle (2012-2013), we asked in a pre-survey, “How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn’t know you very well? Tell us some words you would use to describe yourself, like smart, beautiful, tall, 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, Bangladeshi, Mexican, Chinese, girl, boy, etc.” In this same year’s post-measure we altered the wording some to read “How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn’t know you? Start with, “I AM...”)

On the pre-survey, only one student named a pan-ethnic category; Monkey (a U.S.-born boy whose Mexican immigrant grandfather served in the U.S. army) wrote “Mexican, Latino, boy.” In the post-survey he responded in writing: “I AM FAST”, and then, when prompted by an Ug to produce additional descriptors, said verbally, “I am a kid! A 3<sup>rd</sup> grader, a winner! a roller coaster!” Two of the five participants with ties to the Philippines mentioned “philipina/Filipina” as a descriptor, though as one of long list of eight and thirteen other descriptors. Fina, for example described herself as “tall, generous, 5<sup>th</sup> grader, brings lots of food to school, beautiful no matter what they say), soft hair, Filipina (with a drawing of the Philippine flag to the side), Hyper after 5 pm J.” Magical Music Magenta (MMM), a third grader and one of the five, answered the pre-survey, “I’m a girl. I’m smart. I know Art. My favorite color’s purple, and my favorite food is

spagitte.” Fina did not complete the question on the post-survey, but in that version, now three of the same five Filipina students included “Philipino” in their answer. MMM (now calling herself Magenta Honey Bee Panda) wrote in the post-survey: “I am A \_\_\_\_\_ S\_\_\_\_\_ (her real name, omitted for confidentiality). I am Philipino.” (Of additional interest about MMM, we later learned from conversation with her mother that she is also “1/4 Indian” and has Chinese ancestry on her father’s side.) Other kids taking the pre-survey named their national origins (Guatemalan, Mexican); one named a hyphenated identity (Mexican-American), and one (a third grade girl with Spanish surname) included in her list “USA.” Of the 24 pre-surveys completed, only eight total mentioned any such ethnic category, with the remaining children using no such categories at all.

Two students made reference in this question to language; Cassie, who speaks some Tagalog at home, and is in the Korean/English program at school, noted that she is “trylingual,” and Black Widow, one of five African-American sisters in our program explained in her post-survey, “I would disgrab myself and say Hi I am (real name). I’m a girl I go to school I learn Koren so I’m bilingual I really like learning Korean because it’s fun and easy.” In a prior letter to X, Black Widow also wrote about herself, “P.S. I’m a Korean.” (In her pre-survey, she made no mention of language, answering “Cincative, smart, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, shy, I like to swim”). None of Black Widow’s four other sisters made mention of race or ethnicity either, though Pinkie/Cutie, who has produced multiple name artifacts in Korean, said in her post-survey, “I learned Korean and I learned how to say Hello in different languges.” We find it worth noting, though not surprising, that no child used the school’s language identity labels that weigh so heavily upon their academic

trajectories; e.g. no one referred to his or herself as an “English Learner” or as an “English Only” student.

Because of the school’s explicit focus on bilingualism for all, and the patchwork of home languages the students report, some degree of multilingualism certainly appeared normative for kids in this community. On the survey, we asked kids to list the languages they know, and to check “a little” or “a lot” for each modality: speaking, reading, writing and listening. Twenty-one of the 24 completing the post-survey kids noted they spoke two or more languages, listing in addition to English, various combinations of Spanish, and/or Korean and/or Tagalog; Fina listed “German” behind Tagalog and Korean, and most did not hesitate to assert confidently that they speak, understand, write, and read either “a little” or “a lot.” Language data was only explicitly requested in the pre-survey measure.

### **“What Language Are You?”**

As these survey results suggest, language as a marker of identities, and of how kids “describe themselves to others,” is distinguishable from the ways kids asserted the languages they knew. In other words, while they seemed confident in their claims of multilingualism when asked specifically to list their language knowledge, none, of their own volition, used such linguistic terms in their self-descriptions. So how do we explain the question that arose in the introductory vignette, “What language are you?” This was a question that we heard in other contexts as well, sometimes posed by the children to newcomers in the program. Why would the children ask others to identify by language, but not similarly assert or assume language-based identities for themselves when asked

how they would describe themselves to others? Where, when, and how these linguistic identifiers were used bears consideration.

One day this winter, a visiting scholar, Emilia - a speaker of English, Spanish, French and Arabic, born in Spain, schooled in Los Angeles, living in Philadelphia - was helping arrange the B-Club wall displays. Stely and Cassie offered to help. After Emilia introduced herself, Stely inquired, “What language are you?” Emilia recalled:

I was very struck by the question. Invoking my two most important identities, as a researcher and a teacher, I asked myself how could I answer in a way that was pedagogically sound. I remember saying ‘I am many languages. I am English, I am Spanish, I am Arabic. I am Latin.’ I started naming all the languages I had studied. Then I put it back on them. ‘What languages are you?’ They responded without hesitation, ‘We’re Filipina, we’re from the Philippines.’ I realized that in some way they were really asking me ‘where are you from.’

Let us expand on Emilia’s conjectures about what Stely's question reveals, as well as how Emilia’s response might have further mediated Stely’s understanding. Like Emilia, we were struck by the fact that Stely did not ask “What language(s) do you *speak*?” - the answer to which would be at least partly evident from their conversation, which transpired in English. Was Stely using language as a proxy for race or ethnicity? Was she “really” just asking where she was from? Was she trying to locate Emilia in a racialized or ethnicized category, to name her as “different” in some way? What does this

reveal about her understandings of race, ethnicity, culture, and language, and about her intentions in inquiring about Emilia's identity?

First, we need to consider context of Stely's query. This was Emilia's first visit to the site, yet here she was, participating in the creation of our space by putting posters on the wall, exuding a comfort and belonging that some visitors to our program surely would not assume. Stely seemed to be responding to Emilia's display as a Club insider, participating equally enthusiastically in the ownership of the space, by asking, "Oh, can we help you?" Stely's next question, posed in this context, suggests a desire to *relate* to this new person. The context of Stely's question is important as we attempt to understand her view of the situation, and to combat an adult view that might see Stely's behavior as singularizing language, probing "differences," or using language "merely" as a proxy for race. To ask the question this way – what language are you? - is different than asking "What are you?" or "Where are you from?" even if, as Emilia came to see, that was part of the meaning of the question.

Certainly, however, one way of relating to people is to understand *who they are*, or who they see themselves to be. Stely had the social cues that we all have available in our efforts to read the world (e.g. various aspects of Emilia's self presentation, including her mannerisms, phenotype, dress, speech, and ways of moving in this space), but we can't know for sure which ones she read, or what led her to ask this question. Her question makes evident, however, that she was attentive to language: perhaps she heard Emilia's Spain-Spanish-inflected accent, and her ways of speaking, and was trying to put these together with other social clues as well as her own experiences with language and the movement of people around the world. Arguably, these things might help Stely to

understand much more than just where Emilia is from, but rather, who she *is*. In this sense, Stely's question could be seen as a *humanizing* stance, not a mere naming of difference.

The fact that Stely honed in on language suggests her awareness that people may speak (or literally “be”?) different languages, even if/when they speak English, and that ways of speaking can be a clue to where people are from, or what they “are.” Indeed, the multilingual nature of their community, and our attention to language in B-Club itself, may draw kids to ask this question of new faces to the Club, and as they hear new voices with distinct dialect-sounds. Does being surrounded by people with a wide range of linguistic repertoires with whom they share and construct their environment encourage B-club participants to be more attentive and interested in this sort of information about a potential newcomer? We asked ourselves about an opposite context as well: would kids living in a monolingual community ever pose such a question to a participant after hearing them speak English?

Now let us consider the fact that Stely asked about a singular versus pluralized linguistic identity. Did this suggest that Stely believed one could only “be” one language, even when one speaks more than one? Was there an implicit assumption here that people who speak English in particular ways are “really” something else, or from somewhere else, in the singular, and that they are not “really” English (or American)?

While we can't be sure of Stely's understandings, we *can* consider how Emilia's response may have shaped them. Arguably, Emilia was deliberating attempting to disrupt what has been referred to as the “Herderian triad:” an adult-centric, modernist notion that language is tied to identity and located in a specific (and singular) place (Baumann and

Briggs, 2000; see also Canagarajah, 2012). Emilia was claiming the right to *many* identities, based on the languages she had studied and that she spoke to varying degrees. She was responding as a pedagogue, perhaps out of curiosity and with care not to interpret narrowly why the question might have been posed in the first place. Her response treated Stely's question seriously, connecting on the basis of their shared multilingualism, rather than schooling Stely in the ways of the world. Emilia did *not* challenge the idea that one can "be" a language, or try to teach Stely an adult's distinction between language, race, and identity.

### **Being more than one language**

Another way that we attempted to explore children's understandings, and open up new possibilities, was through our introduction of the character X, who communicates with the kids through handwritten and typed notes, sticky notes, posters and email, as in the opening vignette. Like el Maga, the playfully-mysterious entity who corresponds with kids in other Fifth Dimension programs similar to ours (Cole, 2005), X is all-seeing and ambiguously gendered; but unlike el Maga, X is *not* all-knowing. In fact, X is very curious about social processes and categories, and does not quite grasp why some kinds of differences are salient and imbued with meaning to humans while others are not. X doesn't understand the implicit or explicit rules of our world (regarding social processes, cultural practices, and conventions of all kinds, including spelling and grammar); thus X poses many questions to kids, as the ultimate ethnographer might and often breaks those implicit or explicit rules. (And indeed, the mind of the ethnographic team lurks behind

X's words, as we explore children's understandings and sometimes gently challenge or unsettle them.)

X's first appearance at site in the fall of 2011 was in the form of a letter, which read, in its English version:

I've been traveling around and I found your program. I think you call it "B-Club"? Or planet X? I'm really curious about it. And about You.

I want to know more about You.

I think Names are important here? Can you tell me about why names are so Important?

And what is your name? And what Does it mean?

I'm going to sign this....

X

The same letter appeared simultaneously in Korean and Spanish; the different language versions were distributed randomly into kids' mailboxes. Kibu (who alternatively spells his name as Quiboo, revealing his understanding of variations in letter-sound representations across Spanish and English), a 6<sup>th</sup> grader who joined the B-Club as a newly arrived immigrant from El Salvador, marveled at the fact that he received X's letter in Korean, or, as he put it, "Chino." "Por qué me lo dió a mi en Chino?" ("Why did s/he give it to me in Chinese?") he wondered aloud repeatedly. The fact that X had *not* attempted to "match" the kids' home languages was intriguing, and we mused with Kibu: "What does this mean? How does language work, in X's world, and what is X teaching us about language?"

Soon, we got a partial answer to this question, and more questions to consider. X sent a letter asking the kids to explain “this thing you call language,” and telling us that where X comes from, everyone “just speaks however they like and everyone understands.” This response arguably set the notion that one “is” a certain language on its head: what language would X “be”? X’s response also took the kids’ notion of bi- or trilingualism to an exponential level, blossoming into a kind of “panlingualism” that treated language forms as interchangeable and disrupted ideologies about language dominance and separation. X then began sending letters in a mix of Spanish, English, Korean, and Tagalog, with other languages sprinkled in. Fina, introduced above, read these multilingual texts with ease, fluidly decoding the Korean alphabet, adopting an appropriate accent for Spanish and English, and guessing at the meaning of German and Chinese phrases by using context cues. Kids responded to X in the language of their choice, with most, including Fina, settling on either English or Spanish, rather than following the hybrid model. (We are developing a fuller analysis of these responses in other work.)

With this as the background, we return to the original vignette involving Dolphin’s question to X: “Wat lagwich ar you?” and juxtapose this with the incident involving Stely. Like Stely, Dolphin treated language as an identity category, and posed her question in the singular. Unlike Stely, she asserted her own identity in language-based terms (“I am Spanish and Arabic” vs. Stely’s “I am from the Philippines”). In contrast to her question about X’s presumably *singular* linguistic identity, her own response acknowledged that identities could be anchored in more than one language. She

was Spanish *and* Arabic. One could be more than one thing. Notably, however, Dolphin did *not* name English as an identity, despite the fact that she was speaking and writing in English at the time. By her own admission she only spoke “a little” Arabic, and she spoke “a lot” of English and Spanish. She did *not* claim the right to “be” the dominant language in the society in which she was born, and lived.

### **“Being English”**

It could be argued that the linguistic/racialized/ethnicized identities of both Emilia and X were somewhat ambiguous, and that this ambiguity may have led the kids to wonder “what language” they are. The kids had little contact with people from Spain, much less Spanish speakers who were educated in Los Angeles, living in Philadelphia, and who spoke languages like Arabic as well. And certainly, X presented a real enigma to the kids. The most basic and persistent question kids wondered of X was “are you a boy or a girl?” – and X’s consistent response was “What do you mean?” X clearly came from somewhere where the meanings of things kids held to be true and real and essential to their identities simply did not hold.

A third incident – and virtually the only time that we heard anyone refer to someone as “being English” - also involved a person whose identity could be considered somewhat ambiguous, in terms of the social clues that were available. This was Dré/Andréa’s 15-month-old son, Jackson. The following fieldnote details the interaction:

Jackson does not speak much yet, but he does communicate, and one of the ways he does this, is by saying "eh!" or "eh?" and pointing to whatever is peaking his interest. Miss Vicky observed him doing this as I held him

in my arms, and asked me, "Why does he do that?" I responded by telling her "Because he doesn't know how to talk, so that's how he communicates. He doesn't speak much yet, but he does say 'mama' and 'dada' and 'Manda'." "Manda?" replied Miss Vicky. "Yeah, that's my sister, so I call her 'Auntie Manda' and he says 'Manda'. Oh! And he also says 'I don't know' with his hands, like this, look... 'Where's Manda?'" (Jackson puts both palms up in the air and shrugs his shoulders). "Where's Daddy?" (Jackson repeats the gesture). Miss Vicky says to Jackson, "Where's Mama?" (Jackson turned to me and put his pointer finger on my chest.) "Where's Papa?" Miss Vicky asks. Jackson stares blankly at her. "Where's Daddy?" I ask him, and he repeats his gesture to indicate that he doesn't know. Miss Vicky sees this and exclaims, "Oh! I think he's going to be English!" I asked her why she thought that, and she said that it was because he didn't know the word "papa", but he knew "daddy" (Andréa, May 30, 2013).

Once again we see language used like an identity: Miss Vicky asserted that Jackson was going to "be English," not just *speak* it. The fact that she presented this as a conjecture, as something she "thinks" will happen, suggests she was drawing together the clues at her disposal, and trying to grasp how one comes, not just to *speak* a given language, but to *be* that language. Was Miss Vicky confused by the combination of clues at her disposal: the fact that Jackson's mother arguably "looks Latina;" Jackson's own phenotype, with light skin, curly brown hair and grey-blue eyes; the fact that his mother

speaks to him in English, and refers to his father as “Daddy” and her sister as “Manda” (with an English pronunciation), but also sometimes speaks Spanish with kids in our program?

### **Racing or relating?**

As an authorship team, we struggled over our interpretations of the incidents we have recounted here. Some of that struggle is evident in the questions we raise throughout this manuscript, and indeed, we may be left with more questions than answers. What do kids’ questions and commentaries suggest about their attempts to see, hear, make sense of, and relate to their social world? What connections are they making between language, identity, culture, national origins, ethnicity, race and power? What emergent meanings for race and identity are developing within the complex interplay of language, race, and power that unfolds every day after school at B-Club, shaped as well by kids’ experiences in this multilingual school, community, and globalized world?

Initially, some of us saw these things as evidence that kids were focused on “naming difference:” identifying categories and placing people into them. We suggested that language may be replacing or supplementing other forms of racialized difference, and being used to mark new forms of privilege. Kids were “hearing race” more than just seeing it. We know that the languaging of race, and the racialization of language, is undertheorized, especially in relation to *children*. The cutting edge work exploring the languaging of race and the racing of language that is represented by the authors of this volume has mostly focused adolescents or adults. Our work points to ways very young children may be growing into their understandings of the relationship between language

and identity, race, and power. Kids may be more attuned to racialization processes that are revealed in and through language than many adults, because adults have been so conditioned only to “see” race, not hear it.

We contemplated how attention to linguistic markers of difference were perhaps reinforced as well by institutional practices at this school. In earlier research conducted in this same community, Orellana and Thorne (1993) explored how institutional practices of color-coding tracks in a multi-track year-round school (as red, blue, or green) both constructed and reinforced racialized group differences. In that school, kids sometimes asked each other, “What color are you?” as a way of identifying their track affiliation. Because kids from different national origins and racialized/ethnicized backgrounds were not evenly distributed across the tracks (e.g. the green track housed the Korean bilingual program, and thus most of the Korean immigrant students were on this track), these color-coded labels were shaded with additional racialized meanings as well.

In the school that houses B-Club, institutional practices seemed to be doing something similar, with school tracks based not on “color,” but on language. All students selected into one of two dual language programs, a Korean-English or a Spanish-English program. Thus at the institutional level, a key group difference that has been created is that of language program choice. This may lead students to identify by the program they are in – as Black Widow did when she said she was Korean. And just as in the year-round school color-coded tracks, the demographic distribution of the school’s population into the two language programs is uneven; not surprisingly, most Korean-origin students are in the Korean program, and the Spanish dual language program is predominantly

comprised of native speakers of Spanish. Do kids develop conjectures about who is likely to “be Korean,” for example, or not?

To “be Korean” (or even just “to be in the Korean program”) in this school also likely indexes other things, such as the teachers one has, the curriculum one engages in, friendship circles, and even after-school activities. For example, kids in the Korean classes often took Korean Drumming class after school. We might further note that except in the first year of our program, no Korean-identified students have opted in to B-Club, though we do have participants like Black Widow, who are enrolled in the Korean-English program. In various ways, then, language may serve as some kind of proxy for group differences in kids’ minds. “What language are you?” may take on a mix of meanings, including “What program are you in?” “What language do you speak at home?” “Where are you from?” and “What/Who are you?”

But does this mean language is a proxy for race, as we have come to think about race in the adult-defined world? Some members of our team questioned this perspective, seeing this as adult-centric and based on *our* assumptions about race and the presumed human compulsion to place people into social categories and then rank those categories along lines of privilege and power. Instead of seeing this as a pernicious *search for difference*, we could see kids as *searching for connection*. Arguably, Dolphin didn’t start with the presumption that a genderless alien from another galaxy was irreconcilably different from her; instead, she searched for points of connection, asserting: “I am these languages, what languages are you?”

We came to see that both things could be true simultaneously. Kids certainly seemed to be seeking to relate to and connect with all newcomers entering our B-Club

space. They were open and eager and excited about doing so, welcoming the new Ugs every quarter and showing them how we do things at B-Club. Relationships are central to what we do, and we emphasized through our Cípha, Acuerdos, and everyday interactions that compassion, kindness, connection and communication were essential to membership in our club.

But kids are also being shaped by the larger culture in which they live. They see all kinds of differences: in age, phenotype, language, culture, race/ethnicity, national origins, age, height, physical features, dress, mannerisms, citizenship status, sense of belonging, and so much more. Surely they are trying to figure out what differences do and do not matter, or rather, are made to matter in the world: in their school, their homes, the larger social world, and the special place we have created in B-Club.

The fact that kids keyed in on language reveals their recognition that language matters, and their attunement to its subtleties: what matters is not just *what* people speak, but *how* they do so. In this school, in multiple ways, and perhaps also in their homes and community, language *is* a difference that *makes a* difference (Duster, 2001). It shapes what program they are in, what labels they are given, who they are seen to be, and what they are given access to. Language may reveal who they are, can, “should,” or are likely to be.

Still, these kids are growing up in a multi-lingual community, school, and world, where the Herderian triad that implicitly links language with a singular territorialized identity was routinely disrupted. Kids see that it’s normal to speak more than one language, and that the same language can be spoken in different ways. The ways a person speaks any given language may not just anchor them in a singular identity; it may index

their unique, complex set of experiences of moving across linguistic, cultural, and social borders, all of which make up *who they are*. People can “be Korean” without being *from* Korea. We can all be many things, and while there are clues to who people see themselves to be, we can’t always be sure, so we can ask: “What language are you?”

At the same time, kids’ words suggest awareness that languages and identities are not evenly available to or appropriable by all. English, like whiteness, was largely invisible, and yet pervasive. It dominated all of us, whether we liked it or not, and was something the kids privileged, but not necessarily something they could “be.”

### **Challenging assumptions**

It is also important to consider how we – the research team, visiting adults, and Ugs - responded to the kids’ questions. Did our responses reinforce the idea that linguistic differences *make* a difference, and that people can and should be categorized in those ways? Did our responses link language with ethnicity, national origin, culture, or other categories of power? Did we challenge the Herderian triad and open up new possibilities for youth? Did we work with the identity labels that seemed most meaningful to kids, or transmute their responses into the categories that predominate in contemporary adult culture (e.g. pan-ethnic categories like “Latino” or “Asian,” or racialized categories like “Black,” “white,” or “brown”?) Did we create room for kids to name, discuss, and question these things themselves?

As much as possible, we tried to ask questions and open up dialogue rather than instruct kids on the ways of the adult-defined world. X’s responses to children’s queries did something similar. By not just answering the many questions kids posed, but by

asking questions in return – questions that challenged fundamental ideas about language, race, ethnicity and identity – X pushed the kids to think about what they believe, why they believe it, and how things could be otherwise.

In pushing for dialogue and curiosity, our intent is not to deny the power that racialized categories have in the world, and in children’s lives and experiences. We know there is a place for helping to prepare children to deal with the racism and xenophobia they most surely will face. But we want to do this in ways that empower kids to explore and confront those categories, not just reproduce them. Nor do we want to support the creation of *new* forms of racialized inequities. Further, we want to learn from kids about fresh ways that we could all choose to see the world, and build it: not just seeing what *is*, but imagining what *could be*.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to all the kids and Ugs who make B-Club what it is, and the University of California UC-Links program for funding it. Thanks to Inmaculada García Sánchez and Tomoko Nakajima for feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript, and to Betzabet Chávez and Lauren Cruz for data management support. The research reported here was supported with grants from the Center for New Racial Studies and the Spencer Foundation.

## References

- Alim, H.S. and Smitherman, G. (2012). *Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, language, and race in the U.S.* Cambridge: Oxford University Press.
- Bauman, R., & Briggs, C. L. (2000). Language Philosophy as Language Ideology: John Locke and Johann Gottfried Herder. In P. Kroskrity (Ed.) *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities* (139-204). SAR Press.
- Canagarajah, S. (2012). *Translingual practice: global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. New York: Routledge.
- Duster, T. (2001). The 'Morphing' Properties of Whiteness. In B. B. Rasmusen, E. Klinenberg, I.J. Nexica & M. Wrey (Eds.), *The Making and Understanding of Whiteness* (pp. 113-137). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Omi, M. & Winant, M. (1986). *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge.
- Orellana, M. F., & Thorne, B. (1998). Year-round schools and the politics of time. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 29(4), 446-472.
- Pratt M. L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*. 91, 33-40.
- Spady, J., Alim, H. S., & Meghelli, S. (2006). *Tha Global Cipa: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness*. Philadelphia: Black History Museum Press.