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Publication Date

2022-05-06

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are not available for this reason: N/A

PEDAGOGIES OF BELONGING: THE RACIAL AND GENDERED POLITICS OF U.S.
CITIZENSHIP

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

May 6th, 2022

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

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Abstract

Multiple efforts to hinder immigrant integration of Mexican communities have been enforced through the racialization of citizenship in U.S. policy, the criteria of citizenship transcending as a structural form of settler-colonialism. After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was enacted in 1848, Mexicans became one of the first ethnic groups to be eligible for U.S. citizenship, but only received the title of citizenship with little to no benefits including equitable access to resources, rights to their own land and social citizenship, thereby creating the concept of unequal citizenship. However, less is known about the emotional and structural barriers faced in the naturalization process itself. This study asks: How does the process of naturalization produce emotional and structural barriers for immigrant Mexican women? In addition to conducting a literature review, I conduct oral histories with Mexican women in community-based citizenship classes to document their gendered and racial experiences in the naturalization process. Findings from this study will contribute toward understanding the emotional and structural impacts associated with navigating and obtaining citizenship, in addition to contributing to the larger discussion of equitable naturalization for immigrant integration within the United States.

Acknowledgments

As a first-generation student, support has been critical to my development as a scholar and to this project directly. I would like to thank UCSB's Academic Research Consortium and the HEIR Scholarship for supporting the development and continuation of this project. I want to thank my honors counselor, Dennis McIver, for the reassurance and guidance throughout my time in Honors. I would like to recognize Dr. Jorge Leal, whose encouraging words helped endure this writing process, and Dr. Cecilia Ayón, for being an avenue of support to further research immigrant communities. This project would not have been possible without the additional guidance and mentorship of Dr. San Juanita García. Thank you Dr. Garcia for always supporting me, you have helped me in endless ways. I have been fortunate to meet amazing graduate students, who have extended a their support by offering their incredible wisdom and advice. I would especially like to recognize Shaafi Farooqi, Eliana Buenrostro, Nathaly Martinez, and Katherine Maldonado. I would like to thank my friends for their endless encouragement, and the resilient *mujeres* in my community who are an inspiration to me greatly. *A mi familia, Diana, Chris, Mama y Papa: gracias por todo el apoyo durante todo este proceso, se los agradezco de corazón.*

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Adrián Félix, for the patience, guidance, and support he has given me since I first met him. I would not be involved in the work I do if it was not for him. Thank you for the creative freedom, trust, and kindness you have granted me to be able to embark on this project, and the many rounds of encouragement you gave me. It was a true privilege to be your mentee, I will forever be grateful for your mentorship. I hope to have the effect on others as you have had on me. Thank you once again.

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Introduction: The Gendered Politics of Citizenship

Historically and contemporarily, citizenship has been consistently racialized, as the foundations of this country have been created based on white supremacy, where Anglos are institutionally favored. Settler-colonialism is a critical framework used to understand colonialism as a structurally ongoing phenomenon, rather than a historical act of the past, (Glenn 2015: 52) as oppression and power continue to be “disguised” systemically (Wolfe 1999).

People of Color and minorities are systemically excluded from both de jure and de facto citizenship, as xenophobia and fear of ethnic immigration are upheld by the settler-colonial ideas embedded within the United States immigration system. Many scholars and immigration reformists reference the immigration system as “broken”- yet, a system that was fabricated under settler-colonial premises cannot be broken if it was never meant to serve the communities it negatively impacts. By definition, for a system or institution to be broken, it had to be in a state that was previously stable and functional. The immigration system was never created on the premise to be equitable, and therefore, cannot be restored to a former version where it is, as it is non-existent. The system has been created to uphold not only racialized barriers, but also gendered ones to reflect the patriarchal, heteronormative culture of the United States (Sommerville 2005).

The politics surrounding the inequities in U.S. naturalization, the legalization process for migrants to become citizens, has historically had a prolonged effect on ethnic minority communities that can still be seen today. Sociological factors such as race, gender, and class all have significant impacts on overall accessibility to becoming a United States citizen. This study aims to identify how historical barriers hindering naturalization of Mexican immigrant women

are still embodied today, taking into account how gendered and racialized experiences shape the process. This paper aims to discuss (1) the historical racialization of immigration policy, (2) how the power of racial scripts is present in the immigration system contemporarily, (3) the emotional and structural barriers in the naturalization process, and (4) the implications for policy and practice.

Methods

In addition to conducting a comprehensive literature review, this study utilized oral histories to collect data. Oral histories are described as a recollection of a particular event or process, in this case, the naturalization process. In this study, oral histories were approached as a *political life history* interview, where participants were interviewed to share the beginnings of their migration journey, to their current state as either Legal Permanent Residents or naturalized U.S. citizens.

As a longtime community-based bilingual citizenship class facilitator, participants of this project were both current and former students recruited from this civic space. Oral histories were conducted with four participants who identified as Mexican women, three of the four women having completed the naturalization process. Only two of the three became naturalized citizens, but all had drastically different experiences in their naturalization interviews. *Dolores* was the first to naturalize and was scheduled to take her interview in Spanish. When arriving at her appointment, the USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) official decided to administer the test in English. *Rocío* was the second to naturalize. Her interview was long and anxiety ridden, as she described it to be more than an hour. Her experience entailed being asked intensively about her immigration history. *Rocío* was shocked to see she became a naturalized citizen, as she was under the impression of being deported, because of how negative and unwelcoming the official was to her. *Alicia* was the last to take the exam, but did not pass. She described the officials she met with to be cold and unwelcoming, making her nervous and anxious. *Alicia* shared her English was what frustrated the officials interviewing her. One participant, *Chavela*, has not undergone the naturalization process and is a Legal Permanent

Resident. They are in the beginning stages of preparing to submit their N-400 form, the document used to apply for U.S. citizenship.

These oral histories were conducted with the sole intention of being used as a documentation of an individual's experience through the naturalization process, and not to derive research conclusions. Prior to conducting these oral histories, there was a consultation with an IRB representative to proceed with the oral histories specific to this project.

Oral histories ranged from one to two and a half hours and were conducted through zoom and phone calls. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were informed they would be able to stop the interview at any time or skip any questions they did not want to answer. Interviews were conversational and each question was answered by every participant, despite the difficult range of topics that were covered. Participants were also informed that their information would be kept confidential, and their names would be protected with pseudonyms. Interviewees were also compensated for their time and were informed about how their data would be used.

Section 1: Historical Racialization of Citizenship

Historically, citizenship and naturalization procedures were created to uphold the socially constructed racial hierarchies formulated under a settler-colonial state, where Anglos prevailed and those of indigenous and ethnic minority descent were categorized as inferior. U.S. Imperialism utilized the premise of “Manifest Destiny” as rationale when expanding into the West, and used institutions to uphold ideals of settler colonialism. This was influential when creating naturalization laws and determining the eligibility of political membership and citizenship, as the criterion to determine eligibility to apply for citizenship was based on whiteness through the first-ever naturalization policy, the Naturalization Act of 1790.

The racialization of citizenship is a structural form of settler-colonialism that is still embodied today through the use of racial scripts. Racial scripts are defined as the attitudes, practices, customs, policies, and laws against racial groups that are linked across time and space (Molina 2014) that are manifested through political institutions, bureaucracies, and procedures. When these factors are targeted at one racial group or minority, they are more readily available and hence easily applied to other groups. Racial scripts established who looked like a citizen and who did not, as then immigration was only welcome to Anglo-Saxons through the Naturalization Act of 1790. In this act, those who were eligible for U.S. citizenship needed to be considered, “free white persons.” Racial scripts are important to examine the context of racializing policy, as they were, “key to denying Mexicans the ability to naturalize” (Molina 2014: 42).

The racialization of citizenship did not solely manifest itself in citizenship policy but became embedded in governmental systems and law. Historian Natalia Molina also expands on how immigration officials would find, “ways to establish Mexican immigration as a problem...

[by using] racial scripts to compare Mexicans to racialized groups already familiar to Americans” (Molina 2014). Immigration was not the issue; Mexican immigrants were racially categorized to be one. Arguably, racial and ethnic immigration was perceived as a contentious issue because it threatened the Anglo state of the nation, thus the racialization of immigration through racial scripts was brought into effect.

Citizenship became gradually available to ethnic and minoritized communities. Mexicans were among one of the first groups to become eligible for U.S. citizenship through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Following the Mexican-American War, Mexican populations on the West Coast and Southern Border who were once located in Mexico found themselves in the United States overnight (Molina 2014). They were given the option to apply for U.S. naturalization, or keep only their Mexican citizenship. Of those who naturalized, only the title of citizenship was received with little to no benefits that traditionally came along with *de jure* citizenship. Naturalized Mexicans were deprived of their rights as United States citizens, as their access to resources in comparison to their Anglo counterparts was limited. Many lost rights to their own land, faced discrimination, and lacked social citizenship (Molina 2014), as their *de jure* citizenship did not equate to their *de facto* citizenship. Arguably, Mexicans were never fully integrated, as their presence in the United States was a direct result of imperialism. They found themselves living in a nation that was socially and institutionally constructed to function under a racial hierarchy that did not benefit them, as their citizenship was solely limited to the title. Mexicans were not deemed white and categorized as “othered” both socially and culturally in their own land.

When citizenship starts becoming available to excluded and “othered” groups, “the granting of formal citizenship remains problematic, given the unequal distribution of resources and the maintenance of second-class citizenship” (Salcido and Menjiva 2012). Natalia Molina conceptualized this phenomenon as unequal citizenship.

In order to adapt to the marginalization, the racial hierarchy imposed on Mexican communities, (Nieto-Phillips 2000) Mexicans had to continually prove their whiteness and embrace a “whitened identity,” to adapt to the nation and shift closer to the rights of full citizenship. In short, racial scripts were induced to uphold the ironic construction of categorizing Mexicans as “outsiders” in a land that was once Mexico. Although Mexicans were eligible for citizenship, they were never fully granted U.S. social membership, and were continually ostracized in exercising their political rights, despite still being eligible contenders for citizenship through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The Gendered Politics of Naturalization Law

Not only did the early naturalization laws have racial implications and discriminatory practices, but these laws are also subject to patriarchal scrutiny. Naturalization laws have had a profound history of sexism and were created on patriarchal premises, where male-dominated attributes are favored over women’s (Salcedo and Menjivar 2012). Socially constructed ideals inaccurately portray depictions of women being subordinate to men, that transcend from daily life and become embedded institutionally.

Historically, patriarchal values influenced the social construction of women to be perceived as powerless, and dependent on males. This can be seen before women obtained the right to vote and through the Naturalization Act of 1907, where women’s citizenship was seen as

an extension of their husband's citizenship. Women's citizenship was often proved by a marriage certificate or the presence of their husbands (Menchaca 2011). In her 2011 book, anthropologist Martha Menchaca conducts archival research to depict Mexican women's experiences with naturalization in the state of Texas. Through her work, Menchaca unveils the difficulties Mexican women endured to apply for U.S. citizenship, as the system was favorable to a male's dependence and committed to sustaining the Anglo state of the nation.

In the Texas Women's Suffrage Movement, white suffragists functioned highly on a white feminist agenda, as racist and xenophobic ideologies propelled the movement. White suffragists heavily advocated against the rights of Mexican immigrant women to vote and practice political agency (Menchaca 2011). Through the movement, gender parity in citizenship was advanced through The Cable Act of 1912. However, Mexican women were negatively impacted by its passage, as the xenophobic values of white suffragists were enforced (Menchaca 2011). Mexican women who had citizenship, but that did not formally undergo the naturalization process, were stripped of their legal status and the rights that corresponded, such as the right to vote (Menchaca 2011) further illustrating how Molina's concept of unequal citizenship is not only a racialized sphere but also a gendered one. Further barriers were imposed on Mexican women when applying for naturalization, as the costs were seen as a luxury, and economic opportunities were limited to women, especially Mexican women. White suffragists attempted to further marginalize and perpetuate unequal citizenship transcending onto voting rights. In order for citizen women to be eligible for a poll tax exemption to vote, they needed to pass an English literacy test (Menchaca 2011). Mexican immigrant women were racially targeted and affected by this, as about half of the demographic of Mexican women in Texas spoke English (Menchaca 2011).

Mexican women's bodies were also being politicized through immigration policy, as their fertility was seen as a threat to the Anglo state of the nation (Molina 2014). Gendered notions against Mexican women were embedded in policy through the Immigration Act of 1924, as it limited U.S.-born women's ability to transfer their U.S. citizenship to their children abroad (Molina 2014). Not only was this passage misogynistic, but also racially motivated and discriminatory to Mexican women.

Historically, the state has continually found ways to impede not only Mexican individuals from naturalizing through the use of racial scripts, but also Mexican women, embedding xenophobic and misogynistic ideals institutionally. Even following the acquisition of citizenship, institutional measures to uphold unequal citizenship for Mexican women can still be seen and manifested contemporarily.

Citizenship Education: Institutionalizing Loyalty and Morality

National identity has been historically formulated under a settler colonialist agenda, where power is sustained institutionally. Historically, the creation of citizenship education was vastly concerned with the attachment and loyalty ethnic immigrants would need to demonstrate, as xenophobia was a rooted ideology when naturalizing immigrants.

Due to fear of ethnic immigration in the early 1910s, the "Americanization Movement," was a nationwide incentive that also influenced ethnic immigrants to assimilate to the "American" way of life (Gordon 2008). These ideals were infused in citizenship education. Fear of betrayal, overall rooted in racism and xenophobia, resulted in how the 1914 Bureau of Naturalization Initiative created citizenship education. There was more emphasis on the ideals of privileging morality and loyalty, over the attainment of understanding of governmental systems,

civics, and U.S. history. This initiative also discouraged political participation among newly naturalized ethnic immigrants.

In gendered terms, the progressive era was also influential to “acculturate” immigrant women. Mexican immigrant women were also taught gendered assimilation, as they were pressured to believe their cultures were inferior to that of the United States and were, “pressured to take language and cooking classes to assimilate into American Culture” (Gordon 2008: 83). This was done to enforce the cultural repression of naturalizing ethnic immigrants, and further “other” immigrants’ heritage to cultural inferiority. Referencing the prior writing, this also interconnects to the nation’s ideals of upholding white hierarchies, also transcending onto gender, and a further expansion of settler colonialism and manifest destiny.

Section 2: Modern Racialization of Citizenship in Policy and Institutions

The United States' policy on immigration has historically been heavily influenced by the racialization of immigration and the construction of race by means of criteria for citizenship. As seen in the early naturalization laws and the creation of citizenship education, settler colonialism is embedded institutionally to sustain power differentials of the racial hierarchy the U.S. enforces. Negative attitudes and discourse toward Mexican immigrants are not a recent phenomenon, but rather, a series of gendered and racial ideologies that pre-date present-day manifestations of anti-migrant sentiment (Molina 2014).

Although race is no longer explicitly used as a criterion in contemporary naturalization requirements, it is still institutionalized today. Instead of strictly analyzing rules of racial criteria, naturalization needs to be analyzed as a whole system of policy regulations and admission (FitzGerald 2014). Connecting this theory to Molina's, racial scripts are brought into effect contemporarily, as the hyper-militarization of the Southwest border and increased enforcement has been embedded with racial animus since its creation in 1924. Border patrol agents continue to engage in racist discourse against Latinx immigrants, as rates of racial profiling continue to persist, in addition to Border Patrol agents maintaining affiliations with white supremacist organizations (Murdza and Ewing 2021).

Whiteness still continues to correlate with citizenship institutionally today, one manifestation of this phenomenon being through the hyper-militarization of the border and the Senate Bill 1070: The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act (2010) enacted in the state of Arizona. SB 1070 allowed law enforcement to stop individuals and question their legal status on the premise of racial bias. Latinx persons were stopped at the

highest rates, also increasing existing health disparities for this population, as access to institutional services decreased out of fear (Toomey, Umaña-Taylor, Updegra 2014). This policy not only fed into the discourse of who looked like a citizen and who did not, but also shaped who accesses institutional resources, thus sustaining the neo-colonial state of the nation by institutionalizing discrimination on the basis of whiteness.

Alongside racial institutional discrimination, gendered notions of misogyny are also embodied, as Mexican women's bodies still continue to be politicized contemporarily. Like the ideology fueling the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act, "hyper-fertility" is still constructed to be an issue contemporarily, as women's childbearing was seen as a "public charge." This demonstrates the power of racial scripts, determining how racial and gender-charged discourse embeds itself institutionally, hindering access to institutional resources.

Social constructs of race and gender are institutionalized, as xenophobia and misogyny towards Mexican immigrant women's identity becomes manifested in discourse. This also determines who can utilize the institutional resources, categorizing and designating who is a "public charge," a burden to the nation. U.S. citizenship can be viewed as an act of extended, institutionalized imperialism.

Section 3: Emotional and Structural Barriers in U.S. Naturalization

Feminist scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Audrey Lorde have argued being a woman of color does not solely entail the “single-issue struggle” that results from the patriarchy (Lorde 1982). Rather, the multitude of identities and the intersection of race, class, and ethnicity creates unique ways inequality is experienced, as each avenue of inequality exacerbates one another, thus creating an intersectional struggle (Crenshaw 2020). Intersectionality affects the ways women navigate institutions, including the naturalization process itself.

As scholars Greta Gilbertson and Audrey Singer argue, “there is no single ‘immigrant’ perspective on naturalization and citizenship because immigrant views are always conditioned by a multiplicity of factors.” (2003: 28) Mexican women’s experiences in the naturalization process are unique in the way it is navigated, as institutionalized spaces cultivate a heteronormative (Sommerville 2005), male-dominated praxis of measuring how imperial citizenship is attainable, sustaining unique barriers and emotional challenges for Mexican women. As seen historically, hierarchical systems of power impose subordination and oppression on minority communities. Naturalization itself has been constructed under a settler-colonist agenda, where citizenship is institutionally catered to sustain the Anglo state of the nation. Imperial citizenship has been more steadily available to those who fit the criterion that colonization has cultivated. Cultural dominance and inequality are reinforced through imperial citizenship and the naturalization process itself is perpetuated through, “political, economic, cultural, and institutional arrangements,” (Salcedo and Menjivar 2012: 340) where neo-colonialism can be connected within government institutions (Smith 1996).

Citizenship contemporarily continues to have racialized implications, as Latinx populations report to have one of the lowest naturalization rates (MPI 2020), even though they are the largest minority group in the United States, comprising seventeen percent of the entire population as of 2013 (PEW 2020). Mexicans are also the largest representative group of Latinx's in the United States, as they comprise 64 percent of all Latinx's. Mexican populations are also the largest group that holds Legal Permanent Resident Status (PEW 2020), implying they are also the most eligible to qualify to apply for citizenship (Robert Warren and Donald Kerwin 2015). However, given these numbers, they have one of the lowest naturalization rates (Taylor, Torres, and Paral 2008), implying naturalization lacks equitable foundations, sustaining racialized and gendered barriers in the process. This next section includes excerpts from oral histories conducted with Mexican women and their experiences in the naturalization process. Through the literature, this section also discusses the emotional and structural barriers there are for Mexican women undergoing the process.

Why Naturalize?

Given the gendered and racial inflicted challenges in the naturalization process, why is naturalization so appealing to Mexican women contemporarily? According to a study conducted by the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Norte Dame in 2008, researchers concluded that Mexican immigrants choose to naturalize for a variety of reasons, including increased legal rights, political agency, economic opportunities, and structural benefits for them and their family (Taylor, Torres, and Paral 2008). The desire to attain citizenship status to access institutional resources and structural benefits is described as instrumental naturalization (Félix 2018: 33), gendered roles aggravating the urgency in naturalizing. The desirability of citizenship

can also be justified by a similar rationale historically as to why Mexican populations want to naturalize. As mentioned in the historical analysis, in order to adapt to the marginalization of the racial hierarchy imposed on Mexican communities, they had to shift closer to the rights of full citizenship through U.S. naturalization. Historically, complete rights were never fully achieved, but individuals were brought closer to them because of U.S. citizenship.

Push factors in obtaining citizenship are associated with the instability over what rights pertain to Legal Permanent Residents, as there has been a history of uncertainty with the changing immigration policy climate. One example of this political uncertainty can be demonstrated in the 1990s, when Congress, “considered prohibiting legal permanent residents from participating in over 35 major social programs such as lead-based poisoning prevention programs and Medicaid” (Taylor, Torres, and Paral 2008: 5). The National Latino Immigrant Survey conducted in 1988 found that 70 percent of immigrants applied for US citizenship to, “establish eligibility for government programs” (Taylor, Torres, and Paral 2008: 6). Based on the literature, the desirability of imperial citizenship is due in part to the structural benefits that come along with it and the uncertainty in the rights that pertain to Legal Permanent Residents. Here is an excerpt from Dolores’s shared experience, which exemplifies this urgency:

“Tenia que ser ciudadana porque no sabia en el futuro podría ver algunas leyes que me podia perjudicar como residente, y pues decidí que es momento de hacerme ciudadana”

“I had to become a citizen because I didn’t know what laws in the future could hinder me as a Legal Permanent Resident, and well I decided now is the moment to become a citizen”

Gendered Push Factors to Naturalize

Women have a higher likelihood of pursuing the naturalization process in comparison to men, as, “they are more risk-averse” (Dorantes and Lopez 2020: 865). This is in part due to the threat, fear, and uncertainty of the changing immigration policies for Legal Permanent Residents and the implications these policies have for their children and families based in the United States (Dorantes and Lopez 2020). Naturalizing is desirable to women for their strengthened ties to the United States that are rooted in family (Gilbertson and Singer 2003: 47). In most experiences, women fulfill gendered roles that care for family members and children. In application to naturalization, their desire to reside in the U.S. increases (Dorantes and Lopez 2020), thus, allowing women to seek citizenship status through naturalization. The risk of familial separation can be institutionally addressed by attaining citizenship, relieving these structural tensions, thus allowing women to seek naturalization at a higher rate than men. Chavela, a Legal Permanent Resident, shares their experience as to why they are seeking naturalization:

“Yo quiero convertirme en ciudadana para quedarme con mi familia en los Estados Unidos y no correr el riesgo de ser separada”

“I wanted to naturalize to stay with my family here in the United States and not run the risk of being separated”

Rocío, a naturalized U.S. citizen, shared that their motivation to naturalize was to help their family in the United States:

“Yo siento que no tanto lo hice por querer ayudar a mi esposo sinceramente, porque [como] residente, puedo ayudarlo. Pero, sentí que me impulso mas el querer meter la solicitud de mis padres... tengo que poder”

“Sincerely, I feel like it didn’t do it so much to help my husband, because as a resident, I can help him. However, I felt more motivated by the need to start the legalization process for my parents... I have to be able to”

Gendered Barriers to Obtaining Citizenship

The idea and drive of obtaining imperial citizenship among Mexican women is present, *so why is it that these rates continue to be low in comparison to other populations?* Building on Molina’s concept of racial scripts contemporarily, the system is rife with intersectional barriers based not only on race but also ones linked across other marginalized identities and groups, such as gender and class that policies of exclusion enforce. Mexican women do not solely navigate the struggles under patriarchal premises, but also under classism and racism. By incorporating a gendered analysis of the literature on Mexican women’s struggles for belonging, this next section documents Mexican women’s experience in the naturalization process and aims to identify the gendered emotional and structural barriers that Mexican women face. Mexican women face a naturalization procedure rife with gendered meanings (Salcedo and Menjivar 2012), including cultural barriers of language, fiscal barriers, discrimination, and bureaucratic inconsistencies within the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the naturalization process. Each one of these barriers has gendered implications as well and intersects with racial insinuations, intersectionality being a bridge to these faced inequalities.

Language as a Cultural Barrier

“Primero que nada, nunca pensé que me iba convertir en o que yo quería convertirme [en ciudadana Estadounidense] porque me daba miedo convertirme en ciudadana. Y el miedo mas grande te lo vuelvo a repetir; el idioma de inglés. Ese era mi miedo, como no tienes idea.” - Rocío

“First and foremost, I never thought I was going to become or wanted to become a U.S. citizen, because I was scared to become one. The biggest fear I repeat to you; the English language. That was my fear, like you have no idea.” - Rocío

The ability to demonstrate an “understanding of the English language, including the ability to read, write, and speak basic English” is a requisite in obtaining U.S. citizenship (USCIS 2022). Legal Permanent Residents also have the option to take the test in their native language through the 65/20 Special Consideration, depending on how long applicants have been residents for or if they have had a medical disability. However, not all applicants are eligible for this option, push factors and urgency leading women to naturalize in the first place do not allow time to be a feasible option.

Mexican immigrant populations are the most vulnerable to the English language requisite, as they have the lowest rate of English proficiency among all Latinx immigrants (Radford 2017). This statistic is also explained by the Mexican population’s lack of formal education in the United States, which is structurally unwelcoming for Mexican immigrants, as fears of deportation, discrimination, and economic factors prevail and prevent individuals from seeking educational attainment (Ayón, Nieri, and Gurrola 2018: 26).

High English proficiency and ability to speak the language is correlated with higher naturalization rates (Johnson, Reyes, Mameesh, and Barbour 1999: 26). Language has been utilized as a way to reinforce cultural dominance and racial inequality in institutionalized ways, as exemplified here and historically in The Cable Act of 1912. Through the passage of this act, English literacy was made a requirement to qualify to be exempt from the poll tax to vote. The implementation of this was directly targeted to disproportionately affect Mexican immigrant women’s political agency and rights (Menchaca 2011). Language discrimination is highly

present contemporarily, as Latinx immigrants report experiencing high rates of cultural discrimination based on English language ability (Ayón, Nieri, and Gurrola 2018). This is one manner in which citizenship is still racialized contemporarily through the use of cultural dominance with language.

In both of Alicia's naturalization interviews, she shares her experiences were met with linguistic prejudice. Alicia explained the USCIS officials made her incredibly nervous and unwelcome, by the way they treated her and how the interview was conducted. Alicia answered all the U.S. Civics questions correct, but was met with frustration by officials when she struggled to understand the questions officials had from her N-400 application in English. Both interviews stopped shortly after the officials grew impatient with her.

Economic Barriers

Language is also seen as a barrier in hindering not only Mexican women from obtaining citizenship but is also a procedural hurdle that intersects with other structural issues, such as gendered responsibilities and financial obstacles (Salcedo and Menjivar 2012). Being the largest immigrant group in the U.S., Mexican populations have lower incomes in comparison to other immigrant groups and native-born populations (Ayón, Nieri, and Gurrola 2018), complicating the naturalization process, as its high costs are imperative to the process. USCIS is notorious for its gradual fee increases, as these fiscal increases negatively impact Mexican communities' rates of naturalization (Pastor 2013).

Costs and fees associated with naturalization create a systemic barrier to working-class Mexican communities (Pastor 2013) and more specifically, Mexican women. Patriarchal structures that lead women to migrate, such as lack of equal employment opportunities

(Sreeharsha 2010), are still met in the United States. In the United States, Latinx women are more likely to work in low-wage jobs and are affected by the gender pay gap more than any other demographic group (AAUW 2022). Fiscal barriers are prominent barriers to Mexican women, as higher-income levels are strongly correlated with higher rates of naturalization (Johnson, Reyes, Mameesh, and Barbour 1999).

Gendered implications, such as the second shift, a concept coined by scholar Arlie Hochschild, further complicate the attainability of citizenship. The second shift examines how patriarchal structures in place contribute to increased responsibilities that are often left to women, such as domestic labor including household duties, childcare, and family care (Hochschild 1989). Women's increased familial responsibility faced through the second shift also places them in a position where work opportunities are more limited. Women reported leaving the workforce to care for their children and relatives, thus, impacting their financial independence, and, "hindering them from the legalization process or excluding them altogether" (Salcedo and Menjivar 2012). In Alicia's experience, a Legal Permanent Resident who already endured the naturalization process, she shared the rationale as to why their English is limited:

"Mi escuela es muy baja, yo siento que yo sola no lo podia hacer... cuando tomamos la decision para llegar a este país [USA] Siempre me enfoque en trabajar para ayudar a mi mama y mis dos hermanos mas chicos, porque mi mama se quedo sin hogar de donde somos. Después a los años me case, y me he dedicado a cuidar de mis dos hijos y mi hogar y no he puesto empeño en aprender yo el idioma [ingles] para seguir adelante."

"My schooling is very low, I feel like I couldn't do it alone... when we made the decision to come to this country [USA] I always focused on working to support my mother and my two younger brothers, because my mom was left without a home where we're from. After years passed I got married, and I decided to take care of my two kids and my home and I haven't put effort to learn the language [English] to move forward."

Economic barriers are prominent for Mexican women, as higher-income levels are strongly correlated with higher rates of naturalization (Johnson, Reyes, Mameesh, and Barbour 1999). In Dolores's experience, they share how the process would've been financially difficult if they did not have resources, such as community-based immigrant serving organizations and programs:

“Sin la ayuda comunitaria, me habría afectado mucho económicamente [el proceso]. Ellos ayudan sin ningún cobro, ellos no cobran para ayudar uno llenar los papeles. Eso fue algo bueno para mí. Y aparte pues por el fee, pues también me ayudaron informar que no tenía que pagar [por la exención de tarifas].....Si no hubieran estado ahí pues yo hubiera sufrido mucho económicamente.”

“Without community help, I would've been affected a lot economically [by the process]. They helped me free of charge, they didn't charge to help file paperwork. That was something good for me. And apart from the fee, well they also helped by informing me I didn't have to pay [because of the fee-waiver]....If they were not there well I would've suffered a lot economically.”

Bureaucratic Biases, Discrimination, and Inconsistencies

Discrimination against Latinx populations is heavily embedded institutionally, also exhibited in the naturalization process itself, implying increased racialized and gendered barriers. Latinx populations report high rates of discrimination in the United States, as a 2016 study determined in a representative sample of the Latinx population residing in the U.S that about 70% percent of this population has had direct experiences with discrimination (Almeida 2016). Discrimination also has furthered implications, not only affecting the way institutions are navigated, but also affecting the mental health and well-being of these individuals (Ayón, Nieri, and Gurrola 2018).

Bureaucratic biases and preferences largely determine the experiences of individuals in the naturalization interview and play a role in determining the result (Bishop 2017). The naturalization interview is one ridden with inconsistencies, as individuals' experiences in the citizenship interview range widely, due to the bureaucratic arbitrariness (Félix 2018: 47) embedded systemically.

Bureaucratic biases influence the way a USCIS official navigates the citizenship interview, and enforce discretionary power, as hidden agendas (Heyman 1995) often guide how an interview is conducted. This allows for the naturalization interview to be inconsistent and unpredictable. To echo scholar Sarah C. Bishop's statement in their direct analytical critique of USCIS, naturalization cases are heavily determined by the individuals who facilitate these interviews (2017: 34).

In Alicia's experience in the naturalization process, she recounts how she witnessed differences among other applicants in the naturalization process:

“Lo que yo mire fue que a unas personas, ni huellas les pidieron, no se lo que tiene que haber eso con, siendo como que uno es una raza y otros son otras razas. Pues todos los casos son muy diferente, por lo que uno viva y una escucha. Son procesos muy distintos. Todos los vivimos diferente, desde que mandas la aplicación hasta que terminas el proceso”

“What I saw was that some people, didn't even get biometrics asked for, I don't know what's up with that, if that has to do with being a certain race while others are a different race. Well all the cases are really different, for what one experiences and what one hears. They're very distinct processes. Everyone experiences it differently, starting from when you first send in the application until you finish the process”

Rocío described being told her interview would be only 15 minutes, but she endured a much longer interview:

“Yo iba muy nerviosa, pero ya se empezaron calmar los nervios.... Siempre me decian, tu cita solamente es 15 minutos y ya nomas!.... Creo que me tardo como mas de una hora”

“I went in really nervous, but my nerves started to calm down... They always told me, your interview is only 15 minutes and done!.... I think it lasted more than one hour”

Rocío also described having to defend their responses repetitively, as the USCIS official had asked extensively about their immigration history in a demeaning manner.

“A la vez fue chistoso, pero a la vez yo ya sentía que ya no podía a la ciudadanía. Yo pensé que se estaba metiendo mucho en mi vida personal. Entonces, me sentí como que, *este me quiere sacar del país.*”

“It was funny at the moment, but at the same time, I felt like I couldn’t obtain citizenship anymore. I thought he was getting too involved in my personal life. So, I felt like, *this guy wants to get me out of this country.*”

In Dolores’s experience going to the interview during COVID-19, they described their interview as relatively quick:

“Fue como muy pronto, no fue una entrevista muy larga. Ya cuando estamos caminando al cuarto, ya me estaba haciendo preguntas de los 100 que teníamos que estudiar y nomas me pregunto 3 preguntas de esas. Ya cuando estamos en el cuarto me pregunto como otras 3.”

“It was like really quick, it wasn’t a long interview. When we were walking to the room, they were already asking questions from the 100 we had to study and he only asked me 3 of those questions. When we got to the room he asked me like another 3.”

Dolores then went on to describe she was only asked about one instance of her immigration history briefly and then was directed to sign a paper to become congratulated as a U.S. citizen. However, she described her interview was scheduled to be conducted in Spanish alongside a translator. In her experience at the time of the interview, the USCIS official decided

to proceed with the exam in English, without an interpreter, overriding the original instructions Dolores prepared for.

In Alicia's experience, she described their interview as one that was ridden with anxiousness.

“Durante el proceso, te sientes como muy inquieto, muy ansioso, porque no sabes como te va ir y como te va tratar la persona, si te vaya ayudar, a pesar que no es tu idioma

“During the process, you feel like really restless, really anxious, because you don't know how it's going to go for you and how the person is going to treat you, despite it not being your language either”

Backlog and Anxieties: *Vivi un Tiempo de Incertidumbre*

Backlog on immigration-related matters creates anxieties unique to women, due to the increased wait times and processing backlogs in the system. In 2010, the Immigrant Policy Center created a report that evaluated immigrant women's direct gendered struggles with the U.S. immigration system and determined how immigration processing backlogs, regarding the family-sponsored reunifications, had emotional implications for women's wellbeing, as it constructed an “emotional burden on women and their families” (2010: 5). Concerning naturalization services, COVID-19 has also amplified processing times (DHS 2021), furthering these anxieties and emotional experiences, as uncertainty affects not only applicants' emotional states, but also their families' (MPI 2020). In Alicia's experience, they share how they felt with the backlog in their naturalization case as their application process occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic:

“Y si vive uno tiempo de incertidumbre y me tardo como un año [mi entrevista], casi el año para el entrevista. Es un proceso de mucho ansiedad e incertidumbre y ya cuando estas ahí ya no sabes como vaya ser la persona que te va atender, mas que nada.”

“I did live a time of restlessness and [my interview] took about one year, almost one year for the interview. It's a process filled with a lot of anxiety and uncertainty and when you're there, you don't know how the person you're going to get is like, more than anything.”

Backlogs in processing cases do not only have emotional implications, but also negative structural consequences for applicants according to the literature. Even prior to the pandemic, “slow logs in the citizenship process delay the integration of immigrants and limit their potential economic, social, and political contributions to the communities nationwide” (MPI 2020). Backlogs in citizenship processes have not only impacted the integration of Mexican women but also their emotional state and well-being.

Section 4: Policy and Pedagogical Implications

USCIS needs to diversify the citizenship education curriculum, in addition to encouraging educators to integrate a *critical consciousness and pedagogy* when teaching U.S. history, government institutions, and overall content in the U.S. Civics questions. In his work, scholar Paulo Freire coins the concept of *critical pedagogy*, where educators need to comprehend power in relation to structures and examine patterns of inequality (1968). In doing so, learners are challenged to examine power structures of oppression, allowing naturalizing immigrants to not feed into a nationalistic ideology or a sanitized mythology of the country.

One critique against the current U.S. Civics education for naturalization is the lack of diversity that is reflected in the 100 U.S. Civics questions. Susan B. Anthony is also the only woman explicitly stated in the U.S. Civics curriculum, with the exception of region-specific questions that may vary per applicant's geographical location and time of applying. Susan B. Anthony being the only woman explicitly stated is emblematic of manifesting patriarchal ideologies in the curriculum. There is a need for more women and BIPOC representation in the curriculum, as history has to be reflective of the diverse population the United States prides itself in being.

Critical consciousness needs to be cultivated when learning about pivotal figures, despite who they are. Susan B. Anthony did accomplish many historic rights and was a pivotal figure in the Women's Suffrage Movement, and it is salient to recognize. However, as previously discussed in the historical analysis in Section 1, the Women's Suffrage Movement functioned highly on a white feminist agenda. Anthony was against Black men obtaining the right to vote before women did (Gordon 2020). Pedagogically it is important to recognize these pivotal

figures and their significant contributions, but also recognize the darker impacts of their trajectories. By actively ignoring these critical reflections, one further engages in a hero narrative that instills nationalistic values (Walsh 2020). As Freire discusses, “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process” (Freire 1968: 83). By not recognizing historical figures with a critical consciousness, one furthers the “hero narrative,” through the way cultural discourses are framed (Walsh 2020). If the U.S. continues to pride itself in diversity, it needs to also be reflected in the curriculum. Paulo Freire mentions when learning history, that, “history does not become immobilized, it does not die. On the contrary, it goes on” (1968: 82). Similarly, in an interview as a MacArthur Fellow, Natalia Molina states it is key to understand the “historical factors that shared where we are today, to have the power to reimagine where we can go from here” (2020).

Policy Implications

Given the examined barriers revealed through the literature, several policy implications can be underscored to increase rates of naturalization among Mexican women. Two policy implications are increased multicultural support and decreased fiscal barriers.

Increased Multicultural Support

USCIS’s new 2022 mission statement vows to, “uphold America's promise as a nation of welcome and possibility with fairness, integrity, and respect for all we serve.” However, in order to truly maintain this promise, they need to accommodate the diverse body of applicants that naturalizing immigrants represent. The literature identifies language as a key barrier, especially for Mexican women, and should be addressed through the implementation of increased funding for bilingual and multicultural resources beyond what USCIS currently has. This can be done by

investing in communal bilingual legal resources that aid applicants in the process, and through bilingual and multicultural citizenship education.

Rocio shares her experience of what aided her in the naturalization process:

“Créeme que me impulsaron mucho mis clases.. sobre todo en el idioma: Había momentos donde yo decía, yo no puedo hablarlo, yo no puedo. Pero cuando yo me juntaba en el centro donde yo tomaba mis clases... yo decía, *si puedo*.”

Believe me when I say I was motivated by my [citizenship] classes... the language above all. There would be moments where I would say, no I can't speak the language, I can't do it. But when I would join the center where I would take my classes.... I would say, *I can do it*.”

Decrease Fiscal Barriers

Finances pose a large barrier for Mexican women in the naturalization process and is also a barrier that prohibits applicants from even considering naturalization (Taylor, Torres, and Paral 2008). In a 2018 study, researchers revealed that providing fee waivers to low-income populations increased the rate of applying for naturalization (Hainmueller, Lawrence, Gest, Hotard, Koslowski, and Laitin 2018). As discussed in Section 3, gendered experience also affects fiscal barriers, and implies the process is increasingly difficult for women. Providing more fee waiver eligibility and lowering the costs can relieve financial burdens that harm individuals in the naturalization process and hinder individuals from even considering it.

Conclusion and Reflection: *They Shouldn't Have to be Resilient*

As an individual who obtained U.S. citizenship through birthright citizenship, I am reminded of that privilege every day. To borrow the words from the author, Laila Lalami, my birthright citizenship was *accidental*- I had no agency to dictate where to be born, it was something that occurred out of pure *chance and coincidence* (Lalami 2020).

Growing up in an immigrant community, seeing the structural and emotional barriers that are ridden within the legalization and naturalization process through my firsthand witness and the literature, I can conclude the system was never meant to aid women of color. Even though Mexican women continue to persist in this system through admirable resiliency and personal sacrifice, *they shouldn't have to be resilient*. To be resilient, you need to adapt and prevail through difficult experiences and situations. The system should not be constructed this way. Naturalization should not be a challenge for its diverse applicants, even as USCIS ironically advertises it is not in its new mission statement.

The process should not be uniquely difficult for Mexican women. I still struggle to understand why an individual needs to “earn” their right to be a citizen on stolen land. I still struggle to understand why individuals need to endure this process to receive the same structural rights I do when I have not ever done anything to institutionally “earn” it besides being born here. I still struggle to understand why U.S. citizenship is determined by bureaucratic individuals and a process infused with inequities for women of color.

What I *am* sure of is that the system is not equitable and upholds the settler-colonialist ideals it was created on. Despite the rebranding of USCIS’s mission statement, being that they’re

committed to upholding fairness in the process, the body of literature and the lived experiences of diverse people imply otherwise. *So why is it that inequality continues to persist?*

This critical analysis has been based heavily on the settler-colonial state the U.S. deploys and functions in the replacement and repression of indigenous communities (Glenn 2015).

“Who lived in America before the Europeans arrived?

- American Indians

- Native Americans”

This is the question and answers to item number 59 on the 100 U.S. Civics Flash Cards administered by USCIS, for naturalizing immigrants to learn and memorize. The question’s past tense phrasing has multiple suggestions when critically evaluated, but in short, these linguistic implications continue to blur the narrative of the violent colonization indigenous communities endured and the erasure of their struggles, both historically and contemporarily. It erases the narrative that indigenous people’s land was stolen on violent premises to further fuel Manifest Destiny, and create settler-colonial systems like the naturalization process.

In this process, it is important to recognize and learn about displacement and indigenous presence in this pedagogical space and naturalization process, something citizenship education curriculum doesn’t explicitly state. Pedagogies are critical when defining what U.S. citizenship truly is, and how it affects a sense of belonging. The citizenship classroom is an *empowering space* (Félix 2018: 25), and one rich in playing a role in communal and political belonging for naturalizing individuals, despite whatever outcome bureaucratic officials dictate. When

discussing Alicia's experience in the naturalization process, a conversation steered to a discussion on citizenship and belonging:

“No porque este niño nació aquí, es cien por ciento naturalizado del país. porque las meras personas que si son nativas de aquí son las personas indígenas.”

“Just because a child was born here, does not imply they are one-hundred percent naturalized to this country, because the real people who are native to here are indigenous peoples.”

To echo Alicia's reflection on indigenous communities, citizenship isn't defined by birthright citizenship. Additionally, indigenous people are the true inhabitants native to this occupied land the United States is. To add on, I believe citizenship is not even defined by the *de jure* means of acquisition of citizenship. Whether one feels they belong in the United States or not, that belonging should not be institutionally defined, but rather, personally and communally defined. Citizenship can be reframed as an action, not a legal status.

It is only right to conclude with a Chicana scholar who recognizes patterns of oppression through the lived experience between the spiritual and physical Borderlands, enduring similar writing challenges many Chicana scholars face. Gloria Anzaldúa and the women who shared their experience with the naturalization process are true embodiments of the *Chicana Spirit*, one that persists, “coming up against all sorts of walls,” (Anzaldúa 1989: 72) and prevailing nonetheless.

“This land was Mexican once,

was Indian once,

and is.

And will be again.”

- Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*

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