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Dis/articulating national dis/belonging:
Stories of **free**-d*uh*m and **kap**-i-tl-ist ih-**kon**-*uh*-mees within ESL citizenship classrooms

By

Karen Eliza Villegas

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Kris Gutiérrez, Chair
Professor Janelle Scott
Professor Jovan Scott Lewis

Summer 2024

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Abstract

Dis/articulating national dis/belonging:
Stories of **free**-d*uh*m and **kap**-i-tl-ist ih-**kon**-*uh*-mees within ESL citizenship classrooms

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Examining the ideological underpinnings of language, literacy, and citizenship within adult ESL citizenship classes has much to tell us about hegemonic structures and alternative possibilities. Adults enroll in this class to prepare for the naturalization process; a means of acquiring U.S. citizenship available to lawful permanent residents after meeting extensive federal requirements. To consider the expansive possibilities or (im)possibilities within these spaces, I investigate where ideologies about language, literacy, and citizenship come from, how they manifest in the classroom, and their limits for counter-hegemonic thought. I use a variety of data sources including archival methods, participant observation, and interviews to understand how neoliberal policies shaped ESL citizenship classes in California for immigrants and other marginalized populations. My project analyzes materials from the California Adult Education Archive, specifically the Oral History Project. Notably missing from the Oral History Project are interviews with students of adult education. To privilege the perspective of ESL citizenship students, I conducted participant observation and interviews at two ESL citizenship courses, one in southern California and the other in northern California. I bring these data sources together to show how students and teachers reinscribe, contradict, and contest the ideologies displayed in the Oral History Project. I show how ideologies about language, literacy, and citizenship influence the education and socialization of immigrants, and I reveal the practices and consequences of this ideological literacy project. ESL citizenship classrooms manifest xenophobic materiality rooted in white supremacy and anti-blackness, and yet, there are openings whereby students question their place within these institutions and concomitantly build toward new understandings of citizenship.

Para mi abue.

And to all the ordinary people, may we realize that we should all be on the same side.

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Acknowledgments *in English*

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> I know my mother would want all the non-Spanish speakers to know what she's done. Even though my work refuses to translate, I include this *one* translation here:
>
> To my mother, Carmen Rodríguez, who made sure school was my only job and found tutors at her jobs when I was struggling and cut fruit for me when we argued, thank you—even though you didn't understand where this would lead. My mother waited until my little sister and I left home (unmarried!) to start her own life—to date, to learn English, to go back to school, to get her citizenship—I appreciate the sacrifices you made, the sacrifices I could've never asked for. My mother always asks the tough questions, when are you going to finish, what do you write about so much? Dear mother, I write about you, I write about us.

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All the mistakes in this manuscript are my own. As much as I want to honor my work, I must be honest. I struggled to find the time and space to simply write, to simply be. I have grieved this. This research wasn't funded by any major philanthropic donors. Maybe my work wasn't where it needed to be, maybe the powerful avoid funding projects that could challenge their own power, or maybe they prefer to support initiatives with known outcomes. I worked too many jobs, and though I made more money than my parents ever made in any given month that pay was not enough to live in the Bay Area. So, like my parents, I balanced work and research and mentoring students like me who are trying to live here too. I pieced together my funding from various sources while working as a McNair Mentor, Community Advisor, and Teaching Assistant across different departments. I extended myself to the point of exhaustion. But I believe writing this dissertation under such precarious circumstances gave my work a unique sense of fearlessness that it might not have otherwise possessed.

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For better or worse, I was wholly myself, thank you for fostering this.

Prologue

June 6, 2024

Dear Reader,

I hope this prologue reaches you and your loved ones in strength and solidarity but also with sadness and anger amid the genocide in Palestine, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the escalating climate crisis, forced migrations, the continuous police killings of Black people, mounting economic precarity, and the fleeting loss of connection. My dissertation feels so small, because it is small, especially now.

I write about ESL citizenship classrooms. Inspired by Mike Rose (1989), this dissertation is about language and human connection. Citizenship classrooms are complicated, troubling, and beautiful in a multitude of ways all at the same time. At once, these classrooms are both an indoctrinating apparatus that mirrors education writ large, and a place of possibility. It is this very contraction, that of constraining and enabling possibilities, that organizes my dissertation.

It took my mother twenty-five years to become a U.S. citizen, and she did so through an ESL citizenship class that is included in this project, as is her interview. I draw on her class to illustrate the intimate experiences of prospective citizens navigating the naturalization process amidst a set of rigid procedures and an indoctrinating curriculum. Though I saw my mother giddy about going back to school, joyously making new friends, and happy to be learning, it was peculiar seeing these ideologies at work in the context of citizenship and integration. Barbara Fields (1990) reminds us that "[i]deology is best understood as the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day" (p.110). These ideologies were evident in the curriculum of ESL citizenship classes, which emphasized working hard, learning English, and bettering oneself—all to belong. *But belonging to what exactly*? Though these educational spaces provide a material advantage in gaining U.S. citizenship, ESL citizenship students, like many others, become entwined in the state's ideological goals of economizing life.

I became a doctoral candidate as my mother became a U.S. citizen and this shaped my dissertation proposal in deeply personal ways. Full of ominous, inexplicable excitement, I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at the start of 2020. At the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, everything changed for me, as I am sure it did for everyone. But our [academic] worlds were made possible with high-speed internet access and the world-class provisions of a top research institution. In the face of a worldwide pandemic, we swiftly and eerily shifted to Zoom. It was eerie how quickly our work moved to a virtual space amidst the gravity of a global pandemic. And yet, my dissertation site, an ESL citizenship class in southern California was not so lucky. Students lacked access to the internet, computers, and even time. They were unable to move to Zoom. I located one ESL citizenship class in northern California that was able to move online. But ESL citizenship students across both sites, even as their own lives and the lives of those they loved grew more and more precarious, their day-to-day practices remained relatively unchanged. The demands on their everyday lives remained the same. While they had no protection or support from the ravages of the pandemic, these were the front-line workers upon which everyone relied; on which their families relied for sustenance. The virtual, safe spaces of Zoom could neither contain nor protect the demands of their labor.

They continued to work, as they have always worked (in perpetuity). They worked at hospitals, fast food restaurants, and grocery stores. They worked wearing a thin blue mask during a global pandemic for nine months prior to the advent of the vaccine. They worked several months thereafter to receive the vaccine and have it take effect. COVID-19 placed students into yet another liminal space, full of new precarities, with an emptiness where their physical ESL citizenship class once stood.

This was/is a moment.

Though you will see pedagogical differences across both sites, you will learn about how the curriculum was created in part by the California Archive of Adult Education; across each site, you will notice the highly structured rules of order through which each classroom operated. By modeling the U.S. civics exam, each ESL citizenship classroom reduced literacy and English to reductive notions of functionality, writing one sentence, reading one sentence, and memorizing agreed-upon facts to perform English in *just* the right way for an immigration officer who would be interviewing them.

I struggled to find a form that could both describe this rigid context and make space for the potential openings within it. Because of this curricular rigidity, I aspire to write differently – to play with the form of academic writing and to write against the rules to privilege the openings before us.

This dissertation is about ESL citizenship classrooms. But it is also about so much more. Throughout the project, I directly address you, the reader. Because, as I write this, I am thinking about the implied reader. Sylvia Wynter (1992) reminds us that literacy scholars use the concept of the "implied reader" to show how writers imagine their readers as they write, albeit not always so directly. I do this for a variety of reasons: from trying to connect with the reader to considering the various implied readers, to getting across something deeply important to the reader; to not trusting the reader. I'm trying to write a way out of these origin stories—the histories of colonization, genocide, and slavery. I'm trying to connect to something else in a desperate attempt to believe that there has to be something better than this.

Thank you for reading this.

With melancholy and hope,

Karen

Introduction

"Let us today resolve to roll up our sleeves and get to work, because there's very much to be done. Across this great land, let those of us who can read teach those who cannot. Let the lights burn late in our classrooms, our church basements, our libraries, and around our kitchen tables—wherever we can gather to help others help themselves to the American dream."

—Ronald Reagan (1983), U.S. president, Remarks at a White House Ceremony Announcing the Adult Literacy Initiative

"Yes, it does take our whole community in order to raise people's literacy levels. Because when we don't do it, we see the effects of [illiteracy], in terms of persons who are getting public assistance, we see it in terms of our correctional institutions, we see it in terms of children on the street who come from abusive families, we see it in poverty. We see it in so many different ways…not involved politically, not voting, not taking advantage of citizenship."

—Aryola Taylor (1995), Project Director of Adult Literacy Instructors Training Institute, oral history interview in Adult Education Archive of California

"George Washington is the father of our country."

—U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2023), Administrator of U.S. citizenship exam, oral reading test

"The unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, their laziness, and, let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps."

— Frantz Fanon (1967), *The Wretched of the Earth*

In 1983, United States President Ronald Reagan announced plans for a national Adult Literacy Initiative. The program was rolled out with the following alarm, "Conservative estimates are that 23 million Americans, one in five, are functionally illiterate…*let us today resolve to roll up our sleeves and get to work because there's much to be done*" (Reagan, 1983). The trope of illiteracy—a reductive, deficit model of language (Heath, 1982; Rose, 1985) — snowballed alongside the culture of poverty myths (e.g., Moynihan Report, Coleman Report, Word Gap) as part of a larger project of racialization that places blame on individuals rather than the oppressive structures surrounding our lives. We see this racialized, deficit-based model in "*so many different ways*." We see it in adult education programs. In the 1970s, neoliberalism, defined as a political-economic paradigm that emphasizes deregulation, privatization, and the reduction of state influence in favor of market mechanisms and competition (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2007a) reshaped adult education whereby learning goals were driven by welfare-to-work legislation and mandatory English classes were required as part of immigration reform. We see this same model in ESL citizenship classes whereby the same standardized exams used in welfare-to-work initiatives developed citizenship exams for prospective U.S. citizens (*CASAS History*, n.d.). The citizenship exams test for literacy in English by having prospective U.S. citizens read or write the following sample sentence out loud to a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agent: "*George Washington is the father of our country*." Neoliberal

policies and the ideological vestiges long before neoliberalism, reduce language and literacy to racialized notions of functionality and promote moral imperatives for English monolingualism vested in xenophobia and nation-building. These initiatives tell nondominant communities that the ways they move through the world is in need of perpetual reform. Indicative of the regime of racial liberalism, these efforts seek to resolve problems of inequality through measuring, monitoring, and reforming non-dominant communities (Aggarwal, 2016a). Stemming from "the unpreparedness [and unwillingness] of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, and their inaction at decisive moments in the struggle"—this class has gone too far in protecting their own power—*Their cowardice continues to give rise to tragic mishaps*.

Locating the Project in Relevant Literature

The Americanization Movement continues to influence adult education and frames the learning of English as part of an assimilationist project. English as a Second Language (ESL) citizenship classrooms, an understudied site within the academic literature, are promising sites for studying the relationship between language, literacy, and nation-building processes. In ESL citizenship classrooms, the focus lies not only on teaching English but also on preparing students for their naturalization interview to become U.S. citizens. Here students must demonstrate speaking, writing, and reading in English proficiently and pass an oral civics test. However, these tests are not straightforward literacy and civic tests; instead, they serve broader ideological purposes, reinforcing specific notions of citizenship and belonging. The construction of the neoliberal citizen is mediated through the naturalization process and education functions to produce good citizens (Urciuoli, 1994). The nation's origin stories function to otherize immigrants while simultaneously trying to integrate them into the economy and assimilate them into whiteness (Wynter, 2003). The role of language in the nation-building process is critical: language and literacy (Graff, 1987) are ideologized and embedded within national identity (Blommaert, 1999; Kroskrity, 2010) that stems from U.S. colonial history (Fanon, 1967; Veronelli, 2015). Neoliberalism positions the learning of English as the gold standard for academic advancement (Bernstein et al., 2013; King, 2002) and the prerequisite "to be" a productive citizen - a status characterized by an impossibility of never achieving and always becoming.

I argue that learning spaces in western education are designed to operate in service of capital (Césaire, 2000); to become yet another entry point into our hierarchical orders: to conscript our imagination and our hopes for an otherwise (Crawley, 2016); to author the deradicalized, depoliticized, and the going-about-ness worker. Our epistemological codes which are rooted in U.S. Empire's origin stories—the histories of colonization, genocide, slavery—the very codes designed to protect capital through the exploitation of non-dominant communities, are *learned* in the classroom (Woodson, 1990).

The analysis presented in this dissertation grows out of my empirical study of the ESL classroom, where I examined its history, artifacts, and classroom practices. By marshaling theory and literature, I aimed to demonstrate how these educational spaces perpetuated the ideologies of nationalism and assimilation. The insights from this study reveal the broader implications of how educational practices are intertwined with nation-building processes and economic imperatives.

Research Questions

The three articles that comprise this dissertation are concerned with examining the ideological underpinnings of language, literacy, and citizenship within adult ESL citizenship classes. Taken together, they seek to investigate where these ideologies come from, how they manifest in the classroom, and their limits for counter-hegemonic thought. Accordingly, this dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

- Article 1 addresses the question: How do adult education administrators and teachers embrace and/or contest the ideologies of neoliberal policies?
- Article 2 addresses the question: How do students sustain, modify, or reject these ideologies in their everyday lives?
- Article 3 addresses the question: To which ideologies and literacy practices are students in the ESL citizenship classroom being socialized?

My study analyzes the practices of the course, particularly the ideologies indexed in these practices and the ensuing kinds of literacies produced in these settings, to consider the ways in which students are learning how to become citizens and the (im)possible openings that exist therein. The findings show that ESL citizenship classes do not foster a sense of political incorporation or belonging. Instead, they position U.S. immigrants undergoing the naturalization process to identify as workers rather than citizens who can influence their world. In this context, literacy is used as a tool of functionality, not possibility, and certainty, not world-building. I intervene in the scholarly literature on multiculturalism and language learning to show how both are reduced to neoliberal monocultural/monolingualism when literacy is used as an assimilatory tool for aspiring citizens.

Conceptual Framework

Situated within the field of critical learning sciences, this paper takes seriously the Politics of Learning Writing Collective's (2017) call to develop a political theory of learning. Sociocultural theory defines learning as a situated, social practice (Engestrom, 2006; Scribner & Cole, 2013). Embracing learning as situated means "to conceptualize it as inherently political: it is always embedded in and articulated through, hierarchies of power and tied to particular visions of possible futures" (The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017, p. 95). Notably missing from the broader learning sciences literature is a deeper conceptualization of ideology (Philip et al., 2018) and interrogation of pedagogical instruction in spaces of higher education and sites of popular education like community colleges and adult education programs (The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). Noncredit classrooms are particularly under-researched, especially those with the added goal of teaching the content needed for U.S. citizenship. I argue for the interrogation of these unique learning spaces where the learning of language and literacy is imbued with racialized ideologies intended to mold neoliberal citizens.

A Note on Form

As a qualitative social scientist, I employ humanistic research methods, through my interrogation of language and learning within the context of this ethnographic project. The form of the first article traces the directionality of power from the most powerful literacy sponsors to the least powerful sponsors. In the second article, my unwillingness to translate from Spanish to English emphasizes the nontranslatability of difference. And lastly, the form of the third article

itself is pedagogical, to gesture toward other possibilities by showing how [our] teaching could be more expansive. I address the reader directly because we are all implicated in this project.

Design and Methods

Data Collection

My dissertation project collects data from the oral histories from the California Adult Education Archive and two ESL citizenship courses, one in southern California and the other in northern California. I collected artifacts from each course, including class handouts and students' notebooks to learn about the instructional materials that reflect and enforce master myths to learn more about this indoctrinating process. I completed participant observation from the ESL citizenship class in northern California, totaling 175 hours. I conducted interviews with 10-15 students from each class to investigate how students sustain or fracture the imposition of the neoliberal citizen. I also interviewed the teachers of each class to learn about their pedagogical practices. The rationale for these data sets is to comprehensively understand the multi-faceted nature of ESL citizenship education and its ideological role in shaping prospective citizens. By examining these sources, I hope to glean an understanding into the broader implications of educational practices on understandings of citizenship and belonging.

Following this introduction, each article of the dissertation provides a more detailed discussion of the methods and the rationale employed in collecting and analyzing data from the oral histories in the California Adult Education Archive, as well as from the ESL citizenship classes in both southern and northern California. Each article focuses on the analysis of specific forms of data, including class handouts, students' notebooks, participant observation fieldnotes, student interviews, or teacher interviews, depending on the article's research questions. I focus on illustrating the indoctrinating process and exploring how students navigate the ideological impositions around citizenship.

Data Analysis

To begin the process of data analysis, I created activity logs of field notes and interview transcripts. I used Dedoose, qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, to code my data with three undergraduate research assistants. My codebook contains the following parent codes: language ideologies, neoliberal ideologies, and citizenship ideologies, with subsequent child codes. The codebook and thesaurus were developed iteratively, with initial codes derived from the literature and refined through discussions and coding meetings with research assistants. These theoretical parent codes are informed by the literature and reflect a combination of bottom-up and top-down coding approaches, bringing in theoretical categories while also examining what could be observed in the data. This dual approach allowed for both the integration of existing theoretical frameworks and the identification of new patterns emerging from the data. These codes inform what counts as literacy, what counts as language use, and what conceptions of citizenship emerge. I wrote iterative analytic memos to capture themes. This analysis advances analytical generalizations (Yin, 2014) by exploring the utility of theoretical constructs through the analysis of varied data sources associated with the case to corroborate and refine constructs.

Robert Yin (2014) argues that case studies have the potential to advance generalization, distinguishing between two types: statistical and analytical. Statistical generalization, based on positivistic traditions, uses experimental and correlational designs to sample individuals and generalize findings to a larger population. In contrast and suitable for ethnography, the purpose of analytical generalization is theory construction. Analytical generalization involves exploring

the utility of theoretical constructs through the analysis of varied data sources associated with the case to corroborate and refine these constructs. Ethnography privileges the theory-building aspects. By deeply engaging with the context and participants, ethnographers aim to develop rich, contextually grounded theories. This process involves iterative data collection and analysis, allowing for the identification and refinement of theoretical constructs.

In this study, analytical generalization is achieved through an iterative examination of the practices and ensuing ideologies of ESL citizenship classrooms. By analyzing field notes, interview transcripts, class handouts, and student notebooks, I aimed to construct and refine theories related to language ideologies, neoliberal ideologies, and citizenship ideologies. This approach allows for the development of nuanced insights into how these ideologies are embedded and enacted in educational settings, to advance our theoretical understanding of these processes. The following table presents a research matrix that depicts the study's design, breaking down each research question into units of observation, data collection methods, frequency, and units of analysis to show the framework guiding this study. In practice, the matrix would reveal an iterative design.

Table 1 Research Design Matrix

Research Questions	Units of Observation	Data Collection	Frequency	Unit of Analysis
(1) How do adult education administrators and teachers embrace and/or contest the ideologies of neoliberal policies?	-California Adult Education Archive	-Oral History Project -Memos		Discourse practices: -conceptions of literacy -conceptions of language use -conceptions of citizenship
(2) How do students sustain, modify, or reject these ideologies in their everyday lives?	-Interviews with ESL citizenship students in southern California cite -Group interview with focal students	-Memos -Interviews with participants -Artifacts from the class (course materials) -Artifacts created by participants (note cards, notebooks from the course)	-Interview per focal participant lasting between 30 minutes to 1 hour -Follow-up interview -One group interview	Ideology -the underlying beliefs, values, and norms that influence behavior and social structures Practices -literacy practices -language use

				-social organization (e.g. instruction)
(3) To which ideologies and literacy practices are students in the ESL citizenship classroom being socialized?	-Participant observation of ESL citizenship class in northern California site -Interviews with individual students	-Memos -Fieldnotes - Interview with course participants -Artifacts from the class (course materials) -Artifacts created by participants (note cards, notebooks from the course)	-Participant observation throughout yearlong course -Monday and Wednesday evenings -Interview per focal participant lasting between 30 minutes to 1 hour -Follow-up interview	Ideology -the underlying beliefs, values, and norms that influence behavior and social structures Practices -literacy practices -language use -social organization (e.g. instruction)

Overview of Articles

California is a rich site to study ESL citizenship classrooms: much of the curriculum and federal testing measures for ESL citizenship classrooms developed in California and later spread to other states. To understand how neoliberal policies shaped ESL citizenship classes in California, my project analyzes oral histories from the California Adult Education Archive. In the first dissertation article, I trace how neoliberal policies sought to expedite literacy acquisition for Vietnamese refugees and Latino immigrants to socialize them into low-paying jobs. Educators, modeling the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s, racialized their students based on their perceived literacy practices, shrunk spaces of critical thinking, and reduced literacy to notices of functionality. My work is critical of piecemeal reform initiatives in general, and more specifically, of those policies that target people – immigrants, refugees, or otherwise – as the site of needed change rather than targeting the structural forces of power and institutions.

To understand the perspective of ESL citizenship students and show how neoliberal ideologies continue to shape classroom practices, my dissertation draws on data from two ESL citizenship courses, one in southern California and the other in northern California in the Bay Area. I collected artifacts from each course, including class handouts and students' notebooks. My second dissertation article, based on in-depth interviews with students from the southern California site, shows how the ESL citizenship classroom continues to embrace reductive notions of functionality through English-only instruction. This article shows how the learning of a language acts as a code of membership where learners begin to perform the script guided by the epistemological codes that govern our lives. These codes are rooted in the origin stories of the capitalist economic system, protected by the constitution, and dominate the curriculum. I problematize the concept of belonging to show how prospective citizens engage in anti-

Blackness as a form of belonging by embracing these codes. Drawing on moments when students contest these codes, I illustrate the openings that could exist in ESL citizenship spaces, to point to the possibilities therein if we were to design learning environments against notions of work, English, and citizenship.

My third dissertation article draws on yearlong participant observation of the northern California site. This paper examines a representative lesson covering slavery and the civil rights movement to show how the space of critical thinking collapses. In educational spaces like ESL citizenship classrooms – and primary and secondary schooling – the civil rights movement has come to stand in for nonviolence, progress, patriotism, and morality – all of the values the state wants us to enact, neglecting the radical foundation of the civil rights movement and its pedagogical potential. The findings of this study are presented in two parts: empirical and conceptual. In part 1, I analyze lessons on slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement to illustrate how the U.S. civics test curriculum portrays slavery as an isolated event, neglecting its ongoing logics of exploitation. In part 2, I reimagine ESL citizenship classrooms as sites for counter-narratives, demonstrating how storytelling can challenge and break away from prescribed norms.

By bringing together these data sources and forms of analysis, I show how neoliberal policies continue to influence the organization of ESL citizenship classrooms. I also illustrate the ways students and teachers reinscribe, contradict, and contest the ideologies displayed in the Oral History Project. By analyzing ESL citizenship classrooms, my project demonstrates how economic ideologies and language ideologies shape the assimilation process of naturalization. My analysis shows that the pedagogy remains 'grammar-based' and 'communicative' despite the strides made in teaching language acquisition. In addition, economic ideologies and language ideologies further the logic of settler colonialism within hegemonic institutions that define citizenship. I show how these logics are indexed within citizenship education and analyze how these logics are remade, reproduced, and at times, contested. Within the context of domestication, my project shows how these ideologies manifest in the classroom and their limits for counter-hegemonic thought while considering the expansive possibilities or (im)possibilities within these spaces of indoctrination.

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English that works: Unsettling literacy sponsors in adult education

Well, you know,
downtown L.A., people work-
there's a lot of hotels there.
People get off maybe at midnight.
They're still a little bit awake,
so they were willing to go to school for a couple of hours.
The problem was getting teachers.
[both laugh]
So it didn't last as long as it could have.
[both laugh]
Not too many teachers want to teach from 2:00 A.M. to 4:00 A.M
[But] people were actually going to class.
It was just amazing.

—James Figueroa, Director of Adult Education at Los Angeles Unified School District, oral history interview excerpt from Adult Education Archive of California[1]

The expansive potential of literacy education can empower learners by providing them with tools for critical engagement and personal transformation (Freire, 2000a; Gee, 2004; hooks, 1994). Literacy education aims to foster not only basic skills but also the ability to question and reshape one's social reality. However, this paper argues that literacy education has often been constrained by an underlying focus on these very basic skills to socialize learners into menial employment rather than embracing the transformative potential of literacy education. I draw on archival data from the Adult Education Archive of California[2] to examine how the forms of literacy employed in citizenship programs sustain the aims, ideologies, and practices of traditional approaches to literacy. The Adult Education Archive of California presents a rich opportunity to study the historical antecedents of ESL citizenship classes. This archival study is part of a larger study that examines the classroom practices and ideologies therein of ESL citizenship classes. Specifically, this study applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to oral history interviews of administrators and teachers to trace the link between larger neoliberal policies implemented between the 1970s to 1990s and the teaching of literacy for citizenship. This study has implications for citizen education in California and demonstrates how well-meaning educators might undermine full democratic engagement. It models the neoliberal

[1] Excerpt is quoted directly from James Figueroa's (2001, p.80) oral history interview transcript. The author's added emphasis is indicated by the arrangement and bolding of the text.

[2] The Adult Education Archive of California contains materials related to adult education programs in California. It includes archival data such as policy documents, program reports, oral history interviews, and administrative records. Originally located at the California State Library in Sacramento, the archive was recently relocated to Stanford University.

policies through which educators reinscribed racialized understandings of nondominant communities and reduced the expansive potential of literacy as a social practice.

With the passage of the federal Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, which included a new requirement for 40 hours of English language classes to be eligible for the U.S. citizenship exam, the need for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in California tripled between 1986 and 1990[3] (West, 2005). In response, adult education administrators responded in creative ways; sites in Los Angeles offered ESL classes spinning like a carousel across the 24-hour day, with some classes taking place from 2:00 AM to 4:00 AM. Educators made room for their students' work schedules in seemingly impossible ways, and yet these very accommodations came together so urgently and efficiently around functional models of literacy. Functional models of literacy, as described by Mike Rose, focus on practical skills and basic reading and writing abilities required for everyday tasks, often at the expense of critical thinking and broader engagements with literacy (Rose, 1985). This functional model of literacy was effective in providing the knowledge necessary for low-wage employment, despite the law's mandate to create English fluency. This form of literacy, often characterized as utilitarian or vocational, also serves to socialize people to conform to the needs of menial employment, eerily reminiscent of schools becoming "mere factories to train the workforce" (Giroux, 1988, p. 93) with no critical thinking, civic literacy, or historical memory.

To understand how neoliberal policies influence those regulating literacy, one productive approach is to examine the role of literacy sponsors. Deborah Brant (2001) defines literacy sponsors as "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain an advantage by it in some way" (2001, p. 19). Literacy is an evolving social and historical construction, a social practice that moves through institutions according to stated and unstated rules shaped by institutional sites and events. These sites, such as schools, libraries, and workplaces, and events, like educational programs and policy implementations, shape how literacy is taught, learned, and practiced (Luke, 1994). Literacy is both a resource and a commodity, and literacy sponsors set the terms of access to literacy. Thinking about access to literacy according to the social contract set explicitly or implicitly by the sponsor helps us see how literacy practices operate in differential economies.

I analyze the ideologies of literacy sponsors to understand how their ideologies (Kroskrity, 2010; Silverstein, 1996) about literacy, and its interplay with neoliberal policies, influence their teaching practices. Using data from the California Adult Education (CAE) Oral History Project, which is housed in the Adult Education Archive of California, an archive that has not been previously cited or utilized in existing academic literature, this analysis was derived from a project conducted between 1992-2002 that interviewed twenty-nine educators.

Together, their interviews capture seventy years of service and their experience with literacy reveals important changes across the history of adult education in (West, 2005, p. v). The participants of the CAE Oral History Project included twenty men and nine women whose roles spanned from teachers, administrators, program coordinators, federal project directors, and leaders of professional organizations within the realm of adult education. Participants were interviewed by researcher Linda L. West and Cuba Z. Miller whose own ideologies come through in the oral history interview conversations. These interviews were conducted to capture and preserve the diverse experiences and perspectives of those involved in adult education. This

[3] Enrollment numbers show that the most significant impact was during 1988-89 and 1989-90 school years.

data set allowed me to examine how neoliberal policies influenced teaching contexts and limited the possibilities of literacy learning by tracing educators' ideologies as the unit of analysis. In analyzing the oral history interviews, I used critical discourse analysis (CDA), a theoretical and empirical approach that focuses on the role of language in society and its intersection with discourse, ideology, and power (Fairclough, 1995, 2010; Gee & Green, 1998). I documented the intricate ways in which language use maintains and reproduces unequal power relations by using literacy as a tool of socialization. Two of the twenty-nine educators interviewed were *exceptional* students of ESL adult education classes who went on to take for-credit community college courses, attend four-year universities, and eventually become teachers and later administrators of the same ESL programs they attended years earlier. The term exceptional is italicized to consider how notions of exceptionality imply that through notions of working hard one can transcend socio-economic barriers. Aside from these two former ESL students, no other former students are included in the archive. Because the oral history project only includes educators with long, successful careers in adult education, another poignant omission is that of teachers who left the profession. These omissions poignantly remind us of how the archive is created, whose very sources are produced by power and maintained by power (Hartman, 1997; Lowe, 2015; Trouillot, 1995). While it is possible that logistical constraints such as time or funding limitations also played a role in these omissions, the selective nature of the archive still reflects broader dynamics of power. Given the relatively small number of interviews from the CAE Oral History Project, it is likely that many categories of educators are not represented and it is hard to know who and why left the profession. Even though it's clear ESL citizenship students at the time were not included in the project, without more background on how the interviews were collected, and the selection criteria, it is difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions about inclusion and exclusion. My own selection was intended to provide insights into the impact of these reforms on adult education and my choices also reflect bias and constraints.

I drew from eleven of the interviews in the archive, strategically selecting eleven educators who worked during the neoliberal reforms in California. Among them, my primary focus centers on three educators who served as teachers during the implementation of these policies. This focus enables us to see how these neoliberal policies variably influenced teaching contexts and pedagogies. Although this paper understands all twenty-nine educators interviewed as literacy sponsors, I want to emphasize that they were merely working under the conditions set forth by the more powerful literacy sponsors – those designing neoliberal policies. This emphasis, and the organization of this paper, attempt to speak to the directionality of this power.

Thus, this paper centers on the neoliberal policies of the 1970s to 1990s to show how these policies shaped the organization of adult education. One interviewee from the oral history project described these neoliberal policies as the "earthquake of adult education," a metaphor not used lightly by Californians. Neoliberal policies reshaped adult education such that learning goals were driven by welfare-to-work legislation and immigration reform; these vestiges remain in adult education, especially ESL citizenship classrooms. In 2024, ESL citizenship classrooms teach English and prepare students for their naturalization interview to become U.S. citizens.

The present historical study seeks to understand a primary question: how do the ideologies from neoliberal policies take hold among adult education administrators and teachers? Materials from the California Adult Education (CAE) Oral History Project provide insights into the meanings, ideologies, and understandings of literacy during this period of neoliberal reforms that continue to shape literacy and citizenship education for prospective U.S. citizens. By analyzing the discourse in the oral history interview as part of a series of social practices guided

by ideological understandings of literacy, I argue that adult education does not meet the needs of its students but rather the desires of more powerful literacy sponsors. I use the term neoliberal literacies to name the worldviews and underlying ideologies that present literacy as a neutral technology free of racialized exploitation. I advance the concept of neoliberal literacy which is an insidious form of inclusivity and multiculturalism that reinscribes monocultural assimilation, and functions so that immigrants may become U.S. citizens to assimilate into low-paying jobs – but not allow them to question their own oppressive working conditions. My analyses demonstrate how the ideologies from neoliberal policies trickle down into adult education, promoting a moral imperative for English monolingualism vested in nation-building. The current citizenship exams for prospective U.S. citizens are based on the standardized exams used in welfare-to-work initiatives outlined in this paper (*CASAS History*, n.d.; West, 2005). Educators' discourses reveal how they see their students as Other, and literacy is reduced to a racialized notion of functionality, with the goal of teaching English so that students can function as workers. This paper contends that neoliberal literacy reinscribes racialized understandings of nondominant communities and reduce the expansive potential of literacy as a social practice.

There are two parts to this paper. The first part provides the historical context of literacies to show how literacy has functioned as a tool for socializing people into ideologies and sensibilities. In the second part of this paper, I trace the influence of neoliberal policies on literacy instruction and citizenship classes through the actions of literacy agents. Drawing on Brandt's (2001) notion of literacy sponsors, I use sponsorship conceptually to analyze the neoliberal forces that promote and/or constrain literacy. The second part of this paper is organized to emphasize the directionality of power from the more powerful literacy sponsors, those responsible for designing and implementing neoliberal policies aimed towards the rapid acquisition of functional literacy, down to the less powerful literacy sponsors, those who work within the framework dictated by these policies, and ultimately to the nondominant students who are assimilated into these ways of being. I begin my analysis of the archive with the neoliberal policies taking hold to examine how the actions and decisions of the more powerful literacy sponsor structure the way less powerful literacy sponsors teach literacy. I then transition to a close reading of the interviews with less powerful literacy sponsors to capture how literacy and citizenship come to be understood through the lens of neoliberal ideology.

Part 1: Historical Context of Literacies

To contextualize the analysis and findings, this section begins by providing a concise overview of dominant understandings of literacy to illustrate their ongoing influence on contemporary literacy practices. I begin by contextualizing dominant understandings of literacy within the legacies of colonialism and their subsequent impact on remedial education and reductive forms of literacy vis-à-vis the literacy myth. The literacy myth, as defined by Graff (1987), underscores that literacy inherently leads to individual and societal progress, often ignoring the complex factors that influence literacy acquisition. I then distinguish between what came to be known as the autonomous model of literacy and the ideological model of literacy. Though literacy theory is not limited to these two models, touching on both models underscore the distinctions between viewing literacy as a collection of individual skills based on certain, often deficit, assumptions about nondominant communities and recognizing the sociocultural aspects of literacy. These sociocultural aspects, as highlighted by Barton and Hamilton (2012), shed light on the underlying ideological assumptions that shape dominant understandings of literacy and challenge the deficit perspectives often imposed on nondominant communities.

Great Divide theories of literacy, the canon of literacy studies, touted significant differences between literate and "nonliterate" people and their communities. These scholars emphasized the differences – writing versus orality, modern versus traditional, and educated versus uneducated (Collins, 1995, p. 75) – in the cognitive and cultural development of literate "civilizations" over "nonliterate" peoples. Jack Goody's (1986) influential role on writing in societal development highlighted the transformative effects of literacy on social organization and cognition. Greenfield and Bruner (1966), for example, suggested that oral language relies on context for communication, while written language requires that meaning be made clear and independent of any immediate reference. Olson's (1977) work also associated literacy and education with cognitive growth by linking logical competency to literacy. Goody and Watt (1968) privileged the development of alphabetic literacy and credit the rise of Greek civilization as a historical example of the transition toward literate society and the development of political democracy. This body of scholarship supported the dominant belief that literacy leads to higher—more civilized—forms of thought (Goody, 1986, 1987, 1988; Goody & Watt, 1963; Havelock, 1963; W. J. Ong, 1982). This definition of literacy reinforces a deficit perspective on nondominant communities and devalues other forms of literacy present in these communities (Gee, 2008; B. V. Street, 1993).

Literacy Myths and their Epistemological Codes

To further contextualize how Great Divide theories of literacy were informed by colonial legacies and continue to inform policy decisions, this section discusses how the grandiose assumptions concerning literacy – "a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility" (Graff, 2010, p. 635) – forms the literacy myth. The literacy myth becomes a "master myth[4] of our society" (Gee, 2008, p. 51) by guiding the way we make sense of our (distorted) realities through the teaching of literacy. A more critical perspective on the global spread of English and literacy, however, reveals its ties to colonialism, linguistic imperialism, and globalization (Sonntag, 2003).

Within the formation of the new state, through colonialism and slavery, racialized subjects were shaped, in part, through literacy. Literacy practices "function through a politics of rehabilitation and inclusion/exclusion that have always upheld dominant ways of knowing/being" (Truman, 2019, p. 111). Otherness – beginning in medieval times – came to be mapped onto new areas of the world and "new" people with an inside/outside relationship of accepted and not accepted values. With literacy upholding dominant ways of knowing/being, literacy preserves our Empire's master myths. Master myths refer to the dominant narratives – the stories – reinforcing the beliefs, values, and ideologies set by the dominant group that serve as the foundation of our social structures and institutions. Textbooks, for example, impose a narrative that uplifts the U.S. state as a "nation of immigrants" rather than one of racial and cultural domination (Wynter, 1992a).

Missionaries, administrations, and other colonial agents wrote grammars and textbooks based on the constructions of language in *their* image and for *their* agendas rather than the local languages used in context (Isichei, 1995; Renck, 1990). With the invention of languages, an

[4] I draw from Sylvia Wynter (1992) who conceptualizes master myth as the beliefs, values, and ideologies that serve the foundation of our social structures and institutions. These dominant narratives, master myths, establish hierarchical power structures that maintain the status quo at the expense of nondominant peoples.

ideology of languages was created. These inventions carry material effects that determine how languages are understood, how language policies have been constructed, how education has been pursued, and how people come to identify with linguistic labels (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005, p. 139). A study considering language and identity discrimination among Puerto Ricans found that English continues to be associated as a language of work, school, and economic advancement whereas the speaking of Spanish, their mother tongue, often leads to further racialization (Martinez, 2022). Ideology is inscribed into language which functions as a code of membership and delimits a shared behavioral contract among speakers, guided by the epistemological codes that govern our lives and the grammars of order (Wynter, 2000, 2003) held together by the same stories that justify the continual Othering process. Master myths protect the state apparatus, and its stories, used to colonize and enslave, and later rehabilitate and reform nondominant communities towards "progress" through literacy. As in this study, these myths are reproduced in the classroom to remediate prospective citizens to align with *their* agendas.

The application of the alphabet to colonial contexts extends to non-dominant communities in schools, workplaces, and communities whose life circumstances are thought to improve when adopting the literacy practices of the dominant group (like those in ESL citizenship classrooms). From the middle of the 19th century, the American school system has acted as a powerful source of assimilation for both immigrants and the children of immigrants. Across time, literacy sponsors have implemented policies to address the "literacy crisis." The Immigration Act of 1917, for example, used literacy tests to ban immigrants over the age of 16 who were deemed illiterate, with an exception made for laborers. Businesses in the agriculture sector challenged the literacy requirement, and eventually, the Immigration Act of 1924 modified the Act of 1917 to focus on exclusion in the form of national origin quotas (successfully excluding all immigrants from Asia) (Urciuoli, 1994). After World War I, Americanization took the form of naturalizing immigrants by providing classes in the English language and promoting literacy and knowledge of civic affairs (King, 2002). These ideologies around progress and socialization towards said progress shaped notions of remediation around literacy. The belief in literacy as a tool for societal improvement and individual advancement reinforced the idea that acquiring English literacy was essential for integration and success in American society.

The Role of Remedial Education

Building on these historical perspectives, common-sense notions of literacy, as revealed in this archival study, have aligned with ideologies of the Great Divide, and continue to persist in adult education. Through ideologies of remediation, the teaching of literacy continues to be imbued with discourses of difference and deficit views of nondominant students that motivate interventions to "fix" individuals for their future success (Gutiérrez et al., 2009). Characterizing learners as remedial is "to be substandard, inadequate, and, because of the origins of the term, the inadequacy is metaphorically connected to disease and mental defect" (Hull & Rose, 1989, p. 171). The comparison of nondominant and dominant communities, often without empirical evidence, brings forth policy solutions rooted in fixing nondominant communities without attention to their practices of literacy but rather an overemphasis on the technical, utilitarian dimensions of literacy (Rose, 1985). Cole & Cole (2006) reexamine Jack Goody's writing on literacy as an autonomous causal agent and ground their examination on the social historical contextual factors that propelled the Goody myth forward. In the early 1960s, in the aftermath of World War II and after decades of colonial rule, there was a consensus among international development organizers that former colonies should transition into industrialized societies and

adopt the ways of life of more developed Western nations. Many, including the United Nations, believed that literacy would be instrumental in bringing about this transformation. Though Goody (1987) objected to the characterization of his work as one of technological determinism, the scholarly and social context of his writing invited these large-scale views (Cole & Cole, 2006). Remedial education remains a prevalent intervention strategy in the education of nondominant communities and continues to drive deficit understandings of nondominant communities, rooted in a long history of eugenics, and has continued pedagogical and social implications (Villegas et al., 2021).

New Literacy Studies (NLS), the ideological model of literacy

Building on sociocultural studies of literacy learning, literacy studies took a social turn. By the 1980s, Great Divide theories of literacy were more widely challenged. Scribner and Cole's (1981) foundational work considered the organization and use of literacy in different social and cultural contexts. They examined the consequences of literacy apart from schooling among the Vai people in Liberia, a community that invented a syllabic writing system to represent their language and learned their writing system away from school. Instead of working down from developmental theories, Scribner and Cole began to work up from observations of how literacy was socially organized and used by the Vai. Their experimental activities were based on ethnographic observation, and these observations suggested appropriate tasks to test the applications of literacy. Their project showed that engagement in reading and writing does not have psychological consequences, but rather these consequences are specific to activities with the Vai script and need to be understood contextually.

Informed by sociocultural views of learning and social practice theory, New Literacy Studies (NLS) considered literacy a social practice and examined literacy practices and literacy events as units of analysis and focus (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Gee & Green, 1998; B. Street, 1984). A theory of social practice, for example, helps "account for the varied, problematic, partial, and unintentional production of persons through historical and biographical time, in a multiplicity of identities constructed and reconstructed through participation in social practice (Lave et al., 1992, p. 257). From this perspective, learning, integral to social practices, needs to be understood as part of the social and cultural context of the community, rather than in isolated, abstract settings. People learn by becoming full participants and engaging in meaningful activities with their communities.

Building on this tradition, New Literacy Studies (NLS) emphasized that the teaching of literacy needs to be situated in the socially constructed nature of human practices and meaning-making systems where language constructs an identity within the speech community (Rogers, 2011). Literacy is tied to community values and connects people and their shared histories. NLS focused not so much on the acquisition of skills but rather on literacy as a social practice and the recognition of multiple literacies and their relations of power (B. Street, 1984, 2003). The notion of multiple literacies makes a distinction between "autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy. The autonomous model supported the Great Divide premise that the introduction of literacy enhances cognitive skills and economic prospects. In contrast, the ideological model conceptualized literacy as a social practice, not a technical or neutral skill, where the consequences of learning literacy depend on the context of development. These models are particularly useful in this study as they help to situate the forms of literacy emergent in the literacy agents' ideological understandings surrounding their teaching of literacy to nondominant communities.

In line with the ideological model, learning to read and write is no longer exclusively the acquisition of a set of cognitive skills, but rather a socialization process through which students participate in recognized practices and take on sanctioned social identities. Literacy is implicated in broader sociocultural processes within cultural apprenticeship into a community's values, social positions, and identities (Sterponi, 2011). According to insights from this work, students bring their histories into the classroom, and teaching should build on this difference by drawing on students' history of involvement with literacy (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) rather than the standardized 'one size fits all' approach to teaching literacy.

Neoliberalism Funding the Literacy Myth

While Great Divide theories of literacy faced increased scrutiny in the 1980s, by the 1970s, the economic landscape had undergone significant transformations that aligned with the autonomous model of literacy. By the 1970s, when interest rates turned negative, capitalist classes used the economic principles of neoliberalism to restore capital accumulation for elites (Harvey, 2005). The shift towards a human capital model contributed to the stigmatization of those who relied on the welfare state, while praising the "hard worker." Citizenship, within this neoliberal schematic, is defined as the civic duty of the individual to reduce their burden on society, and "to be an entrepreneur of her/himself" (A. Ong, 2003).

Through colonization, exclusion, and now selective inclusion, the elite have used literacy as a tool to maintain dominance and exert control over the masses. The neoliberal turn cut financial support for vulnerable populations, engaged in private contracting for greater profit, reduced state involvement in public institutions (Hall, 2011), and used literacy to "empower" people by encouraging them to rely less on the state. Neoliberalism was expansive enough to incorporate civil rights era gains for racial and gender representation. Neoliberal multiculturalism becomes a way for the state to regulate difference rather than challenge its underlying systems of power with multicultural world citizens on the one hand and Others dispossessed by their own monoculturalism on the other hand (Melamed, 2006). Models of incorporation, whether it be the salad bowl or melting pot metaphor, serve the interests of dominant groups by focusing on the homogeneous common good and disregarding the individual accommodations needed by heterogeneous immigrant groups; with refugees, "this obscures their actual socio-political circumstances and erases their historical experiences" (Berray, 2019, p. 142). Neoliberal multiculturalism also promotes the myth of the U.S. State as culturally pluralistic, when it is racially and culturally hierarchical (Wynter, 2003). Further, citizenship is a sociocultural process of "subjectification" (Ong, p.16, 2003) whereby local authorities and mediators (like literacy sponsors) act as "experts of subjectivity" (Rose, 1985) to manage and reform prospective citizens. As my study will show, the teaching of neoliberal literacies becomes a covert way to shape nondominant, new immigrants – to teach the values of English and citizenship – towards becoming self-sustaining citizens, even if that means working multiple low-wage jobs.

I argue that the teaching of literacy can serve to standardize and regulate peoples' belief practices for the interests of dominant groups. Economic elites use literacy to exploit nondominant communities for purposes of capital accumulation, and critical scholars assert that the economic elites have learned how to wield literacy as a tool to maintain social order (Gee, 2008; Graff, 1987; Luke, 1994). For nondominant communities, literacy does not necessarily act as a catalyst for economic advancement, but rather literacy can inculcate values and behaviors into the general population so that their labor moves along large-scale economic development for the further, asymmetric benefit of elites (Graff & Duffy, 2008). Literacy is used to evaluate

whether a person can function in society based on whether they can encode and decode meaning according to the terms set by the dominant class (Truman, 2019).

Despite advances, schooling has used literacy as a colonizing tool (Battiste, 2013; Patel, 2015) and I focus on how schooling uses neoliberal literacy, a set of skills necessary for the workplace. Neoliberal literacies still uphold dominant ways of knowing through this very politics of rehabilitation for non-dominant communities. With neoliberal literacies, inclusion only functions to ensnare nondominant communities in low-wage work. Exclusion manifests through the assimilating forces of this constant overarching rehabilitation. This very rehabilitation through education operates within a strategy of pluralization rather than a questioning of the inventions of language, literacy myths, and master myths.

Part 2: From the Powerful to the Less Powerful Literacy Sponsors

The Powerful Literacy Sponsors

While literacy theory in the 1980s moved away from the autonomous model of literacy, this change did not influence the intent of the more powerful literacy sponsors. The neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s embody the autonomous model of literacy despite the strides made in literacy theory. *Dear reader*, isn't it peculiar that the progress made in literacy theory did not trickle down to the policy level? Is it because progressive scholars were not able to shape public policy? Is it because the more powerful literacy sponsors, like the academy itself, exist to protect capital accumulation at the expense of the poor? Will the university ever be able to "reproduce a labor force that understands itself as not only unnecessary but dangerous to the development of capitalism" (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 104)?

I turn to the neoliberal policy taking hold – passed down from the more powerful literacy sponsors with insidious agendas. Table 1 presents a timeline of events and policies that were referenced in the oral history interviews during the neoliberal era, each of which is further described below, showing how the policies influenced adult education by creating an apparatus designed to reform immigrant and refugee populations through welfare-to-work reforms that shaped curriculum.

Table 2: Timeline of Key Events and Policies Referenced in Oral History Interviews

1975	Vietnam War Ends - 1975: "First wave" of Vietnamese refugees, after U.S. exit from South Vietnam, through President Ford's initial evacuation of 140,000 refugees who were educated and spoke English. - 1978-mid 1980s: "Second wave" of Vietnamese refugees who were considered uneducated and did not speak English.
1978	Proposition 13, a California ballot proposition that limits property taxes, forced adult education in California to rely on funding from the state government (which did not fully compensate for the loss of revenue from property taxes) as well as funding from the federal government.
1983	Reagan's Adult Literacy Initiative
1983	The Federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) provides support services, job training, and education necessary to 'enable' low-income and unemployed persons to prepare for economic self-sufficiency. It was later renamed Greater Avenues to Independence (GAIN).

1985	The Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program (JOBS), a welfare-to-work program that replaced the Work Incentive program (WIN) of 1967.
1986	Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).
1992	California Adult Education Accountability and Assessment CASAS, a standardized testing system developed to sort adult education students, becomes formally part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service testing program.

Addressing the U.S.-Made "Refugee Crisis"

Powerful literacy sponsors targeted Vietnamese people, "a people fleeing from the only war the United States had lost," for these education programs so that they could transition from refugee to worker. Refugees are part of "the violent legacy of war and social upheaval" (Espiritu, 2006, p. 410). Throughout the oral history interviews, the resettlement of Vietnamese people in the United States is described as "a flood," "an influx," and most often, "a crisis." The construct here represents Vietnamese people as passive recipients of U.S. generosity while insidiously omitting the active role of the U.S. state in inflicting and sustaining the "refugee crisis" (Espiritu, 2006). Concomitant with the first wave of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the U.S. state's "generosity" intended to combat communist ideology (Harvey, 2005). And although neoliberalism itself advocated to reduce the role of the state, economic initiatives depended on state-imposed neoliberal reforms with strong government action. The federal government supported refugee resettlement with grants to school districts (West, 2005). Linguistic, behavioral, and cognitive assimilation was the perceived solution to the U.S.-driven "refugee crisis" so that assimilated Vietnamese people would enter low-paying, exploitative, entry-level occupations.

Proposition 13

Proposition 13, a California ballot proposition passed in 1978, limits property taxes and future increases to property taxes and requires a two-thirds majority of the state legislature to increase any state tax or pass a new tax. Prop 13 benefits homeowners and commercial property owners at the expense of low-income communities. In step with the conservative, anti-government ideologies of the 1970s, Prop 13 limited the amount of revenue that local governments could collect from property taxes which contributed to a reduction in funding public services like infrastructure, healthcare, and education (Mathews, 2010). California's public school system went from being one of the highest funded to one of the worst funded in the U.S., from 18th in 1978 to 45th in 1983 (Henke, 1986). Schools were forced to cut programs and services, increase class sizes, and lay off teachers.

The oral history interview of Ronald K. Attebery (1992), an adult education administrator, discussed the impacts of Proposition 13 on enrollment and the kinds of classes that adult schools could offer. Attebery (1995) explained that their enrollment went from 120,000 to around 50,000 to 60,000 enrollees; "the communities that suffered the most" were the areas that "had the lower economic group[s] and a lot of ethnic people because people couldn't afford to pay" (p. 37). Attabery remembers a time when adult education could pay local community members to bring "Black, Indigenous, Mexican American, and Anglo students to school (p. 7)." Robert E. Ehlers (1995) added that "when Prop. 13 came and we got only 50 percent of the revenue limit" (p. 42), they hired only part time teachers as opposed to full time teachers. Prior to Prop 13, adult education offered a wide range of courses. Due to Prop 13, adult education in California had to rely on funding from the state government, which did not fully compensate for

the loss of revenue from property taxes, as well as funding from the federal government. The federal government, however, would exclusively fund classes related to job training and learning English, limiting adult education offerings and effectively instrumentalizing language as a necessary skill for low-income immigrants.

Literacy as an Autonomous Tool

In 1983, United States President Ronald Reagan announced plans for a national Adult Literacy Initiative:

> Let us today resolve to roll up our sleeves and get to work, because there's very much to be done. Across this great land, let those of us who can read teach those who cannot. Let the lights burn late in our classrooms, our church basements, our libraries, and around our kitchen tables—wherever we can gather to help others help themselves to the American dream.

The program was rolled out with the following alarm, "Conservative estimates are that 23 million Americans, one in five, are functionally illiterate…*"* (Reagan, 1983). These initiatives are part of the regime of racial liberalism, an effort to resolve problems of inequality through measuring, monitoring, and reforming non-dominant communities (Aggarwal, 2016b). These initiations – cloaked as reform – reproduce the myth of illiteracy and further racialize non-dominant communities. I argue that these initiatives tell nondominant communities that the way they move through the world needs perpetual reform. The neoliberal policies below also show the inherent contradictions embedded in neoliberalism: the neoliberal promise of less government is reliant on more government for control.

Welfare to Work Legislation

Neoliberal policies from the federal government shaped adult education programs. Two major federal initiatives aimed at welfare reform - The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) in 1983 and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS) in 1985 - thrust the California adult education system into job training. Additionally, the Reagan Administration amended the federal Adult Education Act to reflect the shifting of responsibility to the private sector and non-paid volunteers to sustain public goods. JTPA established Private Industry Councils (PICs) to facilitate coordination between private employers and public education (West, 2005). Reagan couched this shift within the federal National Adult Literacy Initiative which raised public awareness of *adult illiteracy* only to promote collaboration between public and private sectors.

In California, the federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1983 was administered largely by the Employment Development Department and partly by the Department of Education to provide support services, job training, and education necessary to 'enable' low-income and unemployed persons to prepare for economic self-sufficiency. The California version of JOBS was an *educational* initiative that specifically targeted welfare recipients - fittingly, it was later renamed Greater Avenues to Independence (GAIN); "The phenomenon of long-term dependency on the welfare system by unskilled and unemployed persons with children had reached troubling proportions; in many families generation after generation was on welfare" (West, 2005, p.62). These ideologies are powerful – "generation after generation" on welfare while generational wealth grows exponentially – and become a hegemonic process of subject-making. From

industrialization to neoliberal capitalism, adult education in the U.S. creates a citizen/worker subject with "desirable" qualities for the accumulation of capital and generational wealth (Leonardo & Vafai, 2016).

Immigration Reform

Alongside neoliberal reforms came a predictable—always racially motivated—rise in public anxiety concerning unauthorized immigrants which led to the standardized development of naturalization materials for ESL citizenship classrooms, adult education classes to teach English and qualify students to become U.S. citizens. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Characteristic of the *Era of Enforcement* (Kibria et al., 2014), the law penalizes employers for knowingly hiring undocumented workers, and it led to the plastering of those giant E-verify posters we have all grown to recognize, with the American flag blurred in the background and a phone number to snitch on your co-workers (*E-Verify*, n.d.). The law provided a limited path to amnesty, a five-year program where all unauthorized immigrants present in the U.S. since 1982 were allowed to apply for temporary and then legal status if they met oddly specific conditions (prove their unbroken residence in the country since before January 1, 1982; persons who had worked in agricultural jobs for at least 90 days between May 1985 and 1987).

Over 50 percent (1.6 million) of the amnesty applicants across the U.S. lived in California, and the majority were Spanish speakers from Mexico (West, 2005). Once an applicant was able to establish one of these conditions for citizenship, applicants were given a temporary residence card, valid for 30 months; during those 30 months, applicants had to demonstrate knowledge of basic English and U.S. history and government. Applicants could either pass a test or attend an approved class for 40 hours where they would earn a Certificate of Satisfactory Pursuit. Only then were applicants eligible to graduate from temporary to permanent residence (West, 2005). This fast-paced mandate for English acquisition speaks to the temporality of the acquisition itself. Powerful literacy sponsors assume that the acquisition of English literacy is achieved linearly from illiterate to literate rather than seeing literacy for what it is, an ongoing social practice.

With the passage of the federal Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, particularly the 40-hour class requirement, the need for ESL classes in the CA tripled (especially in the 1988-89 and 1989-90 school years). Patricia L. Rickard (1998), Executive Director of the Foundation for Educational Achievement of San Diego Community College District, described it as the earthquake of adult education in California, "to have that large of a number of people-many, who were *functioning* at beginning levels of ESL, seriously, tremendously impact our ESL programs in California" (p.121). Adult education centers responded with ESL classes running in three-hour blocks across the 24-hour day – "People get off maybe at midnight. They're still a little bit awake, so they were willing to go to school for a couple of hours" (Figueroa, 2001, p. 80). This 24-hour carousel successfully helped "California's 1.6 million undocumented immigrants adjust [to legal status]" (Rickard, 1998, p.121).

With adult education struggling with funding, especially due to Prop 13, and ESL students needing the 40-hour class requirement, Lois E. Hotchkiss (1995) describes how adult education began looking to ESL students as a stable form of income. Hotchkiss (1995) referred to this as a "siren call" where the administrators want to get more "bang for their buck" and

"when everything is based on A.D.A[5]., to put in a program that will attract students." With ESL classes, "If twenty of the ESLs [ESL students] disappeared within the month, there would be twenty more replacing them. You would have the same number of bodies, so [they] were earning the same amount of A.D.A., but [they] were not doing ... what I would consider a good job of education" (p. 43). Hotchkiss (1995) is pointing out that the government may view this as a success since the classes are always full, but this revolving door is not providing quality education.

Despite the increased number of classes, Vietnamese immigrants and Latino immigrants were competing for access to English classes for their dreams of transitioning to permanent statutes. Ronald K. Attebery (1995) explained how Latino immigrants would complain that Vietnamese immigrants were taking their seats in English class, and James A. Figueroa spoke of "physical fights between Mexican students and Vietnamese students because of lines. There would be yelling matches and shouting" (p. 18). The ethnic tensions between Mexican and Vietnamese immigrants reflect the need for legality and citizenship that the Immigration Reform and Control Act created across immigrant populations and the lack of adequate funding for adult education to manage this very need. At the same time, James A. Figueroa (2001) speaks of Black Angelenos who argued that if their Spanish-speaking neighbors were "learning English, we want to learn Spanish. Why can't we learn Spanish? How come they get ESL for free and we can't get Spanish for free? I just want to learn to communicate in this community" (p. 66). This speaks to the possibilities of adult education– to learn a new language to connect with your new neighbors – possibilities that were foreclosed due to limited resources and the focus on functional literacy as a means of assimilation. Figueroa (2001) speaks to the materialization of neoliberal multiculturalism whereby inclusion into ESL is only to benefit the state's need for labor, not for Black Angelenos to build community with their Spanish-speaking neighbors. The state facilitates the competition between ethnic groups for limited resources rather than one of connection between new neighbors through language.

Influence on the Organization of Adult Education

Prior to 1983, attendance in adult education programs was voluntary, but after 1983, to receive government assistance and/or acquire 40 hours of English class for citizenship, adults were now required to attend adult education classes (West, 2005). This attendance requirement speaks to the way that the state seeks to control literacy practices by pushing adults into specific educational programs. The attendance requirement itself is part and parcel of the politics of rehabilitation inherent within neoliberal literacies whereby the arbitrary number of hours seeks to shape prospective citizens into low-wage work. Likewise, adult education programs with employment components were required to place students into jobs. JTPA programs were run by the Employment Development Department and refugee programs were run by the Department of Social Services. This jurisdictional oversight matters because it shows how the goals and expertise of the program would focus on employment and not education.

Along with the introduction of mandatory attendance for refugees receiving welfare and immigrants on a path to amnesty, adult education also began to implement standardized testing. Students were expected to check a box of passing an exam as part of their rehabilitation. The CASAS Vocational Committee developed the Employability Competency System (ECS) and

[5] Average daily attendance (ADA), meaning that California districts do not receive funding for students on days they are absent.

other placement tests for welfare-to-work programs (like JTPA and GAIN). The standardized testing developed in California through CASAS would later develop into the first standardized naturalization exam used at the federal level to naturalize all prospective U.S. citizens. By 1992, CASAS was formerly part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service citizenship testing program. CASAS administered its Basic Citizenship Skills Examination to thousands of immigrants who wanted to become citizens across 224 public and nonprofit agencies (*About CASAS*, n.d.; *CASAS History*, n.d.).

Reframing literacy, reframing the archive

Understanding the historical context of the literacy myth shows how the literacy myth continues to benefit those in power. Understanding literacy as a social practice undermines or contradicts? the hegemonic notion that claims introducing literacy to the poor, "culturally deprived," and "illiterate communities" will enhance their cognitive skills and thus improve the economic conditions that "created the illiteracy in the first place" (Street, 2003, p. 1). The autonomous model of literacy continues to perpetuate deficit notions about the cognitive potential of nondominant communities, frames the way we study literacy, and guides policy solutions related to literacy (Gutiérrez et al., 2009). Adult education is part of this socialization process. During the 1980s, the more powerful literacy sponsors implemented a series of neoliberal reforms to control, assimilate, and shape nondominant communities away from state aid, and those reforms structured the way less powerful literacy sponsors teach literacy.

The Less Powerful Literacy Sponsors

The less powerful literacy sponsors help us see how these neoliberal policies appeared in classrooms of adult education. The less powerful literacy sponsors are merely working under the conditions of the more powerful literacy sponsors who have set the terms of the order, who have told them to teach literacy so that nondominant community members can quickly exit welfare programs, who have told them to teach English to the worthy immigrant so that they can become U.S. citizens. Dear reader, this continuous reminder is not meant to excuse the ignorance of less powerful literacy sponsors, but to contextualize the way power operates, so that we may critique power, not individuals, no matter how hard neoliberalism may try to get us to do the latter.

Thinking of people expansively

To think of people expansively (especially those we cannot interview) and consider larger themes that extend beyond the realm of this paper, I build identity portraits to intimately capture the educators included in the Oral History Interview Project. I've selected these specific people because they were teachers at the time neoliberal reforms took hold in classrooms. This heuristic is also a way to assuage my own growing fears, that to "neatly" capture our "findings", we capture nothing by omitting the messiness of what we find – the inconsistencies, the things for which we cannot code. And lastly, the identity portraits help humanize the less powerful literacy sponsors in the context in which they are forced to work. Below I include identity portraits of those whose interviews I draw from the most to provide context for the perspectives of the educators.

Identity Portraits



Acela (Chela) Gonzalez has a kind face; the corners of her lips curl into an ever-so-subtle but warm smile. Her hair is short, simple, unadorned, and curled at the ends, lying delicately over her face. Her voice is young and pleasant, a bit hesitant and anxious. Chela grew up in Mexico; she was one of the exceptional ESL students who went on to become an ESL teacher and coordinator for the Metropolitan Adult Education Program in San Diego. Chela's father passed away when she was two years old. Then her mother started trying to immigrate to the United States, "So it was what happens to a lot of immigrants, they want a better life" (p.1). When Chela was 6 or 7 years old, her mother was finally able to get papers to immigrate to the U.S. Chela's mother needed to prove that she made enough money to support her daughter before being able to bring Chela to the U.S. In the meantime, Chela grew up in a government boarding school for children who did not have parents or whose parents worked far away. Chela was 14 by the time her mother was able to make enough money to bring her to the U.S. Chela describes her former self in the same way she describes her students – "not functional." Chela says she is very open with her students and enjoys having genuine conversations with them, "I am very honest with them as to what the expectations are in the United States, as far as socially, and they want to know. And I think that certainly has helped in my teaching, in that I know what I wanted to know and what embarrassments I went through when I was an ESL student when I arrived" (p.34). Chela hauntedly explains how "she never felt she had enough English," alluding to the always-becoming-and-never-becoming part of the American Dream. Interviewed November 30, 1995, by Cuba Z. Miller.



Autumn Keltner is a white woman from San Diego, CA. She has a no-nonsense haircut of the 50s with furrowed brows and a squinty smile that shows her two front teeth. Her voice sounds confident, nasally, and warm all at the same time. Her career as an adult educator spans across three distinct phases: an instructor and coordinator with San Diego Community College District, a consultant with the Amnesty Education Office for the California Department of Education, and a research associate with the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System. Autumn describes her students as "delightful" and "caring" people who "had a variety of different kinds of jobs and were hoping to get ahead in life" (p. 4). Autumn helped design Project Step-Up, a precursor to workplace literacy programs for new entry-level jobs. Autumn tells us that when the Feds asked her to submit ESL students' reading scores, she would write the following in her reports, "Give me [an] appropriate test to test the ESL students and I will give you a report." Autumn then played an integral role in the development of CASAS testing systems that would later become the framework for the federal naturalization tests for new immigrants. Interviewed April 16, 1999, by Cuba Z. Miller.



Aryola Taylor is a Black woman from Los Angeles, CA. Aryola has a classic beauty, her smile is elegant, and she loves plants. Her voice is strong and kind; you can hear the empathy and the care in her words. Aryola is a fierce advocate of basic literacy as a fundamental right for all people, especially "native English speakers" (p. 2) – her Black students. She says illiteracy is "everybody's business" (p.3) and advocates for student recruitment: "There was a story that there were one hundred sheep, and ninety-nine were there but one was lost, and the good shepherd went for the one" (p.5). She even applied for grant funding to be able to do more recruitment. Aryola doesn't like the term illiteracy; she says it suggests a person is ill when they are not. She believes workplace literacy addresses the needs of the employer more than the student with other needs. And yet, she believes, "Many of the social ills in our nation have as their roots the fact that many people don't have literacy skills" (p.2). She sought out professional development to be a better teacher for her students. She describes her students as "dedicated, very conscientious," noting that even though many of her students were working in the evening, "They came on time." She says as her students learned more, they grew empowered and took control of their own education. And she loves this. Interviewed October 27, 1995, by Cuba Z. Miller.

These identity portraits suggest some of the contradictions in the archives: the way even conservative teachers resist the federal policymakers; the way nondominant teachers reproduce the same oppressive conditions they lived through as students; the deep frustration of teachers who saw the resources allocated to their Black students diminish in the shift toward large-scale assimilation projects for other non-dominant communities.

In what follows, I show how the instructors of adult education during the 1970-90s – the less powerful literacy sponsors – responded to the neoliberal policies affecting their day-to-day lives. They made room for their students as their resources grew smaller and smaller in their precarious positions where their employment depended on meeting the benchmarks of neoliberal policies for continuous funding. They used their limited resources as intended by the more powerful literacy sponsors – they taught neoliberal literacies to rehabilitate their immigrant students. Rather than question the assimilative arc of their literacy mission, they folded in line with the literacy myth. Literacy sponsors racialized their students based in part on their alphabet. Literacy was understood through the autonomous model, and it was reduced to notions of functionality. As subversively intended by the more powerful literacy sponsors, the possibility for counter-hegemonic thought grew smaller and smaller– even as ongoing movements in the 1970s were growing counter-hegemonic thought – this affects citizenship.

"These people": racializing students based on their perceived literacy practices

Analysis of the oral history interviews using CDA show how literacy teaching reinscribed racialized understandings of nondominant communities and their literacy practices. In much of the oral history interviews, considerable time is spent discussing the "influx" of Southeast Asian refugees. Ms. Chela Gonzalez (1995), for example, explained that the "first wave" was "highly educated people who had come from pretty high socioeconomic levels in Vietnam (p. 50); much of the focus lies on the "less educated" and "incomprehensible" refugees of the "second wave" (p. 54). Ms. Gonzalez (1995) said that classes became "very large," and staff development became "a must" to understand "a totally different culture" (Gonzalez, 1995, p. 61). Ms. Gonzalez (1995) underscored that "Hmong and the Cambodians were not literate," and that students who were not literate had "not been seen" in an ESL classroom prior to this time (p. 61). Teaching consisted not only of teaching an alphabet that "Asian languages did not have,[6]" but also "some of the most basic bathroom habits" and "even the type of clothing that is appropriate for outside the home" (p. 62). Ms. Gonzalez (1995), as a successfully assimilated immigrant from Mexico turned adult education educator, comes from this very process of othering and others her own students. Ms. Gonzalez (1995), like so many others, reproduces the dominant view of Vietnamese people as Other, as markedly different from Americans, and even significantly different from "Hispanics" assimilating into America. The racialized differentiation of Asian immigrants from Latino immigrants itself positions Asian immigrants as un-assimilable and Latino immigrants as sub-assimilable based on a Latin alpha-numeric alphabet that connects English and Spanish.

Ms. Autumn Keltner (1999) – like several other teachers – echoed much of Ms. Gonzalez's (1995) sentiments about the racialized understandings of Vietnamese refugees. Ms. Keltner (1999) described her students as "mostly Cambodian fishermen and/or Lao Hmong hill people" who were "pre-literate" and "did not even have much of a written language to learn to read their own language" and "had not even been exposed much to print material in any way" (Keltner, 1999, p.33). Ms. Keltner, who worked in San Diego, emphasized that "Hispanics," their largest group of students, were "uncomfortable and left for a period of time" due to "real tension with Southeast Asians" (p.37). Both Ms. Keltner (1999) and Ms. Gonzalez (1995) expressed that the majority of "these people" [Southeast Asian immigrants] never reached an intermediate level of basic competency and thus continued to struggle with high unemployment. While acknowledging the "shock to [refugee] lives," Ms. Keltner (1999) emphasizes the "coping skills" of teachers who now needed significant "professional development activities to help those teachers not only cope with the culture and the cultural differences but the teaching differences" (p. 35-36). This did not need to be the case. Anglocentric bias[7], a focus on the literacy experiences of white Europeans while systematically ignoring the literacy experiences of nonwhites, characterizes the histories of literacy in North America (Greene, 1994). Like many

[6] Khmer, Laotian, and Vietnamese also have French colonial alphabets alongside indigenous or Sino-influenced writing systems.

[7] To consider Anglocentric bias, conquered alphabets, and the power embedded in the archive I draw from Duffy (2007) who records a series of Hmong narratives addressing lost, stolen, and conquered alphabets. Duffy (2007) uses oral interviews with Hmong refugees to trace the literacy development of the Laotian Hmong whose language was not widely accepted until the late 1960s. Oral testimonies provides information about literacy that is absent from the archive.

others, both Ms. Keltner (1999) and Ms. Gonzalez (1995) subscribe to neoliberal literacy by upholding dominant ways of knowing rather than questioning the colonizing powers of language.

Unfortunately, whatever professional development they received did not contradict the deficit, colonialist understandings of literacy commonly documented in the archive. Understanding and contextualizing the literacy practices of non-dominant communities can expand "literacy instruction, curricula, materials design, and teacher training, while also promising a more inclusive account of the history of reading and writing in the United States" (Duffy, 2007, p.103). By emphasizing that Vietnamese people have no alphabet and no language, educators reproduce what Veronelli (2015) calls the "coloniality of language" where they reproduce "the colonizer's imagination of the colonized as having no language, that is, no Eurocentrically valorized expressivity (p.119)." And yet, colonized populations' subordinate positions prevent them from accessing the forms of legitimacy associated with the mastery of European languages (Fanon, 1967). As a neoliberal literacy, the colonizer's alphabet becomes a means to an end to assimilate non-dominant peoples into a racial fabric that needs their labor while reforming the perceived differences.

A functional curriculum outside of "critical thinking"

The insidious ways in which teachers as literacy sponsors reinscribe racialized understandings of nondominant communities extended to the teaching of functional notions of literacy. The earthquake of these policies and its subsequent association of literacy with notions of functionality standardized curriculum had a serious – and I would argue intended – effect on "critical thinking."

VESL. The mass enrollment of refugees into adult vocational training programs led to the development of Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL). VESL programs focused on teaching general language for the purposes of accessing and securing a job and its curriculum was explicitly designed to support students in entry-level occupations (West, 2005). From 1979 through 1982, California used aid from the federal Adult Basic Education to address refugee student needs through (VESL) curriculum and cultural awareness. VESL curriculum focuses on teaching the general language needed to secure and maintain employment. Ms. Gonzalez (1995) points to the role of the state in educating refugee students and the ensuing pressure on adult education teachers:

> Well, okay, first the government brought the refugees, and then they were all of them on assistance, and then the American people were saying, "Well, where is our money going?" And then the government was forced to ... okay, you've got to train these people. And how can you train them if they don't speak the language? So then they started these VESL classes, Vocational ESL classes in electronic assembly and wafer production and all these different VESL classes. So there have been a number of changes based on the ... and because of the influx of the Southeast Asians and the refugees, yes. The amnesty program was another policy (Gonzalez, 1995, p. 63-64).

Ms. Gonzales speaks to the way in which average, overworked citizens look to racialize the people they perceive as other and how the solution looks to adult education for assimilatory ends and how that led to curricular solutions. Ms. Keltner (1999) also explains how the "refugee crisis" motivated the Vocational ESL (VESL) movement,

> You had huge new populations in communities. They, for the most part, were not able to support themselves, so they were either being supported by a social service organization of some kind or were on welfare. And we needed to assist these students, this population, in getting jobs as rapidly as possible. So, one of the first things that happened was there was money available to set up intensive language programs. We had programs that ran five, six hours a day, five days a week, for refugees only, the Indochinese[8] Orientation and Employment Program in San Diego (Keltner, 1999, p. 41)

Ms. Keltner (1999) ties the educational assimilation process to low wage work with the goal of "getting jobs as rapidly as possible." Learning English becomes central to these assimilation efforts. Curricular materials under the punny-yet-ominous title *English that Works*. Although these efforts may provide some sort of material benefit, the problem lies in that access to English is granted *only* to function at a site of low-wage, exploitative employment without much possibility to exit and certainly not to question an exploitative employer. This is neoliberal literacy, teaching literacy only so that the student can meet the needs of the state for capital accumulation. In contextualizing the literacy sponsors' understanding of their students' literacy practices, we must consider the greater picture. Assimilating Vietnamese refugees, who are here due to the actions of the despot state, protect U.S. interests by continuing to fill exploitative jobs. After the U.S. intrudes into a place that it did not belong, the state mandates forced assimilation through adult education classes, a move considered essential to "protect[ing] the interests of the American public" (Espiritu, 2006, p. 13).

Competency Based Adult Education (CBAE). From welfare and immigration reforms, adult education established a competency-based adult education (CBAE) curriculum. CBAE is defined as an educational framework that promotes the practical needs of adults. While VESL focused on teaching nonnative English speakers within a vocational context, CBAE included nonnative English speakers to improve their employability. The 1988 amendments to the federal Adult Education Act focused on "the improvement of educational opportunities for adults who lacked the level of literacy necessary for effective citizenship and productive employment" (West, 2005, p. 61). The legislation itself positioned students as lacking and the state as generous for providing something that is in their vested interest: to shrink the welfare state. By the 1980s, despite academic scholarship moving away from literacy as an autonomous tool (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Gee & Green, 1998; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 2003a), CBAE curriculum defined literacy for functional ends. CBAE becomes a way to inscribe neoliberal literacy into curricular goals; although the names of these programs may change, its literacies still function to reform nondominant communities for the needs of the dominant groups.

For those pursuing citizenship through the IRCA, CBAE curriculum became the foundation by which adult education programs in California would teach ESL citizenship classes. John W. Tibbets, who established the Center for Adult Education explains,

> Later, of course, the Amnesty Act [IRCA] allowed many people who had been in this country and had not become legalized to become legal, if they were to register, and had been in this country a number of years. And so a new program was developed and similar needs were found for that population. Many teachers didn't know how to combine the teaching of ESL and the teaching of citizenship skills and U.S. history, those sorts of

[8] A colonial term used to refer to refugees of the Vietnam War.

> things together, and so a new kind of curriculum began to be developed. And the competency-based program served as the model for developing those new programs as well, so it's had a long-range effect in a variety of programs, particularly in California (Tibbetts, 1994-1995, p. 42).

The colonial language ideologies present in CBAE and its extension to the teaching of citizenship take us further away from the notion of empowered communities. Adult education, like K-12, provided a common language and narrative of the history of the United States with school curricula and instruction acting as forms of assimilation. With a mandated, standardized curriculum, the role of the teacher is reduced to classroom manager, whereby the pedagogical practices are reduced to a market-based conception of the learner as a consumer of information (Giroux, 1992). Neoliberal literacies rehabilitate nondominant communities to functional ends in areas of low-wage work.

No room for critical thinking. Ms. Gonzalez (1995) explains how the 40-hour requirement dramatically increased student enrollment and affected the potentiality of critical thinking. Ms. Gonzalez (1995) explains:

> They had their five years, but they still maybe had gotten their forty hours for amnesty, but maybe had not been able to continue going to school, and still didn't speak English or didn't understand it. And here they want to get their citizenship, but they don't have the language, yet. And the impact was that we've had to change some of our classes from ESL to ESL citizenship, and teach ESL while doing the citizenship, because the students are not the citizenship students that we used to know, where they would go to a citizenship class because they already spoke English and understood and read and wrote… It's changed the way the ESL citizenship classes are held, are taught at a much lower level of English, with not as much information as before, maybe more facts and just not a lot of critical thinking as to why policies are made, because the level of understanding and comprehension is not there. (Gonzalez, 1995, p. 66).

Ms. Gonzalez (1995) and several other interviewees emphasize the perceived deficits of their students as opposed to the structures in place (e.g., the arbitrary requirement of 40 hours in such a short period). In this context, normative framing of ESL students as the "problem" begins with racial/ethnic group categorization, not language practices (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006). Freire reminds us that pre-critical thought is still a potential part of a whole toward counter-hegemonic action (Freire, 1987). Adult education students are uniquely positioned to think against power because they live through these material conditions in their day-to-day lives. And yet, Ms. Gonzalez (1995) speaks to how neoliberal policies shrank the learning space of ESL citizenship classes. The standardization of the adult education curriculum created a classroom space rooted in facts devoid of meaningful literacy practices. Neoliberal literacies give the illusion of choice, agency, and freedom for students to gain independence from the welfare state and pursue their own entrepreneurial pursuits while neoliberal literacies produce a worker that can be exploited, a worker that doesn't question the very capitalist oppression guiding their lives.

Literacy Campaigns "to function"

In Reagan's literacy campaigns and in the archived interviews, literacy is seen as an autonomous tool reduced to notions of functionality. Mr. James Parker (2001) discusses the results of the Adult Performance Level study of 1975 which led to the reauthorization of the Adult Education Act in 1978. The Adult Performance Level study and its attendant legislation mandated educational programs that help adults acquire "basic skills necessary to function in society. A functional definition, if you will, of literacy" (p. 7). Mr. Parker (2001) says this became the "law of the land" in adult education where "a number of states, including California, has moved very strongly into functional literacy or functional aspects of basic skills" (p. 7). Neoliberal literacies view literacy as an autonomous tool that reinscribes the literacy myth and fails to capture the potentiality of literacy education.

The objective was to force the recipients to secure and retain employment to exit the welfare system (West, 2005). Mr. Tibbetts (1994) describes the shift this caused in adult education,

> There was a great thrust to try and educate immigrants as they came into this country, particularly because people realized that if we don't have a functionally competent immigration population-being a large percentage of our population-then California as a state is not going to be a very competent state. So [of] the different programs that you have mentioned, the GAIN program, was designed to deal with our welfare population, which was increasingly large in California, a lot of single mothers particularly, but also immigrant persons who came in who were ending up on welfare. [There was] the need to get them into the mainstream workforce, [but] it was very difficult, particularly since the wages that they could earn would not support their children (Tibbetts, 1994-1995, p.40).

The infiltration of neoliberal literacies into adult education reinforces neoliberalism's goal of restoring class power (Harvey, 2007b). Regarding neoliberal policies, "human interests are abandoned whenever they threaten the values of the market" (Freire, 1998a, p. 93). This speaks to the interest in reducing literacy to mere notions of functionality to move further away from critical thought. By the 1990s, "the assets of the top three billionaires were more than the combined GDP of all developing countries" (Harvey, 2007, p.31), and education was used to "deal with the welfare population," despite knowing full well that their wages "would not support their children (Tibbets, 1940, p. 40)."

Although Tibbets and his colleagues are aware that wages are not enough, they comply, without interrogating these policies. Tibbetts' (1994-1995) second point on the need for the population to "become productive, to become workers, and to learn English as fast as they could (p. 41)" is indicative of "linguistic instrumentalism" an ideology that language skills lead to social mobility and economic development transforming language into monetary or symbolic value (Kubota, 2016). English language access and instruction continue to be promoted for purposes of employment opportunities (Vafai, 2014). Language learners and their teachers see English as the way to a better life that will allow access to social mobility and opportunity, but the advertised benefits of social mobility and economic development do not always translate into material advantages; instead, they often contribute to increased social stratification (Phillipson, 1998; Sonntag, 2003). The approach to immigration is part of the focus in welfare reform vis-à-vis job training to make neoliberal subjects respond to a surveillance and regulation approach to learning and in turn, receive the benefits of a functional life.

The emphasis on functionality highlights the ideological success of Reagan's illiteracy campaigns and how these insidious ideologies get taken up. Ms. Aryola Taylor (1995) shows how these ideologies intersect with citizenship,

> TAYLOR: I guess my point is: Yes, it does take our whole community in order to raise people's literacy levels. Because when we don't do it, we see the effects of [illiteracy], in terms of persons who are getting public assistance, we see it in terms of our correctional institutions, we see it in terms of children on the street who come from abusive families, we see it in poverty. We see it in so many different ways. The NALS Study[9], if you just look at the results, and I haven't read it detailed from cover to cover, but all the way through it people who were scoring at the lower levels of the NALS test were making less money, were either unemployed or underemployed, more apt to be getting public assistance, not involved politically, not voting.
>
> WEST [Interviewer]: Not taking advantage of citizenship.
>
> TAYLOR: [Not] taking advantage of citizenship, thank you. We show that right along. So what else do we need to tell us that literacy is important to the very fabric of our society, that much of the root of what we are experiencing stems from people not being able to take advantage of what they see on television because they don't have the skills to? So what are we going to do when we get into the year 2000, when you have millions of people who can't do simple math or write a decent sentence? (Taylor, 1995, p. 68).

Ms. Taylor (1995), as a literacy sponsor, correlated illiteracy with poverty, abuse, prisons, and public assistance. Although Ms. Taylor (1995) advocated for more literacy resources for all students, especially her Black students, she nevertheless reinscribes the literacy myth. Ms. Taylor (1995) speaks to the proliferation of the myth of the culture of poverty. There is a vested interest in blaming poor families for perpetuating cycles of poverty even for Ms. Taylor (1995), a Black educator, who wants to see her Black students succeed and see them "take advantage of citizenship" too. Neoliberal ideologies also run deep – "taking advantage of citizenship" – is reduced to educating students as consumers, "to take advantage of what they see [advertised] on television", which *includes* politicians.

When public education succumbs to market economies, we shift to consumer accountability as mediated by the educational market as opposed to democratic accountability as mediated by the whole community (Grace, 1997). Without this public sphere, citizens cannot challenge the neoliberal myth of citizens as consumers (Giroux, 2003). Realizing Reagan's dreams, literacy comes to be defined through the autonomous model as the point at which people begin to *function*. This word *functioning* appears above: Mr. Tibbets expresses the need for a

[9] National Adult Literacy Survey, a nationwide study of adult literacy conducted by the Educational Testing Service and released in 1993. More than 26,000 persons sixteen years and older were assessed at five levels of complexity. Approximately half the adults tested scored in the two lowest categories, demonstrating low levels of literacy that would limit their use of print to learn, achieve goals, and function in society. The lowest literacy levels were found among those who were immigrants, had fewer years of education, had a disabling condition, were older adults, or were incarcerated.

"functionally competent immigration population" (p. 40), and Mr. Rickard (1998) explains that their students were barely "functioning at beginning levels of ESL" (p.121). And we see how functional definitions of literacy affect classroom curriculum. This concept of *function* is indicative of neoliberalism's economization of political life and noneconomic spheres where political elements of democracy (e.g., freedom and universal equality, as well as those specific to this project, language, and literacy) are converted into economic elements (Brown, 2015).

The following excerpt from Ms. Holda E. Dorsey (1995) captures how these issues travel through time.

> So now [Proposition] 187 has created a completely brand-new group of people who feel the pressure of becoming citizens. Amazingly enough, it's not necessarily these people who became legal permanent residents during amnesty; a lot are people who have been here for thirty, forty, fifty years. And you say, "My gosh! How could you be in a country for those many years and not learn the language?" Well, it wasn't needed. They didn't even internalize that they needed it. But now it has become a matter of necessity.
>
> WEST: They see a reason: they need to vote. [Chuckling]
>
> DORSEY: They have a reason. Absolutely. They need to vote. You said it. Some people say, "Oh, it's because they want the services." It's not the services. It's being able to vote and have control as to the decisions that affect their lives. So, it's kind of interesting. It's going to be fascinating what happens when all these people do become citizens and vote and start voting.
>
> WEST: And start voting. Things will change.
>
> DORSEY: Things are going to change. It might not be comfortable for others, but things are going to change (Dorsey, 1995, p. 139-140).

Ms. Dorsey's (1995) ideology of literacy, citizenship, and social change is different from that of a citizen as a consumer, but it still operates within pacifying state logic that assumes "things will change." Prop 187 was a 1994 ballot initiative that sought to establish a state-run citizenship screening system and prohibit undocumented people from using non-emergency health care, public education, and other services (Thurber, n.d.). The law passed as a referendum with 58.3% of Californians supporting it. The day after the law was passed a federal district court found the law unconstitutional. Latinx communities organized in the most powerful of ways; some were even motivated to become future voters. Ms. Dorsey (1995) discusses the pressure "of becoming citizens" to vote. They needed to overcome a series of bureaucratic hurdles, learn a number of U.S. history "facts," and they needed to read and write a given sentence like "George Washington is the father of our country[10]" to become citizens. Ms. Dorsey (1995) is optimistic, "Things are going to change." Literacy crisis after literacy crisis has reinforced an autonomous model of literacy, and things have not changed as much as they could have.

[10] Sample sentence used to test reading and writing in the U.S. Naturalization test for citizenship.

Discussion

The neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 90s had a lasting effect on adult education and continue to shape the way we come to understand literacy learning. The lens of sponsorship makes visible the directionality of power from the powerful literacy sponsors to the less powerful literacy sponsors to students. Within this power differential, each student brings their own histories into the classroom. And these histories of displacement and violence are exerted by the very state assimilating them into this new imaginary. The powerful literacy sponsors design and implement neoliberal policies to expedite literacy acquisition for Vietnamese refugees and Latino immigrants to work in low-paying jobs. They generated a scarcity of resources which led to ethnic fragmentation between Vietnamese refugees and immigrants from Latin America rather than coalition building between these two non-dominant communities. Such policies bring significant influences over the less powerful literacy sponsors, educators who find themselves navigating the constraints imposed by these policies in their teaching contexts. The concept of neoliberal literacies sheds light on the pervasive ideologies that permeate literacy learning vis-à-vis seemingly neutral neoliberal policies such as welfare-to-work reforms. Consequently, teachers modeled the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s – they racialized students based on their perceived literacy practices, shrank spaces of critical thinking, and reduced literacy to notices of functionality.

In the oral histories of Ms. Gonzales, Ms. Keltner, and Ms. Taylor, we see the challenges and frustrations as their classrooms shifted because of changing policies. We see the shallow ways in which they responded to students who appeared worlds away from their immediate world even as they shared the same world. And yet, I am reminded that the powerful literacy sponsors set the terms of order, and the less powerful literacy sponsors teach according to *their* codes – teaching a pacified version of history pacifies learners whereby teaching a functional version of literacy allows learners to work in isolating, exploitative environments. Neoliberal literacies reduced language and literacy to racialized notions of functionality by assimilating nondominant communities – through English – towards pacifying ends without much room to engage critically, such as the 40-hour requirement of facts-based English class. Literacy became a tool for racialized control, and we see this play out in the formation of ESL citizenship classes.

Full literacy teaching necessitates reading the room, the very room in which power masquerades as functional notions of literacy, reductive notions of citizenship, and extractive notions of work. Literacy teaching needs to be read through these machinations of power. What would happen if powerful literacy sponsors took NLS seriously – or is it simply outside of their interests? What room is there for the less powerful literacy sponsors to take NLS seriously? Or have these trickle-down ideologies clouded that very possibility? While the autonomous model of literacy reinscribes notions of functionality, the ideological model of literacy emphasizes the way literacy is shaped by these very power structures. To take NLS seriously is to build our own power – to act on literacy itself – to work towards a counter-hegemonic order that breaks away from these dominant literacy practices and ideologies, that question the unequal distribution of literacy opportunities and thus exploitation itself. And the way learners themselves draw on their literacy practices to their own ends, to participate, to negotiate these very power structures, and to connect with each other – like Black people who wanted to learn Spanish to connect with their new neighbors.

Literacy is socially and culturally situated and constructed. We do more with literacy than simply read and write. We do these things with each other. We communicate with each other beyond the grammars of extraction and exchange as proscribed by the relations of capital.

Literacy connects us. Literacy builds our communities. Literacy preserves our histories. And yet – sinisterly – literacy defines our relations. Literacy can act on us to define our relations through the codes of extraction. When literacy operates in service of white monoculture, in service of capital, when it becomes an entry point into citizenship – into our hierarchical orders – literacy takes away from this very human connection. This teetering between control and connection lies in part with the literacy sponsor, a positionality which, in one way or another we all possess; and, when we work under exploitative circumstances or more comfortable positions with impossible pressures to produce, we affect others in varying ways from the banal to the harmful.

Humans are valuable outside of their ability to contribute to capital accumulation. And perhaps understanding *this* helps us see how literacy is not a neutral tool – so much so that this perceived neutral tool *turns* on well-meaning teachers (*and/or*, professors, administrators, deans, and even graduate student instructors/teaching assistants), too. Dear reader, let us think about the context in which we are also forced to work. Have not most of us, at one point or another, been forced to work—or will be forced to work—in unfortunate, exploitative circumstances that, in one way or another, brought out, or will bring out, the worst of us? Working conditions are designed so that we trudge along, so that we do not imagine other possibilities so that we drift further and further away from what it means to connect, remake, and build together. How many times have we thought we were simply doing our best, and yet like Ms. Gonzales, Ms. Keltner, and Ms. Taylor, our best was in line with the wrong codes? Have we missed our chance?

Ms. Gonzales, Ms. Keltner, and Ms. Taylor go along with these codes even as they may try to have a critique of the code. The code functions to prescribe literacy sponsors into actions or reforms that perfect the code while pacifying them into a continual going-along-with-the-code while trying-our-best without being-able-to-imagine-an-otherwise. Ms. Gonzales grew up in Mexico, and like many immigrants, her family wanted a better life. They all worked hard. Her mother worked to make enough money to send for Chela who waited in a government boarding school. And Ms. Gonzales teaches to these very codes, to work hard, learn English, and become functional. Ms. Keltner rolled her eyes at federal authorities asking for her student's reading scores without an appropriate measure, and yet she helped design a testing system to act as that very measure. Ms. Keltner created a tool that made the codes more effective and efficient according to the referent logics of measuring and controlling nondominant communities. Ms. Taylor, who believes in the good shepherd who went looking for one stray sheep, advocates fiercely for basic literacy as a fundamental right for all people, not just new immigrants. Ms. Taylor believes so very deeply in education, in its emancipatory responsibilities, but she too, heartbreakingly, teaches to their code.

These less powerful literacy sponsors are well-meaning, good at their jobs, and they have done their best with what they were methodically given by the more powerful literacy sponsors – but they get stuck in the inability to see an otherwise (largely aided by the policies set by the more powerful literacy sponsors and the ideological power embedded in racializing their students!). They believe so fiercely in these codes but these codes masquerade so deeply into order, control, and compliance. That is part of the deviousness of the code: it conscripts our imagination, hopes, and our ways of being and authors the deradicalized, depoliticized, and the going-about-ness worker. The codes contribute to the project of producing a docile immigrant figure away from any kind of radical possibility that might have otherwise existed in this curriculum.

The conceptual organization of sponsorship emphasizes how teachers were forced to work in this very limited context to force our attention to the structures around us. Codes traffic

in oppression but they are also a both/and, and there is always a possibility for an otherwise. What would it mean for Ms. Gonzales to teach such that work is not the horizon of living and learning? Rather than teaching for the simple transfer of knowledge, teaching to co-construct knowledge with her students, to include their histories, and critically reflect on the structures surrounding their lives. How might Ms. Keltner work against these bureaucratic codes? What would it mean for Ms. Taylor to harness all her earnestness to encourage her students to use literacy for their own ends, to use literacy as a tool that names oppression, that makes demands for power? What would it mean for teachers to teach their students to imagine and work towards an otherwise, to teach literacies that can take us somewhere different?

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Trapped in our origin stories: Interrogating the ideologies of ESL citizenship classrooms

capitalist economy, capitalist economy, capitalist economy…
the Louisiana Territory, the Louisiana Territory, the Louisiana Territory…
provide protection (police), provide protection (police), provide protection (police)…
freed the slaves, freed the slaves, freed the slaves…
we the people, we the people, we the people…

- phrases assembled from the Civics (History and Government) Answers for the Naturalization Test, 2020

These phrases come from answers to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' Civics Test for naturalization. Naturalization refers to the process for obtaining U.S. citizenship undergone by lawful permanent residents after meeting several extensive federal requirements (*Citizenship and Naturalization | USCIS*, 2020). The Civics Test — composed of 100 questions in areas of American government, American history, and integrated civics —asks aspiring citizens about: "the principles of American democracy, systems of government, rights, and responsibilities [of mainly citizens], the colonial period and independence, the 1800s, recent American history and other important historical information, geography, symbols, and holidays" (sub headers of *Civics Questions for the Naturalization Test, 2020).* My arrangement of the phrases listed above emphasizes the subtext of this exam for racialized groups and its larger ideological project, which I argue is one of creating an unquestioning, neoliberal, work-until-you-die American citizen.

To prepare for this test, some permanent resident cardholders enroll in a noncredit community college adult education class known as ESL citizenship[11]. In the ESL citizenship classroom, the focus lies on preparing students for their naturalization interview where they must: (1) demonstrate proficient speaking, writing, and reading in English and (2) pass an oral civics test in English. In the classroom, teaching and learning is modeled on the naturalization interview, forming a mutually constitutive process between students learning English and learning how to perform English and Americanness to pass their interview. These performative acts map onto the creation of the neoliberal citizen to and through economic and language ideologies. The totality of these performances produces a new way of seeing and being through literacy and language practices that privilege a neoliberal notion of citizenship. As I define in more detail below, neoliberal citizen refers to the ways in which aspiring citizens are created to serve the economic interests of the state, in part through ways of knowing.

These *ways of knowing* have manifested in tangible ways through slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and now, neoliberalism (Melamed, 2006; Wynter, 2003). The materiality of these practices is implemented in waves of Americanization through language and economic ideologies. In each iteration of Americanization, literacy is used as a means to exclude or colonize those who do not practice Western idealizations of literacy (Graff & Duffy, 2008). Scholars have long examined how the assimilationist legacy of the Americanization Movement

[11] Community colleges in California offer noncredit courses to students at no cost.

continues to influence adult education and frames the learning of English as part of an assimilationist project (Leonardo & Vafai, 2016; Vafai, 2014): the teaching of English is utilitarian and thus done in a targeted, decontextualized form.

This empirical study builds on a related archival study that drew from the Adult Education Archive to understand how ideologies travel and take hold in curriculum and instructional practices. I found that neoliberal policies reshaped adult education in the late 20th century when learning goals were driven by welfare-to-work legislation and immigration reform. Literacy education, like many other liberal "reforms' ' of the 1980s and 1990s, reproduces unequal power relations by shaping "refugee" and "immigrant" subjects as people in constant need of reform. These neoliberal vestiges remain in spaces of adult education including ESL citizenship classrooms.

Given what I learned in this previous archival study, this empirical work interrogates the ideologies shaping the learning taking place in adult, ESL noncredit citizenship classrooms to better understand how these ideologies influence aspiring U.S. citizens from student perspectives and experiences. Today, the ESL citizenship classroom teaches targeted, decontextualized English *and* prepares students for their naturalization interview to become U.S. citizens; the role of language and literacy is mutually constitutive of the nation-building process. This study answers the following research question: To which ideologies and literacy practices are students in the ESL citizenship classroom being socialized? How, if at all, are these ideologies mediated by neoliberal logics? This study analyzes the ideologies indexed in the practices of the course and how they are mediated by neoliberal logics to consider the ways in which students are learning how to become citizens and the (im)possible openings that exist therein.

I conceptualize neoliberalism and citizenship as deeply embedded within the founding logics of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness; I interrogate the ideologies surrounding the naturalization process to analyze how learning comes to be situated within hierarchies of power. I argue that neoliberal logics mediate the ideologies guiding the classroom practices that teach literacy and citizenship. This analysis reminds us that the teaching of literacy does not lead to increased social power, but rather that historical and contemporary instances show that 'making people literate' serves to standardize and regulate people's' belief practices for the interests of dominant groups. Literacy acts as a tool, a practice of exclusion, inclusion, or both. Within spaces of citizenship education, the learning of language and literacy is imbued with racialized ideologies intended to mold neoliberal citizens. These racialized ideologies, while they encode the desired ideas and behaviors constitutive of molding a prototypical neoliberal citizen, also function to create othering as a form of belonging. As I will show, the already othered citizen aspirant comes to be taught and therefore comes to learn othering as part and parcel of Americanization, which thereby creates a condition of performing belonging and othering simultaneously.

This paper could provide guidance to researchers and practitioners on creating more effective approaches to language and literacy education for immigrants and others outside the formal institutions of schools, colleges, health care institutions, and social services and welfare programs; but instead, I question the very necessity of such educational programs, and instead, I encourage researchers and practitioners to think of ways we can teach to the needs of students, their futures, and move towards a counter-hegemonic order, even while acknowledging the material benefits, perceived and otherwise, of gaining access to U.S. citizenship. This study examines language and literacy as double-sided tools for pedagogy, meaning-making, sense-making, and the socially constructed ideologies present therein. I argue that without explicit

attention to the role of power, these courses advance hegemonic notions of control. I make visible the ideologies and histories of practice (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) so that we may position language and literacy into tools of empowerment, tools of emancipation (Freire, 1987; Gramsci, 2000).

The following section situates neoliberalism within settler-colonial, anti-Black logics, and defines neoliberal citizen vis-à-vis language and economic ideologies to show how language is reduced to notions of functionality. Next, participants Karla, Maria, Axel, Linda, and Gabriel[12] walk us through the classroom practices of their ESL citizenship classroom in southern CA. The English-only practices of the classroom promote a subtractive view of language. By analyzing student reflections, their understandings and contradictions, I show how students from the class respond to the ESL citizenship classroom's rigid rules of order by instantiating performative belonging and performative othering. By drawing on individual and group interviews as well as cultural artifacts in the form of notebooks, this study privileges students' reflection and interpretation of the ESL citizenship classroom's classroom practices. I show the formation of the neoliberal citizen, the assimilatory nature of these spaces, and the ruptures present therein to gesture toward other possibilities, what could it look like to do something different, and who could it serve?

Neoliberal Citizen, Liberal Origins

The conceptual framework employed relies upon a critical reading of the histories that have led to the construction of both neoliberal ideologies and language ideologies. This conceptual frame historicizes Americanization in neoliberal times, from the 1970s to the present. My framing addresses the interrelatedness of language and neoliberalism with roots in settler-colonial and anti-Black logics. This project argues for the interrogation of economic ideologies and language ideologies that advance the logics of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness within hegemonic institutions that define citizenship. My analysis shows how these logics are indexed within naturalization practices, and by studying an ESL citizenship classroom and tracing the ideologies therein to the neo liberalization of adult education in California, this study explores how these logics are remade and continuously reproduced.

Creation of the Neoliberal Citizen

The construct of the nation functions to otherize immigrants while simultaneously trying to integrate them into the economy and assimilate them into whiteness for a nonexistent, elusive sense of belonging. Citizens need to be created with specific constitutions (e.g., drives, pulls, and desires) related to the interests of the state. The construction of the neoliberal citizen is mediated through the naturalization process.

Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a political-economic doctrine that argues that social progress can be most effectively furthered by "liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). In the 1970s, driven by neoliberal policies, corporations relocated to different places that attracted migrants. This resulted in an increase in the flows of capital and people, as well as foreign investment and transnational corporations. With this, decisions made in the economic sphere began to challenge nation-state borders.

[12] All names are pseudonyms.

Urciuoli (1994) discusses the framing of the 'good ethnic citizen' - one that epitomizes hard work, the will to better oneself, and the desire to "make it" as an American. Within this frame, an ethnic citizen can safely be nonwhite, but without this frame, the safety disappears. Language is ideologized and embedded within the national identity. This process is fueled by the conceptualization of a neoliberal citizen: an English speaker who contributes to the economy; and thus, the behaviors they perform such as doing hard work, doing English. The frame of the good ethnic citizen helps us see how the construct of "an American" is embedded within the cultural model of the white Anglo. The result is a racially ambiguous model of good citizenship where race and class are mapped onto a person's character, beliefs, and abilities.

Language Ideologies. The term "language ideologies" refers to beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language structure and use that index the political-economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups, and nation-states (Kroskrity, 2010, p. 192). These ideologies are typically multiple, context-bound, and constructed from the sociocultural experience of the speaker. The American preoccupation with the nation as speaking only monolingual standard English is representative of monoglossic language ideologies. Silverstein (1998) uses the term monoglossic language ideologies to describe "a culture of monoglot standardization" (p. 284), where deep-rooted allegiances to imagined linguistic norms persist regardless of whether or not these norms are adhered to in practice.

To privilege the colonized, racialized discourse on language, this project incorporates the historiography of language ideologies (Blommaert, 1999) to emphasize that language phenomena are intrinsically historical and embedded within histories of settler colonialism and manifest in everyday practices like language. Colonizers used the term "simple communicators" to invoke a fiction that imagines the colonized as less than human communicatively (Veronelli, 2015). Some colonial agents saw no role for indigenous language in European colonial projects and believed it should be replaced with European languages (Mignolo, 2011). From this perspective, colonized people could only evince their humanity by mastering a European language. However, as Fanon (1967) explains, colonized populations' subordinate positions prevent them from accessing the forms of legitimacy associated with the mastery of European languages. And even when colonized subjects comply with the imposition of European languages, they are continuously positioned as racial Others who will never be fully European - nor, by extension, fully human. Racialized noncitizens who learn English and become U.S. citizens are continuously positioned as racial Others who do not really belong into the fabric of American citizenship.

***Monolingualism for Neoliberal Competitiveness*.** Neoliberal ideologies commodify individuals and their language (Bernstein et al., 2013). Kubota (2009) uses the term "linguistic instrumentalism" to refer to the ideology that language skills lead to social mobility and economic development transforming language into monetary or symbolic value. Neoliberalism frames language as a commodified skill and individuals as human capital developed through the acquisition of these skills. English and literacy are masked as democratizing forces (and spread by neoliberalism) yet both privilege the elites (Sonntag, 2003) while simultaneously facilitating greater social stratification (Phillipson, 1998) and cultural homogenization. Although language learners, like those in ESL citizenship courses, see English as the way to a better life that will allow access to social mobility and opportunity, the elite's advertised benefits of social mobility and economic development do not always translate into material advantages. For example, Griswold's (2010) microanalysis of corrective sequences in an ESL citizenship classroom shows how the learning of English is reduced to "hearable grammatical and phonological accuracy" to

pass the naturalization interview. Like Griswold (2010), this study explores how language and literacy are reduced for the purposes of the naturalization interview, but also, how this reduction travels beyond the classroom.

Neoliberal Economic Ideologies. Neoliberal economic ideologies differentiate people into individuals and citizens whose collective existence is reduced by economic sovereignty that continually restructures the domain of "democratic participation" according to neoliberal logics of privatization and profit. This shifts responsibility from the state to its citizens. Brown (2015) defines responsibilization as the moral burdening that tasks the worker, student, consumer, or indigent person with surviving as a manifestation of human capitalization. The state then pathologizes those who cannot adjust and those whose cultural formations do not align with idealized American norms and nationalist sentiment. Aspiring U.S. citizens, many of whom fear accessing needed public assistance, enroll in citizenship classes to access better employment as part of this very neoliberal responsibilization.

'Multicultural' Citizen. Volpp (2007) explains how the institution of citizenship is both cultural and anti-cultural. Although citizenship itself is embodied by cultural values, "citizenship emerges through its distinction from the cultural other, who is measured and found wanting for citizenship" (p. 574). Cultural differences are not always acceptable differences and are often marked as threatening by the liberal state itself. Volpp problematizes how citizenship falls into a presumption of 'culture-less citizenship' and thus cannot attend to the problem of cultural difference. Melamed (2006) theorizes how neoliberalism influences the development of the 'multicultural citizen.' Multiculturalism portrays neoliberal policy as the key to post-racial freedom and equality while coding the wealthy as 'multicultural world citizens' and coding the poor as "handicapped by their own 'monoculturalism' or other historico-cultural deficiencies" (p. 1). This official ideology obscures white supremacy and new forms of racial dispossession by suppressing the material consequences of global capitalism and replacing equitable access to the free market with social freedoms. The frame of the multicultural citizen helps this study analytically by naming the ways in which multiculturalism does not take up difference in productive ways, certainly not outside capitalism.

Irene Bloemraad's (2006) comparative study between the U.S. and Canada considers the incorporation of immigrants as they gain citizenship in their respective countries. Bloemraad finds that Canada's national policy of multiculturalism facilitates immigrants' political incorporation more so than in the United States. Using a model of structured mobilization, Bloemraad explains how both fellow immigrants and local organizations promote citizenship, and how the government influences immigrant organizations in the form of material assistance and policies of integration and diversity. Together, both shape immigrants' understanding of citizenship. Bloemraad emphasizes the ways scholarship has ignored the role of the state in immigrant integration, particularly the importance of institutional support in the form of settlement assistance including English language classes. Félix (2008) too studies an ESL citizenship classroom with a focus on how Mexican immigrants experience the naturalization process and what their experience means for political participation. Félix describes how the citizenship classroom fosters a sense of community through native language use. The classroom itself becomes a counternarrative, where students develop an oppositional rather than assimilative relationship to citizenship. Unlike Félix's (2008) study, this study looks at the ideologies that arise from an English-only ESL citizenship classroom and traces how students come to understand who belongs and who doesn't belong and how that bleeds into people's understanding of everyday life.

This empirical study focuses on English language classes with a citizenship component, arguing that they do not foster a sense of political incorporation nor belonging and instead they position U.S. immigrants undergoing the naturalization process to identify as workers rather than citizens who can influence their world. This is the very intent of the U.S. state – to reduce the potentiality of an expansive notion of citizenship. I intervene in the scholarly literature on multiculturalism and language learning to show how both can be reduced to neoliberal monocultural/monolingualism by using literacy as an assimilatory tool for aspiring citizens.

This study traces how ESL citizenship students reflect on their classroom practices to show how neoliberal ideologies and language ideologies mediate the assimilation process of naturalization. The impossibility of imagining a future where citizens can enact a civic literacy that affects social change is indicative of the interests of the state in naturalizing neoliberal citizens. The civics exam and the curriculum foreground students' economic progression into low-wage jobs over critical notions of literacy and citizenship. Neoliberalism positions the learning of English as the gold standard for academic advancement and the prerequisite "to be" a productive citizen – a status characterized by an *impossibility of never becoming and always becoming*.

Performativity: Living Inside These Stories

This study draws on Judith Butler's notion of performativity (2006) to analyze language, *particularly the learning of a language*, as a performance - a performance that indoctrinates people into a neoliberal citizenry. Language is not simply language but speech, a code of membership (Austin, 1975; Derrida, 1972). As the participants learn codes of what people are supposed to be, those codes become a social contract whereby they begin to enact said behaviors for membership in the community. The more you learn the language, the more you start to perform the behaviors of the code. The social contract is shared, shared among speakers, and guided by the epistemological codes that govern our lives and by the grammars of order (Wynter, 2000, 2003). Wynter reminds us that *we are always in language*, *we are always telling stories* (Wynter, 2020, p.34). The capitalist economic system too is part of these stories, and the constitution upholds and protects the story of capitalism. As I will show, ESL citizenship classrooms are always telling and teaching the same stories, and students, like teachers, come to *live inside these stories* (Wynter, 2020, p. 37).

Speech goes beyond the behavior contract; language itself is embedded in the cognitive process (Vygotsky, 1978). Language, the ultimate mediator between speakers and the phenomena of the word (Vygotsky, 1978), and the ideologies present therein, orient us to and through these very epistemological codes to be in language and to distinguish between the 'us' and 'them.'

As people engage in the collective construction of social objects, they become bound by those codes and, by consequence, the ideological project of neoliberalism (e.g., demonizing the poor). Neoliberalism, a system based on getting people to align with the identities and behaviors of the state, absorbs differences. Neoliberalism does not demand everyone do the same thing but rather that everyone modifies themselves to fit the needs of the state as self-regulating subjects - *you can be whatever you want as long as you do what we want you to do*. The state continuously redefines the nature of the subject and their membership where neoliberal citizens shift per the needs of the state. This is what it means to belong.

Performative belonging, through Nietzche, Foucault, linguistic theories, and Butler, "problematizes the task of investigating belonging by turning attention to the production of

selves as effects" (Bell, 1999, p. 1), thereby allowing us to question how identities come to be produced and performed. I use performative belonging to attend to how language, specifically the learning of English, comes to be performed and produced to gain a sense of belonging in the United States. Belonging attends to the ways "common histories, experiences and places are created, imagined and sustained" (Fortier, in Bell, 1999, p. 3). In ESL citizenship classrooms, the rote repetition of common English phrases and nationalist splices of history model this sense of performative belonging.

I use the term performative belonging because no one—especially nonwhites being indoctrinated as neoliberal citizens—truly belongs. Naturally, performative belonging also necessitates othering. I use performative othering to show how students in ESL citizenship classrooms engage in the practice of othering, in an attempt to belong.

Design and Method

This study employed qualitative methods to understand the perspective of ESL citizenship students and show how neoliberal ideologies mediate classroom practices including: interviews with the classroom teacher, analysis of classroom artifacts, and individual and reflective group interviews with ESL citizenship students. By centering the classroom practices as the unit of analysis, this study analyzes the ideologies indexed in the practices of the course and traces how the ideologies are mediated by neoliberal logics. By privileging interviews with ESL citizenship students and conducting reflective group interviews with focal students we see how the ideologies from the class influence how students are making sense of citizenship vis-à-vis performative belonging and performative othering.

Context

Setting. The ESL citizenship class is in a small town in southern California, about three hours from Mexicali, Baja California, about two hours (without traffic!) from Los Angeles, and about an hour and a half from the closest beach, though not many people, at least those without papers, dare venture far enough to see the ocean. Known for dairy farms and agriculture and with a median household income between $45,000 and $50,000, this is a small town that's been changing steadily for years with the population doubling at every census count, hovering around 45,000 in 2020. Racially, more than half of the town is white, about 10% is Black, and about 40% is Hispanic or Latino of any race. There is one school district with one high school, and, surprisingly, one community college (founded in 1965). And that one high school and that one community college partner together to administer adult education classes and this ESL citizenship class.

Teacher. The teacher, like most teachers in this area, is not from the community. They commute 30-40 minutes to their posting. But nonetheless, the teacher is well respected by his students. Although he insists that his students call him Bill—not Mr. Rollins—they endearingly and differentially call him "teacher." He took this job when he and his wife decided to homeschool their children; his wife stays home and he got a night job to make up for her lost income (gone are the glory days of the one job per nuclear family, he would say). Bill is a white, monolingual English speaker.

Course Goals. ESL citizenship classrooms are designed to prepare students for their naturalization interview where they must demonstrate that they can (1) speak, write, and read in English proficiently and (2) pass an oral civics test in English (USA GOV, 2019). During a

naturalization interview, a USCIS officer[13] asks prospective citizens questions about their citizenship application and background to verify their information and test how well they speak English. A USCIS officer then reads a sentence aloud to the applicant and the applicant must legibly write one of three sentences correctly. A USCIS officer then administers the oral civics test in English. The questions concern the 13 original colonies, geography, branches of government, and U.S. holidays. There are 100 possible questions, the officer asks the applicant ten questions, and the applicant must answer at least six questions correctly. A naturalization applicant can take the exam in their native language only if the applicant is age 50 (or older) and only if the applicant has had their green card for over 20 years. If the applicant is age 55 (or older), they need to have had their green card for over 15 years (USA GOV, 2019). While some immigrants may wait to take the exam in their native language, those who need to sponsor other family members into the U.S. (including their very own children living in the U.S. with the precarity of DACA) apply for citizenship as soon as they have had their green card for the minimum five years and take the exam in English. Aspiring citizens working in low-wage jobs where their native language is the only language spoken particularly struggle to prepare for the naturalization interview.

These two requirements act as perpetually overarching federal "standards" for ESL naturalization classrooms. The first standard models the decontextualized, rote, mechanical teaching of English described earlier. The second standard models the mechanics of the first but while also privileging a nationalist notion of history.

Data Collection

Drawing from a larger study including archival research, as well as ethnographic research in an ESL citizenship class in northern California and an ESL citizenship class in southern California (discussed here), this analysis is based on interviews, cultural artifacts in the forms of notebooks, and reflective group interviews. This data was collected between November 2019 and April 2021.

Like many studies taking place during the precarious times we are all trying to live through, this study was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic; this paper makes an explicit effort to lean into this interruption by applying the theoretical framework of "learning to see" *to see* differently (Gutiérrez et al., 2017; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2016). I spent two weeks in the community getting to know the students and building rapport, but the Covid-19 pandemic closed the classroom before I could begin participant observation. I interviewed ten students from the class (four of the ten students had previously attended the class and had no plans to re-enroll). I organized a reflective group interview with focal students from the class—and this group interview became the heart of this paper. Rather than drawing from the traditional 'researcher as observer' method, this paper leans on this reflective group interview to recreate the classroom from the perspective of its ESL citizenship students. Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev Vygotsky remind us that language is a meaning system, and this meaning system grows through everyday conversation. By privileging this group interview- a dialogic conversation where ESL citizenship

[13] On March 1, 2003, the Department of Homeland Security absorbed the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) under its service function. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is under its enforcement function.

students recreate and reflect on their classroom practices- this paper hopes to show how ESL citizenship students move towards the creation of a new meaning system, at the very least, a new way of seeing, one that begs that we (writers, researchers, teachers) also "see" learning spaces differently.

Interviews. This project draws on the qualitative interview (Packer, 2010) and dialogical conversation (Seikkula, 2003). As mentioned above, I interviewed 10 students from the same ESL citizenship class in southern California. Through interviews, I sought to understand: (1) their decision to undergo the naturalization process as well as the ideologies that informed their decision; (2) how taking this class influenced their evolving understanding of belonging and citizenship; (3) how their learning from the course traveled to their homes and community. I also interviewed the teacher of the ESL citizenship classroom to understand their pedagogical orientation to the class and the ideologies influencing their pedagogical practices. I selected five focal participants based on those who had attended the ESL citizenship class the longest (this paper draws on a group interview with four focal participants). I built rapport with participants by helping them continue to study for their naturalization interview (even though that too was suspended), and if participants were willing, I conducted additional follow-up interviews, including the group interview described below.

Cultural Artifacts. I collected notebooks from two of the five focal participants. This paper draws on those notebook entries to follow the classroom practices of the classroom and consider the way students engage in the scripted activities of the class.

Group Interview. In March 2021, I organized a group interview over Zoom with focal participants to reflect collectively on their experiences in the classroom and make sense of their classroom practices. Through dialogical conversation, I sought to understand how the organization of classroom activity shaped their understandings of belonging and citizenship and how these understandings differed or coalesced across the group as well as the contradictions and ideologies present therein.

By using dialogical conversation to "learn to see," this reflective group interview turns language on its side and explores how people live in many voices, and how this multivoicedness brings out new understanding and contradiction. This paper is a small attempt to move from monological worlds, where the learning outcomes of ESL citizenship classrooms rely on memorization and repetition in English, to multivoiced dialogical worlds to seriously consider what it would mean to structure ESL citizenship classes themselves as dialogical conversations rather than monological utterances.

Data Analysis

To begin the process of data analysis, I transcribed audio recordings of interviews. I wrote iterative analytic memos to capture emerging themes. I used Dedoose, qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, to code my data. My codebook contains the following parent codes: language ideologies, neoliberal ideologies, and citizenship ideologies, with subsequent child codes. These theoretical parent codes are informed by the literature. These codes inform what counts as literacy, what counts as language use, and what conceptions of citizenship emerge. This analysis advances analytical generalizations (Yin, 2017) by exploring the utility of theoretical constructs through the analysis of varied data sources associated with the case to corroborate and refine constructs.

Course Practices. The nature of the naturalization interview and the classroom goals constrain the possibilities of what can be taught (e.g., alternative curriculum, social theory,

critical texts, social consciousness). Through ESL citizenship students' retelling of their class, I analyze how the class is taught (e.g., the organization of learning, social relations, and forms of mediation) and how students are engaged. Gutiérrez & Vossoughi (2010) remind us to go beyond the curriculum to see also what influences learning (e.g., social and spatial relationships, tools, processes, and goals). For this reason, this paper privileges classroom practices and utilizes classroom practices as my unit of analysis. Relying on the group interview allows the analysis to go beyond classroom practices and toward what Gutiérrez & Arzubiaga (2012) term "people in practice" to engage in consequential empirical work that captures the community's ecology and its influences on everyday practices. Here, literacy is a social practice—something that is done—acting as a form of human labor, a means for production, an engagement with cultural artifacts, and social relations (Luke, 1994). The classroom practices of this ESL classroom consist of quick write sessions, independent reading, group conversations, class presentation, dictation, and pop quizzes based on the civics exam. The practices model the enumerated goals described above from the naturalization interview. What follows is an introduction of my focal participants and their retelling of the classroom practices through a dialogical conversation, the contradictions therein, and the consideration for new imagined futures that do not yet exist.

Focal Students

Using identity portraits, inspired by Rosa (2016), let me introduce you to my focal participants with a focus on their ideologies surrounding language, literacy, and citizenship anchored within their everyday practices:

> **1. Axel**: Axel is always telling a joke, always laughing. His friends say he is incorrigible, sometimes they even avoid sitting next to him out of fear of spending the entire class giggling as opposed to paying attention. Axel speaks to his friends and to me in Spanish. He will code-switch to English *only* to poke fun at a monolingual English speaker, "Si yo estoy contando un chiste o simplemente chismeando, sin falta el maestro dice" - Axel cranes his neck to the side as far as it can go, deepens his voice, and says, "*Englishhhhhhh pleasesssse*!" Axel worked at the local fast-food joint for five years until it was purchased by a new franchise owner who asked him to quit. Now he works in a cafeteria in a hospital. He is from Mexico, relishes gossiping about his family members that did not learn English, and is married to a man he lovingly calls 'my guero,' a term of endearment for his American, white husband.
>
> **2. Linda**: Linda is strikingly beautiful; everyone knows it and she knows they know it. And yet, or as a result, she is shy and soft-spoken. She listens intently and waits until everyone has finished talking before adding her thoughts. But at times, she will perk up, gently pointing one finger in the air, and, if need be, interrupt others to get her point in. She adores her husband and describes him as a hardworking, emotional man. Linda and her children were separated from her husband due to the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 which sent Linda back to Mexico on a ten-year ban. She never misses an opportunity to subtly mention that their daughter graduated college on time - and not from a community college. Indeed, her daughter graduated from a four-year institution in four years. She announces that her daughter is and will always be a *professional* and nobody will be able to rob her of that. Linda is also a Donald Trump supporter.

3. Maria: Maria moves through the world *slowly*. She likes to have two, maybe even three-hour lunches with deep conversation. Without fault, she will send you home with not one, but two bags of peaches from her beautiful, old tree. She'll tell you how to can the peaches into a delightful jam, *and* she will send you home with jars of her own peach jam. She came to the U.S. at the age of 15; Maria has since been longing to return home to Sinaloa. She says Mexico is beautiful, and even more so before the U.S. started coming around. A retired beautician, in no rush to become a U.S. citizen, she comes to class because she wants to speak English as fast and as "lyrically" as she speaks Spanish but mostly because she sees herself as a "lifelong learner."

4. Karla: Karla describes herself first and foremost as a mother. She waited until both of her children left the house to start school. As a result of the class, she became a U.S. citizen in 2019. She texted her daughter with a picture of her ballot asking her to circle which things to vote for, because she has better things to do than research ballot measures. As a caregiver, she enjoys talking politics with hospital patients; "that Nancy Pelosi," she'll say, which works with Republicans and Democrats alike. Now that her children are out of the house, and now that she is a citizen, she spends frivolously. She buys $8 oatmeal, and she loves it! She says she drove several miles (about 15 miles or so), without counting how much each mile would cost her in gas, to pick up her best friend. They drove (several more miles!) with nowhere to go, they talked for hours and laughed. When her favorite song came on the radio, she pulled the car over, got out, and danced in the middle of the street.

5. Gabriel: Gabriel is young with a boyish, round face. He is 18 years old and works at the shop with his dad. He comes to class 15-20 minutes late, but he always comes. He is forgetful, always asking a friend to borrow a pencil or paper or both, but everyone obliges; they like him. Because he was born in the U.S., Gabriel is already a U.S. citizen, but he moved to Honduras as a baby. He moved to the U.S. about a year ago, and he comes to this class because he has a plan for his life. He wants to learn English so that he can get his GED, a prerequisite to his dream: enlisting in the U.S. Army. He likes guns. He even fantasizes about AK-47s, not in a white school shooter kind of way, but in an I-want-to-belong-somewhere kind of way.

The participants vary by age, gender, ethnicity, and social class. These identity portraits show how the neoliberal subject is not contained or condensed into a neat box, nor does it apply to any of the regularly prescribed categories used to categorize people, but rather, the neoliberal subject can be found in parts of all of us, no matter how different. If we look close enough, we can see the consequences of this assimilationist ideological project in the everyday imagination of aspiring citizens. And let me emphasize here that students like Maria and Gabriel continue to attend the class without the (immediate) need for U.S. citizenship – Maria does so for the language and for the community and Gabriel does so for other more immediate (or instrumental) goals – reminding us that the possibility of this space could be so much more. *Dear reader*, try not to judge the Trump supporter or the military-industrial complex fan too harshly; like us, they too are part of this larger ideological project at work. I center here the everyday practices and the way these practices are influenced by neoliberal imaginaries.

Right to Opacity

In the pages that follow, the ESL citizenship students walk us through each of the classroom practices: quick write sessions, independent reading, group conversations, class presentation, dictation, and pop quizzes based on the civics exam. The ESL citizenship classroom begins with a quick write for students to complete *in English* as they come into class. While Mr. Rollins grades the quick write, students read something of interest, *in English*. After getting their quick writes back, Mr. Rollins tells students to turn to a partner and discuss what they wrote, *in English*. After group conversations, Mr. Rollins calls on students one-by-one to come to the front of the classroom to read their quick write to the class, *in English*. After the presentations, Mr. Rollins dictates a couple of sentences for students to write in their notebooks. After the dictations, students flip to a new page in their notebooks for a "pop quiz" where Mr. Rollins writes five questions on the board from the U.S. civics test, and students answer them in their notebooks. The ESL citizenship classroom was constituted by these routine practices with a circumscribed curriculum.

Karla, Maria, Axel, Linda, and Gabriel all emphasize how classroom practices are carried out *in English.* In turn, this paper privileges focal students reflecting on these classroom practices in Spanish, without word-for-word translation in English of all quotes. My unwillingness to translate is twofold: Drawing from Glissant's (1997) "right to opacity," I emphasize the non-translatability of Spanish to English and thus the non-incorporation of immigrants into multicultural imaginaries. Not everything can nor needs to be translated. I use the original Spanish to think with and against language and difference and allow for the non-assimilatable excess of aspiring U.S. citizens. The unwillingness to translate is also meant to juxtapose the ESL citizenship classroom's highly structured rules of order of English. In a small way, I force readers to sit with not knowing everything and to sit with why it is they want to know everything even when they cannot know everything. I do not mean to be alienating or unkind to the reader, but rather, I attempt to show, in a small way, what it is like to move through this class without translation. I ask that you lean into the discomfort and the subtext of this opacity.

Classroom Practices *in English*

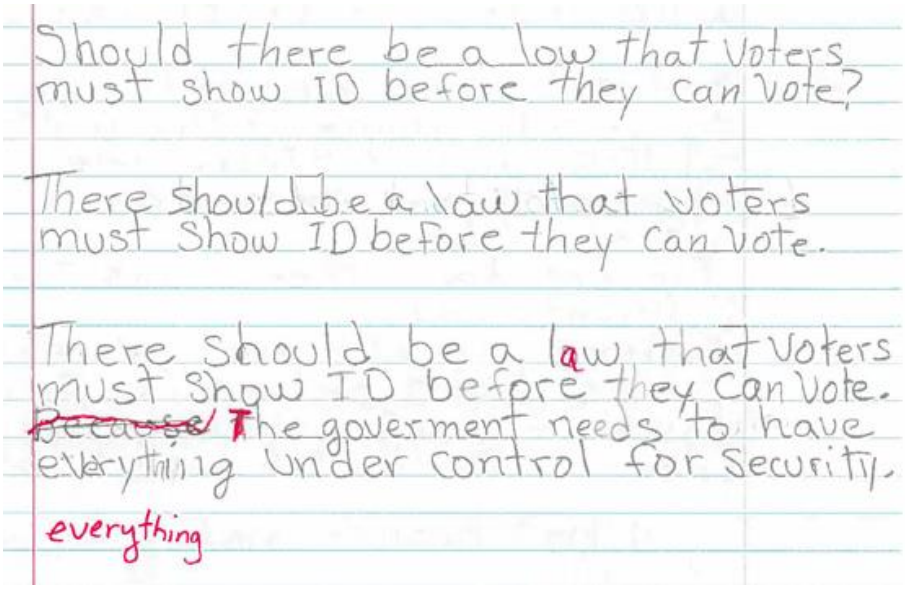
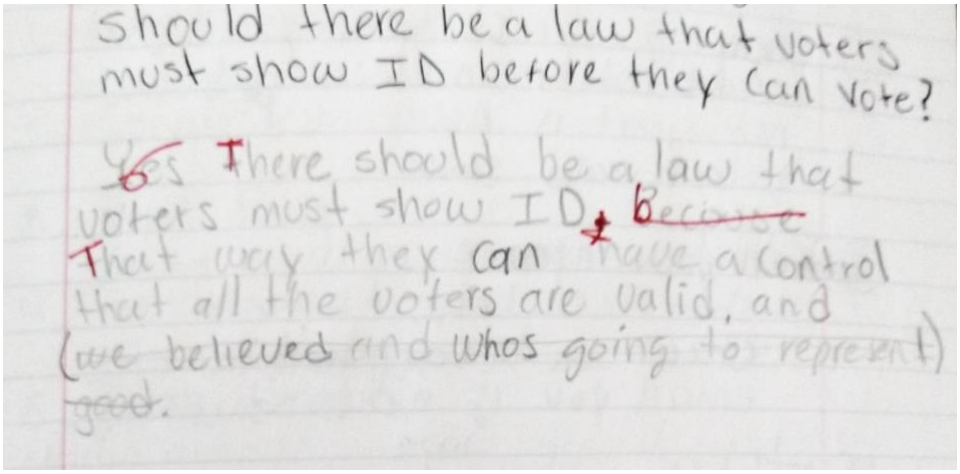
Analysis of interviews, notebooks, and reflective group interviews show that, to varying extents, students from the class are learning how to be "American" – a neoliberal subject, and the students' model this in their interviews (e.g., "I came here to better myself/I came here to work, not to be taken care of/I am not like the other..."). The ESL citizenship class embodies larger ideological tropes that are locally constructed and reconstructed. The classroom practices, and by extension what students learn, oscillate between (1) performing belonging; (2) performing othering; but also, and this is the opening, (3) talking back to these very tropes, talking back to English only and talking back to notions of functionality. At its worst, as seen in the reflective group interviews, the class manifests xenophobic materiality rooted in white supremacy and anti-Blackness. However, at its best, there are openings whereby students question their place within these institutions and concomitantly build towards a new understanding of citizenship.

In the following sections, we see how the normative classroom practices are experienced by the ESL citizenship students, including their critical reflections about English only, and the ideologies, contradictions, and prejudices therein.

Quick write, *in English*

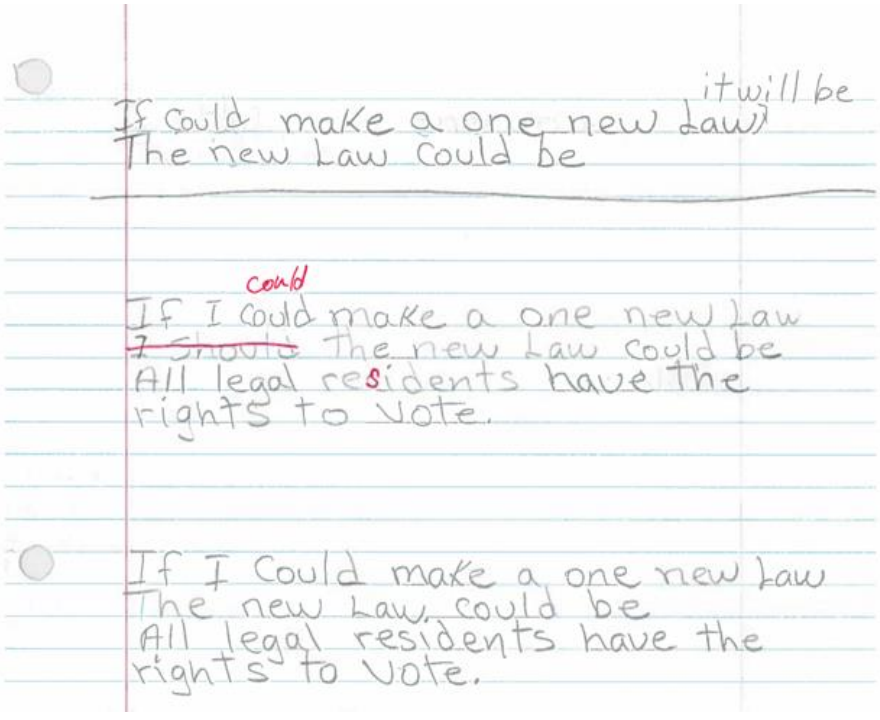
Karla, the ringleader of the group, explains that class is scheduled to begin at 6:30 PM but that most students don't really get into the class until 6:45 PM or so. Karla says they are greeted by their teacher who has written a prompt on the board for them to complete in their notebooks; she says Mr. Rollins calls it a "*quick write*." Karla shares her notebook from the ESL citizenship class, Maria shares hers as well, and flips through the pages entitled "quick write." Both Maria and Karla comment on how this practice provides some flexibility for their friends who often run late from their other jobs, and Linda and Axel nod in agreement. During the quick-write, they spend 15-20 minutes writing out their answers and make their way to the front of the classroom to turn in their quick writes where Mr. Rollins grades them for spelling and grammar.

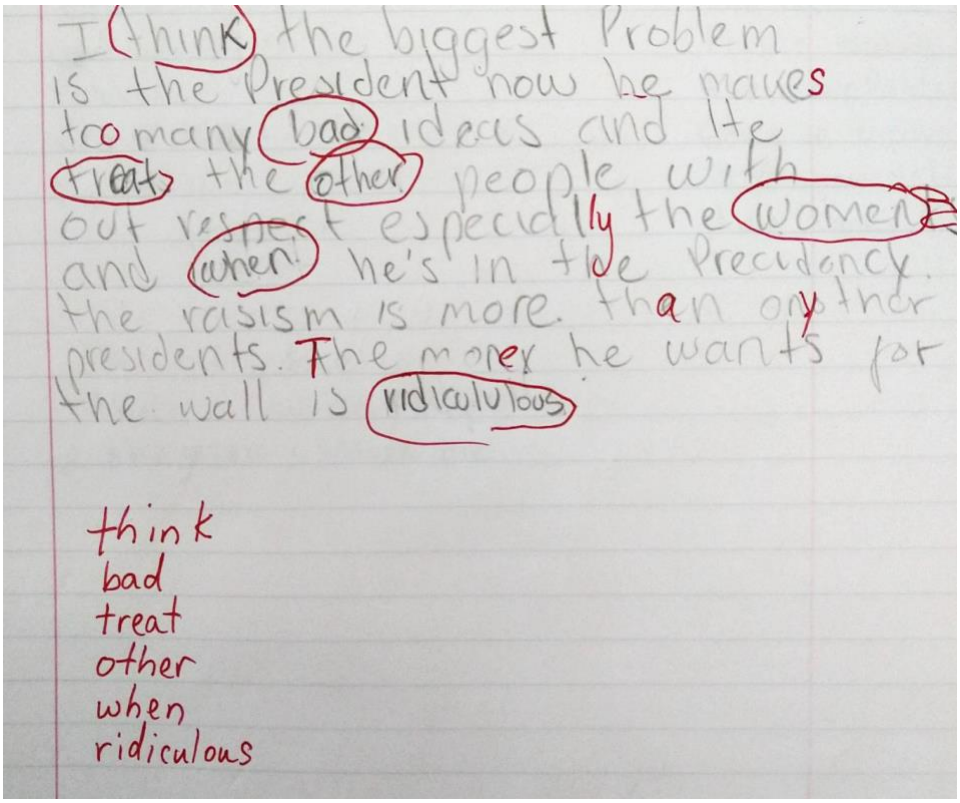
Table 3 Quick Write on Voter Identification

Student	Notebook Entry
Maria	
Karla	

The prompts vary on the ideological scale and range from “Should CA raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour?” to “Should there be a law voters must show ID before they can vote?” to “Should the police be allowed to enter your home?” As shown in Table 1, the quick write asks, “Should there be a law that voters must show ID before they can vote?” This was in late 2019 when several states were trying to pass legislation that would make it harder for non-white people to vote in time for the presidential election. Both Maria and Karla wrote that there should be voter ID laws so that the government can “have everything under control.” Maria and Karla and the other students articulate their belief in control, the same control that has brought them to the classroom in the first place. In one way, students are engaging in performative belonging by writing and agreeing with the majority of white America about voter ID laws. By extension, they are also engaging in the practice of performative othering whereby by agreeing to voter ID laws and reproducing that knowledge in the classroom, they are othering the people voter ID laws exclude, mainly Black people and Indigenous people (Anderson, 2018). With this example of voting, it is peculiar that permanent residents are being asked if they agree with adding restrictions to voting even though they themselves are unable to vote.

Table 4 Quick Write on Addressing U.S. Problems

Student	Notebook Entry
Maria	

Karla	

As shown in Table 2, Maria, a permanent resident for 30 years, raises this very point in another quick write: "If I could make a new law The new law could be All legal residents have the rights to vote." This quick write is in response to the following prompt, "If you could make a new law, what would it be? Or what is the biggest problem facing the United States?" As opposed to the previous quick write prompts which could yield an answer by reformulating the question, these prompts are more open-ended. The option to answer either prompt almost seems to acknowledge that some problems cannot be addressed by the law. This is seen in Karla's response, "I think the biggest problem is the president how he make to many bad ideas." Like Maria, Karla too speaks to the irony of "Should there be a law that voters must show ID before they can vote?", whereby Karla can critique Trump's bad ideas but she could not vote against him. Even worse, the instantiation of voter ID laws is another one of Trump's bad ideas but there is not room in the classroom for an expansive critique of voter ID laws. Despite the open-ended nature of these prompts, the classroom still models the citizenship exam in that it privileges a question and then an answer without further discussion or interrogation of that answer.

Compared to the naturalization interview which tests how well students can write one sentence, the quick writes expand the activity of writing. In speaking to Mr. Rollins, he says his students are going to be U.S. citizens and he wants them to start to think about issues that matter, he hopes they will recognize the issues from the news (which he encourages students to watch, *in English*) and begin to think about where they might stand, what they want to see change. However, the model of asking a seemingly benign, neutral question and then answering said question in English, and prioritizing only grammar and spelling, takes away from the expansive possibility of discussing the prompt further or even the possibility of questioning the question-answer format.

Reading quietly, *in English*

Karla tells us that while Mr. Rollins grades their quick-write for spelling and grammar, students are to read quietly. Mr. Rollins tells students to bring a book, or any reading material, to give themselves peaceful silence to read something of interest, *in English*. This is a form of sustained silent reading, a regular K-12 practice.

This activity also brings forth notions of expansive possibilities, of bringing something to read, something you might fall in love with, in a language that you might hate. Karla reflects on the practice with the group,

> Karla: Bueno, para ser honesta, al principio estaba como, ¿en serio? Estoy aquí para que tu[14] me enseñes a mí a leer en inglés, hah.
>
> Pero funcionó.
>
> Hizo que todos trajeran un libro,
> y lo hicimos,
> y luego nos hizo leer un párrafo,
> y lo hicimos,
> y luego nos hizo preguntas sobre lo que leemos
> y pudimos responderlas.
> Empecé a entender lo que estaba leyendo en inglés

Karla begins with a nod to the true spirit of consumer-oriented learning, "And at first, I was like seriously? I am here for you to teach me how to read in English, hah." She goes on to reflect on the practice in the most poetic of ways:

> But it worked.
>
> He had everyone bring in a book,
> and we did,
> and then he would have us read a paragraph,
> and we would,
> and then he would ask us questions about what we read,
> and we could answer them.
> I started to understand what I was reading, in English.

Axel interrupts, "¿Que era, Campbell's chicken noodle, no?" and the friends laugh. Karla rolls her eyes, reaches into her big purse and pulls out *Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul*, "Si, este

[14] Drawing from Heritage and Clayman (2010), I use the underline feature to indicate emphasis spoken by participants. The more underlining under the word, the more emphasis. I italicize the words that participants say in English, to invert the practice of italicizing "foreign" words. I use square brackets for my notes indicating tone, non-verbal communication, and so on.

es mi libro, me gusta porque los párrafos son cortos, pero se entiende la historia." Karla says the book is hers, she likes the book because the paragraphs are short, and she understands the stories.

Allowing for choice in reading material countered the teacher-centered, naturalization-centered curriculum that dominates the rest of the class. Again, compared to the naturalization interview which tests how well students can read one sentence, this reading activity expands the activity of reading. This practice stands against the usual reading material of ESL citizenship classes (the 13 original colonies and the constitution, and etc.). Mr. Rollins says it works for everyone because he does not like using the copy machine to bring in civics test reading material.

Quick write discussion, *in English*

During the sustained silent reading, Mr. Rollins passes back the quick writes with corrections. Maria says that once she receives her quick write, she studies her mistakes carefully. Then Mr. Rollins tells everyone in the class turns to a partner to discuss what they wrote, *in English*. The group reflects together,

> **Maria**: si y luego nos ponía en grupos para hablar entre nosotros y nos escuchaba desde donde estaba, nos corrigía
> **Axel**: y si nos escuchaba hablando en Español, nos dicia, "*Englishhhhhh, English please."*
> [risas]
> **Maria**: si nos decía, "¿Dónde estás ahora? Estás en clase de inglés, no clase de español"
> **Karla**: si no nos dejaba hablar español en la clase

Axel, as shown above, recounts the ways the teacher would intercede/police/surveil the use of Spanish in the classroom; he code-switches to English *only* to mock and poke fun at the teacher's insistence on English. Maria interjects to say that the teacher would allow Spanish to help other students in the class who could not otherwise understand the conversation.

> **Maria**: Como que lo permitiría si alguien más no entendiera para ayudarlos, para ayudar a otro compañero a entender. Y eso es lo único que uno quiere es ser entendido.

This exception to the English-only rule was made for Gabriel, the U.S. citizen born in Jersey who left the U.S. to his home country in Honduras and, very recently, returned to his birth country knowing little English. Gabriel, in a one-on-one interview, shares:

> **Gabriel**: Me parecía que no les gustaba mucho cuando hablábamos español
> Compañeros mi ayudaban pero luego, él maestro dice como, "*Okay English, ppractice English*."

Though there was a brief window to include Gabriel in classroom practices, it was just that, brief, followed by an immediate transition back to English only. Indicative of most night school English classes and K-12 settings, Mr. Rollins admonished Spanish and insisted on English only as the practice. But as Maria emphasized above, I think all anyone wants is to be understood.

In this conversation, although the students deeply respect their teacher, and they have never said anything bad about their teacher, they poke fun at the English-only practices of the

classroom. Axel mocks the teacher's insistence on English only, and the friends laugh and point to other instances and laugh some more.

Class Presentations, *in English*

Class presentations would unfold after students discussed their quick writes with a partner. As the conversations wind down, the teacher would call on students one-by-one to come to the front of the classroom to recite what they wrote on their quick write or tell the class about what they read, *in English*, of course. Classroom presentations were organized to provide students opportunities to practice their English and to share their writing. With this practice, students were hesitant and uncomfortable. Linda explains the practice as follows,

> **Linda**: Entonces sí, leíamos en voz alta lo que habíamos escrito.
> –**Karla**: lo siento Linda, cuando no pronunciamos algo bien, el maestro lo hacía, luego le movía la lengua así, y no dejaba de insistir hasta que pronunciamos algo bien.
>
> **María**: Y todos teníamos problemas con nuestros tiempos, el presente, pasado y el futuro porque estaríamos hablando en el tiempo equivocado - eso me pasa todo el tiempo - se me olvida que estoy hablando en el pasado y usando un tiempo presente
> [risas]
> **Axel**: ¡Quizás sí necesites un intérprete!
>
> **Karla**: Cada vez que nos pedía que pasáramos al frente del salón de clases, lo cual odiaba, lo odiaba.
> **Axel**: *To read, to read*
> **Grupo**: [risas]
> **Maria** -para que leyéramos en voz alta lo que habíamos escrito. A veces, leíamos una oración a toda la clase o nos pedía que nos presentáramos hola, soy fulano de tal, estoy aquí porque quiero mejorar, quiero hablar mejor inglés, quiero hablar mejor inglés, yo quiero mejorar mi inglés–
> **Karla**: pero nadie, nadieyyy, quería hacer esto. Y nos obligaría a hacerlo

Karla interrupts Linda as she recounts the process (and no one interrupts Linda), to emphasize that nobody, absolutely nobody, wanted to go to the front of the classroom to speak in English. Students feared projecting their voice in a language they didn't like, they feared being corrected in front of the class. Karla puts her hand to her ear and moves her mouth in slow motion to imitate the teacher as he interrupted them mid-thought to insist they speak louder or to correct their pronunciations. In many ways Mr. Rollins' practices enacted what Hill (1998) refers to as white public space, the hyper surveillance of the speech of racialized populations in his classroom. Rosa & Flores (2015) emphasize the directionality of power whereby white listening subjects and dominant institutions dictate "correct" usages of language such as pronunciation, as exemplified by Mr. Rollins' corrections at the point of utterance. When the group explains how students were thrown by the teacher's interruption, Axel, imitating Mr. Rollins, says "Read, read!" to demonstrate the teacher's directive to get students to finish their presentation.

Though the group pushes back on this practice, the conversation then shifts into the practice of performative othering in the form of gossiping. They express that learning English is hard, difficult, and humiliating; the group emphasizes that, at the very least, they are doing the

work of learning English, unlike other immigrants, with their own family members as a reference point. Axel begins,

> **Axel**: Mira, te voy a contar.
> Tengo una hermana y ella se divorció de su primer esposo, vino a los Estados Unidos. ¡Ella nunca aprendió inglés, tuvo dos hijos nacidos aquí!
> Entonces ella no puede hacer nada. Está atrapada en México, está enferma, ni siquiera puede caminar. A sus hijos tampoco les va bien.
> **Linda**: Pobres niños
> **Axel**: - No, ya están grandes, 35 y 40 años, pero ¡los hijos nunca aprendieron inglés!
> **Maria**: Oh no, bueno, a cierto punto eso está en ellos ahora.
> **Axel**: Cuando vine aquí, la vi y le dije a mi mamá. No salí de México y vine a Estados Unidos para echar a perder mi vida como ella. Piensa en todo lo que podría haber tenido. Vine aquí para mejorarme a mí mismo
> **Linda**: Mhmm
> **Axel**: -Y como dije me ha ido bien, gracias a este país, me ha ido bien y no tengo nada de qué quejarme. Gracias a Dios lo he hecho bien. O sea, no como millonario, pero tengo suficiente para salir adelante, para ayudar a mis hermanos en México, que no les va tan bien. Porque en México es duro con la edad, a esta edad te vas a México, no puedes trabajar. Aquí tienes la oportunidad de trabajar a cualquier edad, bueno eso es lo que admiro de Estados Unidos. Si tienes 60, 70 años todavía puedes trabajar y para ser honesto, en México no es así. Y no me quejo de mi país, mi país es hermoso, pero hay que buscar otras oportunidades. Hazlo bien.

Axel emphatically tells us the story of his divorced sister, who came to the U.S. and never learned English. He tells us that his sister has two children *born* here, as if that were enough to gain membership. But nothing is ever enough, and to Axel, it's especially not enough when his sister doesn't learn English. And so now, Axel tells us his sister is stuck, trapped may be a better translation, in Mexico. Axel's story, a story of caution, takes the classic cataclysmic turn—his sister is sick in Mexico, can't even walk, and now even her U.S.-born children aren't doing well. In the most liberal of ways, Linda expresses sympathy for the children, to which, Axel interrupts to say the children are grown, and therefore, ineligible for sympathy, and more so because the children never learned English, and so, of course, nobody is doing well. Even Maria, who doesn't usually glamorize English, nods her head and says, "Well, at a certain point that's all on them." The ideologies at work here shift to those of performative othering. Alex implies that if only his sister had learned English, her fate could have been different. Ideologically, Alex engages in performative othering by othering those who have not done the work of learning English.

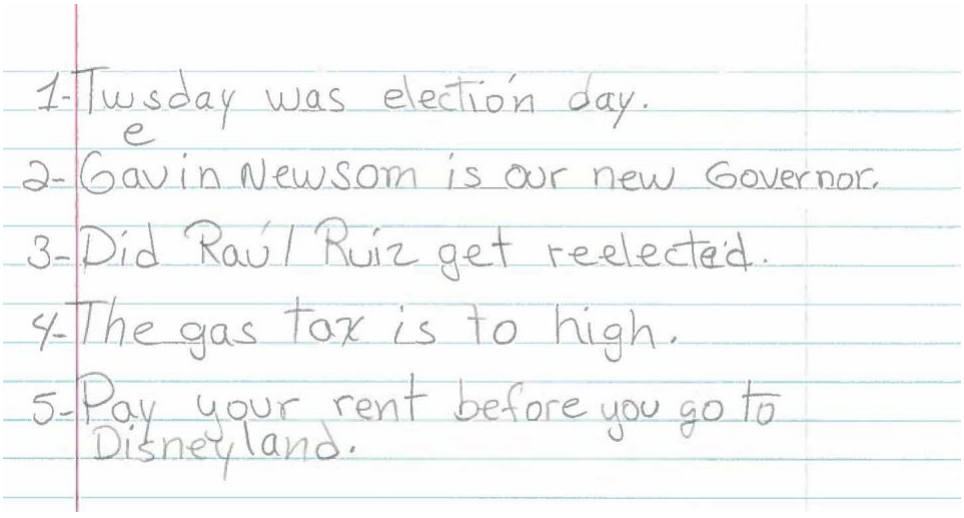
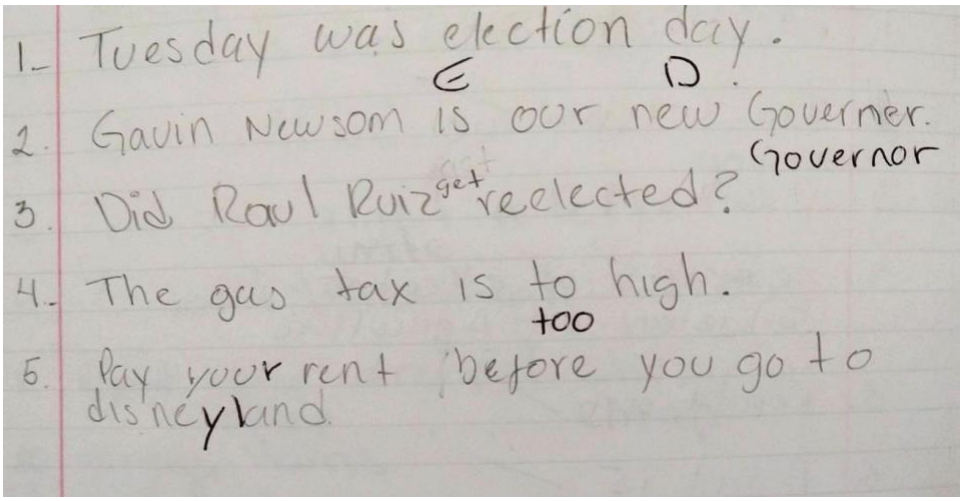
Axel finishes the story by telling us how he told his mother, "I am not going to throw my life away like her," his sister. He says he tells his mother, "Imagine all that she could have had, not me, I came here to have a better life." Axel ends by saying he has no complaints, that he is fine, that he's not a millionaire but he has enough to move forward, to help brothers in Mexico that are getting older. Axel wanted to make sure I would tell you (yes you!), that he doesn't want to complain about *his* country, that his country is beautiful, *but* there aren't many job opportunities for the elderly. He admires the U.S. for giving opportunities for work to people at *any* age, at 60 years old, even 70 years old. The opportunity to work until you die (til death do

you part). Though the story begins with the practice of performative othering, it ends with the practice of performative belonging; after all, there is nothing more American than working until you die.

Dictation, *in English*

After their presentations, students return to their desks, Mr. Rollins resumes his place at the front of the classroom and holds it until the end of class. He dictates a couple of sentences for students to write in their notebooks. This practice models the naturalization interview where an agent dictates the sentence for the applicant to write. Maria shows the group her journal.

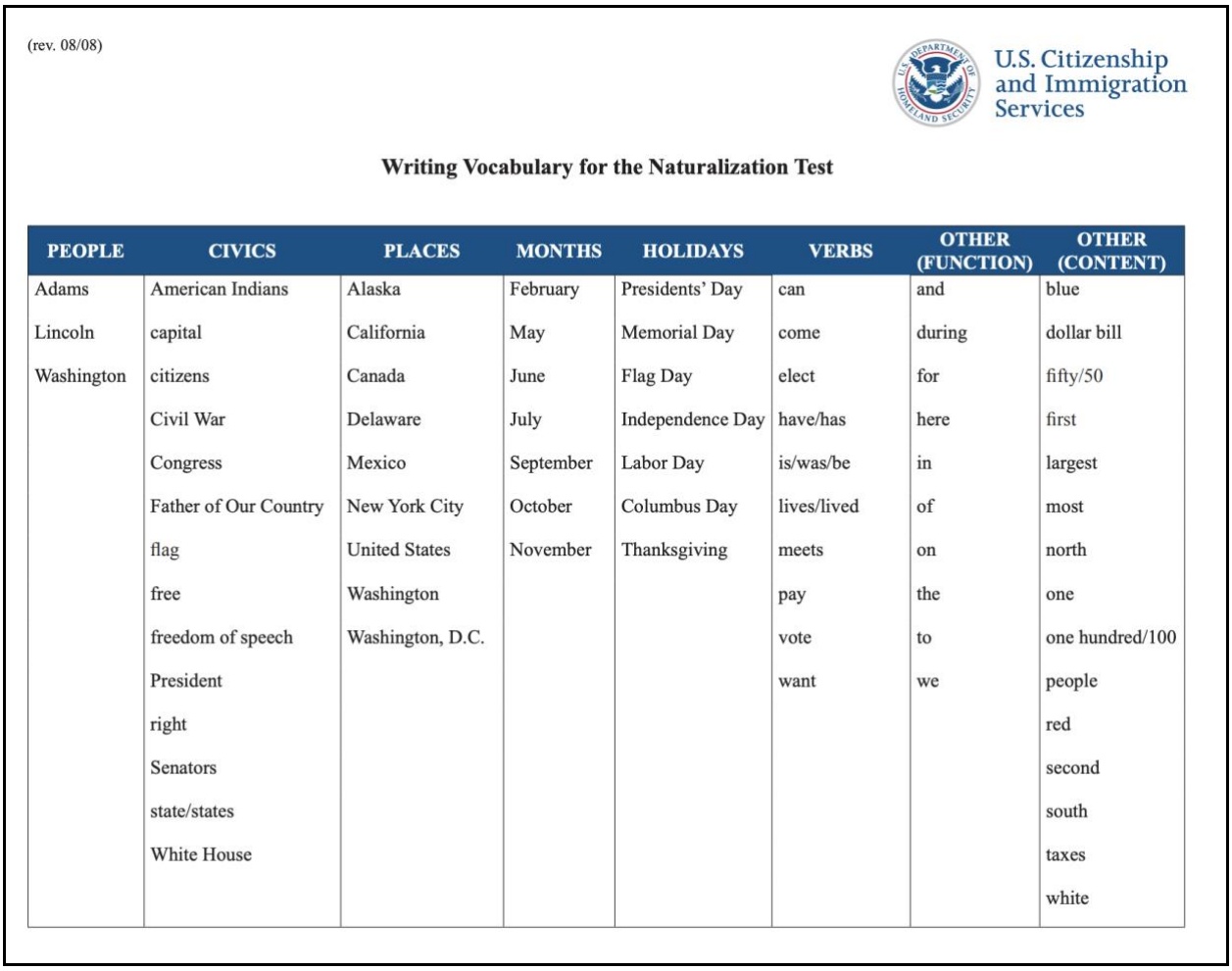
Table 5 Ideological Dictations

Student	Notebook Entry
Maria	
Karla	

In the notebook excerpts in Table 3, we see Mr. Rollins dictate five sentences for students to write; the last one reads, “Pay your rent before you go to Disneyland.” Immediately, I thought, “huh,” so I looked up the list of words from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services half

expecting to find that Disneyland made the list, perhaps under "places" or maybe "other content" but no (see Table 4). Mr. Rollins positions Disneyland as a commodified, deferred reward, only for those that are working until they die and have responsibly saved up the money to visit Disneyland. The sentence encourages students to be consumers but also criticizes/others/demonizes those that defy the very social construct of a responsible, moral citizen by going to Disneyland before paying their rent. Juxtaposed against, "The gas tax is too high," these two dictations are for those who have paid their rent, then drive their car to Disneyland to rightfully complain about the gas tax because they are responsible people who saved for Disneyland and pay their taxes, unlike others.

Figure 1 Writing Vocabulary for the Naturalization Test



(rev. 08/08)

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Writing Vocabulary for the Naturalization Test

PEOPLE	CIVICS	PLACES	MONTHS	HOLIDAYS	VERBS	OTHER (FUNCTION)	OTHER (CONTENT)
Adams	American Indians	Alaska	February	Presidents' Day	can	and	blue
Lincoln	capital	California	May	Memorial Day	come	during	dollar bill
Washington	citizens	Canada	June	Flag Day	elect	for	fifty/50
	Civil War	Delaware	July	Independence Day	have/has	here	first
	Congress	Mexico	September	Labor Day	is/was/be	in	largest
	Father of Our Country	New York City	October	Columbus Day	lives/lived	of	most
	flag	United States	November	Thanksgiving	meets	on	north
	free	Washington			pay	the	one
	freedom of speech	Washington, D.C.			vote	to	one hundred/100
	President				want	we	people
	right						red
	Senators						second
	state/states						south
	White House						taxes
							white

100 Questions, *in English*

After the dictations, students flip to a new page in their notebooks for a "pop quiz" to close out their day. Mr. Rollins writes five questions on the board from the U.S. civics test, and students answer them quietly. Afterwards, the class goes over the answers together. Mr. Rollins calls on multiple students for the answer (as there can be multiple predetermined, accepted answers). Each student checks their responses and fills in the blanks they left in their notebook. Axel adds that if there is still time, pairs of students will take turns asking the other the question.

Axel rolls his eyes and then smiles to say that one student will act as the immigration agent asking the questions to the other student, and then they switch; at the end of each practice, the "agent" says, "pass!"

In Table 5, the first column has the civics questions which were written on the board for students to answer. The second column shows the possible correct answers to the civics question, as listed in the study guide. Although the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services "is aware that there may be additional correct answers to the 100 civics questions, applicants are encouraged to respond to the civics questions using the answers provided below," meaning applicants should refrain from being critical or cheeky.

Table 6 Pop Quiz and Its Limitations

Question from Civics Test	Possible Correct Answers
1) What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?	▪ vote ▪join a political party ▪ help with a campaign ▪ join a civic group ▪ join a community group ▪ give an elected official your opinion on an issue ▪ call Senators and Representatives ▪ publicly support or oppose an issue or policy ▪ run for office ▪ write to a newspaper
2) What happened at the Constitutional Convention?	▪ The Constitution was written. ▪ The Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution
3) What was one important thing that Abraham Lincoln did?	▪ freed the slaves (Emancipation Proclamation) ▪ saved (or preserved) the Union ▪ led the United States during the Civil War
4) What did Martin Luther King, Jr. do?	▪ fought for civil rights ▪ worked for equality for all Americans
5) Where is the Statue of Liberty?	▪ New York (Harbor) ▪ Liberty Island [Also acceptable are New Jersey, near New York City, and on the Hudson (River)]

With "What happened at the Constitutional Convention?" and "Where is the Statue of Liberty?" the possible answers are simply different ways of saying the same thing. The sheer number of possible responses to "What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?" shows the investment in promoting an imagined sense of belonging *in* democracy. With "What was one important thing that Abraham Lincoln did?" and "What did Martin Luther King, Jr. do?" we see how the structures in place set by the state, and the ideologies at work, minimize spaces for critical thinking—*and isn't that the point*. There is no public space to engage in radical possibilities within these predetermined answers. The rote, repetitive nature of the civics

exams acts as intended, by minimizing any possibility to question them *or to question anything*. Take this excerpt from the group interview where the students discuss what they liked learning about as it relates to the civics exam:

> **Karla**: Para mí fue esclavitud
> **Linda**: Mhmm
> **Karla**: Cómo fue ese tiempo y cómo los presidentes intentaron acabar con él y cómo tomó tanto tiempo
> **Linda**: Mhmm
> **Maria**: Gran parte de la clase fue interesante para mí. Bueno, yo, sinceramente, me gustó todo. Me gustó lo que hizo Abraham Lincoln y lo que hizo Martin Luther King y bueno, lo que acabas de decir-
> **Axel**: -Terminando con la esclavitud.
> **Maria**: Sí, terminando con la esclavitud, diciendo que todos somos iguales, y el derecho también el derecho a la libre expresión, todo eso, todo, todo fue interesante.

They all agree that the end of slavery was their favorite. Maria shares that she liked what Abraham Lincoln did, and she liked what Martin Luther King Jr. did and "the end of slavery, saying we are all equal, we all have rights, freedom of expression." Everyone agrees with Maria, Karla adds that she couldn't believe how long it took to end slavery, and how the presidents tried.

Here we see how students understand history as guided by what individuals do — Abraham Lincoln freed the enslaved, not the collective, not the enslaved freeing themselves. This could be attributed to how the exam treats these large, complicated movements as being led by one person demarcated by the one-person answer. The limitations of the civics exam, and by nature, the class, minimize critical thinking. Here, the "absence of history is not only how ignorance becomes normalized but also how the absence of critical thought allows us to forget that we are moral subjects capable of changing the world around us" whereby we end up reinscribing notions of white supremacy (Giroux, 2021, p.170). There is no space to acknowledge and affirm human beings as historical subjects capable of understanding and changing the world and instead, the class closes spaces of transition and erases the notion that human subjects are capable of understanding and changing the world.

Reflecting on this practice, I asked students where the questions come *from*? Axel answers very matter of fact that the questions come from the immigration agent. Linda interrupts him to say,

> **Linda le dice a Axel**: Pero ella está preguntando de dónde vienen las preguntas.
> El gobierno tiene su examen de ciudadanía
> Sobre la historia de los Estados Unidos, el gobierno
> **-Maria**: Como quien era el presidente, que hacía Martin Luther King
> **Linda**: La oficina de inmigración, esa es la prueba para todos, ellos hacen la prueba. Esa prueba, bueno, es la prueba, como dice una ley, esa prueba tiene que ser así, en esa ley.

Linda corrects Axel to say that I am asking where the questions come from, not who administers the questions. Linda says the questions come from the government; Linda says the government has *their* exam on citizenship. The exam belongs to *them*, not to anyone else, and certainly not to Linda or her friends from the class or even the teacher of the class; *it's not ours*. Linda and Maria go on to list the topics covered: the history of the United States, the government, who is the president, and of course, what did Martin Luther King Jr. do. Even here, Linda clarifies that although it's *their* test, *everyone* has to take the test. Linda goes on to say, *"*That test, well, it's the test, like a law says so, that test needs to be that way, it's the law."

Linda and her friends certainly do not question the law. Karla, in line with this logic, with deference to the law, explains,

> **Karla**: Bueno, eso responde bien a tu pregunta, las preguntas vienen de la historia de los Estados Unidos y bueno, yo creo, bueno, es un privilegio estar aquí, para mí es un privilegio estar en este país.
> **Linda**: Mhmm
> **Karla**: Y entonces lo mínimo que puedo hacer es aprender
> **Axel**: Sí, para aprender - para adaptarse a los Estados Unidos. ¿Por qué vendrías aquí y te quedarías en el mismo lugar? ¿Por qué vendrías a este país si no vas a avanzar al menos un poco en este país?
> **Linda**: Mhmm
> **María**: Sí, es porque para eso venimos aquí

Karla concludes that the questions come from the history of the U.S., and she goes on to explain that it's a privilege to be here, to be in this country— to which Linda nods vigorously— and well, the least she can do is learn. Axel interrupts Karla, he says, "Of course to learn, to adapt to the United States, why would someone come here and just stay in the same place, not advance even just a little bit?" Maria agrees, she says, "Well, yes that is why *we* come here." Again, Linda nods vigorously. Everyone agrees that the least they can do is *learn how to be*.

And then, the conversation delves into another segment of performative othering,

> **Axel**: -Yo si vivo un poco, ahogado, pero es lo que hagas una vez que llegas aquí, aproveches o no las oportunidades. ¿Ayuda del gobierno? Llevo aquí 31 años y nunca le he pedido ayuda al gobierno.
> **Linda**: Mhmm
> **Axel**: He pagado por todo lo que tengo. Me he enfermado, y eso sale de mi trabajo. Sabía que con el tiempo, estas cosas sí afectan a las personas.
> **Karla**: Mmmm eso es cierto

Axel explains that he struggles a bit, that sometimes he is *drowning*, but that it's all about taking advantage of opportunities. He says he has been here 31 years, and he has never asked the government for help, that he's paid for everything that he has. After all, "Why come to this country if you are not going to advance a little bit*,"* Axel says. And with that, the conversation delves into an anti-Black discussion on government help. Linda says,

> **Linda**: Una cosa voy a decir, la gente que trabaja todos los días desde las 6 a.m. o digamos como mi esposo que trabaja desde las 4 a.m. hasta las 6 p.m. y todos los años

paga impuestos para que otras personas puedan obtener estampillas. Eso no me parece justo y–
Linda: Umm no sé, tal vez no debería decir
Karla: De lo
Linda: Trump, los conservadores, pues yo creo que los demócratas apoyan más al pobre, pero yo creo que aquí no debería haber gente pobre porque siempre hay trabajo, pero mucha gente no quiere trabajar, porque al no trabajar califican para médico, califican para estampilla, para ellos es más fácil de esa manera.
Y creo que eso es lo que Trump estaba diciendo, no era tan mal presidente porque llevó al país a mover más el dinero. Mis impuestos no deberían pagar por eso.

Maria: Pero fíjate que aunque pase eso te digo una cosa, encontraron que la persona que más ayuda pide, el más mantenido, son los estadounidenses. Son los americanos.
Axel: Y los morenos
Karla: ¿Entonces estás diciendo que eso es lo que Trump estaba tratando de arreglar?
Linda: Si
Axel: -Pero Linda, él nunca pagó sus impuestos tampoco ¿entonces? Se imagina son *millions and millions of dollars*, supuestamente tenía y pagó 600 o algo así en impuestos por todos sus millones, esa fue su declaración!
Linda: Pues a mí si me toca pagar impuestos.

Linda begins by saying that people work every day—like her husband who works from 4:00 AM to 6:00 PM—and pay their taxes only so that *other* people can get [food] stamps, well, "It's just not fair." Linda hesitates, unsure if she should bring politics into the conversation even though she already has, Karla eggs her on, and Linda finishes her thought,

Linda: Trump, the conservatives, well I think Democrats support more the poor person, but I think that there shouldn't be poor people here because there is always work, but lots of people do not want to work because by not working, they qualify for medical, they qualify for stamps, to them it's easier that way.

Linda, embodying the most insidious of neoliberal ideologies, adds, "My taxes shouldn't pay for *that*," taking ownership over the most American thing, taxes.
Linda's friends push back in two ways:

Maria: But see here, even though that happens, I'll tell you one thing, they found that the person who asks for the most help is, the one who is most taken care of, if we want to say it that way, is Americans. It's the Americans.

While acknowledging that some people do take advantage, Maria is emphasizing that the white people are the ones who take *the most*. But Axel quickly interrupts Maria to add that in addition to white people, Black people also take advantage.

-**Axel**: y los morenos

Though Axel's comment, "y los morenos" could be framed in the context of a darker-skinned person of Latinx descent, he is indeed referring to Black people. While wealth certainty does not trickle down, these insidious ideologies do. Axel, and everyone, reproduce the logics of the Moynihan Report, of the Coleman Report, of everything - the materiality of anti-Blackness and racial capital, the instantiation of citizenship against Blackness, well documented by Fraser & Gordon (1994). The anti-Black logic shown here extends beyond this conversation. Eight of the ten people interviewed at this site indicated dislike towards people who receive government assistance, completely unprompted as if to indicate that they - unlike Others - have worked hard for their place here. As Taylor (2016) has shown, antipathy towards those who receive government assistance reflects anti-Blackness, as well as embrace of a neoliberal ideology. And thus, we see the goals of the class manifesting in real-time, the dreams of the welfare-to-work reformers, the dreams of the teacher who had them write out, "Pay your rent before you go to Disneyland." The dreams of the government who made the exam, and the dreams of Republicans and Democrats alike as students become neoliberal citizens.

The group doesn't discuss the fact that white people take the most or the myths of the Moynihan Report because, Karla, shocked that Maria just outed herself as a Trump supporter, asks, "And so you think that's what Trump was trying to fix?" Karla doesn't get her answer. Axel interrupts, pointing out to Linda that Trump never paid his taxes either, that he only paid something like $600 on all of his millions,

> **Axel**: Se imagina son *millions and millions of dollars*, supuestamente tenía y pagó 600 o algo así en impuestos por todos sus millones, esa fue su declaración!

Axel code-switches to English to emphasize "millions and millions of dollars" because that level of wealth could only *be* described in English. Linda laughs, waves her hand, and says, "Well I do have to pay *my* taxes," as if that amount of wealth excuses Trump, but not her, and certainly not the *others* who take government help.

The conversation between these friends here, the potentiality of discussing something at length, does *something*. Could it have changed Linda's mind about Trump, probably not. Could it have exposed the insidious nature of neoliberal ideologies, also no. However, the conversation here goes beyond any performative practice from the class. I believe it could have gone further had there been just a little bit of room in the class, though certainly not in *English only*. The classroom practices reduce literacy to functionality, reducing people and students to workers, *to work every day until they die*.

Discussion

Taken together, the highly structured rules of order embedded in the classroom practices perpetuate reductive ideologies around othering and belonging. By modeling the standardization of the naturalization interview, the classroom itself reduces literacy and English to reductive notions of functionality: to the writing of one sentence, to the reading of one sentence, and to the memorization of henceforth agreed upon facts. Preparing for the test lends itself to preparing to become a particular kind of citizen that doesn't question anything in the same way that students in the controlled ESL citizenship classroom are positioned to not question anything.
Dear reader, if you've made it this far, I leave you with this:

For Maria, Linda, Axel, Karla, and Gabriel, becoming American tasks them with reconciling an always-yet-not-quite aspiration of *value* towards belonging into this imagined and

storied framework of American citizenship. Maria and Gabriel come to class without the need or intention of becoming naturalized citizens, but rather, to learn and to dream, and to move from one step to the next (in the case of Gabriel, the practical steps needed to become a direct, yet small actor within the militarized state). And yet, they too are tasked with dancing with and against the state's *realized* dreams of economizing life. And through this very class, the state takes whom they perceive as poor, illiterate immigrants and teaches them what it is they need so they can work until they die.

Literacy comes to be defined through reductive notions of functionality and instantiated through policies and practices of English only. Citizenship comes to be defined as an English speaker that contributes to the economy- and doesn't ask too many questions. Literacy, language, and citizenship all become tools intricately entangled in this indoctrination process. There is something harrowing and devious about how these places become sites of indoctrination. Through the ESL citizenship classroom in southern California, we see how these ideologies travel—as they always have—across time and into the present. At the end of class, Mr. Rollins reminds students to practice English in the home: speak to your children *in English*, watch television *in English,* be *in English.* Like others before him, he reminds students to listen to the civics test CD in the car, on their way to work, and on their way home —and to practice out loud.

> *capitalist economy, capitalist economy, capitalist economy…*
> *the Louisiana Territory, the Louisiana Territory, the Louisiana Territory…*
> *provide protection (police), provide protection (police), provide protection (police)…*
> *freed the slaves, freed the slaves, freed the slaves…*
> *we the people, we the people, we the people…*

Though Mr. Rollins controls the classroom, these practices bleed beyond the classroom. And yet there is hope in what could exist beyond these ideologies, beyond these stories of value. The people pictured here know these places are not made for them – Maria, Linda, Axel, Karla, and Gabriel all say it is *their* laws, *their* test, *their* country. And even as they perform belonging, this knowing is always present. And yet, performative othering becomes a way to aspire toward – though never quite attain – belonging, even with the title of U.S. citizen. They are living in *their* [new Empire's] origin stories, in the production of value for settler-colonists. Performative belonging, and thus, too, performative othering, comes through these ideologies; it is how the performed behaviors come to be. Where racial capitalism is predicated on the Other, the Black subject, the welfare recipient, through which citizenship can be defined, through which democracy, justice, and freedom come to be defined against.

And yet, people deviate from these values – in the way they talk back to these values – and these deviations bring with them different possibilities. The way neoliberal subjects retain their own stories and make new stories. The way the students laugh at English only, the way they critique the excess wealth of the U.S., the way they point to how white people take the most, especially Trump. In this, we could, at the very least, situate the classroom practices and the ideologies therein as political. We could name how they are articulated through hierarchies of power. We could make visible the ways in which the state attempts to minimize space for critical thinking. We could teach differently. We could see differently. We could view literacy as a set of practices that function to empower or disempower people. We could kill literacy's associations to functionality (as many have tried) and move towards more expansive

possibilities. Moving towards a political theory of learning, we can perhaps begin to interrogate this notion of value, and maybe we can render it obsolete. Maybe we can live outside these origin stories – those stories that legitimized the colonization of indigenous peoples, those stories that legitimized genocide, and those stories that legitimized the enslavement of Black people – those stories and their founding fictions that made this state apparatus and everything thereafter possible. Maybe too, there is space for different possibilities, for different dreams, dreams that are not tethered to value—dreams that exist outside of working until you die. Maybe we could dream new dreams, imaginatively and capaciously, together.

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"That still happens now teacher": Unraveling the now-logics of slavery in ESL citizenship classrooms

Mrs. Evans[15]:"Zhang Wei, may I ask you a question?"
Zhang Wei: "Yes teacher."
Mrs. Evans: "What is one reason colonists came to America?"
Zhang Wei: "Freedom."
Mrs. Evans: "Yes."
Mrs. Evans: "What is the economic system of the U.S.?"
Zhang Wei: "Freedom."
Mrs. Evans: "No, for this question you can say kap-i-tl-ist ih-kon-uh-mee."
"Or you can say mahr-kit ih-kon-uh-mee. Let's practice this question again."

-Field note from ESL citizenship class on October 20, 2021

The scripted call-and-response format of the ESL citizenship class, exemplified by Mrs. Evans and Zhang Wei, undermines critical thinking by reducing complex concepts like freedom and the capitalist economy to rote memorization. This memorization, in turn, reveals the central tension addressed in this article: the official function of the course and its potential to shape views of citizenship that align with and reinforce nationalistic and capitalist ideologies. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "The purpose of the civics test is to ensure that applicants for naturalization have a *basic understanding* of U.S. history and government and an *attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution*[16]" (*Preparing for the Naturalization Test*, n.d., p. 2). While USCIS does not purport to foster a critical analysis of U.S. history, my study reveals that by constraining ESL citizenship teachers to teach to the scripted U.S. civics test, this naturalization process socializes students through a sanitized version of history, rather than a *basic understanding* of history, so that they can develop an *attachment to the U.S. Constitution*. Although teachers have some degree of freedom to alter the course, the exam itself significantly constraints this possibility. As shown by the exchange between Mrs. Evans and Zhang Wei, the structures of the USCIS test provides students little opportunity to develop a *basic understanding* that capitalism is not merely the economic system of the U.S., but integral to the racial fabric of the U.S.

Fostering critical thinking is essential for analyzing and understanding the complex structures of racial capitalism. Through this process, students could see how racial identities and inequities are constructed and maintained by capitalist systems under the guise of freedom. However, the all-too-common sanitizing of history in this classroom—omitting the horrors of slavery and its foundational connection to racial capitalism—in educational settings more broadly undermines the very possibility of thinking critically. I argue that this form of critical thinking is actually fundamental to a robust citizenry and an engaged citizen.

[15] All names are pseudonyms.
[16] Emphasis added.

I draw from Sylvia Wynter (1992) who conceptualizes master myths as the dominant narratives—the stories—reinforcing the beliefs, values, and ideologies set by the dominant group that serve as the foundation of our social structures and institutions to advance my analysis. Similar to the ways in which the standards and curricula of K-12 schools protect master myths, the nature of the naturalization interview and the classroom goals of those in the study constrain the possibilities of what can be taught and attempt to shape a particular kind of citizen. Consider that during the naturalization interview, prospective citizens must demonstrate that they can (1) speak, write, and read in English proficiently; and (2) pass an oral civics test in English (USA GOV, 2019). These two requirements act as federal "standards" for ESL citizenship classrooms. I argue that the first standard models the decontextualized, rote, mechanical teaching of English. The second standard also models the mechanics of the first but privileges a nationalist notion of history. While this empirical project also builds on those naturalization requirements, it focuses on the specific curriculum used and how that curriculum maps onto the desired "moral character" of new citizens. In doing so, the following analysis interrogates the additional naturalization requirements (3) "An applicant for naturalization must show that he or she has been, and continues to be, a person of good moral character," and (4) "An applicant for naturalization must show that he or she has been and continues to be a person attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States and well-disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States during the statutorily prescribed period (*Citizenship and Naturalization | USCIS*, 2020). I contend that these naturalization requirements perpetuate a narrow and mechanical view of language and civics education, which limits the possibilities of an expansive literacy education.

The findings from this empirical study have implications for the type of citizen that schooling attempts to create and how master myths function to socialize prospective citizens by promoting a sanitized and uncritical understanding of U.S. history that aligns with nationalistic ideals. This study examines two key questions: (1) How does the teaching of history map onto the creation of the ideal citizen? and, (2) What linkages, if any, bind history to the ideals of "good moral character"?

Drawing from a larger study I conducted that includes archival research, and interviews with students from an ESL citizenship class in southern California, this paper is based on yearlong participant observations, interviews, and cultural artifacts in the forms of classroom handouts with students from an ESL citizenship class in the Bay Area, located in Northern California. This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, unlike most ESL citizenship classrooms, especially those in rural areas with one, if any, computer per household, this classroom was able to transition to Zoom. Several students preferred this format because they could Zoom in from their second or third jobs, on which they depended to survive and support their families. They listened to the lesson as they picked up Door Dash orders or delivered Amazon packages.

If we return to the interaction between Mrs. Evans and Zhang Wei, Zhang Wei's guess of 'freedom' reflects how many of the prescribed answers to the civics questions for the naturalization test include the word 'freedom.' The concept of 'freedom' is emphasized repeatedly in the teaching materials and curriculum. I argue that teaching to the U.S. civics test comes to protect the state's master myths by promoting the guise of freedom for the benefit of capital (Táíwò, 2022). The emphasis on 'freedom' in educational content as the right answer and as an ideology, as seen in Zhang Wei's responses, underscores how this narrative is perpetuated. In the development and implementation of teaching standards, a variety of actors, including

governmental bodies, educational institutions, textbook publishers, and other stakeholders, play significant roles. These entities collectively shape the curriculum and the content that is taught in classrooms through what Táíwò (2022) calls elite capture, a process where the interests of the powerful dominate and dictate the direction of policy to maintain their power. In the context of ESL citizenship classrooms, these influences converge in the form of the U.S. History and Civics Naturalization test, which reinforces these distorted understandings of history.

Structure of the paper

To illustrate the limitations and possibilities in ESL citizenship classrooms, this paper analyzes a representative lesson covering the period from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement that was designed to prepare students to answer questions on the U.S. civics test. However, the analysis will show multiple missed opportunities to present a more expansive understanding of history and opportunities to develop a kind of critical thinking important to civic learning and reasoning (NAEd, 2021). Instead, we see how the space of critical thinking collapses, as well as its connection to fostering "good moral character." Here I define critical thinking based on Paulo Freire's notion of problem-posing education: an active, dialogic process where students and teachers question the status quo to effect change in their immediate lives (Freire, 1998, 2000). I also draw from Carmen Kynard (2013) who conceptualizes teaching as an activist rhetorical education, as moving beyond skills-based curricula and toward centering "the ideological investigations of language and simultaneous interrogations of speaking, reading, writing, and designing texts" (2013, p. 7. Such literacy encourages students to understand the socio-political contexts of their education and become active participants in their learning and their communities.

This empirical study shows how the way history is taught serves to advance the good moral character of the individual by distorting the character of the U.S. I begin by discussing citizenship education through: (1) the historical context and implications of Americanization in ESL citizenship classrooms, and (2) how formalizing one language and one history in schooling closes the space for translation. I then introduce my theoretical guide by drawing from Sylvia Wynter's (1992) cultural model approach to discuss the aforementioned lesson. I show how the distorted teaching of slavery and racial capitalism bolsters our master myths and folds into what a good moral citizen should be and the imagined freedom we have all consented to on (racial) capitalism's terms of the order. This consent is manufactured through the deep-seated internalization of hegemonic ideologies, in part through schooling, that reproduce the dominant narratives that obscure racial capitalism (Gramsci, 1971). Racial capitalism, the thread throughout this paper, draws from Sylvia Wynter's (1971) analysis of plantation logic to understand how these oppressive histories persist from chattel slavery into our modern economic system and fold into our foundational structures through our current economic and social policies, including education.

Content overview: Empirical insights and theoretical possibilities

There's something at stake in the way we teach. The empirical findings for this study are organized into two parts, one is empirical and the other is conceptual. In part 1, I empirically examine the lesson on slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement drawn from the larger study to show how the curriculum model aligned with the U.S. civics test frames the institution of slavery as an isolated historical event, rather than tying it to ongoing logics of exploitation. Like in K-12 settings, ESL citizenship classes can act as indoctrinating spaces

where students learn origin stories of the United States that fail to discuss the violent colonization of Indigenous peoples, enslavement, and state-sponsored racial, gender, and other forms of discrimination. In part 2, this article addresses the conceptualization and re-imagining dimension. I conceptually show how the politics of education—who, how, and what we teach and to what ends—determine correctives to re-imagine how we live and interact together. Because ESL citizenship classrooms can also be places of imagining, I re-imagine the ESL citizenship classroom as a site of counter narrative by showing how we can tell stories that break away from these prescribed orders. This approach aligns with social design experiments, which seek to transform educational practices through iterative, participatory methods that challenge existing power structures (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010).

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Historical Context and Implications of Americanization in ESL Citizenship Classrooms

This empirical study provides a window into how language instruction contains elements of indoctrination geared toward immigrants who are typically entering low-wage or entry-level jobs (Carlson, 1970; Hartmann, 1948). 'Indoctrination' refers to the process of teaching conformity to dominant social norms such as immersion in a consumerist-oriented culture (Sokolik, 2007) and aspiring to achieve the 'American Dream'—all themes in ESL course materials (Griswold, 2010; Vafai, 2014).

This orientation has a long history. After World War I, nativist fears and suspicions against immigrants manifested in policymakers demanding 'Americanization' for unnaturalized immigrants. In 1918, legislation permitted the Federal Bureau of Naturalization to develop and implement citizenship classes, and the American School Citizenship League created a History Committee to examine how history should be taught to better enhance citizenship (King, 2002). This is similar to the contemporary outcry against Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K-12 classrooms under the guise of modifying curriculum by minimizing discussion of racism and systemic racism (Gutzmann, 2021; Kelly, 2023; Morgan, 2022).

The legacy of the Americanization Movement continues to influence adult education and frames the learning of English as part of an assimilationist project (Leonardo & Vafai, 2016;

Vafai, 2015). In In line with its legacy, the pedagogy remains 'grammar-based' or 'communicative'—despite the strides made in teaching language acquisition. The teaching of English through the ESL curriculum is often utilitarian and targeted, offered to better prepare students for low-wage work. This aligns with the 'autonomous model' of literacy where literacy education often focuses on technical skills detached from students' social contexts and critical engagement (Street, 1984).

Agenda-driven language instruction

The research conducted in noncredit ESL classes, though limited, shows that the end goal of language instruction contains elements of indoctrination geared toward low-skill newcomer immigrants (Carlson, 1970; Hartmann, 1948). Vafai (2015) examines the Integrated Education and Training (IET) program, a method of English language instruction that integrates career readiness and workforce skills, to show how English is primarily valued for enhancing employment opportunities. Vafai emphasizes that this constrains student aspirations whereby, "The deployment of such narratives in social interaction frames students' opportunities to build identities as neoliberal subjects" (p. 131). Leonardo & Vafai (2016) too find elements of the Americanization movement in adult education as "vehicles for socio-economic and political socialization" in the creation of a citizen/worker subject with certain "desirable" qualities (p. 613).

This job-oriented curriculum is all too common in adult ESL classrooms. Emerick et al.'s (2020) study explores an ESL adult classroom intended for Spanish speakers working in the restaurant industry. This classroom attempts to incorporate a translanguaging pedagogy into the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). Unlike other assimilatory spaces of adult education, this classroom explicitly privileges the knowledge and language practices of its students. Félix (2013) also describes how citizenship classrooms can foster a sense of community through native language use. The classroom itself becomes a counternarrative, where students develop an oppositional rather than assimilative relationship to citizenship underscoring the value of native language use. And yet, Emerick et al. finds that despite the classroom's translanguaging CSP curriculum, it remained complicit with a "neoliberal educational agenda" that prepares them for low-skilled work. This classroom, like many others, could not transcend the overarching neoliberal implications of centering learning for work.

The value placed by the state on English monolingualism is a function of language ideologies. For example, Park's (2021) study shows us how language ideologies become a process of world-making for recent-arrival immigrant youth in high school. By following youth across their content-area and ESL classes and foregrounding the theory of figured worlds, Park captures how students position themselves and understand the possibilities and constraints of their worlds. Students shared the value of native language use in their ESL classroom and how that opened a space of counter discourses where they could deconstruct deficit-oriented language ideologies that they faced in English-only classroom spaces. Through this study, we see how language ideologies shape a sense of belonging and emphasize the importance of developing curricula whereby students can "critique colonialist, racialized discourses on language and education, seeing discourses and knowledge as socially constructed and ideologically motivated" (Park, 2021, p. 210).

However, standardized assessments often limit the rich, diverse potential of language and literacy practices that are essential for cultivating belonging and citizenship, particularly for students from nondominant backgrounds. The educational arm of the state uses high stakes

testing to pathologize students and shape complacent citizens. Bach (2020) examines how standardized testing shapes language and literacy instruction for high school-aged emergent bilinguals near the U.S. Mexico border. Testing structures, in the form of online language and literacy programs, are used to improve reading levels, reduce student learning and monitor the compliance of students and teachers alike. When neoliberal market-based reforms guide the teaching of language and literacy, the testing structures put into place "promote disengaged, passive, and disempowered models of citizenship and constrain the learning that can happen through diverse reading and writing practices" (Bach, 2020, p. 256). Bach reminds us that mandatory testing regimes take away from the expansive possibilities of language and literacy that could cultivate a sense of belonging and citizenship for nondominant students.

One Language, One History

As discussed in an earlier article titled "Trapped in our origin stories: Interrogating the ideologies of ESL citizenship classrooms," I use the term neoliberal citizen to name the ways aspiring citizens are created to serve the economic interests of the state. Civic discourse succumbed to the language of commercialization, privatization, and deregulation whereby "citizenship is portrayed as an utterly privatized affair that produces self-interested individuals" (Giroux, 2002, p. 425). Without this public sphere, folks cannot challenge the neoliberal myth of citizens as consumers (Giroux, 2003). Time and time again, the scholarly literature extols that citizenship education should bring us closer to democracy by "educat[ing] the members of a social group to imagine their social belonging and exercise their participation as democratic citizens" (Levinson, 2005, p. 337). This vision emphasizes the role of education in fostering inclusivity and active civic engagement among all community members. And yet, schools distort this vision by creating a common language and narrative of the history of the United States with school curricula and instruction acting as forms of assimilation (Brayboy et al., 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). In this way, schools set the terms of order for political participation and belonging. With a mandated, standardized curriculum, the role of the teacher is reduced to classroom manager, where pedagogical practices are reduced to a market-based conception of the learner as a consumer of information (Giroux, 1999). Teachers are working under more whereby neoliberal policies demand more constraints and surveillance under the guise of accountability (Apple, 2001).

By formalizing one language and one history, schooling closes the space of translation—the very space of translation that purports to be present in multicultural imaginaries. To address the conflation of schools, teaching, and curriculum, I draw from Anderson and Scott (2012) who highlight the importance of intersectionality in understanding the complex, layered interactions of these various factors that contribute to causality in social processes. They call this the meso space, situated between the micro (individual) and macro (institutional) levels, to allow for a nuanced exploration of complexities in educational contexts. Na'ilah Suad Nasir et al. (2016) focus on the sociopolitical contexts influencing teaching practices. They describe how policies, community norms, and the broader socio-political climate significantly impact classroom dynamics, with these influences converging at the meso level where policy implementation and teaching realities meet. These levels are social constructs; they do not exist independently of one another but are mutually constitutive. This layered analysis underscores the importance of how teachers navigate and negotiate these influences in their daily practices, which shapes the curriculum.

When the teaching and learning of language relies on traditional conventions, errors, correctness, and language fluency (mode of native speaker), teaching fails to contextualize language and literacy and the broader understanding of language as a cultural tool. By extension, when sanitizing history, teaching fails to embed history within structures of power and reinscribes white supremacy. This has material consequences for nondominant students whereby "dominant discourses of assimilation and integration presuppose certain 'desirable' social characteristics, the prerequisites of political participation, which may or may not be deemed educable (Levinson, 2005, p. 335)." By fostering assimilation over a sense of belonging, there is no space to affirm human beings as historical subjects capable of understanding and changing the world (Giroux, 2021). Instead, educators should draw on the historical context and emergent critical understandings of language to rethink how we perceive the role of language and the education of emergent bilinguals ((Villegas et al., 2021). With the right tools, learners can challenge the social order of their everyday lives (Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

Theoretical guide

As my analysis will show, schooling generally, and ESL citizenship classrooms specifically, relies on a politics of rehabilitation, which is a limited form of inclusion that works with economic, racial, and gendered exclusion. As previously mentioned, I draw from Sylvia Wynter who conceptualizes master myth as the beliefs, values, and ideologies that serve as the foundation of our social structures and institutions. These dominant narratives, master myths, establish hierarchical power structures that maintain the status quo at the expense of nondominant peoples. Textbooks, for example, impose a narrative that uplifts the U.S. state as a "nation of immigrants" rather than one of racial and cultural domination (Wynter, 1992). Sylvia Wynter's essay, *How Textbooks Perpetuate Racism*, (1990) uses a cultural model approach to challenge the validity of the teaching of history through long-established, incomplete canons. This approach names the "prescriptive rules" and "specific cultural rationality" that function as an ideology to produce distortions in curriculum, the very distortions that "contribute to the crisis in our schools and society" (p. 4). By applying Wynter's framework, my study aims to show how these master myths and ideological distortions shape the content of ESL citizenship classrooms.

History textbooks, used in ESL classrooms, like *America Will Be*, depict the United States as culturally pluralistic and inclusive, rather than attending to the racial and cultural hierarchies embedded into U.S. social fabric. By centering the European immigrant origin story rather than that of racial and cultural domination, textbooks violently conscript Black Americans into a false narrative. The erasing and rewriting of the historical experiences of Black Americans is another violence. This erasure marginalizes the centrality of the "inherited baggage" that the slaves of African descent brought with them "on the slave ships across the Middle Passage to the syncretic and emerging world culture of the Americas" (Wynter, 1990, p. 6).

By focusing on pluralism through the processes of immigration, textbooks obscure the shaping of Empire that happens outside of immigration, which is the hellish materiality of conquest, displacement, and enslavement. This pattern of master myths is evident in the data, where curriculum in ESL classrooms presents a sanitized narrative of inclusion and progress instead of the histories of racial violence and systemic oppression. This observation aligns with Wynter's critique and emphasizes the need for a more accurate and inclusive representation of history in educational resources.

The sanitizing, misrepresenting, and distorting of history is a function of ideology, as evidenced in my data through the analysis of ESL classroom materials. The teaching of idealized

history aligns the interests of immigrant and middle-class Americans on the same "public language knowledge." By utilizing Paul Ricoeur's notion of ideology as a public language system, Wynter explains how ideology functions to reinforce how the U.S. imagines itself as a nation and represents the Euro-Immigrant American historical continuum as rigidly encompassing immigrant and non-immigrant experiences. By situating my findings within the context of Wynter's and Ricoeur's theories, I can demonstrate how the curriculum materials analyzed in my study reinforce these dominant ideological constructs. For prospective citizens learning the public language knowledge—along with a new language and their new Empire's origin stories—history becomes a tool in creating new citizens of good moral character.

In classrooms, as Carter G. Woodson argued (1990), the rules of social interactions are set by those in the "master role" to influence the kinds of conversations that can take place (as cited in Táíwò, 2022). This dynamic is further illustrated by Assata Shakur (1987) when she alludes to what Freire (1970) calls the banking model of education:

> The usual way that people are taught to think in amerika is that each subject is in a little compartment and has no relation to any other subject. For the most part, we receive fragments of unrelated knowledge, and our education follows no logical format or pattern. It is exactly this kind of education that produces people who don't have the ability to think for themselves and who are easily manipulated. (p. 35)

In this frame, subjects have no relation to each other, no relation to power or world orders, and people lack a sense of relation to one another. This isolation, a friend to extractive capitalism, bleeds education dry, preventing nondominant students who are uniquely positioned to see exploitation in their lives from connecting it to broader power structures. However, as Freire reminds us, there are ways to exit this model through emancipatory spaces, or more currently understood as "fugitive" spaces, where critical and transformative pedagogies thrive. These spaces resist the compartmentalization and fragmentation of knowledge from praxis, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Gutiérrez, 2008).
Stuart Hall et al. (1996) conceptualizes ideology as social systems where people "make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (p. 26). Ideologies shape and situate students as learners in a local context and that perceived proficiency allows learners to become recognized as competent participants in a community (Philip et al., 2018). I draw on Hall's notion of ideology to help unpack the ways in which the ESL curriculum ideologically leans towards nationalism and how this ideological leaning potentially influences students' perspectives on a variety of issues.

Ideology serves as a unit of analysis to understand how the ESL curriculum leans towards nationalism and potentially reinforcing anti-Black ideologies in an effort to shape notions of good moral character. Ideology is contested, subject to struggle and negotiation, and constantly changing. This fluidity means that ideologies can shift, and the public language knowledge can shift, too—as we talk, learn, and interact—we build the world together (Táíwò, 2022). Wynter and McKittrick (2015) remind us that we express and come to know who we are through storytelling, and while this very storying capacity has been used by those in power to uphold a dominant world order, radical storytelling can subvert this. Through an analysis of a lesson on slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement, this study shows how we can tell stories that break away from these prescribed orders. Yet, this paper also grapples with Assata

Shakur's (1987) framing of education as inevitably being a tool of oppression, highlighting the tension between emancipatory and oppressive educational practices.

> The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them. Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free. Schools in amerika are interested in brainwashing people with amerikanism, giving them a little bit of education, and training them in skills needed to fill the positions the capitalist system requires. As long as we expect amerika's school to educate us, we will remain ignorant. (p. 181)

ESL citizenship classes reflect the society that created them. These classes prepare students to pass the U.S. civics test, a test that paints figures like Abraham Lincoln as [our] true hero. And all of this is paired with the high stakes of gaining U.S. citizenship. This paper holds this very contradiction: I do not attempt to reconcile the contradiction between schooling and society but rather think alongside its praxis and make room to tell different stories. From a sociocultural view, ideology is a mediational tool and thus is both enabling and constraining. And while these are powerful hegemonic ideologies, recognizing these contradictions and constraints allows us to challenge and expand on the narratives presented within ESL classrooms. This could foster critical consciousness and alternative ways of knowing. Perhaps by understanding the ways in which ideology is weaponized, and by gaining knowledge of social order, its myths, and its lies, we can move towards more expansive pedagogies.

In what follows, I introduce the context and the people in this study, situating their experiences within the theoretical frameworks discussed here. I contextualize their stories and hope to tell new stories. Drawing on Stuart Hall's conceptualization of ideology and Sylvia Wynter's notion of master myths, I show how the curriculum sanitizes racial capitalism to reinforce master myths. Doing so shapes notions of good moral character and an *attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution*.

Design and Methods

This transition from theory to the study highlights how ideological constructs provide a critical framing for understanding the real-world implications within ESL citizenship classrooms. I turn to an analysis of how these dynamics play out in ESL citizenship classrooms. I briefly present the course, its context, and its participants to help situate these practices. Becoming a citizen and helping students navigate that process, including passing the citizenship tests, is consequential; the stakes are very high. Any effort to support the students toward that goal is laudable, as it often provides openings to previously unattainable opportunities and may help others in the family secure their status in this country as well.

At the same time, we must ask: to what opportunities are they being prepared? To what notions of citizenship are they being socialized? Through an examination of the course content and classroom interactions, we can explore how the curriculum not only aims to impart knowledge for passing the citizenship test but also subtly inculcates specific ideological perspectives through master myths. These perspectives shape students' understandings of citizenship and their roles within society. This analysis will reveal the dual nature of the curriculum—the way it perpetuates existing social hierarchies and ideologies but also its potential to open up other possibilities.

Context

Setting. The ESL citizenship class is in a Bay Area urban city. This city was a former industrial hub, but at the time of this research, those manufacturing jobs were rare, and many families now live in poverty. The median household income was approximately $45,000. According to the 2020 Census, the city was racially diverse, with 17.8% of the city identified as White, 17.1% identified as Black, 14.6% identified as Asian, and 48.0% Hispanic or Latino of any race (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The ESL citizenship class partnered with a local school district to administer the class, holding classes at a local high school. Most of the students are of Latin American origin, primarily from Mexico, and a small minority of the class is from China and Pakistan. Students work in the service sector such as hotels, restaurants, and gig work.

Teacher. Mrs. Evans is highly respected by her students, as evidenced by interviews in which they describe her as always prepared, patient, and kind. Mrs. Evans designs packets of worksheets for each Monday and Wednesday class based on the lesson and shares them with students at the beginning of the week like clockwork. While these worksheets support individualized, rote learning, they are also reviewed in class and used to lead classroom discussions. Mrs. Evans designs her own worksheets and continuously modifies them based on what she believes works and doesn't work. She does not enforce an English-only policy and welcomes students to talk in their native language, especially to help another student. This is very useful for student learning and fosters a supportive classroom community. She never forces students to talk in English before they are ready, always asks students if they want to participate when she calls on them and encourages them to say "pass" if they just are not feeling up to it that day. For example, she says, "pass is a polite way of saying I don't want to do it." Mrs. Evans believes in adult education and advocates for its funding at school district meetings; she encourages her students to participate in the ways they *are allowed to* and to vote after becoming citizens. Mrs. Evans is a committed teacher. Her dedication and advocacy for adult education, along with her supportive teaching methods has a positive impact on her students.

Description of Class and its Routine Practices. The class met every Monday and Wednesday from 6:30 PM to 8:00 PM. The lesson frequently goes past 8:00 PM, sometimes until 8:45 PM. She stays after class to work with students and shares her personal phone number to practice with students once they receive a naturalization interview date. The class begins with pleasantries: hellos, how-was-your-days, how-are-the-kids, and have-you-gotten-your-date. The core group of the class, those who attend regularly, genuinely know each other, and they show up for each other. The class then transitions to more banal chit-chat like how-was-work or how-is-the-weather, the kind of chit-chat a naturalization officer would use on the day of an applicant interview to gauge, measure, and assess how good someone's English *really* is. Mrs. Evans prepares students for that kind of chit-chat. Each class is guided by the worksheet Mrs. Evans sent to students at the beginning of the week. On Mondays, Mrs. Evans prepares a lesson that addresses the questions of the U.S. Civics Test. The Civics Test—composed of 100 questions in areas of American government, American history, and integrated civics—asks aspiring citizens about: the principles of American democracy, systems of government, rights, and responsibilities [of mainly citizens], colonial period and independence, the 1800s, recent American history and other important historical information, geography, symbols, and holidays (*Civics Questions for the Naturalization Test,* 2021). On Wednesdays, the class pulls out their 20-page printed N-400 citizenship application (though applications are now submitted online) and fills out a section of the N-400 application together. The N-400 application asks aspiring citizens about their: basic

personal information, physical attributes, family history, relationship history, military service, trips aboard, residential history, employment and educational history, income tax obligations, personal ethics, affiliation with, or memberships, in certain organizations, and questions about legal issues. Mrs. Evans explains the meaning of each of these sections by designing a thematic lesson based on the N-400 questions themselves such as:

> "Where else have you worked in the past five years?"
> "Have you ever been associated with or a member of the Communist Party, the Nazi Party, or a terrorist organization?"
> "Do you support the U.S. Constitution and the U.S. government?"

Because an immigration agent will go through the N-400 application with the prospective citizen and ask them some of the questions on the date of the interview, the class practices their personal answers. Mrs. Evans would always look out for her students and give them game, tips on how to perform in front of the officer: she would encourage them to share how they are involved with their church or children's school, and if they didn't have time for volunteering, Mrs. Evans would encourage students to explain how hard they work at their jobs, to say how many jobs they work and how they support themselves and their families on these jobs. Mrs. Evans' praxis of giving game is an intimate way of knowing and striving with her students.

After the lesson of the day, the class goes into Zoom breakout rooms to rehearse the U.S. civics test. As a participant observer, I would facilitate one of those breakout rooms. I would assume the role of a naturalization officer and ask students questions from the U.S. Civics and history test. If there was time afterward, we would talk about their children, the places they would like to go, and what happens once they become citizens. Like Mrs. Evans, I shared my phone number to practice with students in this way once they got their naturalization interview date. I practiced with seven of the students from the class, four of whom became focal students in the study.

Description of Students. Most of the class is women, only about 20% are men. There are about 15–20 students chiming into each session, 12 of whom are regulars. Students in the class represent a variety of languages; mainly Spanish, and Arabic and Chinese. The class usually sticks to the script in English. When someone is notified of their interview or passes their interview the class breaks into their native language asking a series of questions related to their concerns and expressing their support. There are three women who speak Arabic among each other, usually helping the newest classmate. The husband of one woman likes to chime in the class to answer U.S. civics test questions like it's a game show. The men of the class listen quietly and earnestly. One man's wife unmutes to ask logistical questions, "Has anyone gotten their interview yet?" and "How long does it usually take after you put in the application" and "If he doesn't pass, do we need to pay again?" ESL citizenship students learn about the class from their children's school, church, or friends. Because the class is funded by the local school district, the class is completely free to all participants. However, this also means that recording attendance is particularly important to justify the class. To the occasional annoyance of the class, Mrs. Evans meticulously records attendance. If a student arrives late, Mrs. Evans stops the lesson to record their arrival, because it's Zoom, there is a loud ding as someone enters the class. Following the ding, Mrs. Evans asks, "who just came in?" and the students fumble a bit unmuting and connecting to the audio to say their name.

Focal students. In this study, I focused on a particular set of students to better understand their experiences in the ESL citizenship class and their naturalization process. These students were selected based on the rapport I established with them and their regular attendance in the classroom. This allowed for consistent follow-up on what they shared in class and their thoughts about what they learned over the yearlong course. I interviewed these students for my project and assisted each of them in studying for the naturalization exam.

1. Sofia's Zoom screens into her dining room, she sits in front of white walls on what looks like a glass table. She and her husband immigrated to the U.S. from South America, and they are both engineers. Sofia says she followed her husband to the U.S. because he got an engineering job, but she misses her country. She wants to become a citizen so that she can leave the U.S. for longer spans of time. Unlike her husband, her English is not as "perfect" as her Spanish, she says starting over in this way is an indescribable pain, she says she feels small. She paints beautiful landscapes, like oceans and forests, and the paintings decorate her home outside of the Zoom screen. Sofia is a perfectionist, she wanted to practice for her naturalization interview every day. Sofia was the first person to become a U.S. citizen in the class.

2. Miranda's Zoom screens into her parked sedan as she waits for her daughter to get out of swim class. The screen grew darker and later grew brighter with the sun as the time passed. Her husband is a cook at a Mexican restaurant, and she is a waitress at the same restaurant. She loves being close to her husband. Miranda has been meaning to become a U.S. citizen, and with her children getting older, she finally found the time. Miranda wants the security that comes with being a citizen. She is the only student who vocalizes that she wants to vote. Miranda was the second person to become a U.S. citizen in the class. When she passed her naturalization interview and came back to class to share her experience, she shared that she wished the class had been taught how to make sense of the state ballot propositions.

3. Elena's Zoom screens into her 1980s-inspired wall-to-wall wood-paneled bedroom. She sits at a desk with countless notebooks she uses to practice. She immigrated from Mexico. She works at a motel as a housekeeper, and a housekeeper supervisor. Her motel was just sold to a larger company and she's unsure of her future there. She worries that the big company will do what all big companies do so she works as a housekeeper at another motel to keep "two horses" in the race. Elena has energy all the time. Elena says she speaks Spanish at all her jobs, so her English is just "good," not "great." To others' annoyance, Elena participates the most in class, and folks in the class tease her about how much space she takes up. Elena retorts back quickly, saying *they* should be more assertive. Elena was the third person to pass her naturalization interview. She says she feels lighter. She wants to seek citizenship for her daughter. She wants to fix her daughter's undocumented status in this country.

4. Lucia's Zoom screen is usually off. Occasionally she'll turn it on, and you'll see her kitchen table decorated with a vintage wooden set displaying the good China. Other times she sits over her bed folding clothes. Lucia emigrated from South America. Lucia has two small children, and she wants to communicate with their teachers, especially as they get

older. Lucia was the last person to pass her naturalization interview before the summer break. The whole class rallied behind her. Lucia is excited to visit her home country for the entire span of her children's summer vacation without worrying about not being allowed back into the United States.

These focal students provided a valuable lens through which to examine how the curriculum's ideological leanings towards nationalism and the emphasis on passing the U.S. civics test shape students' notions of good moral character.

Organization of "Findings"

The "findings" of this study are organized into two parts: empirical and conceptual. Part 1 critically analyzes a representative lesson covering the period from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement to show how history is taught to advance the good moral character of the individual by distorting the moral character of the U.S. By employing the analytical frame advanced by Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, I highlight how this lesson falls short due to the structural limitations and ideological constraints of the U.S. civics test. Part 1 is anchored by the teacher's Zoom screen and the ensuing class discussion, revealing how history is taught and how that teaching potentially shapes students' ideologies.

The lesson captured via Zoom screen aims to reflect the eeriness of indoctrinating prospective citizens and the dystopian methods used to perpetuate myths. While Mrs. Evans aimed to provide a comprehensive historical education, my analysis reveals that the curriculum inadvertently contributes to this ideological shaping. By interspersing worksheets from other lessons, we see the continuities and fractures in creating docile and unquestioning state subjects. This is supported by evidence from class interactions; by sanitizing racial capitalism, students do not have the tools to ask critical questions or see how they can participate in social movements against power. Leveraging new theoretical insights and literature, Part 2 demonstrates how we can reimagine educational spaces to foster a citizenship that is critically engaged and challenges dominant narratives.

Dear reader, by moving away from the usual three-headered findings, I tell a story. Part 1 describes the stories—the myths— that ESL citizenship students learn in the classroom, but Part 2 tells other stories, and gestures towards other possibilities to imagine what might have transpired had the curriculum been, at minimum, contextualized and, at best, more expansive. Part 2 is as much about method making as it is conceptual, method making in how we can think with ordinary people and consider how literacy is as much about emancipation as it is about epistemology. Here, Part 2 answers the call of social design experiments (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010), proposing new ways to engage with educational practices that are transformative and rooted in critical pedagogy.

The worksheet's content is deeply disturbing and unsettling to me; it features cartoon drawings that depict the brutality of the auction block and the terror of lynching. The sentences accompanying the worksheets are passive to the point of dehumanization. This material is challenging with which to engage. I include this material to confront this discomfort collectively—to unravel the myths together—and to seriously consider the implications of employing such educational materials to educate prospective citizens. We must consider how these myths are employed not only to instruct new immigrants but also routinely used in K–12 spaces.

When I point to the way Mrs. Evans's lesson falls short, I am really highlighting the structural limitations and ideological constraints under which she is working. The curriculum positions Mrs. Evans as a clerk of the system, constrained by the requirements of the U.S. civics test.

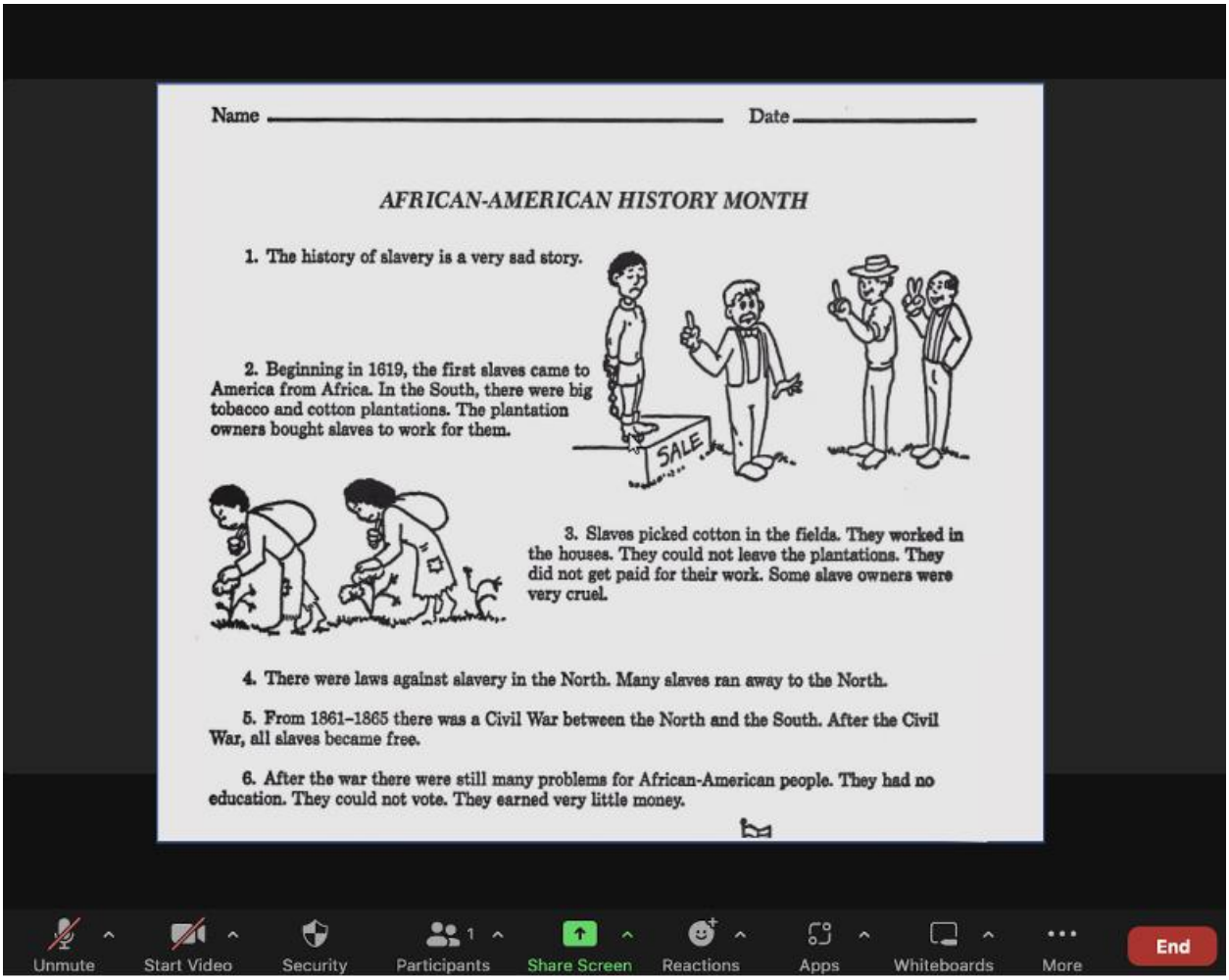
Part 1: Empirical Insights into Master Myths in the Indoctrination Process

Racial Capitalism: "A man selling a man"

Though the term "racial capitalism" is never used, the ensuing discussion teaches ESL citizenship students about slavery as a transactional process. The analysis of this lesson demonstrates how decontextualizing historical events can obscure deeper structural implications and perpetuate master myths. This occurs, in part, due to the constraining effects of the U.S. civics test, which limits the depth and complexity with which these topics can be explored.

Mrs. Evans begins the lesson, "This is the story for African American History Month." She fumbled a bit with the "share screen" feature of Zoom. She shared her screen showing the worksheet she sent to students earlier in the week. The lesson covers slavery, the Civil War, reconstruction, segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Figure 2 African-American History Month (continued), On Slavery



"So let's look at the pictures, what do we see?"
The whole class answers in unison, "slavery," with Elena's voice confidently booming over the others.
Mrs. Evans responds, "Yes. In this first picture, what do you see? How many people do you see?"
The whole class again answers in unison, "Four."
Mrs. Evans responds, "Yes, and what do you think this man is umm, what do you think this man is doing?"
Elena answers, "This man is selling a man."
Mrs. Evans circles her cursor over the man who is selling a man and responds, "Yes, this man, is selling this man, this is what is called the auction block. Mrs. Evans then circles her cursor over the pair of men, "If this man is selling, who are these men?"
Not as confidently as before, the class answers, "Buyers."
Mrs. Evans responds, "Yes, buyers at the auction block, so that the people buying people could see them. And what are these men saying?"
Elena answers, "One dollar, I think, two dollar."
To which Mrs. Evans responds, "Right, that is how an auction works." Elena, do you want to read number 1?"

Mrs. Evans frequently relies on the images accompanying the worksheets to begin the call-and-response portion of the class. When the topic turns to the auction block, the class falls awkwardly silent. This is unusual, as the students are typically neither silent nor shy about participating. But the class feels palpably uneasy about the auction block. They utter the word, "buyers" in hesitant unison and Mrs. Evans reassures them, "so that the people buying people could see them." Though the class is familiar with the broad strokes of slavery-emancipation-reconstruction-segregation-civil rights, the auction block is a relatively new concept. The class understands slavery as "a man selling a man," but the auction block concretizes this process, the class sees the seller, the buyers, and their bidding. Even though Mrs. Evans does not mention race, the class sees what McKittrick (2006) refers to as the "racial positionings" of the auctioneer—*so that the people buying people could see them*—the domination of the gaze through bodily evaluations and eventual exchange of money. And yet, the class misses the larger structural role of the auction block. The auction block naturalizes the relationship of white people buying Black people- *this man is selling a man.* In turn, this characterizes the radical decontextualization of the structural organizing myths that enabled the laws necessary to construct Black people as private property in the first place.

The class popcorns through the rest of the text displayed on the worksheet, pausing to carefully sound out words and practicing the cumbersome words in unison together.
Elena responds, "Yes teacher, the history of slavery is a very sad story."

"Good, thank you Elena, yes very sad story," says Mrs. Evans, "Susana, want to read number 2?"
"Yes teacher," says Susana, "Beginning in 1619, the first slaves came to America from Africa. In the South, there were big tobacco and cotton plantations. The plantation owners brought slaves to work for them."

The class pauses to sound out **plan·ta·tion**. The importance of learning English—the material stakes of performing English in just the right way for an immigration officer—forces the class to pause at all the wrong moments. Despite the privileging of pronunciation and grammar, Mrs. Evans does not point to the passive arrangement of sentences dancing dangerously throughout the lesson. The sentences are passively constructed—

> *the first slaves came to America from Africa,*
> *slaves picked cotton in the fields,*
> *they could not leave the plantation*
> *they had no education*
> *they could not vote—*

The construction of the sentences omits the role of slave traders, slave owners, administrators, politicians, and Empire effectively obscuring the centrality of *this* story to our larger story of Empire. By hiding behind passive voice and depersonalizing historical actors, the lesson ignores the systemic and deliberate processes that perpetuate slavery. The stories, the master myths, learned by ESL citizenship students situate slavery as a stand-alone event, *as a very sad story*, that is divorced from the social processes of domination and its relationship to capitalism— the organizing structures around us now. Pausing at these moments, too, could help ESL citizenship students understand that slavery is not merely an injustice of the past, but part of these ongoing structures of exploitation, and perhaps, they could see themselves within these very organizing structures.

With the auction block and the broader context of slavery folding into Empire's master myths, the Civil War bolsters these myths. Key historical events are often presented as mere facts to be memorized for the test. Without any meaningful pauses, Sergio agrees to read number five, "From 1861-1865 there was a Civil War between the North and the South." Mrs. Evans steps in to remind students about Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation— two key answers in the U.S. Civics Test for naturalization. Although the worksheet currently displayed on the Zoom screen doesn't detail Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, an earlier worksheet created by Mrs. Evans on April 27, 2022, shows how this topic remains decontextualized despite a more detailed exploration.

Table 7 Abraham Lincoln as the Hero

Fill in the blank exercise on Abraham Lincoln	Civics Exam Question
1. Lincoln was against slavery, but he wanted to preserve the union. 2. Lincoln wanted to end slavery gradually, not quickly, so the country would stay together. 3. Lincoln decided to free the slaves during the Civil War because the need to end slavery was then imminent . 4. The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in the states that had seceded from the U.S.to form the Confederacy.	What was one important thing that Abraham Lincoln did? Possible Prescribed Answers: ● Freed the slaves (Emancipation Proclamation) ● Saved (or preserved) the union ● Led the United States during the Civil War

Similar to the Civics Exam for Naturalization, Mrs. Evans's worksheet presents Abraham Lincoln as the central figure of the Civil War. Commonly in ESL citizenship curricula, Lincoln is depicted as the 'Heroic Emancipator' to model the Civics Exam. However, Mrs. Evans, in her progressive Bay Area class, portrays Lincoln as a strategist rather than falling into the narrative of the heroic emancipator. It's an opening, *the material can be more expansive*, and students can still answer the state's question. But, like most liberal, well-meaning progressive moves, it doesn't attest to power; it doesn't unravel the myths, and it doesn't show what this could all mean for collective action. This more nuanced understanding of Abraham Lincoln *still* ignores the collective struggle for freedom.

The tension here is that the class is doing exactly what it was designed to do—create particular kinds of citizens through an ahistorical, reductive approach that holds up autonomous forms of literacy and undermines critical engagement with U.S. history. My critique is that while Mrs. Evans tries to advance a more nuanced narrative, it ultimately perpetuates the same limitations by not addressing the broader context of racial capitalism and the ongoing struggles for freedom and justice.

ESL citizenship students learn—repeatedly—the master myth that Abraham Lincoln freed the enslaved. Consequently, students understand history as guided by what individuals do, not the collective, not the enslaved freeing themselves. W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized that the enslaved emancipated themselves through various means, including acts of resistance, rebellion, and work stoppages to rebel against the institution of slavery. By engaging in a general strike, the enslaved—the revolutionary proletariat—disrupted the labor force and functioning of the slave economy. The most significant, most massive strike culminated during the American Civil War when the enslaved freed themselves as the main actors in securing their own liberation (Berlin, 1996; Fields, 1990). And yet, ESL citizenship classes—and K–12 schools—across the country instill, drill even, the fiction of Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. Could it be that the possibilities of another general strike are that threatening to the moral character of a nation so steeped in exploitation? The limitations of the civics exam, and by nature, the class, minimizes critical thinking and reinscribes notions of white supremacy.

Once Mrs. Evans reminds students about Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, Sergio finishes reading from the worksheets that present a simplified view about the aftermath of the Civil War, "After the Civil War, all slaves became free." Mrs. Evans does not provide the ESL citizenship class with accurate information about the aftermath of the Civil War. Though Mrs. Evans does not pause to clarify that not all slaves became free after the Civil War, in another lesson from June 20, 2022, Mrs. Evans discusses Juneteenth. The Juneteenth lesson is indicative of Mrs. Evans' genuine effort to make the curriculum more expansive and move beyond patriotic narratives, as she expressed in this interview:

> "So I really try like I said. I try to represent the history in a more accurate way than the, you know, the citizenship test. It is, it's kind of the rah rah go America history that I learned in elementary school, you know. And I understand the importance of that, but I also feel like they deserve a little more nuance" (December 27, 2021).

Despite Mrs. Evans' intention to provide a more nuanced historical perspective, the simplified narratives presented in class indicate a gap between her goals and the curriculum's execution. This gap reflects the challenges educators face in balancing curricular requirements, as set by the U.S. civics test in this study, with the need for comprehensive historical education. These two

goals are often at odds with each other. Mrs. Evans is aware that this kind of nuanced education did not happen in her own schooling and is now trying to implement it in her classroom. She is also aware of the nationalistic learning of history set by the U.S. Civics test, but she is constrained by rigid curricular standards and external pressures.

The following table shows the class's reading on Juneteenth and the ensuing class discussion. As a reminder, students are expected to complete the worksheet before class. During class, Mrs. Evans fills out the answers to the worksheet on her shared Zoom screen in red and then shares the completed worksheet with students the day after class. By presenting these worksheets and class discussions, I aim to illustrate how the curriculum can perpetuate simplified and misleading historical narratives even as Mrs. Evans tries to do the opposite. Through a critical examination of the data, I show how such teaching practices impact students' understanding and engagement with history, highlighting the need for accurate educational materials.

Table 8 Juneteenth, "the day slavery really ended"

Class Reading	Class Discussion
 **Juneteenth, a Holiday about the End of Slavery** 1. Juneteenth is a holiday celebrated around the 19th of June in many U.S. states. 2. It is a holiday to celebrate June 19, 1865. 3. On that date, Union soldiers came to Galveston, Texas to announce that the Civil War was over and slavery had ended. 4. This was the day slavery really ended in the United States, two years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. 5. Juneteenth is now a national holiday.	Bonus Questions 1. Do you think the U.S. should pay reparations for slavery? Why or why not? No, because it's a complicated history. Since the 13th amendment ended slavery. Ratified = approved No, because all people are equal. It is in the past. The people lived in that time are the ones that should have gotten the money. 2. Do you think Juneteenth should be a national holiday? It's OK.

The class popcorns through the reading shown above and Mrs. Evans shows a YouTube video that explains the significance behind Juneteenth. Before watching the videos, Mrs. Evans reviewed the following vocabulary words that would appear in the YouTube videos: commemorate, legacy, inheritance, spirituals, sponsored, and reparations. The Juneteenth class addresses inaccuracies in the worksheet shown on the Zoom screen by explaining that slave owners deliberately suppressed news of freedom, that it took over two years for news of the Emancipation Proclamation to reach Texas. However, the stand-alone lesson on Juneteenth does not disentangle the web of master myths the class has already spun. The class does not question how earlier lessons – and lessons that will come after – mistakenly associate Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation with the sole cause for the end of slavery. Also, there is no discussion of the U.S. civics test for Naturalization in its privileging of these answers or why the U.S. civics test for Naturalization would be so keen on these very fictions—the curriculum is incapable of providing the mere possibility for such questions to be posited in the first place.

In the ensuing discussion on "Do you think that the U.S. should pay reparations for slavery? Why or why not?" The ideological underpinnings of the class show how learning about slavery in a decontextualized way shapes ESL citizenship students' ideologies. Because ESL citizenship students learn about slavery as a standalone event, they have little opportunity to see the ongoing implications and the "now-logics" of slavery that continue to manifest in modern forms of racial inequity. Consequently, this decontextualized teaching contributes to their skepticism towards reparations, making it more difficult for them to connect past atrocities to present-day disparities and the need for systemic redress.

> Mrs. Evans finishes reading from the screen and turns to the class, "What do you think?"
> "I think so, no. No teacher, because this history complicated, you know. And since the Thirteenth Amendment and the Constitution Convention was pass and ratif— it ended legal slavery in the United States
> — "Wow, wow, that's really good Elena," interrupted Mrs. Evans
> — "rat-rat-rat if," Elena struggles to say ratification from earlier in the sentence, Mrs. Evans helps her sound out the word, and the whole class joins in.
> Mrs. Evans adds, "Ratified means that all the states, yeah umm, approved, well might not have been all of the states, it just had to be more than…"
> Elena rereads her sentence with the correct pronunciation of ratify, "And since the Thirteenth Amendment and the Constitution Convention was pass and *ratified*, ended legal slavery in the United States."

Elena comes into view on the Zoom screen and reads what she wrote on her worksheet. Her answer is cold, mechanical, and flat. Aligning with the regurgitation of material similar to the call-and-response format of U.S. civics questions, Elena doesn't engage with the discussion Mrs. Evans is posing about Juneteenth. Elena's response exemplifies how the curriculum, with its focus on rote learning and standardized responses, can stifle critical engagement when Mrs. Evans designs for these discussions. She regurgitates phrases from the class, which are praised by the teacher. Mrs. Evans helps Elena sound out the syllables in **rat·i·fy** rather than pose a question about what the lesson on Juneteenth has taught us about the end of legal slavery. These very drills on pronunciation and memorization come to influence Elena's belief system—that legal slavery and its ensuing violence are in the past. While Elena correctly answers to the Constitutional Convention's role in establishing the procedures leading to the proposal and ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, which effectively ended legal slavery and involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime her response does not reflect any understanding about the broader and compounding effects of slavery.

In Elena's prepared remarks above, through her language we see how she believes in their [new] Empire's founding documents as inherently just, righteous, and virtuous even though the formation of the United States Constitution and its design of the three branches of government were heavily shaped to protect the interests of slaveholding states. Despite the many lessons on the Constitution and the three branches of government, no lesson addresses the intent behind the bicameral legislature. The Great Compromise of 1789 addressed the issue of representation by creating the Senate and the House of Representatives which efficiently secured the support of slaveholding and non-slaveholding states for a united federal government inscribed in the Constitution. The Senate would protect the interest of smaller, slaveholding states by granting them an equal number of senators regardless of their size in population. This

gave slaveholding states a significant voice in the federal government leading to problems of legislative imbalances and unequal representation. The historical protection for formally slaveholding states continues to influence the Electoral College as well. Because the Electoral College assigns a specific number of electors to each state, determined by the sum of its senators and representatives in Congress, like the Senate, this structure grants smaller states, regardless of their population size, a slightly disproportionate influence in the presidential election (C. Anderson, 2018). Mrs. Evans doesn't connect these dots; the stakes are too high and Mrs. Evans needs to cover the curriculum to ensure students are prepared for the U.S. civics test.

Mrs. Evans's focus on pronunciation and memorization reflects the pedagogical and systemic constraints within which she operates. Her focus on clear, factual explanations helps students meet the specific requirements of the U.S. civics test, which is a critical step toward their goal of citizenship. This pragmatic approach underscores the central tension in citizenship education: balancing the need to pass standardized tests with the opportunity to engage in deeper, more critical discussions about the underlying structures of American democracy. Given the stakes as high as obtaining citizenship, Mrs. Evans focuses on the immediate goal of passing the exam rather than waging an ideological insurrection, even as she yearns for something different. Thus, Mrs. Evans, instead responds:

> "Great Elena. Okay. Thank you, Elena. Anybody have a different idea? Did anybody write something different?"
> Lucia unmutes her Zoom mic, "Teacher, I think well no because all people are equal. All people are the same.
> And it pass, I mean in the past. No no, maybe people who lived in that time are the ones that should have gotten money. Yes.
> Mrs. Evans responds, "So we can't give it to people now because they died a long time ago uhm okay.

Like Elena, Lucia too speaks to the values of the Constitution; *We Are All Created Equal*. The notion that *people are the same* maps on to good moral character. According to Lucia, because slavery was *a long time ago*, and because *we are all the same*, reparations no longer apply. Lucia seems to argue that in the present day, conditions have changed, they've improved. Lucia, and others, perhaps unknowingly lean towards this brand of racist conservatism, that believes Black people should work harder, *like them*, for money.

These master myths get taken up in everyday ideologies. Maybe, too, master myths work as intended—they project capital and instantiate an ethic that does not account for the historical legacy of slavery and the ways it sustains everything around us. Like other marginalized groups, ESL citizenship students are keenly aware of the abundance of wealth around them—they *see* it and they *feel* it—and yet, even within this hypothetical class activity where they could account for the atrocities of slavery, where they could redistribute wealth, both Elena and Lucia refuse. These perspectives were confirmed in interviews, which confirmed that the students' in-class responses align with their personal views. In one-on-one interviews, Lucia says that slavery, "está en el pasado," and Elena says, "la historia de esclavitud es muy triste pero la constitución ya lo arregló, ya todos somos iguales." Lucia expressed that slavery is in the past and Elena expressed sadness with the history of slavery but believes that the constitutions fixed those injustices.

And yet, Mrs. Evans seems to yearn for something different—*did anybody write*

something different. Or perhaps, like many teachers striving for impartiality—for the myth of neutrality—Mrs. Evans aims to present both perspectives on an issue.

> Mrs. Evans, "so anybody else, anybody write something different. Does anyone have different ideas?"
> Edie unmutes, "Umm…"
> Mrs. Evans, encouragingly says, "Edie do you have something different?"
> Edie, "Umm, I'm thinking"
> Mrs. Evans, "That's good, there is no right answer!"
> Edie, "Umm teacher, I don't know."
> Mrs. Evans, "You know that's okay, keep thinking about it, it's not a simple question, it takes thought and learning so that's great. Okay, let's practice the vocabulary we learned."

There are openings in the class, openings that could take us somewhere different—*It takes thought and learning*. But rather than mediate, or even offer their own thoughts, Mrs. Evans chooses to move on to vocabulary. Elena interrupts,

> "Teacher, you skip question 2!"
> Mrs. Evans responds, "Oh yes, I forgot to take it out, I made the worksheet last year and Juneteenth is a holiday now."
> Elena answers, nonetheless, "Yeah it's okay."
> Mrs. Evans, "Anybody else?"
> Elena, "If the company pays (laughs), I take it off!"
> Mrs. Evans, "Yeah, it's not really a day off from work for everybody. I actually think it's good we have Juneteenth because I really didn't know about it, I was surprised. I think people don't know enough about that time, so I think if we have it people will learn more."

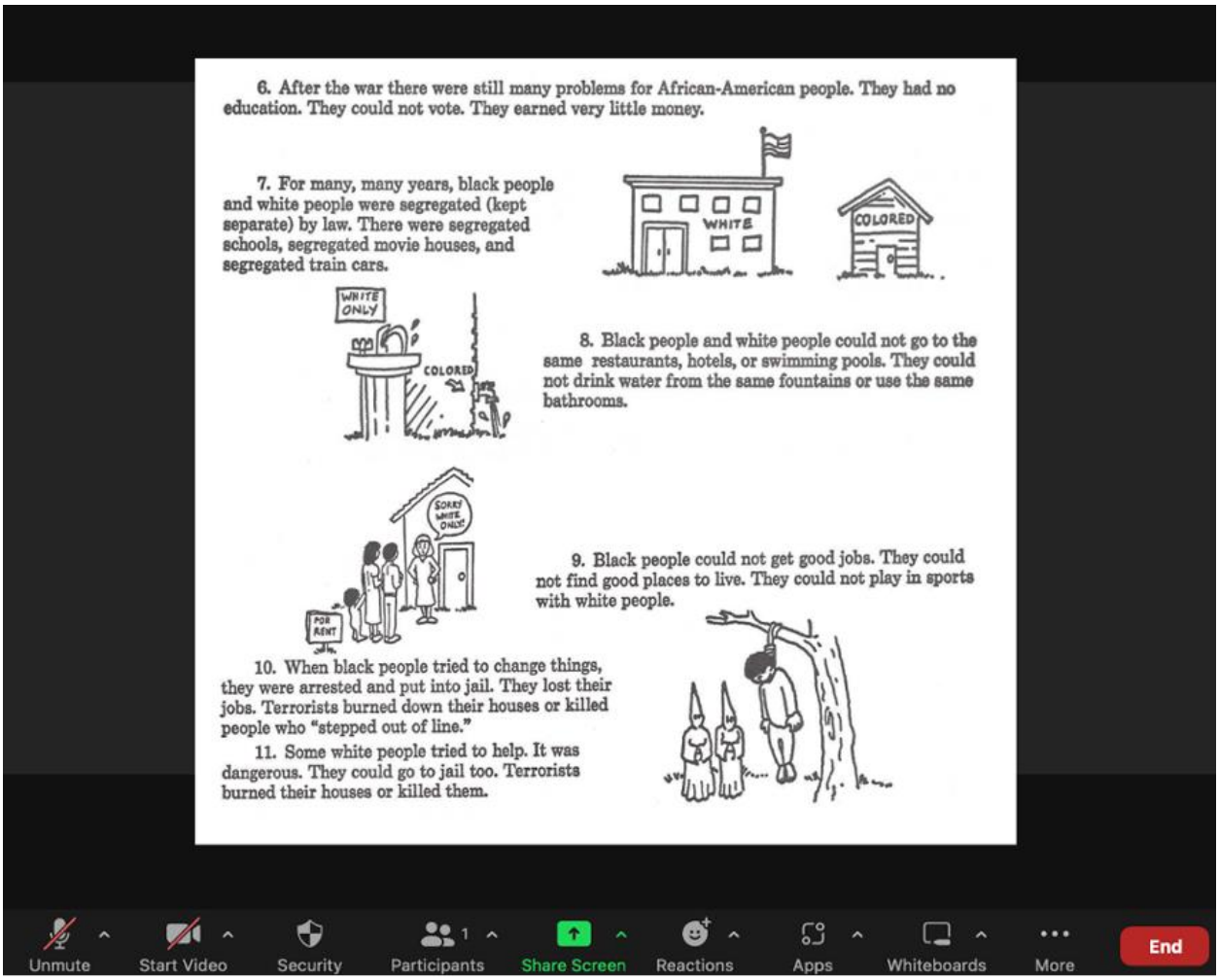
In this exchange, Juneteenth is subsumed into another national holiday, on par with the way we absorb differences rather than critically engage, but there is a missed opportunity for learning. And Mrs. Evans admits that she is doing that learning herself. And if Mrs. Evans can share her thoughts on Juneteenth as a holiday, she can also share thoughts on reparations, and present an alternative viewpoint to the class by perhaps drawing on her student's life experiences and understandings about excessive wealth. And maybe too there is a way to untangle the master myths throughout the lessons, not in a standalone Juneteenth lesson. And yet, by incorporating a lesson on Juneteenth, the class performs Bay Area progressivism by failing to effectively dismantle the myth that the Civil War conclusively ended all forms of slavery—*a long time ago*—and the way these logics continue to exist.

Although this lesson focuses on Juneteenth, it ultimately addresses the modern implications of slavery—what Sadiya Hartman (1997) refers to as the 'now time' of slavery. Hartman argues that the Emancipation Proclamation and the act of freeing the slaves represent a 'non-event,' as the underlying logic of slavery persists through time. The way this lesson structures discussions about Juneteenth underscores Hartman's point, often presenting slavery as a relic of the past, as if its underlying logics have ceased to exist.

Reconstruction: "You stay in the line we want you to stay in"

From "a man selling a man" to the fiction of "all slaves became free," Mrs. Evans, and the class transition, albeit quickly, to reconstruction, segregation, and briefly the Civil Rights Movement. By decontextualizing slavery from ongoing logics, students view slavery as an isolated historical event rather than part of a continuum of racial oppression. The following classroom discussion demonstrates how the post-Civil War narrative is presented in a way that oversimplifies and detaches the continuity of systemic oppression. This discussion hints at the logics of slavery that led into segregation and lynching, rooted in systemic disenfranchisement and racial terror.

Figure 3 African-American History Month (continued), On Reconstruction



Eva begins by reading number 6, "After the war, there were still many problems for African-American people. They had no education. They could not vote. They earned very little money." Mrs. Evans thanks Eva for their participation and briefly interrupts the popcorn reading:

> "Actually the Constitution says they could vote, but a lot of the states had ways of keeping them from voting. And so were they able to get an education?"
> To which the class responds, "No."

> Mrs. Evans adds, "Right it was very hard, most of the slaves who were then free, on the plantation, they did not give them an education or teach them how to read and write."

By referencing the founding documents, Mrs. Evans highlights the Constitution's failure to safeguard the rights of Black people. However, her approach addresses isolated issues rather than acknowledging the systemic institutional problems inherent in the Constitution itself (C. Anderson, 2018). Additionally, because this very class is centered on literacy education, there's a missed opportunity to explore the continuum between slavery to reconstruction where literacy bans persisted to historicize the content. U.S. education has always been a racial project, and education for Black people was "fiercely suppressed in an effort to exploit Black labor; first as an enslaved population and later as an underclass of workers stigmatized as former slaves" (Givens & Ison, p. 345, 2023). In large part through anti-literacy laws, American colonies and eventual states criminalized or restricted the teaching of literacy to enslaved and free African Americans fearing literacy would lead to rebellion (Givens & Ison, 2023). From American Independence to the 1820s, anti-Black sentiments across the country obstructed integrated education in the North and led to the total suppression of Black education in the South through formalized laws and policies to cement Black people in America's status as one of noncitizens (Span, 2005). The class misses the opportunity to delve deeper into the systemic denial of education to Black people, both during and after slavery, and the enduring impacts of these policies.

Mrs. Evans propels us several years later to the 20th century. In the following discussion, we see how ESL citizenship students start to see themselves in the curriculum by recognizing the persistence of racial segregation in education, they *see* how past injustices continue to manifest in contemporary society. She hovers her mouse over the image of the building with the words 'white,' "What's this picture over here?" The class answers together,

> "School."
> Mrs. Evans adds, "Yes, it looks like a fancy house, it has a flag so it's probably a government building too, it's a school and you can see that the schools are very different."
> Miranda reads number 7, "For many, many years, black people and white people were segregated, kept separate, by law."
> Miranda interrupts, "That still happen now teacher! It happen all the time."
> "Yeah, even though it's against the law," Mrs. Evans responds.

Like Mrs. Evans's earlier defense of the Constitution by pointing to the problematic states, Mrs. Evans alludes to the way in which bad things happen even though they are against the law. . Miranda pulls us into the present, "*that still happen now teacher*," Miranda speaks to the inequities between rich and poor schools and the way that difference bleeds into unequal schooling for white kids and black and brown kids, like *her* kid.

"*That still happen now teacher*," is an opening, an untangling of the myth, a connection to the 'now time' of slavery, an understanding of the way these logics have persisted through time in new ways.

Mrs. Evans doesn't pause for discussion and instead transitions by hovering her mouse over the people in pointed hoods, "And who are these people?"

The class answers, “Ku Klux Klan.”
Mrs. Evans adds, “Yes. this is called lynching, when people take somebody and execute that person, it’s a lynching ummuhhh. And actually, just today, a law was signed saying this is a federal hate crime, but it took this long for this to become law, so this is something. Roosevelt tried to pass a law and he couldn’t so there were people that really protected this activity. Miranda, do you want to read number 10?
“Yes, teacher. When Black people tried to change things, they were arrested and put into jail. They lost their jobs. Terrorists burned down their houses or killed people who stepped out of line."
Mrs. Evans adds, “The white people wanted African American people not to complain about all of this bad treatment like you read Miranda ‘stay in line,’ you stay in the line we want you to stay in. Lucia, want to read number 11?”
“Yes teacher, Some white people tried to help. It was dangerous. They could go to jail too. Terrorists burned their houses or killed them.”

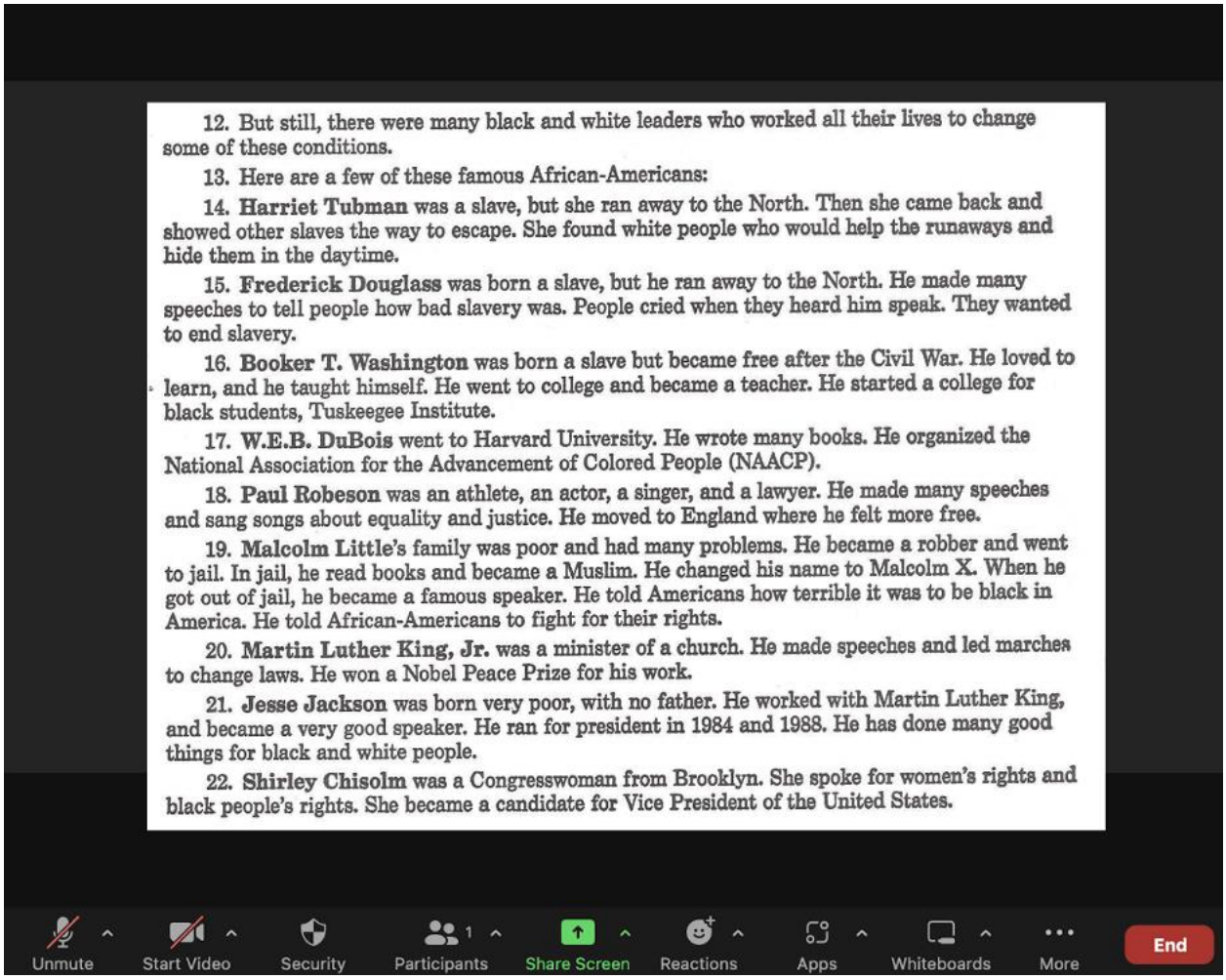
The carton lynching displayed in the Zoom worksheet trivializes the act of terror itself. The image is made more violent by depicting two people in pointed hoods and not the horde of “regular” whites partaking in the spectacle of lynching, a spectacle repeatedly displayed in mainstream newspapers as well as the longstanding consumption of lynching in the form of postcards (Raiford, 2009). Instead of contextualizing lynching as a spectacle for the horde of “regular” whites, the class neutralizes whiteness by pointing to the ways “some white people tried to help.” While it is important to acknowledge that some white people tried to help, and that this is also part of the history that is not often taught, this should not neutralize whiteness or overshadow the widespread societal complicity and support for racial violence as part of a systemic event.

Doing so, I argue, serves to obstruct the ways in which the act and consumption of lynching were meant to hold black communities in a subordinate place and “help imagine and construct a unified white American identity” (Raiford, 2009, p. 117). In locations of racial and sexual violence, like the auction block, lynching is entwined in human disempowerment and dispossession “wherein the body is not only marked as different, but this difference, precisely because it is entwined with domination, inscribes the multiple scales outside of the punished body itself” (McKittrick, p. 3, 2006). Understanding *this* would help complicate the soon-to-be citizen’s notion of belonging into the storied framework of American identity. This analysis reveals how the lesson obscures the complicity of wider white society in maintaining racial terror. This underscores the importance of a comprehensive and critical approach to history that includes the systemic and societal dimensions of racial violence, rather than reducing these events to isolated actions of the Ku Klux Klan.

Symbolic Lists

After rushing through racial terrorism and segregation, Mrs. Evans shares her screen again to end with famous African Americans. This classroom interaction highlights the superficial approach often taken when discussing “African-American history” in educational settings, where the complexities of racial terrorism and segregation are not fully explored, and a focus on prominent figures is used to conclude the lesson. This method can inadvertently simplify and distort historical narratives.

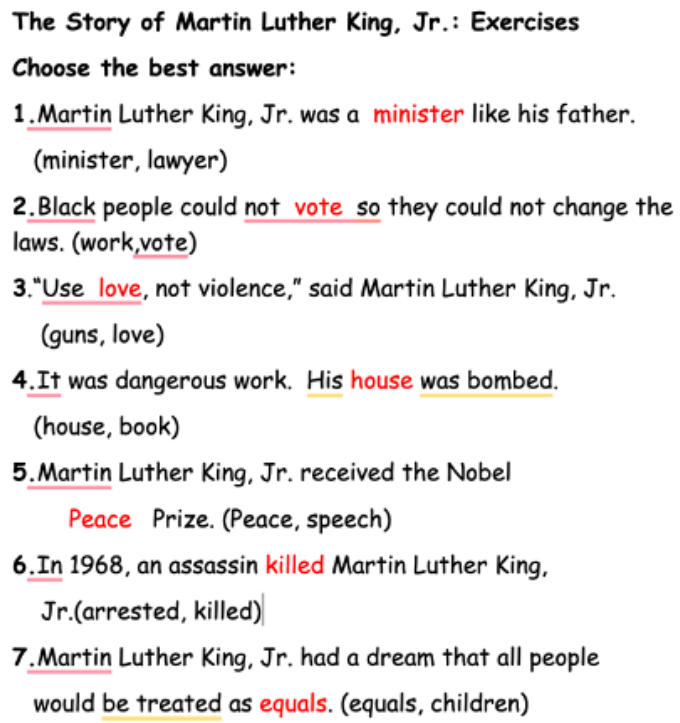
Figure 4 African-American History Month (continued), Symbolic Lists



Sofia begins by reading number 12, "But still there were many black and white leaders who worked all their lives to improve these conditions." Mrs. Evans pauses to add, "Right even though it was dangerous, there were still black and white leaders doing this." Again, we see the investment in including good white people throughout the classroom activity on "African American history." Mrs. Evans emphasizes the risk involved for *both* racial groups as if they were equal which can also obscure the systemic nature of racial oppression. Students' popcorn through Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B DuBois, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and Shirley Chisolm. By focusing on a few prominent figures, the lesson misses the opportunity to delve into the broader and more nuanced history of "African American history" (like Assata Shakur and the collective bloc of the Black Panthers!) and the pervasive impact of systemic racism. This method aligns with the constraints of the U.S. civics test, which prioritizes certain historical figures and events, often at the expense of a deeper, more critical engagement with history.

Mrs. Evans pauses here to remind students about Martin Luther King Jr.—*the* answer for the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. civics test for naturalization. There are several worksheets designed by Mrs. Evans about the Civil Rights Movement that center Martin Luther King Jr. and voting.

Figure 5 Centering Martin Luther King Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement



The Story of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Exercises

Choose the best answer:

1. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a minister like his father.
   (minister, lawyer)
2. Black people could not vote so they could not change the laws. (work,vote)
3. "Use love, not violence," said Martin Luther King, Jr.
   (guns, love)
4. It was dangerous work. His house was bombed.
   (house, book)
5. Martin Luther King, Jr. received the Nobel
   Peace Prize. (Peace, speech)
6. In 1968, an assassin killed Martin Luther King,
   Jr.(arrested, killed)
7. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream that all people
   would be treated as equals. (equals, children)

By centering Martin Luther King Jr., the class reverts to mistakenly understanding history as being led by individuals, not the collective. The U.S. civics test for—naturalization, and by extension, this class, positions these large, complicated movements—like the Civil War—as being led by one person, not the collective working against power. As intended by the state, the space of critical thinking collapses. The Civil Rights Movement is often appropriated by the powerful to advance their own agendas. Scott (2013), for example, critiques elite education reforms for portraying market-based school choice as an extension of the Civil Rights Movement by showing how reforms overlook the grassroots efforts of non-dominant communities who oppose an education system that promotes competition and choice over an equitable distribution of resources. By co-opting the Civil Rights Movement without truly serving the marginalized communities they claim to support, these powerful groups exacerbate educational inequalities, by facilitating resource-rich individuals and communities to isolate themselves while nondominant students remain in under-resourced public schools that are continuously abandoned—*that still happen now teacher*.

The distorted teaching of "slavery and racial capitalism" folds into what a good moral citizen should be and the imagined freedom we have all consented to on (racial) capitalism's terms of the order. If we think about the Civil Rights Movement on its own terms, the radicalism of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lies in believing, wholeheartedly, that the U.S. founding documents, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution, extended to Black people. Now what does this all mean for oppressed people today who are being taught *not* to think, to read these documents as pro-freedom, the people who are learning about the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution in ESL citizenship classrooms, in the state-intended space of collapsing critical thought and what that means for civic education, civic discourse, democracy, and freedom?

Much of imagined participation is reduced to voting: *"Black people could not vote so they could not change the laws*." This approach implicitly suggests that participation in the democratic process is the ultimate marker of citizenship and integration into American society. In an earlier lesson, Mrs. Evans discusses literacy tests as one of the ways in which states would keep Black people from voting:

Table 9 Voting as a Privilege

Class Activity	Class Discussion
Listen for the answers to these questions as you watch the videos: 1. Who could vote when the United States was first a country? Adult white landowning men. 2. What was a grandfather clause? African American men could only vote if their grandfather was able to vote. 3. What was a literacy test? African Americans had to read and answer complicated questions. Also some uneducated white people. 4. What was the purpose of poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses? These are voting barriers that limit the vote to certain people. Year / Amendment # / What changed? 1870 / 15th / African American men got the vote. 1920 / 19th / Women got the right to vote 1964 / 24th / Poll taxes became illegal	**What do you think?** 1. A **felon** is a person who has committed a serious crime. Do you think felons should be allowed to vote? Why or why not? No because they lost their right to vote. They broke the law and have no respect for it. Maybe after they get out of prison. 2. Do you think U.S. citizens should be able to vote at the age of 16? Why or why not? No that's too young. 3. Do you think election day should be a national holiday? Why or why not? Yes, of course. Only for education.

In an ESL citizenship class for prospective citizens and prospective voters, there is an investment in situating voting as the epitome of belonging. The Civil Rights Movement is positioned as correcting all injustices committed against Black people even as Black death is predicated on and constitutive of American democracy, liberalism, and freedom—the Civil Rights Movement remains an unfinished project. In educational spaces like ESL citizenship classrooms—and primary and secondary schooling—the Civil Rights Movement has come to stand in for nonviolence, progress, patriotism, and morality—all the things the state wants us to be. Teaching in this way aligns with developing good moral character, like Martin Luther King Jr., *use love not violence*. ESL citizenship students understand history as they are taught, as the passage of time and the arrival of great change-making men like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. who corrected these injustices and improved our institutions. These change-making men corrected these injustices and better the institutions. This understanding of history fosters trust in these very institutions, inspiring students to learn their codes and language so that they can vote too.

But as Miranda reminds us, once she passed her naturalization interview, she wished the class had taught her *how* to make sense of the California propositions. In California, where politics is local, propositions carry significant weight and directly influence people's day-to-day lives. More often than not, the nation goes the way of California's propositions (i.e., property tax

law, banning affirmative action, "three strikes" law). Importantly, the ordering of the words for California propositions is a long political process intended to confuse voters and this is amplified by those misleading ads on TV. Consequently, untangling propositions is a meaningful literacy practice. For example, Proposition 22, presented to voters in the 2020 California ballot, dealt with the classification of app-based transportation and delivery drivers. Significantly, many ESL citizenship students in this class are gig workers, underscoring the importance of understanding Proposition 22 as a literacy practice. Sponsored by major companies like Uber, Lyft, and Door Dash – the very companies ESL citizenship students work for – the proposition proposed that drivers be classified as independent contractors rather than employees. This classification would exempt the companies from providing standard benefits like minimum wage, overtime, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation (*California*, 2020). Through *millions and millions of dollars* in ad money, the proposition was framed as a move to protect drivers, when in reality, it reduced operational costs for these major companies (Skelton, 2020). This kind of strategic wording and campaigning significantly influences voter perception and decision-making, making it a critical study point for ESL students to understand the complexities, the deceptiveness, of political language and advertising influence. By teaching literacy as the act of reading and thinking critically, to decipher the codes that benefit the powerful, ESL citizenship students could organize against these codes and leverage voting in more material ways.

However, without this critical literacy piece, ESL citizenship starts to fall into prevailing narratives that frame voting as an exclusive privilege and a marker of belonging where individuals are to be judged based on their perceived moral character and notions of 'deservingness.' Because voting is depicted as the horizon of belonging—as a privilege that is to be earned—ESL citizenship students buy into the idea that bad moral character needs to be punished by these very institutions. in the class discussion asking, "Do you think felons should be allowed to vote, why or why not?" Mrs. Evans begins the discussion, "These are some thinking questions—no right or wrong answers. A felon is a person who has committed a serious crime. So, what do you think, do you think felons should have the right to vote?" Two ESL citizenship students, Elena and Sofia, say no,

> Sofia: "Because they lost their right to vote, they are no good citizens, for me (laughs)."
> Elena: "Because they have the right to express themselves, but they do not have the right to vote because they broke the law and have no respect
> Mrs. Evans: "A lot of people think that someone commits a crime, they pay their debt to society, they serve their time and they come out, maybe they are sorry now, could they vote after they get out of prison?"
> To this, Sandra modifies her answer slightly, "Yes, maybe"
> Teacher: "There are some states where- well I don't think there is any state where people can vote in prison- some states let them vote after they are out, others never let them vote."

The students' responses might also indicate a strategic alignment with perceived 'correct' answers, with "doing school," reflecting their desire to "pass the class," just as they also hope to "pass the test" and integrate as U.S. citizens. Although some students may express views they believe are expected of them to align with the curriculum's aims and the broader expectations of what constitutes a "good citizen," the interview with Sandra and Elena reflected their in-class answers, which viewed voting as a privilege that can be lost when someone breaks the law. This

demonstrates how ESL citizenship students often coalesce around the notion of good, hard-working citizens deserving rights, while felons, seen as having failed this standard, are excluded. Similarly, during class discussions on reparations, students often expressed the belief that the injustices of slavery are in the past and have been adequately addressed, and thus denied the need for reparations to account for historical and economic injustices. These perspectives, which may seem like students "doing school," are supported in individual interviews, suggesting that their views may be shaped by the curriculum's emphasis on self-reliance and the attainment of citizenship through conformity.

This perspective on voting as a privilege and denying reparations to Black people aligns with the ideological underpinnings of the class. This is shaped by learning about American history in a decontextualized way. Because ESL citizenship students learn about historical and social issues as isolated events, students are often not taught to see the systemic and ongoing nature of these injustices. Students tend to buy into this kind of respectability politics, referring to felons as— "*they have no respect."* And because "*they are no good citizens,"* they must be punished and lose the privilege of voting." This perspective of ESL citizenship students reveals much about the constructed narrative around freedom and worthiness, especially if the imagined felon is Black, highlighting the way Black people have been historically constructed outside of citizenship.

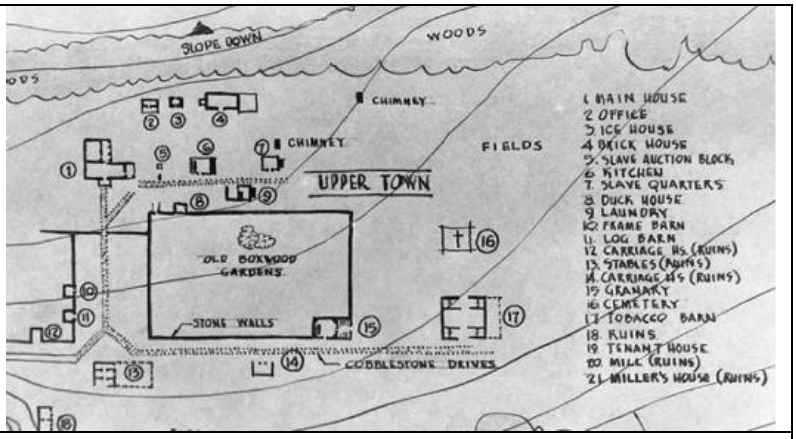
The good citizen dichotomy and the way history is taught to influence patriotism, duty, and love for country shapes ESL citizenship students' ideologies about privilege and punishment. By missing the ongoing nature of the Civil Rights Movement and the now-logics of slavery perpetuated through racial capitalism, the dialectical relationship between freedom and the Civil Rights Movement is reduced to **kap**-i-tl-ist ih-**kon**-*uh*-mee. Like the Civil Rights Movement, ESL citizenship students are subsumed by the capitalist economy to benefit those in power. By spelling out the pronunciation of **kap**-i-tl-ist ih-**kon**-*uh*-mee, the same pronunciation ESL students practice in their class together, I am emphasizing how the curriculum is subsumed within a capitalist framework that prioritizes the interests of the powerful over the rights and freedoms of marginalized groups.

Part 2: Theoretical Possibilities Outside of Master Myths

As I have mentioned previously, the ESL Citizenship class could be a place of imagining. Yet, as we see in Part 1, the U.S. civics test limits the depth and complexity with which these topics could be explored. This limitation leaves us with an unease about how this material is absorbed. In Part 2, I move towards envisioning a more expansive approach to citizenship education, one that embraces critical engagement and deeper understanding to gesture towards other expansive possibilities.

This decontextualized teaching approach orients students to see these historical events as isolated incidents rather than integral components of a larger exploitative system. The strict recitation script goes hand in hand with decontextualized content, shaping students' perceptions in a way that overlooks the ongoing implications of these historical injustices and their roots in the capitalist economy. Imagine if the structures of the exam, and by extension Mrs. Evans' lesson, allowed for contextualizing the auction block with the following photo from McKittrick's (2006) Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle, which presents not only a contextualized approach but one that is historically situated in fact.

Table 10 Auction Block Contextualized

	
Green Hill slave auction block. Photograph by Jack E. Boucher. From Historic American Buildings Survey, 1960. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.	Map of Green Hill Plantation by Orville W. Carroll. From Historic American Buildings Survey, 1960. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

By locating the auction block of Green Hill Plantation—in between the main house and the kitchen, and in front of the plantation offices—students would see and understand how the auction block was an integral part of the town's economy. The auction block itself communicates power, hierarchy, and social roles within an economy of Black dispossession (McKittrick, 2006). However, by decontextualizing the auction block, "the auction block and the black subject are simultaneously abstracted from humanness" (McKittrick, 2006, p. 71) and serves to reify the buyer's/master's embodied universality and subjectivity (Hartman, 1997). While the auction block is a critical site and located within the plantation town, it's also located within a galaxy of black livingness and epistemic modes of being—something else that Mrs. Evans could have addressed. Teaching beyond a man selling a man—contextualizing the auction block with precision, within the ongoing mechanisms of power and capital, could unravel the notion of value.

To achieve this, however, Mrs. Evans would need training in critical race theory and Black studies, focusing on the intersections of race, capitalism, and power. As Lewis (2018) reminds us, "we must recognize the violence of colonization, not just as the abuse and exploitation of territory and human beings, but in the actual making of Western knowledge through omission" (p. 22). Such an interdisciplinary approach would help students connect past events to present-day systemic issues, fostering a deeper understanding of the historical and ongoing impacts of slavery and racial capitalism all of which is impossible through omission. This kind of education is essential for all teachers across all grade levels to provide students with a comprehensive and expansive understanding of history and society- to unravel the master myths around us.

However, entrenched structures of power, including state education departments, standardized testing organizations, and political interest groups, actively resist this kind of transformative teaching (Apple, 2004; Lipman, 2013). Moreover, the political attacks on critical race theory, spearheaded by lawmakers and conservative advocacy groups across the country,

exemplify the lengths to which these powers go to maintain control over the narrative. These attacks are part of a broader effort to protect master myths and prevent educators from exposing the deep-seated injustices and systemic nature of racial capitalism. This ensures the perpetuation of a sanitized, decontextualized version of history that serves to project whiteness (Leonardo, 2004).

Imagine too if the structures of the exam allowed for discussing lynching by showing ESL citizenship students the following image, *Erased Lynchings* by Gonzales-Day (Gonzalez-Day, 2006, also cited in Tuck & Yang, 2014). The lesson above painted lynching as a stand-alone event, unconnected to racial capitalism and racial terrorism, and hid the way it was a spectacle for whites. Integrating *Erased Lynchings* into the lesson would show students the spectacle and reveal a more comprehensive understanding of the historical and systemic nature of racial violence.

Figure 6 Contextualizing the Act of Lynching



In *Erased Lynchings,* Gonzales-Day takes existing photographs and postcards of lynchings and removes the rope and lynch victims to focus our gaze on the onlookers participating in the spectacle of lynching. The image itself is taken in California. The two people removed from the photograph, the two people lynched by the white mob are Mexican. New Frontier terror is not equivalent to the long-standing terror faced by Black people for centuries. However, these incidents point to what Gonzales-Day (2006) calls the "devaluation of the Latino, Native American, and Asian body within the social order that has resulted in the near complete erasure of these communities from the historical landscape" (p. 117) and the legacy of violence against brown bodies. This context would help ESL citizenship students understand that, like lynching in the South and the less frequently occurring lynchings in the North, those in California were also large spectacles. Dehumanization and violence against the "other" were not only sanctioned but also witnessed with impunity by whites (Gonzales-Day, 2006).

These events served to reinforce racial hierarchies and social control, illustrating how such acts of terror were deeply ingrained in the societal fabric across different regions. As a furthermore, California is not the bastion of justice, liberality, and inclusion it portends to be, as its history documents. Integrating this context in an ESL citizenship class, which is often divorced from the racial terrorism of lynching, could lead to a more consequential conversation about racial terror and its relationship to white supremacy. *The two people lynched by the white mob are Mexican, and they were lynched too*. By exposing students to a more complete history of the U.S., this approach could move towards a democracy that acknowledges and learns from its past.

The fabric of racial terrorism connects to who belongs and who doesn't belong and this form of racial terrorism is connected to anti-Blackness and slavery. The 'now-logics' of slavery connects presently to Miranda's kid. *Dear reader*, remember when Miranda interrupted the lesson to interject that segregation still happens now; Miranda says, "*that still happen now teacher*," it's happening to her family, it's happening and her kid. Miranda invokes the very logics of racial terrorism, white supremacy, and precarity— the ways They kill [us] slowly with indifference at [our] 'shitty' schools. ESL citizenship students can see themselves in this project, and they already have— "*that still happen now teacher*."

So much of this ESL citizenship lesson is disciplining in and of itself, "*You stay in the line we want you to stay in.*" The cartoon image portraying a lynching displayed on the Zoom screen reproduced the "hyper embodiedness of the powerless" (Hartman, 1997 p. 19) but there is certainly more to Black people than subjects of terror and state-sponsored violence. In fact, these acts of terror were remade by Black people to organize for abolition and the Civil Rights Movement. Raiford (2009) describes the archive of lynching photography as "a site of struggle over the interpretation of the history of racial violence and black citizenship in the United States" (p. 114). During Reconstruction, Black civil rights groups engaged in anti-lynching campaigns, and proposed hundreds of federal anti-lynching laws, none of which passed until like Mrs. Evans says, "just today, a law was signed saying this is a federal hate crime, it took so long." This indicates that Mrs. Evans too has some recognition of the now-logics of slavery and the prolonged struggle to enact structural changes. However, given the stakes of the U.S. civics exam, there isn't much room to privilege this deeper historical and contemporary context in her lessons.

There is livingness in the geographies that surround the auction block and the remaking of lynching postcards, livingness in how Black people refashioned, repurposed, and rearticulated their lives beyond the static answers in the U.S. civics test for naturalization. Carter J. Woodson (1990) reminds us that the very act of lynching is *taught*—that lynching was *learned* through socialization, cultural values, and the belief in white supremacy to control Black people. Woodson emphasized so strongly that education could combat lynching and other forms of racism *if* education does not omit or misrepresent the true history of lynching and its associated racial violence. This silence and distortion are why the stakes are so high in an ESL citizenship class.

To conclude, as we move forward, it's essential to recognize the potential for deeper, more meaningful engagement within spaces such as the ESL citizenship classroom and help students see themselves in the curriculum. This very engagement could foster a sense of belonging, critical awareness, and empowerment. Like the Civil Rights Movement, the ESL citizenship classroom is already a place of imagining, a desire of wanting to belong, and understanding the impossibility of belonging. By reducing the Civil Rights Movement to a

reductive understanding of Martin Luther King Jr. and voting, we lose the radical imagining of what the Civil Rights Movement could do in a classroom setting like this. ESL Citizenship students could see themselves in the unfinished project of the Civil Rights Movement itself.

Consider the following image of Esau Jenkins and Myles Horton in 1959 at a Citizenship School (cited in Payne, 2007). This picture shows the rich historical context and the ongoing struggle for civil rights that could resonate with ESL citizenship students:

Figure 7: Seeing Themselves in the Historicity of Citizenship Schools



The front room is set up as a grocery store and Black students are in the back room to hide their voter-registration activities. Expanding the Civil Rights Movement to include Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Myles Horton would offer an alternative pedagogy for students and teachers alike to "test the limits on the ability of the oppressed to participate in the reshaping of their own lives" (Payne, 2007, p.68). Septima Clark developed Citizenship Schools with the Highlander Folk School. Highlander, unlike state-centered citizenship courses, was guided by the belief that the oppressed already had the knowledge needed to collectively produce change, "If

they only knew how to analyze what their experiences were, what they know and generalize them ... they would begin to draw on their own resources" (Payne, 2007, p.8). The purpose of the schools was to create involved citizens, not simply voters, and did so by addressing the holistic needs of the communities. Students helped start a credit union, a nursing home, a kindergarten, and a low-income housing project. Citizenship Schools became an organizing tool and source of support for SNCC, "Once you bring people together to talk about literacy, you can get them to talk about a great many other things" (p.77). What would it mean for ESL Citizenship students to not only see themselves in the 'now logics' of slavery but also in see in the unfinished project of the Civil Rights Movement itself, in *this* citizenship class at the back of the grocery store—to see themselves embedded in these logics but to also see a way out of these very logics. By integrating such moments into the curriculum, students can draw connections between past and present, understanding how they might continue the work of the Civil Rights Movement for themselves and for their children- "*that still happen now teacher*." This approach empowers students to see themselves as active participants in this unfinished project.

Even though ESL citizenship classes teach to a state exam and given that the U.S. Civics and History test collapses the Civil Rights Movement around Martin Luther King Jr, MLK too could be taught more expansively. Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1968) "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech, given the day before he was assassinated on April 3, 1968, reflected on the enslavement of Africans in America and the long history of struggle for freedom:

> We've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point, in Memphis. We've got to see it through. And when we have our march, you need to be there. If it means leaving work, if it means leaving school — be there. Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike. But either we go up together, or we go down together (King, 1986).

This part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech tells us about what being in community means. Community encompasses a deep sense of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility. This call to solidarity underscores the power of united efforts in confronting systemic issues and achieving meaningful change. Martin Luther King Jr. implores a radical envisioning, he implores us to work towards what literally *strikes* at the heart of capitalism—like W.E.B DuBois reframing the civil war as a general strike. As the analyses of class curriculum shows, this classroom provided both a constrained view of history and an opportunity for deeper engagement. However, as previously discussed, the focus on preparing for a state exam often oversimplifies complex historical movements to ignore the struggles against power. But there is potential for more expansive teaching. For example, discussing King's broader vision and his critique of economic injustice would offer students a richer understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and its relevance today. This approach not only aligns with the exam requirements but also encourages students to see themselves as part of an ongoing struggle for justice, resonating with King's call to collective action- "*If it means leaving work, if it means leaving school —be there*" (King, 1986). Rather than teaching to protect the master myths spun by racial capitalism—ESL citizenship classrooms could work towards untangling Free-d*uh*m from kap-i-tl-ist ih-kon-*uh*-mee. Conflating freedom with capitalism promotes the idea that economic success can lead to liberation which absorbs persisting systemic inequalities.

For the participants of ESL citizenship classrooms, people already so intimately familiar with precarity: following the rules dictated by their immigration status, clocking into *all* of their

jobs, logging onto Mrs. Evans's attendance log, and doing the same with their children—imagine teaching them to leave work and school; imagine what this could do to challenge state power, imagine what *they* could do.

ESL citizenship students, as non-citizens, do not have the affordances *we* do. How could they engage in resistance so that it's not all on their backs? How can we take on some of the risks? How can we teach differently? How can we teach their children differently?

What could we do together? By having the tools to analyze Prop 22, might they have leveraged their own power against the powerful? Could this collective voting bloc push the mediocre left towards something meaningful? Could their children from 'shitty' under-resourced schools go to college? And if they could, could they go without mortgaging their futures? Could the anti-Blackness in this community of ESL citizenship students be transformed towards a collective understanding of who and what the real problem is? Might there be a way towards a borderless world?

Discussion

When Mrs. Evans finishes the lesson, she asks the class, "Who wants to do a whole practice interview?" This kind of practice time is coveted by all. The class, notorious for keeping their Zoom microphones unmuted, breaks into a cacophony of harsh insistence, kind encouragement, and gentle teasing to encourage Lucia to take the slot.

Cindy says, "¡Lucia hazlo!"
- "¡Práctica Lucia!"
- "try, try!"
-"¡Tienes que intentarlo, se acerca tu entrevista!"

Maria, somberly adds, "has esperado tanto tiempo."
Cindy goes over everyone's head, and breaks through all the voices, "Teacher, Lucia needs it."

Mrs. Evans, understanding some Spanish, steps back when students communicate amongst themselves, "Oh Lucia is your interview coming up?"
Lucia, one of the only students with a muted microphone, unmutes and answers, "Yes teacher."

Mrs. Evan softly encourages yet genuinely asks, "Lucia do you want to practice the whole interview?"

Lucia responds, "I don't know teacher."

Samsung Galaxy 22 turns on her video, nears her face to the camera, wags her finger at Lucia, "¡Hazlo!"

Lucia laughs nervously, takes a deep breath, and says "Okay teacher."

Mrs. Evan smiles sincerely and says "Great!" She stands up, raises her right hand, motions Lucia to do the same, and asks, "Do you swear to tell the truth?"

Lucia looks away from the camera nervously and says "Ummm yes."
Mrs. Evans teases, "Okay. Great, now say it like you mean it."

As much as this paper has tried to show what is at stake with these stories, to untangle the stories, and to gesture towards other stories, I must also highlight that the material stakes for students in this ESL citizenship class are impossibly high. Maria tells Lucia, "*You've waited so long for this*."

This tension is real. The material stakes are terribly high for ESL citizenship students, as becoming a U.S. citizen secures their own standing and that of their family. While a more expansive curriculum could offer them tools to become more agentic citizens, the state and other interest groups want compliant citizens. The risk of being critical is much too high, and the consequences are much too daunting. This is a double bind for the students and the teacher alike.

Dear reader,

Sofia, Miranda, Elena, Lucia, Cindy, Maria, and Samsung Galaxy 22 are ordinary people. They have sat in an ESL citizenship class for over a year trying to get their English *good enough* and trying to learn *just enough* history to go before an immigration officer and become a U.S. citizen. *The stakes are high*.

Mrs. Evans is a dedicated teacher who has helped naturalize hundreds of nondominant students and helped them materialize their standing in a fickle country that's dangled that carrot of protection before them for *years*. Mrs. Evans has successfully naturalized every student that goes through the class, if not on their first try then surely on their second. Mrs. Evans has worked two to three part-time teaching jobs in the span of 25 years; she is genuinely and sincerely doing her best.

The otherwise I've outlined before us is an easy thing for me to do. It's easy for me to sit here doing nothing but read and write a theoretical way out of these origin stories in a *desperate* attempt to believe that there has to be something better.

And you, *dear reader*, please refrain from passing judgment or critique on the people of this class—reserve that for the structures that surround their precarious lives. Whether you are a senior academic/administrator making upwards of $250,000 a year, a junior academic making $100,000 a year, an aspiring academic making $60,000 a year, or a graduate student making $20,000 a year, maybe a teacher trying to figure out how to teach expansively, or someone trying to get to the other side, Sofia, Miranda, Elena, Lucia, Cindy, Maria, and Samsung Galaxy 22 are ordinary people. This whole class is ordinary people. Mrs. Evans is ordinary people.

> A brief aside in thinking about the activities of ordinary people. *Dear reader*, Did you watch the Super Bowl? Did you judge those who watched the Super Bowl? Those who indulge in the brutality of the sport? Those who dare distract themselves from the genocide taking place in Palestine? If you did, I hope it wasn't ironically. I hope you were rooting against the hegemonic teams and lambasting the exit of Rust Belt cities, the teams whose city could use a win. If you did watch, did you stay for the commercials? Did you notice they weren't as good as the 90s? Did you catch the Martin Luther King Jr. commercial, his speechwriter, advertising support for Israel- which already has *millions and millions* of dollars of support from the U.S. and others to commit these ongoing acts of genocide, use their excess millions to take out an ad during the most expensive time

> for the biggest sport of the year? An ad with Martin Luther King Jr.'s speechwriter telling us that the main hero of our collective memory from the Civil Rights Movement would support Israel. The very man who was assassinated only after he began critiquing the imperial efforts of the United States abroad during the Vietnam War and began organizing around unionization domestically in the face of labor exploitation and economic inequality. The stakes are so high.
>
> I include this aside to force you, the reader, to think about the broader context in which we engage with societal issues. To consider how Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream could be requisitioned and appropriated for Empire's ends is illustrative of the similarly sinister, though not cloned, logics of the weaponized curriculum that purports a sanitized message of slavery, lynching, segregation, and progress (Mckittrick, 2021).

Mrs. Evans is going to teach to the test before her, a test ingeniously designed by far more powerful people with far more powerful agendas. Sofia, Miranda, Elena, Lucia, Cindy, Maria, and Samsung Galaxy 22 are going to absorb the curriculum set before them in their new country with its new rules. And—like other students across the U.S.—when slavery is taught as an isolated event that happened hundreds of years ago with no bearing on our current structures; when Abraham Lincoln is presented as the hero of the Civil War; when our Constitution and founding documents are seen as ultimate protectors; and when the Civil Rights Movement is depicted as having resolved the terrors that followed centuries of slavery, dehumanization, and conquest, we end up believing these dangerously simplified narratives. When there is no time to read or to learn beyond this prescribed curriculum—no time given current situations of labor exploitation—like the ordinary people of this class, you too might think that there is no point to reparations; that rights are something to be earned; and that Juneteenth is okay so long as your employer comps the day so that you can log more hours at your gig jobs.

By ordinary people, I mean they take care of their own, they work hard, but they also get harder, as they move up in the world, as they focus on their immediate lives. They might act as if they are better than those with similar backgrounds. We, *dear reader*, too are ordinary people. But for folks in these ESL citizenship classrooms, like my own parents, the majority will always punch a clock. They will know bureaucracy and exploitation in the most intimate of ways. And in this way, they are the best of us.

For ESL citizenship students, and other nondominant communities—who are already not included in the democratic landscape (or whatever), who come from this liminal place of exclusion, those living in the liminal space of acceptance and non-acceptance—*they* are uniquely positioned to levy questions against the social order, even as they are trying to climb up. Far better positioned than the middle class and those of us aspiring to be middle class (by middle class I mean making a living wage with comfortable housing and food security and maybe even the ability to save a third of their earnings).

I don't know *dear reader*. Maybe if we teach differently, if we change our public language systems, if we take critical pedagogy seriously, maybe we could view the world differently. Maybe we would have the tools to be able to see through the messaging of the Super Bowl commercial? The tools to disentangle the propaganda? The tools to teach that work is not the horizon of living and learning? The tools to imagine and aspire towards something different.

"Okay. Great, now say it like you mean it."

I leave these questions here and throughout this piece because I don't know the answers. Like Lucia, I can't say *this* like I mean it. But levying these questions, finding ways for our students to levy these questions, and undoing capitalism and its myths in every legal and illegal way we can is a vernacular insurrection of sorts. I leave these questions at the end of this story because I don't know the answers to them even though I do know that the ending to this story would be different if there were answers. So when Mrs. Evans says, "Now say it like you mean it," *I can't*.

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Conclusion

Dear reader, I have been dreading this conclusion.

For now, I'll begin with a general summary of my project. By drawing from the California Adult Education (CAE) Oral History Project, I emphasized the directionality of power from the more powerful literacy sponsors, those responsible for designing and implementing neoliberal policies aimed towards the rapid acquisition of functional literacy, down to the less powerful literacy sponsors, those who work within the framework dictated by these policies. I use sponsorship conceptually to contextualize how educators, under the forces dictated by more powerful literacy sponsors, racialized their students, shrunk opportunities for critical thinking, and reduced the potential of literacy to functional forms. Mrs. Gonzalez warned us that these new measures were changing the way ESL citizenship classes were taught with "more facts and just not a lot of critical thinking" (Gonzalez, 1995, p. 66).

To understand the perspective of ESL citizenship students, I show how the ESL citizenship classroom in southern California, like the classrooms described in the archive, continues to embrace reductive notions of functionality through English-only instruction. I trace how students take up these neoliberal ideologies through performative belonging and performative othering to belong into this imagined and storied framework of American citizenship. I attend to how language, specifically the learning of English, comes to be performed and produced to gain a sense of belonging. In ESL citizenship classrooms, the rote repetition of common English phrases and nationalist splices of history model this sense of performative belonging. I developed the term(s) performative belonging because no one—especially nonwhites trying to gain U.S. citizenship—truly belongs. This very notion of performative belonging necessitates othering. I use performative othering to show how students in ESL citizenship classrooms engage in the practice of othering, in an attempt to belong.

To understand how the curriculum models the U.S. civics test in the ESL citizenship class in northern California, I critically examine a lesson on slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement. This analysis reveals how the U.S. civics test frames the institution of slavery as an isolated historical event, rather than connecting it to the ongoing logic of exploitation. There is something terribly disheartening and damaging taking place before us, distorting history serves the interest of the powerful by creating pacified citizens who will become unquestioning, neoliberal, work-until-you-die-American-citizens. At the same time, as the curriculum itself and the U.S. civics test emphasize notions of deservingness, the need to work hard for your place in this very storied framework, these ideologies get taken up in quite sinister ways, from believing that Black people take the most to believing felons should lose the right to vote to believing reparations are unfair.

I dread this conclusion because there is no satisfactory way to end this project. There is more melancholy than there is hope.

These less powerful literacy sponsors, the educators from the Oral History Project, Mr. Rollins, and Mrs. Evans, have done their best with what they were methodically given by the more powerful literacy sponsors – but they get stuck in the inability to see otherwise. Earlier I said that ELS citizenship classrooms mirror education writ large. Mrs. Evans says the history depicted by the U.S. civics test is the same kind of "rah rah go American history" that she learned in school. *Dear reader*, it's also the same history I learned in school and it's likely the same history you learned in school too. Malcolm X's (1963) words ring true,

Oh, I say you been misled.

You been had.

Ya been took!

So, *dear reader*, we've been misled. What do we do?

We need to unravel the master myths before us. Maybe we can start by adding this one question to the U.S. civics exam.

Who freed the slaves?

- ~~Abraham Lincoln~~
- ~~Emancipation Proclamation~~
- The enslaved freed themselves

It's an imperfect solution but also easy enough. The U.S. civics test measures a basic understanding of U.S. history and enslaved freeing themselves is a very basic understanding of U.S. history. Although the question still lends itself to rote memorization, at least that rote memorization is accurate and maybe it would do us good to repeat that phrase until it sticks. And maybe the lessons ESL citizenship teachers design would have more room for these expansive narratives of U.S. history. And maybe too students could see themselves as part of a larger movement against power.

But master myths are powerful and they are maintained by power. Since January 2021, following cries to ban Critical Race Theory in schools, 44 states have moved towards legislation or executive order that would restrict teaching by regulating how "how the nation's teachers can discuss racism, sexism, and issues of systemic inequality in the classroom" (Schwartz, 2021). In 2021, Texas Senate Bill 3 (SB 3) censoring classroom instruction on race, gender, and systemic oppression was passed and signed into law by Governor Greg Abbott on September 17, 2021. Building on previously passed legislation, the bill removes requirements to teach topics like Native American history and removes requirements to teach "the history of white supremacy, including but not limited to the institution of slavery, the eugenics movement, and the Ku Klux Klan, and the ways in which it is morally wrong" (Zhang, 2021). These laws aim to instill a sense of civic pride and patriotism as opposed to fostering the very conscientization that could do something different (Freire, 1987).

But none of this is new. In 2019, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill (HB 807) that requires all public schools in the state to review their K-12 civics standards. In this revision, Florida emphasized patriotism and American exceptionalism for the state's revised civics standards which took effect in the 2023-2024 school year (Najarro, 2022). Other states followed Florida's lead. Arizona passed legislation in June that includes sections directly taken from a 2021 Florida law. This law mandates that students learn about the "blessings of liberty" and the "victims of other nations' governing philosophies" (Najarro, 2022) rather than critically understanding the origin stories of the U.S. state. In 2010, Arizona passed a law (HB 2281)[17] that banned ethnic studies programs in state public schools by dismantling the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program in the Tucson Unified School District (Santa Cruz, 2010). Years later even after this ethnic studies ban in Arizona was overturned, the state still jumped on the trend of

[17] Overturned in 2017

banning “critical race theory” (Stephenson, 2021). And, the list goes on. It’s heartbreaking. Even as there are many “lived civics” movements happening around us, we see it in the work of Antero Garcia and Nicole Mirra and others, movements that design towards hope.

As simple and easy (albeit imperfect) as this small first step may sound, these things are terribly political. I came to adult education because I thought, albeit naively, that these spaces had more freedom to experiment in the classroom than the regimented, highly politicized spaces of K-12. Adult education, in modeling the demands of learning English and welfare-to-work reforms to gain U.S. citizenship, is also terribly regimented. And, somehow, the patriotic nature of the U.S. Civics test is catching the attention of high school graduation requirements. Some states are proposing that their high schools integrate the U.S. civics test as a graduation requirement (Evans, 2022). It’s both silly and sinister.

But remember *dear reader*, this dissertation is about language and human connection. We come to reduce something as profoundly human and relational as the sharing of speech, language, meaning, and ideas to determine “functionality” or “suitability” for citizenship. Think back to the oral history interviews where educators talked about how their Black students wanted to learn Spanish to communicate with their new neighbors. However, these classes were not designed for human connection or the needs of the community; they were designed to naturalize as many new immigrants as possible and place them into low-wage work through a nationalist curriculum. And yet, we see that no matter how hard the U.S. civics test tries to make it seem like historical injustices are in the past, and the curriculum supports this past-tense narrative, Miranda is still able to break through to say, “That still happens now, teacher,” to say that her kid and people like her kid still experience segregation.

If history is taught to advance the good moral character of the individual by distorting the character of the U.S., we need to teach to show the true character of the U.S. and maybe then we reframe what good moral character can look like in an unjust world. Good moral character can mean not showing up to work until we are all paid a living wage, not paying our rent until it is an appropriate amount, and destroying property when it’s more important than human lives. And maybe we can do this together.

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