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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02h8c8m4>

Author

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Publication Date

2022-12-21

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

ISSI GRADUATE FELLOWS WORKING PAPER SERIES 2021-2022.91

**Trapped in Our Origin Stories: Interrogating the Ideologies
of ESL Citizenship Classrooms**

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December 21, 2022



Institute for the
Study of
Societal Issues

Trapped in Our Origin Stories: Interrogating the Ideologies of ESL Citizenship Classrooms

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This paper examines the ideological conceptions of language and literacy practices in an adult, English as a Second Language (ESL) citizenship class for naturalization. Naturalization refers to the process for obtaining U.S citizenship undergone by lawful permanent residents after meeting extensive federal requirements. I situate neoliberalism within settler-colonial, anti-Black logics, and I define neoliberal citizens through language and economic ideologies. By privileging ESL citizenship students' perspectives, this paper shows how the ESL citizenship classroom, like others, 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 as well as the ways students deviate from these values and the possibilities therein.

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Introduction

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], colonial period and independence, 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 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. 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 this oral civics test in English. In the classroom space, 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 privileges 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* manifest 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 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. Today, the ESL citizenship classroom teaches 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. As explored at length in a paper in preparation, neoliberalism reshaped adult education in the late 20th century when learning goals were driven by welfare-to-work legislation and immigration reform, and these vestiges remain in spaces of adult education including ESL citizenship classrooms.

Situated within the field of 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 (Engeström, 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 learning sciences literature is a deeper conceptualization of ideology (Philip et al., 2018) and an 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. 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 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. This paper answers the following research question: what ideologies emerge from the classroom practices of the adult, ESL citizenship course? This 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.

By conceptualizing 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 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 peoples’ belief practices for the interests of dominant groups (Luke, 1994). Literacy acts as a tool, a practice of exclusion, inclusion, or both. 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 more importantly, 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 paper 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 it defines neoliberal citizen vis-à-vis language and economic ideologies. Next, participants Karla, Maria, Axel, Linda, and Gabriel¹ walk us through the classroom practices of their ESL

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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 paper 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

My conceptual framework relies upon a critical reading of the histories that have led to the construction of both neoliberal ideologies and language ideologies. My 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 framing shows how these logics are indexed within naturalization practices, and by studying an ESL citizenship classroom and tracing the ideologies therein to the neoliberalization of adult education in California, my 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.

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.

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. 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.

This insidious language and economic ideologies are especially problematic in a citizenship classroom. 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. 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.

Monolingualism for Neoliberal Competitiveness

Neoliberal ideologies commodify individuals and their language (Bernstein et al., 2013). Neoliberalism frames language as a commodified skill and individuals as human capital developed through the acquisition of these skills. 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. Language learners 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. 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.

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 responsabilization 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.

'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. Giroux (2002) discusses how civic discourse has succumbed to the language of commercialization, privatization, and deregulation whereby “citizenship is portrayed as an utterly privatized affair that produces self-interested individuals” (p. 425). 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.

This paper 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.

Neoliberalization of Adult Education

The limited research conducted in noncredit ESL classes shows that the end goal of language instruction contains elements of indoctrination geared toward low-skill newcomer immigrants (Carlson, 1970; Hartmann, 1948; King, 2002). I am deploying the word indoctrination to signify the process of conforming to dominant social norms such as immersion in a consumerist-oriented culture (Sokolik, 2007) and aspiring to achieve the “American Dream” all of which function as running themes in ESL course materials (Griswold, 2010; Vafai, 2014).

Vafai (2015) explores the Integrated Education and Training (IET) program, an English Language instruction approach that incorporates career readiness and workforce skills to show how English language instruction continues to be framed as human capital that views English as a set of linguistic skills for purposes of 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. This job-oriented curriculum is all too common in adult ESL classrooms. Emerick et. al (2020)’s 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. And yet, Emerick et. al finds that despite the classroom’s translanguaging CSP curriculum, it remained complicit with a “neoliberal educational agenda” that reduces students to restaurant workers. This classroom, like many others, could not transcend the overarching neoliberal implications of centering learning for work.

Like Griswold (2010), this paper explores how language and literacy are reduced for the purposes of the naturalization interview, but also, how this reduction travels beyond the classroom. Unlike Félix’s (2008) study, this paper 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 paper traces how ESL citizenship students reflect on their classroom practices to show

how neoliberal ideologies and language ideologies shape 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 paper 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 my 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, a shared behavioral contract among speakers, 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; the language itself is embedded in the nature of being 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 Nietzsche, 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.

Method

Context

Setting

The ESL citizenship class is located 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

deferentially 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 officer² 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

² 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.

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.

Positionality

As immigrants from Mexico, my parents sought to become naturalized citizens, and so, our lives were shaped by the long, arduous naturalization process. It took my father ten years to become a U.S. citizen. It took my mother twenty-five years, and she did so through the ESL citizenship class that is my research site; her interview is included in this paper. Though I saw my mother giddy going back to school, joyous in making new friends, and happy to be learning, it was peculiar seeing these ideologies at work. 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). I saw ideologies about working hard, learning English, bettering yourself – all to belong, *but belong to what exactly?* Though ESL citizenship classes provide a material advantage as students make progress towards gaining U.S. citizenship, I believe the practices and ideologies therein serve, more than all else, the economic interests of the state.

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 paper 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 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 & Arzubíaga (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:

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 pleasssse!*” 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.

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.

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.”

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.

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.

My 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, ESL citizenship students walk us through each of the classroom practices in the ESL citizenship classroom: quick write sessions, independent reading, group conversations, class presentation, dictation, and pop quizzes based on the civics exam. Karla and Maria draw from their notebooks to provide examples of the class (to walk us through the class). Karla's notebook is college-ruled and purple, the cover reads "IB English," and the first few pages are ripped out. Maria's notebook consists of loose college-ruled pages, neatly organized, and held together in a manila folder.

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*

My findings suggest that, to varying extents, students from the class are learning how to be “American” – a neoliberal subject, and they model this in their talk (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, 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.

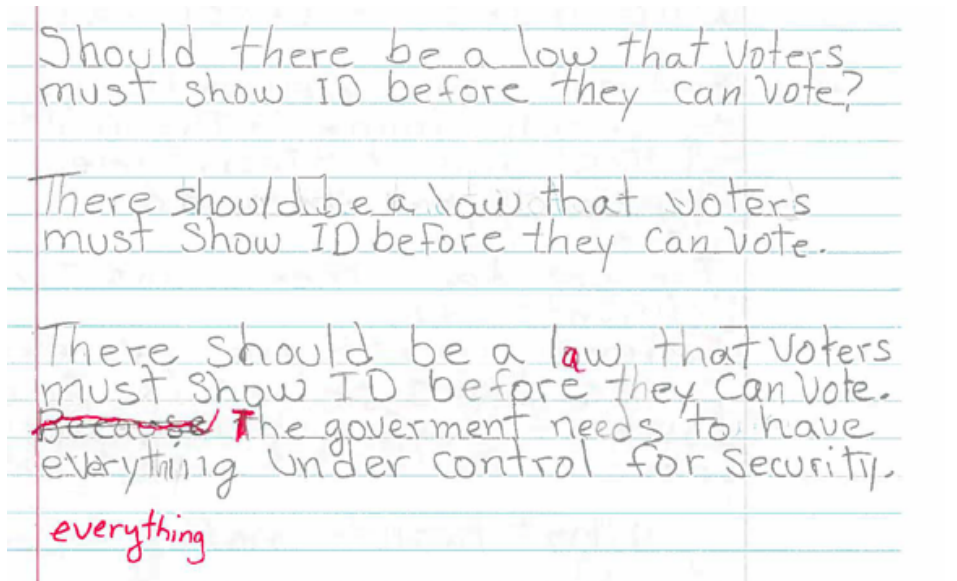
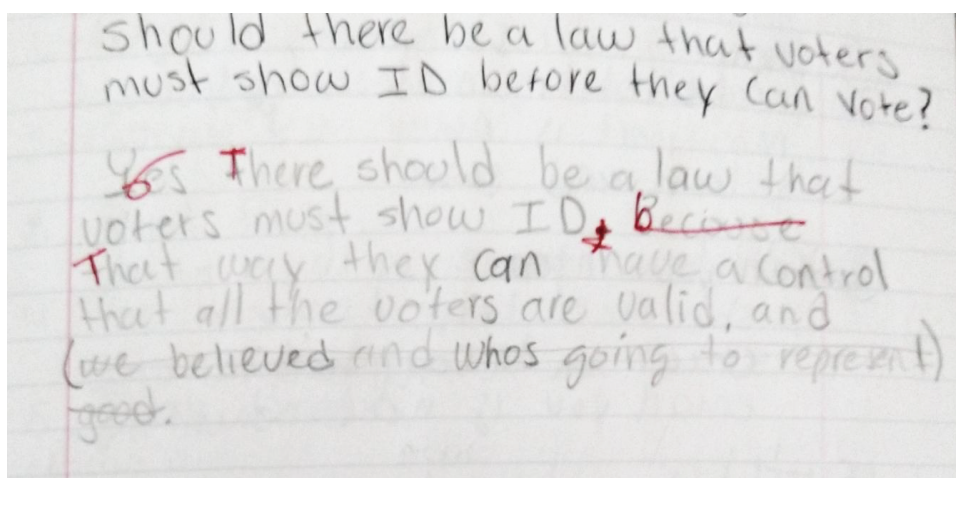
The following sections walk us through the classroom practices as told by ESL citizenship students as well as their critical reflections against English only, and the ideologies, contradictions, and prejudices therein.

Quick write, *in English*

Karla, the ringleader of the group, explains that class is scheduled to begin at 6:30 PM but that they don't really get into the class until 6:45 PM or so. Karla says they are greeted by their teacher and the prompt he's written 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, and Maria joins in as well, she flips through the pages titled "quick write." Both Maria and Karla comment on how this practice makes room for their friends running 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. 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 1: Quick write: Should there be a law that voters must show ID before they can vote?

Student	Notebook Entry
Maria	 <p>Should there be a law that voters must show ID before they can vote?</p> <p>There should be a law that voters must show ID before they can vote.</p> <p>There should be a law that voters must show ID before they can vote. Because The government needs to have everything under control for security.</p> <p>everything</p>
Karla	 <p>Should there be a law that voters must show ID before they can vote?</p> <p>Yes There should be a law that voters must show ID. Because That way they can have a control that all the voters are valid, and (we believed and whos going to represent) good.</p>

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?” I like the open-ended nature of this quick write. The option to answer either question 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.

In these moments of writing, I saw expansive possibilities. 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.

Table 2: Quick write: If you could make a new law, what would it be? Or what is the biggest problem facing the United States?

Student	Notebook Entry
Maria	<p>If I could make a one new law ^{it will be} The new Law could be</p> <hr/> <p>If I ^{could} make a one new Law I should The new Law could be All legal residents have the rights to vote.</p> <p>If I could make a one new law The new Law could be All legal residents have the rights to vote.</p>
Karla	<p>I think the biggest Problem is the President now he makes too many bad ideas and he treat the other people with out respect especially the women and when he's in the Presidency. the racism is more than any other presidents. The more he wants for the wall is ridiculous</p> <p>think bad treat other when ridiculous</p>

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 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 tu³ 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.

³ Drawing from Heritage and Clayman (2010), I use the underline feature to indicate emphasis spoken by participant. 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.

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 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*

Maria explains the next classroom practice: Mr. Rollins passes back the quick writes with corrections. Maria says that once she receives her quick write, she studies her mistakes carefully, and then 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 decía, “*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, “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, “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*

After the quick write discussion with the class partner, the teacher calls on students one-by-one to come to the front of the classroom to recite what they wrote on the quick write or tell the class about what they’ve read, *in English*, of course. Linda explains,

Linda: Entonces sí, leíamos en voz alta lo que habíamos escrito.

–**Karla:** lo siento Linda, cuando no pronunciábamos algo bien, el maestro lo hacía, luego le movía la lengua así, y no dejaba de insistir hasta que pronunciáramos 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 pedían 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. 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. I suggest that Mr. Rollins enacts what Hill (1998) calls 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. 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, 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 que 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."

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*

Maria returns to her journal and briefly shares the last two classroom practices- dictation and then pop quiz. For dictation, Mr. Rollins 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. 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.

Table 3: Dictation

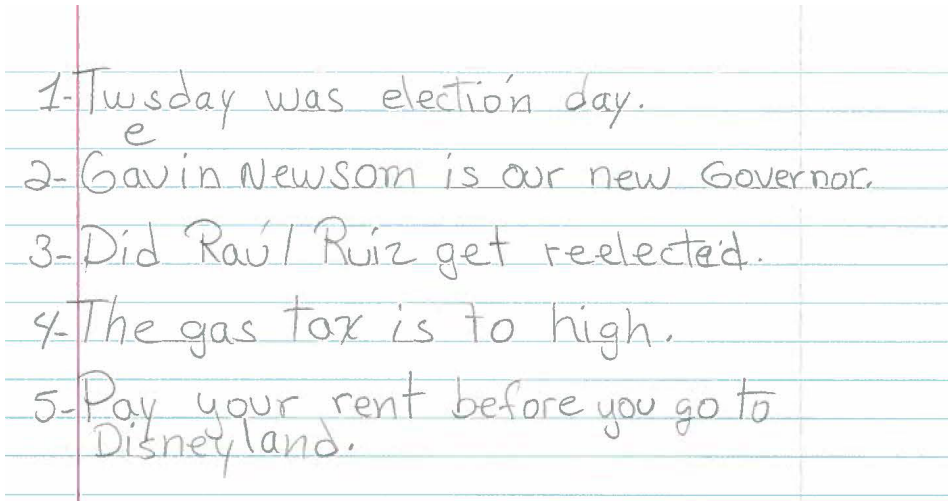
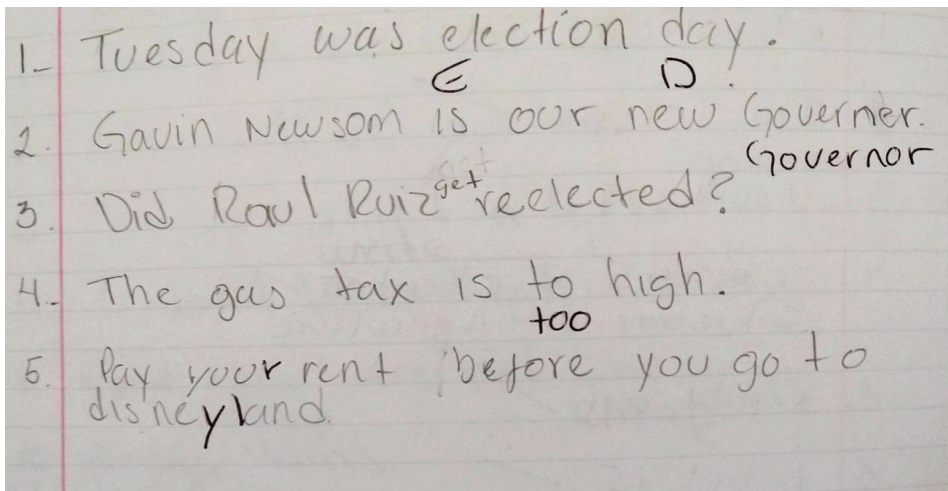

Student	Notebook Entry
Maria	 <p>1- Tuesday was election day. 2- Gavin Newsom is our new Governor. 3- Did Raúl Ruiz get reelected? 4- The gas tax is too high. 5- Pay your rent before you go to Disneyland.</p>
Karla	 <p>1- Tuesday was election day. 2. Gavin Newsom is our new Governor. 3. Did Raúl Ruiz ^{get} reelected? ^{Governor} 4. The gas tax is too high. 5. Pay your rent before you go to Disneyland.</p>

Table 4: 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*

Maria says that 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 question 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 5: Pop Quiz: Limitations and Impossibilities

Question from Civics Test	Possible Correct Answers
1) What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Constitution was written. ■ The Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution
3) What was one important thing that Abraham Lincoln did?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ fought for civil rights ■ worked for equality for all Americans
5) Where is the Statue of Liberty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 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 down 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. While wealth certainty does not trickle down, these ideologies do.

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, “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 says, “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.

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. 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 of 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, “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

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 — 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. 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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