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April 13, 2020

The Immigrant Experience in Atlanta: Navigating the Arduous Path Toward Citizenship

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Science with Honors

Department of Anthropology

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Abstract

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Immigration has been at the forefront of political debates for decades and the prevalence of these issues has certainly intensified in the last several years. Atlanta has become an emerging destination for immigrants, with the first major influx of immigrants arriving prior to the 1996 Olympics in order to help build venues for the games. Today Atlanta is home to a diverse array of immigrant communities and this study will explore the lives of these individuals. Through semi-structured interviews and observation of local citizenship classes, I explore first-generation immigrants' experiences adjusting to life in the United States, navigating immigration law, and interacting with the American legal system more generally. Findings from this study illustrate that the path to citizenship is arduous and often marked by frustrating bureaucratic indifference, deprivation of certain core rights, intense fear of institutionalized authority, structural racism, and prejudice. Immigrants simultaneously mourn the sense of belonging they had in their home country, even in cases where dangerous threats or unsafe living conditions forced them to leave. While many immigrants are successful in overcoming these barriers and obtaining their citizenship, this is largely reliant on their access to insiders with greater connections and resources. Much of the conversation regarding immigration is often centered around policy and politics, but culture and values are also entrenched in these institutional interests. It is my hope that this research can give a voice to an often-silenced demographic and illuminate the challenges immigrants face navigating life in the United States and accessing the American legal system.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Michael Peletz, for his guidance and patience throughout this project. His class on the Anthropology of Law, Discipline, and Social Justice is what initially inspired this project and his advice and feedback throughout this process have been invaluable. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Irene Browne and Dr. Justin Hosbey who were so generous with their time and feedback. I am so grateful for the expertise, knowledge, and input of this committee.

I would like to thank Dr. Debra Vidali and Heather Carpenter for their support and encouragement navigating the Anthropology Program and Honors process, as well as my Anthropology Honors Program cohort for their support.

To the individuals who connected me to interviewee participants, thank you for your vital support and for your tireless advocacy on behalf of the immigrant community every day.

To my interview participants, thank you for sharing your stories. I was truly inspired by each and every one of you and am eternally grateful for the opportunity to share your experiences.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends who have been by my side every step of the way. Thank you to everyone who made this project possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ben, an asylum seeker from the Congo, has been waiting for his application to be processed for over eight years. Threats of torture prevent Ben from returning home to his family, while a broken immigration system inhibits him from establishing a life in the U.S. “I feel like I have been in prison all of these years since I have been in the United States.” Stuck in a state of flux, Ben represents the reality of many immigrants living in the United States today.

Immigration has been at the forefront of political debates for decades and the prevalence of these issues has certainly intensified in the last several years. Ideas of citizenship have moved beyond a narrow definition of a set of legal rights—“either you have it or you don’t—to a consideration of group membership that includes a variety of citizens and noncitizens” (Ong 2003:2). U.S. immigrants have an increasingly diverse array of statuses, which are often unstable and subject to sudden changes based on evolving immigration policy. First generation immigrants account for an astounding 13.7 percent of both the metro Atlanta population and the U.S. population more generally (Pew Research Center 2019; Migration Policy Institute 2018). With immigrants comprising such a sizeable share of the population, issues affecting this demographic are vital to both immigrants and nonimmigrants alike.

This research study focuses on first-generation immigrants in the Atlanta area. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews and observation of citizenship classes, I explore immigrants’ experiences adjusting to life in the United States, navigating immigration law, and interacting with the American legal system more generally. Findings from this study illustrate that the path to citizenship is arduous and often marked by frustrating bureaucratic indifference, deprivation of certain core rights, intense fear of institutionalized authority, structural racism, and prejudice. While many emphasize the undue challenges, which have characterized their immigration

experiences, others received support in their path towards citizenship and are inspired by their newfound sense of national belonging. There are several main research questions that I seek to answer through this project: What characterizes the immigrant experience in the Atlanta area? What distinguishes the immigrant whose experience is predominantly marked by fear and angst from that of the immigrant who receives support from insiders and is successful in their path towards resettlement? What defines the legal consciousness of immigrants?

Much of the conversation regarding immigration is often centered around policy and politics, but culture and values are also entrenched in these institutional interests. It is my hope that my project will underscore this, while telling the stories of an often-silenced demographic of individuals. At the crux of this thesis, and what I hope to underscore the most, is that the nature of the law and legal system in the United States is constructed in such a way that limits immigrant's access to nearly every aspect of the institution. While immigrants can and do successfully navigate the legal system, this is largely dependent on their access to insiders with greater knowledge of its innerworkings. What I have found is that immigrants often perceive the law and those who enforce it as capricious and unpredictable, not only as a result of perpetual changes that are made regarding immigration policy, but also discriminatory policing that unequally target Black immigrant communities. In their resettlement process, immigrants are likewise often situated as marginal to society at large, due to factors such as limited English proficiency or racial stereotypes. Finally, the immigration laws themselves are actually creating the problem of undocumented immigrants, for it is constructed in such a way that makes becoming "legal," extremely difficult and almost impossible.

I begin this study by discussing my initial interest in this topic and explicating some of the relevant literature regarding immigration and citizenship. I then describe the methodology I used in my approach to my own research and discuss my findings.

1.1 Personal Interest

My initial idea for this project stemmed from Sally Merry's book, *Getting Justice and Getting Even: Legal Consciousness Among Working-Class Americans* (1990), which I read in Dr. Peletz's course, Anthropology 391: Law, Discipline, and Social Justice in the spring of my junior year. Merry's study examines lower New England courts, focusing on working class Americans and their experiences with the court and mediation. She seeks to understand what draws an individual to use the court and in what situations they feel entitled to use the legal system. The litigants she examines are primarily white, native-born, and working class and while they are not highly educated or particularly powerful, they expect the support of the legal system when disputes arise that they believe infringe on their rights. Merry mentions that immigrant communities tend to interact with the legal system far differently than these long-established working-class communities do and I became interested in exploring this more in depth.

With a personal interest in immigration, as well as law, I saw this project as particularly relevant. I initially became passionate about immigrant rights through my participation in Project SHINE at Emory, which partners with refugee, immigrant, and New American communities in metro Atlanta, primarily through educational events. My own participation in the organization consisted of weekly tutoring at a school in Clarkston, GA, a community with a large refugee population. I later became involved in Emory Behind the Glass, where I am currently a pen pal with an inmate at Stewart detention center, an ICE detention center in Lumpkin, GA. In the future I hope to attend law school, where I am considering a career in immigration law so I can

help these communities more directly and effectively. My initial motivation for this project was to better understand how immigrant communities understand and interact with the law, to hopefully better discern the barriers that prevent many individuals from successfully utilizing the legal system. As my research progressed, the project has evolved beyond just the sphere of legal consciousness to include broader aspects of the immigrant experience in Atlanta. I was extremely moved by the conversations I had with immigrants living in the Atlanta area and felt it was important to share themes that ranged beyond those strictly relevant to legal consciousness. I hope that my project can shed light on the inspiring lives of these immigrants and the challenges they face, which are stories that often remain untold.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature on Legal Consciousness and Immigration

2.1 Legal Consciousness

Legal consciousness is a concept with increasing prominence in the study of law, particularly in the field of anthropology. Broadly speaking, legal consciousness can be defined as the way people understand and use the law. Consciousness is understood as what people conceive as the normal way of doing things, “their common sense understanding of the world (Merry 1990:5). One’s legal consciousness is both deliberate and subconscious and it is reflected through both action and discourse. In other words, legal consciousness is not solely based on court dates and interactions with law enforcement, but also on how an individual understands rights, entitlements, or potential legal disputes. Consciousness is developed through experience, but within the context of societal structures that define people’s lives (Merry 1990:5). Therefore, it is malleable and can change throughout one’s lifetime as they have new experiences within the legal system.

It is increasingly evident that the law expands into far more social spheres than just those associated with the legal institutions. It is important to not only discover how and by whom the law is used, but also when and by whom it is not used and in order to achieve this we must expand what we define as law to include contexts outside of formally legal institutions (Pew Research Center 2019; Migration Policy Institute 2018). This means also including contexts of families, schools, and neighborhoods, rather than just courts, law offices, or police stations. In other words, we increasingly turn “to commonplace events and transactions to seek the web of legality, conceiving of law not so much operating to shape social action but *as* social action” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:34).

While legal consciousness is broadly defined as how one understands and interacts with the law, there of course, exists variety in how scholars employ the term. There are three primary definitions of legal consciousness: legal consciousness as attitude, legal consciousness as epiphenomenon, and legal consciousness as cultural practice (Ewick and Silbey 1998:35-44). Scholars who conceptualize legal consciousness as attitude see the attitudes of individuals as determining social life and societal structures, such as the law. This framework suggests that all social groups, including family, corporations, legal intuitions, etc., emerge out of the aggregate actions of individuals (Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey 1998). Scholarship that follows this approach focuses mostly on how variation in belief and attitudes shape legal institutions. Legal consciousness as epiphenomenon takes the opposite perspective, seeing one’s legal consciousness as a by-product of the social structures that already exist. Consciousness as a social practice is a perspective developed by Ewick and Silbey, which combines different parts of these two definitions. Through their research they determined that the construction of legal consciousness is far more complex than what either the attitudinal or epiphenomenal approaches

account for. Rather, they propose a cultural analysis “that integrates human action and structural constraint” (Ewick and Silbey 1998:37). Through this lens they draw on a growing body of literature in sociology that attempts to reconcile dualisms such as the attitudinal and epiphenomenal approach. They see the relationship between one’s consciousness and societal structures as mutually defining, rather than oppositional. In other words, “society provides us with specific opportunities for thought and action,” and these resulting attitudes are ultimately reintegrated into the societal structure, sometimes changing the structure itself (Ewick and Silbey 1998:39). In my own work I draw upon Ewick and Silbey’s definition of legal consciousness as social practice. I seek to understand how immigrants’ individualized identities and access to resources influence their interactions with the legal system, while the structure of this system and immigration law itself likewise affects their perceptions and legal consciousness.

2.2 Accounts of US Immigration Law

Integral to the legal consciousness of immigrants within the United States is their personal experience with immigration law, which often affects their perception of the US legal system in its entirety. Immigration policy is undoubtedly a very controversial and divisive topic within the United States. Two seemingly irreconcilable assessments of its effectiveness exist. Some scholars portray laws that bar illegal immigration as powerless in the face of external economic and political forces that compel individuals to immigrate, while others recognize the law as restrictive to entry, making immigrants’ lives exceedingly difficult once they are here, and compelling them to leave (Coutin 1996:11).

Scholars who view immigration law as largely ineffective have generally measured the power of immigration either through one of two approaches, which Coutin (1996) defines as the “enforcement-oriented” method and the “interest-oriented method.” The enforcement-oriented

method determines the law's effectiveness based on its ability to prevent illegal immigration, which would conclude that the law is largely defective. However, they argue that this ineffectiveness is largely due to the government's unwillingness to commit the necessary resources to enforce these laws and that if they did so, the law would be effective in barring illegal immigration. Alternatively, the interest-oriented method explores how US immigration law serves the economic interests of powerful groups. Those who take this perspective argue that laws barring entry were never intended to actually prevent people from immigrating, but rather were intended to render those who immigrate as more exploitable workers. These immigrants benefit powerful economic and political groups in the capitalist system; therefore, these scholars argue that the leniency of the law has the purpose of fulfilling capitalist needs (Coutin 1996).

An alternative to the enforcement and interest-oriented approaches is the constitutional approach, which measures the power of immigration law according to its ability to constitute individuals into different immigration categories. This approach accounts for the effectiveness of these laws, in the sense that these categories often successfully make immigrant lives significantly more difficult. Immigrants repeatedly note how these laws have adversely affected their lives, which extends beyond just the traditional sphere of the law, to one's workplace, school, doctors, etc. These categories "differentiate those who lack valid documents from the rest of the population in both a categorical and material sense." (Coutin 1996:15).

There exists a predominant system of classification for immigrants and all such categories are "socially, culturally, and politically constructed" in order to "encapsulate the relationship of individuals to the state" (Getrich 2019:64). Current US immigration law includes four major classification categories: citizens, lawful permanent residents, nonimmigrants, and unauthorized immigrants. Citizens have full access to constitutional rights and duties, at least in theory,

whereas lawful permanent residents are those who the state grants official authorization to live and work in the US. Nonimmigrants enter the US temporarily for a specific purpose, such as working or attending school and unauthorized immigrants reside in the US without permission from the government. However, despite these categories, the history of immigration law in the US is marked by incoherence and instability, as are the policies produced, with new laws constantly shifting the way we define these categories. Coutin argues that one's immigration status is often mistakenly attributed as a personal characteristic, rather than a result of government policies (Coutin 2016:6). Despite these existing categories, in her study of teenagers from mixed status families in California, Getrich found that many of these individuals understood these distinctions largely in terms of those "who have papers" and those who do not (2019:62). Their legal consciousness often developed around these categories, where they emphasized a certain degree of otherness between themselves and those "without papers", while also identifying with them in a variety of ways.

2.3 Atlanta as a Site for Immigration

In the past several decades Atlanta has become an increasingly popular destination for recent immigrants. While city-wide policies have generally become more welcoming towards immigrant communities, ICE's enforcement of laws regarding undocumented immigrants is seemingly increasing. Today, Atlanta is a "major emerging" immigrant gateway, meaning it had a small immigrant population for most of the 20th century and only relatively recently has become a major destination for immigrant populations (McDaniel 2018:258). The first major influx of immigrants came to Atlanta prior to the 1996 Olympics in order to help build venues for the games. They were drawn to the city for the jobs in construction and agriculture, as well as the relatively low cost of living. Today, there are more undocumented immigrants living in the

state of Georgia than in New Mexico and Arizona combined (Rose 2018). According to Sean Gallagher, the head of ICE's field office in downtown Atlanta, undocumented immigrants who break the law are a top priority, but they now can arrest any undocumented immigrant they encounter. In fact, the number of undocumented immigrants arrested with no record more than tripled in 2017 in the Atlanta region, which was the biggest jump in the country (Rose 2018). According to Gallagher, local sheriffs will let their office know when they have undocumented individuals within their custody, allowing them to be detained by ICE. Unfortunately, judges in Georgia rule against asylum cases more than 90% of the time, which is one of the highest rates in the country (Rose 2018). The national average of immigrants who were denied asylum in 2019 was 71.6%, for comparison (TRAC Immigration 2020). As a result, once detained, one's ability to win a case in Georgia is very small. There has additionally been an increase in deportation by ICE in Atlanta over the last several years. In their annual reports, ICE reported 5,770 removals in 2016, 13,727 in 2018, and 14,473 in 2018 (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) 2021).

Recent events suggest that the difficult situation in Georgia has become even worse recently. In September 2020, an nurse working in a Georgia immigration detention center filed a whistleblower complaint alleging a lack of COVID-19 precautions, as well as the mass sterilization of immigrant women through forced hysterectomies and other sterilization procedures (Treisman 2020). The complaint against the Irwin County Detention Center in Ocilla, Georgia, reports that said procedures were done to such a degree that the accused doctor was called "the uterus collector" (Tucker 2020). While the investigation is still underway, the allegation is an eerie reminder of the violent history of sterilization towards those, "based on

bigoted ideas about what a “desirable” population should look like,” which historically has unfairly targeted immigrants (Deaderick 2020).

In the past decade, several Georgia laws have been passed which have made immigration law across the state increasingly punitive. Two of these policies warrant specific discussion in order to properly contextualize the experiences of Georgia immigrants: House Bill 87 and the 287(g) Program. House Bill 87, also known as the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act of 2011, was passed on April 14th, 2011 with the intention of intensifying anti-immigration laws. The Act includes several provisions, notably requiring private employers to use an employment eligibility verification system to ensure that prospective employees are eligible to work in the United States. It further gives law enforcement officers the authority to enforce federal immigration laws. If a police officer has probable cause to suspect the person has committed a crime, they are entitled to verify the suspect’s immigration status if the individual does not have proper state identification on their person. These provisions put undocumented immigrants in the state of Georgia at heightened risk for deportation.

The 287(g) program is a partnership initiative between state and local law enforcement and ICE, which enables trained local officers to enforce immigration laws under ICE supervision. The program has two models: The Jail Enforcement Model (JEM) and the Warrant Service Officer Model (WOM). In the JEM, trained officers identify and process undocumented immigrants who have been arrested, whereas in the WOM these individuals are only issued warrants. As of January 2021, ICE has 287(g) JEM agreements with 72 law enforcement agencies in 21 states and 287(g) WSO agreements with 76 law enforcement agencies in 11 states. Georgia specifically has existing 287(g) agreements with six different law enforcement agencies across the state: Floyd County Sheriff’s Office, Georgia Department of Corrections, Hall County

Sheriff's Office, Oconee County Sheriff's Office, Polk County Sheriff's Office, and Whitfield County Sheriff's Office, all of which have been implemented since 2019 (Ramsey et al. 2011). The program has been particularly stringent in Georgia, where the Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office alone has accounted for 4,262 foreign-born encounters in 2020, which is 25.2 percent of all 287(g) encounters nationwide (Telford 2021).

Through programs like these, Georgia's policies regarding immigration have become increasingly burdensome for immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented. However, while federal policies have become progressively more hostile towards immigrants, an increasing number of local municipal leaders, often in partnership with nonprofits, have introduced several "immigrant friendly" initiatives (McDaniel 2018). A prominent example of such initiatives is the "welcoming city" framework that was first created by Welcoming America, a nonprofit based in Decatur, Georgia. "Welcoming cities" agree to implement integration strategies with five components: advance the community's global welcoming profile, ensure equitable access to basic services, expand economic opportunity, build immigrant leadership, engagement, and inclusion, and foster a knowledgeable, safe, and connected community. As is the case with Atlanta, state and federal level immigration policy proposals and legislation are often at odds with these concepts promoted by welcoming cities at a local level (McDaniel 2018). Notably, several Atlanta mayors have openly opposed many of President Trump's policies, particularly his zero-tolerance policy, which led to the separation of many children from their parents. Discourse within Atlanta in support of these more welcoming policies often centers around the city's historical role in the Civil Rights Movement, with a continued commitment towards fostering diversity (McDaniel 2018).

2.4 The Punitive Turn and the Rise of the Carceral State

Since the early 1970s, we have seen a punitive turn in the United States that spans across both narrow legal realms, as well as in more encompassing cultural-political arenas. Such trends have likewise spread into the sphere of immigration law. One of the most striking trends in post-1960s America has been the rise of the “carceral state,” which is a political organization where three conditions obtain:

First, incarceration becomes the preferred sanctions for a growing number of infractions. Second, official bureaucracies and civil society collude to intensify enforcement, enhance penalties, and keep the prison system growing. Third, a bloated prison system begins to supply norms for other institutions of government: surveillance becomes routine, and a crime-centered approach shapes the activities of functionaries working in offices unrelated to the penitentiary” (Lancaster 2011:141).

The U.S. prison population has undergone a rapid population increase since the early 1970s, spiking from 161 per 100,000 in 1972 to 639 per 100,000 in 2018 (Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014:33; Prison Population Rate 2018). This change is particularly noteworthy when compared to other countries in the Western world. In fact, the U.S. imprisons five to ten times more people per capita than do other developed democracies and claims about 25 percent of the world’s prisoners, despite only comprising five percent of the world’s population (Lancaster 2011:142). If recent incarceration rates remain stagnant, 1 in every 15 Americans will be imprisoned during their lifetime, numbers that “have no precedent, not even in the postslavery period, when southern states first organized systems of compulsory prison labor as a substitute for slavery, or during Jim Crow” (Lancaster 2011:143). Furthermore, individuals are increasingly being imprisoned for nonviolent crimes, notably drug offenses, which are likewise receiving more punitive sentences. Drug offenses alone account for two thirds of the increase in federal inmates and more than half of the rise in state prisoners between 1985 and 2000, which can be grounds for deportation and has further contributed in constructing the image of the immigrant as

one who poses a threat to American safety and values (Alexander 2010:60; Hernández 2008). This boom in incarceration has been accompanied by cutbacks in welfare and attacks on affirmative action, largely stemming from Reagan's campaign rhetoric, in which crime and welfare were major themes (Alexander 2010:48).

Such trends can likewise be seen in relation to immigration law and injustices of immigration control efforts (Batista 2014). Changes in immigration control "have been part of a larger process that utilizes criminalization, racialization, confinement, and barriers to marginalize minorities" (Batista 2014:3). The militarization of the border, heightened policing of immigrant communities, and the spike in use of immigration detention centers all reflect the ways in which the punitive turn has been applied to immigration (Batista 2014). However, in discussions of mass incarceration immigrant detainees are often overlooked because they are incarcerated outside of the criminal court system (Hernández 2008:40).

In the mid-1990s border militarization was intensified with the enactment of several acts, including Operation Gatekeeper, Operation Hold the Line, and Operation Rio Grande, which heightened security at the United States-Mexican border. Such militarization efforts were further escalated after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the subsequent launching of the "war on terror," which vastly expanded federal authority to detain noncitizens (Hernández 2008: 37). As a result of these efforts, the immigrant experience, particularly regarding undocumented border crossing, was completely transformed. Prior to militarization, border crossing was relatively stable and fluid and Mexican workers would migrate to the US for seasonal employment and then return to Mexico. However, increased policing and border patrol made border crossing increasingly dangerous, as immigrants now faced a heightened risk of family separation and violence (Batista 2014:15). Militarization of the border has further encroached

into internal immigrant communities, as we have seen primarily through heavily policing of African American and Latino communities, which often includes ICE raids. The punitive turn has also resulted in increased surveillance through institutions not associated with the criminal justice system, which has been applied to immigration control (Batista 2014:3). Border enforcement is no longer centralized in government agencies such as ICE, but is now diffused to the local level where both local police and civilians are likewise playing a role in the surveillance of immigrants and the enforcement of immigration law (Batista 2014:15). This reflects a larger trend of neoliberalism policies, which has led to re-regulation and a shift in the state's sphere of control (Hiemstra 2010:76).

In these ways, immigration law has been growing increasingly stringent for a number of decades and it is worth noting that the anti-immigration policies that we so strongly associate with the Trump administration were ramped up under Obama in rather draconian ways, as well. The Pew Research Center reports that in 2018, the most recent year for which complete data is available, Trump deported 337,287 immigrants, which was a 17% increase from the previous year but remained below the levels recorded during much of the Obama administration, which includes a three year period from 2012-2014 where he deported more than 400,000 immigrants per year (Gramlich 2020). During his campaign, Obama further perpetuated several misconceptions about immigration control, notably that if the government spends enough money on fences, barriers, and other technology, the heightened danger of border crossing will stop people from illegally immigrating (De León and Wells 2015). Close to two decades have research has shown that such efforts have only minimal effect in border crossing deterrence and that social and economic factors are what primarily influence such trends (De León and Wells 2015). Despite this, President Barack Obama perpetuated this misconception on several

occasions, notably in his State of the Union address on February 12, 2013, where he argued: “Real reform means strong border security, and we can build on the progress my administration has already made—putting more boots on the southern border than at any time in our history and reducing illegal crossings to their lowest levels in 40 years” (De León and Wells 2015). In other words, it is not just Trump or the Republican party, but even arguably left-leaning, social-justice oriented types, like Obama who have contributed to the increasingly punitive nature of immigration policy ((Alexander 2020).

2.5 Anti-Blackness

Anti-Blackness, the “system of beliefs and practices that attack, erode, and limit the humanity of Black people,” has affected the trajectory of immigration in the US both through structural racism in immigration policing, as well as biases in immigration policy itself (Carruthers 2018:4). Many immigrants, particularly Black immigrants, have to navigate the realities of the racialized police state when they arrive to the United States, which is exasperated given the close proximity in which the police work with immigration authorities. In fact, working-class Black male deportees are often first taken into custody by criminal justice authorities, rather than immigration authorities themselves (Golash-Boza 2017:139). This is particularly evident within Dominican and Jamaican communities for whom a police interaction is almost always the preliminary step in their eventual deportation. This is not only a reflection of systemic racism within immigration policing, but also its gendered aspect. As a result, Black and Latino men are most heavily targeted by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and law enforcement (Golash-Boza 2016). In her 2017 study, Tanya Golash-Boza examined Dominican and Jamaican male deportees who arrived in the United states prior to the age of 18 in an attempt to pinpoint why these national origin groups are more likely to be deported on

criminal grounds and more likely to be deported as legal permanent residents than other groups. Jamaican and Dominican legal permanent residents are a startling five times more likely to be deported than other legal permanent residents (Golash-Boza 2017:143). She finds that these immigrant groups are more likely to arrive and settle within predominantly Black neighborhoods, where heavy policing affects their ability to incorporate into their community. She ultimately concludes that, “the problems they experience and the troubles they got into were a result of both the choices they made and the opportunities they had. The consequences they faced were a result of the punitive nature of criminal and immigration law enforcement in the United States, whose draconian nature became the defining factor in their lives” (2017:155).

Small drug charges in their youth often led to their deportation years later as more stringent immigration laws were adapted, likewise lessening the requirements for judges to rule in favor of deportation. While previous scholars have argued that immigrants’ culture and ethnic ties can somewhat protect them from the structural barriers in their neighborhoods, Golash-Boza rejects such assertions based on her findings that Black and Latino immigrant youth can face deportation regardless of the extent of their cultural ties (2017:141).

Systemic racism not only affects immigrants by the level of policing they are subjected to regarding criminal laws, but also through the racial biases prevalent within immigration policy itself and the discriminatory fashion in which these policies are enforced. As of 2017, there were 10.5 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S., which accounts for 3.2% of the national population and far surpasses the number of individuals the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is capable of deporting (Budiman 2020). The DHS has an internal goal of deporting four hundred thousand people a year. If they reached this goal and there were no new undocumented immigrants, it would take the DHS 30 years to deport eleven million undocumented immigrants

(Golash-Boza 2012:83). As a result, the DHS must target certain people to deport, which is theoretically supposed to be those who are considered to be the most dangerous. However, the main targets of immigration policy enforcement turn out to be Afro-Caribbean small-time drug peddlers and Latino undocumented workers (Golash-Boza 2012:83).

While the DHS's main goal is supposedly to protect the country from terrorism, it is noteworthy that they very rarely deport individuals to the countries that the U.S. identifies as sponsoring terrorism: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Cuba, North Korea, and Sudan. For example, in 2007, 319,382 people were deported in total and among these were only 49 Iranians, 27 Iraqis, 40 Syrians, 76 Cubans, and 13 Sudanese (Golash-Boza 2012:83). Rather, most deportees were often originally from Western countries, with whom the U.S. maintains harmonious relations. The U.S. is further not deporting people to the countries that send the most immigrants—China, India, Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam—with the exception of Mexico. In 2009, 393,289 people were deported, 96 percent of whom were Latin Americans (Golash-Boza 2012:84). Furthermore, recent trends have shown an increase in deportation overall, with the number of people deported in the 2012, 2018, and 2019 fiscal years being 100,695, 159,940, and 171,445, respectively (2019 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics). It is also worth noting that the Department of Homeland Security reports these statistics on their website in a table entitled “Aliens Returned by Region and Country of Nationality,” rather than using the term “undocumented immigrants” or “deported.” This language not only dehumanizes the individuals by using the offensive terminology of “alien,” but the language “return,” further suggests that the deportation is in some way helpful or appreciated by the immigrants in question.

The disproportionate targeting of these groups largely has to do with stereotypes prevalent within the U.S., particularly the association of “Mexicanness” with illegality (Golash-Boza

2012:84). As a result, Mexican immigrants are more likely to be stopped by authorities, as are other Central Americans. Such matters are a clear demonstration of racism in immigration policy and enforcement. Kevin Johnson argues that “a complex, often volatile, relationship exists between racism against citizens and racism against noncitizens” due to the treatment of these individuals under U.S. immigration laws (Johnson 2004:13). Golash Boza extends this argument beyond the fact that noncitizens are denied the basic human rights guaranteed to citizens, but Black and Latino noncitizens are further the disproportionate targets of immigration law enforcement, compared to white or Asians (Golash-Boza 2012:84). Golash-Boza additionally notes that noncitizens from Latin America and the Caribbean are more likely to be victims of immigration policies than those from Europe or Asia, even when we control their relative proportions in the general population. This is a largely a reflection of systemic racism within the United States, which allows for these laws to reproduce racial inequalities based on existing prejudice from those who enforce and/or benefit from them, even if the laws themselves do not explicitly use racist language.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My research methods relied primarily on interviews I conducted with first generation immigrants currently living in the Atlanta area, as well as one interview with immigration attorney and professor at Emory Law School, Charles Kuck. These interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 30-90 minutes in length. I recruited participants by contacting various organizations that provide immigrant services and asking them to disseminate a request for participants. I also used snowball sampling to recruit new participants from past interviewees. All necessary approvals were applied for and granted by the Emory University Institutional

Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. The Emory IRB determined that this study met the criteria for exemption from further IRB review.

Interview topics generally covered one's general background and immigration story, perspective and experience regarding U.S. immigration law, and any experiences with the law/legal system more broadly. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility to explore any new and interesting topics that arose throughout these conversations. In total, I conducted 13 total interviews—12 with immigrants and one with immigration expert, Charles Kuck. Nine out of the twelve interviews were recorded and transcribed using a transcription app (Otter.ai), for which I subsequently replaced the interviewee names with pseudonyms. The remaining three interviews were conducted with the assistance of the instructor of a citizenship class I had the opportunity to observe. I chose not to record these and to instead take extensive notes, as they were more conversational in nature and I felt the interviewees would be more comfortable without my recording our conversation. I further observed six, two-hour long citizenship classes that are offered by a local nonprofit agency. When analyzing the interviews and citizenship classes, I looked for common themes within my conversations, points that aligned or contrasted with aspects of my literature review, as well as interesting concepts and issues that arose in special case interviews. The following table shows the demographics of the interview participants.

Table 1: Interview Participants (N=12)

Name	Gender	Age Category	Country of Origin
Jennifer	Female	20-40	Central America (asked me to remove specific country)
Anna	Female	20-40	Mexico
Sarah	Female	20-40	Venezuela
Carlos	Male	50-70	Venezuela
Grace	Female	50-70	Congo
Ben	Male	20-40	Congo
Liam	Male	40-60	Myanmar
John	Male	20-40	Taiwan
Maria	Female	40-60	Mexico
Isaac	Male	40-60	Sudan
Farid	Male	40-60	Syria
Nicholas	Male	40-60	Iraq

Chapter 4: “Jennifer”

In order to give a more holistic portrait of some of the common experiences shared among immigrants living within Atlanta, I have chosen to delve more deeply into the lives of two of the individuals I spoke with, Jennifer and Anna, which I will cover in the next two chapters. It is my hope that their stories will put real voices behind these immigrant experiences, which can otherwise feel distant to those of us not directly affected.

Jennifer's friendliness was apparent before I even had the chance to speak with her. She was the first person to reach out to me as a willing participant and also the first person I interviewed. She was excited to contribute to my research and this attitude carried throughout our phone call, during which she was extremely kind and open about her experiences as a US immigrant.

Jennifer's immigration story starts out somewhat uniquely. While she grew up in a country in Central America, the specific name of which she asked me not to include, she was actually born in the U.S. When Jennifer's mother was pregnant, she was of advanced maternal age and also had other preexisting health conditions, which heightened the risk of her pregnancy. With the poor healthcare they had in their home country, her parents feared that if there were any complications, neither Jennifer nor her mother would get the care that they would need. At the time, her mother and father were both green card holders, so they opted to give birth at a hospital in the United States. Jennifer also mentioned that there was the added component of knowing the access that she would have to school and education that wouldn't be available to her without citizenship.

Jennifer remembers that "it was kind of like an assumption growing up, because I knew that I had U.S. citizenship, that at some point I would immigrate." In the country where she grew up, there was always an outflux of students who came to the US after high school to pursue higher education, many of whom would eventually return. Growing up, Jennifer always saw herself as having this same identity as this subset of her peers, but this was somewhat derailed when her grandmother fell very ill in 2006 and needed brain surgery. As a result, in 2007 at the age of 19, Jennifer moved to Miami, Florida in order to help care for her, which forced her to defer her education for a semester. She moved into a joint household with her aunt and

grandparents, with other family members periodically visiting to assist with caring for her grandparents. These circumstances would come to largely define Jennifer's initial experiences living in the US.

The grim circumstances under which Jennifer immigrated characterized these early months as a period marked by uncertainty, anxiety, and sadness. The deferral of her freshmen year of college left her feeling very left behind and unsure whether she would be able to catch up. She describes feelings of "possibly [her] own lost potential, definitely anticipation, and nervousness, sadness at leaving [her] family, and fear of the unknown." Had her grandmother not been ill, she thinks the situation would have been defined a lot more by excitement.

Despite travelling to the U.S. throughout her childhood, Jennifer recalls that she still experienced culture shock when she first arrived to live in the U.S. permanently. Particularly striking was the constant, high energy, culture that exists in the U.S., especially in Miami. A distinct memory that Jennifer carries with her from those initial months has to do with the ambient light which was always radiating on the main street they lived on. "You know, you never really think about it, but it was really jarring, because in the middle of the night it would still be really bright." She remembers noticing a stark difference in pace between the lifestyles of individuals in the U.S., where everything is "always on, it's always on the go, and it's always moving." Growing up in Central America, life seemed to move slower, with less urgency to always be connected. And of course, she greatly missed the family connection she had in her home country, but "the active pangs of loss or change have lessened in time" as Jennifer began to foster new social networks in the U.S.

Given that she was living with just her family, Jennifer experienced a lot of social isolation during her first few months in the U.S., as well as throughout the beginning of college.

She was largely unable to communicate with friends, which was an unexpected hardship at the time and made building a social network particularly challenging. This was compounded by the fact that she was a commuter student at her university, which was an additional barrier between Jennifer and her peers, who were largely living on campus. Over time she was able to find a handful of friends who she became close with, but her more durable friendships came from her first workplace at Jacksonville Memorial Hospital where she “really started to feel settled and could see [her]self actually staying in the U.S.”

During her time living in Miami, Jennifer felt predominantly welcomed and accepted, which she credits mainly to the diversity of the area which “is composed of so many different immigrants of predominantly Hispanic and Latino origin.” As a result, Jennifer never really noticed or felt otherness, outside of her travels to other parts of the country. Jennifer is Hispanic and Chinese and as a biracial individual, she says that “you know, the ‘well what are you?’ question comes up a lot.” She specifically remembers an experience she had in Salt Lake City, Utah, where she was travelling with her then-boyfriend, now-husband, who is Indian American. “A group of very large, *very* big white guys” were staring at the two of them and Jennifer felt very unsafe in that moment. She has felt these feelings of otherness most frequently in the Midwest, where “there’s always a sense of being hyperaware and getting looks at stores.” While her most distinct experiences occurred in rural southern areas or parts of the Midwest, there are still times where she feels this way in the Atlanta area. She says that she is “very intentional” with where she goes and where she spends her time. She always tries “to be in communities of color or proximally to them” to mitigate these feelings of otherness, but overall, she does feel that Atlanta is very diverse and generally welcoming to immigrants.

Given her citizenship, Jennifer has been fortunate enough to avoid any direct interaction herself with US immigration, but she has seen hardships with the system through the lens of friends who have immigrated, who have found that “it is incredibly challenging and frustrating and confusing.” Even her friends who came on student visas faced a lot of difficulties navigating the U.S. immigration system as young adults and keeping track of the requirements needed to maintain their visa status. Some of these friends were left essentially undocumented for a period of time while they were going through these lapses in their visa statuses, which made it very difficult to find a workplace who would accommodate them. One of her friends in particular was essentially being taken advantage of by an employer who was paying her under the table for the work she was doing. She was also a student at the time, in addition to working 40 hours a week for this employer. Unfortunately for her friend, and many others in her position, their employment options are so limited as undocumented residents that they feel they have little escape from such treatment. It was very difficult for Jennifer to watch her friends go through such experiences when there was seemingly nothing she could do to help.

After reflecting on some of the experiences of her friends, I asked Jennifer if she thinks it is too difficult to gain U.S. citizenship the way the system is currently organized. She said yes, largely because the process relies so heavily on the local country and its individual immigration offices. In her experience, these local offices are responsible for the screenings, interviews, and other processes required to acquire the status to travel to the U.S. Jennifer thinks that “there’s inherent bias in that situation and that people are not treated fairly in the process.” She has seen and heard of rampant corruption in other countries around getting a visa, where “some people kind of have to pay their local immigration or there’s like a quid pro quo type of system that’s

developed around it.” She sees these processes as both very difficult and very unfair towards those forced to interact with them in order to travel or immigrate.

While Jennifer has had fairly minimal interactions with U.S. immigration law, her family has had relatively extensive interactions with the U.S. legal system more broadly, which has informed her perceptions of the system. Specifically, Jennifer notes that her brother has been involved with a number of legal issues, which have affected her by proxy. Jennifer’s brother suffers from mental health disorders, including bipolar disorder and substance abuse issues, which have ultimately led him to have a number of interactions with the law and legal system. These experiences have been difficult for their entire family, particularly Jennifer who has been heavily involved throughout the entire process. While she was navigating these issues with her brother, Jennifer began her Master’s in Public Health, so her brother’s legal troubles quickly became “a huge emotional burden.” When these issues first arose, Jennifer’s brother was living in Phoenix, Arizona, where he was ultimately incarcerated for a period of time. Jennifer recalls that, “it felt impossible to try to see what his actual court dates were, what his pleas were, it was impossible to get in touch with the public defenders, and they have not always seemed invested in his wellbeing.” Today he is currently incarcerated in Gwinnett, Georgia, where “it’s essentially the same story,” the system feels convoluted and distant, making it extremely challenging for Jennifer to help her brother.

Jennifer’s perception of the U.S. legal system as a whole has been colored by these negative experiences, which “left a bit of a sour taste and skepticism and certainly a lot of feelings of frustration and ineptitude.” Jennifer recognizes that she is not a person of low educational status, but she is still unable to navigate this system, which has made her particularly skeptical. After reflecting on these experiences, Jennifer said that “I don’t know that I would

have faith or confidence in the system if I needed to rely on it.” When I asked if she thinks she would still feel this way had she not had this experience with her brother, Jennifer resolved that she “would have been less skeptical probably before 2016.” In the post-Trump era, she has had a lot of “‘come to Jesus’ moments about all of the systemic issues that exists,” which have also contributed to her distrust of the system.

Jennifer further added that she feels the experience her family had with the court system was in part a consequence of their status as immigrants.

I think in general the system does not function well. Well rather, I’ll take that back. I think it’s functioning for exactly the purpose that it was designed for, which is to incarcerate and punish low income and people of color and I think it does an excellent job of that. That said, I do not think it’s right, I do not think it’s appropriate.

While she recognizes that this is a systemic issue that affects both citizens and noncitizens, she does believe that their immigrant identity played a role in how their experience played out.

My parents have not ever been able to assist [her brother] with his mental health needs or his legal needs and so, I think them not being here, them not knowing the system, me not knowing the system, like all of that has compounded factors. Like if we had been able to figure out how to get him better access or if we had been able to figure out how to declare guardianship for him where we would make decisions, I think that would have been different had we grown up here or we knew more about the system.

Chapter 5: “Anna”

Anna is a 29-year-old woman who, like so many others, moved to the United States to pursue higher education. Several years ago, Anna left her home in Mexico to begin her pursuit towards a Master’s in Public Health at a prestigious private university in the U.S. Southeast. She came alone, leaving behind her family who all remain in Mexico. While she had already received her M.D. in Mexico, she later decided she wanted to pursue a career in public health and quickly learned that the best place to get an education in this field is in the U.S. When I asked why she chose Atlanta specifically, she said that she could not handle the colder climate of many of her

other potential schools. This was one of the few factors that Anna had the ability to control when she immigrated.

Anna grew up in a city in Mexico located close to the U.S. border, so she came to the U.S. frequently for vacations throughout her childhood. When she first arrived to move here permanently, she came a few days before her school orientation, along with her parents. Her university hosted an orientation specifically for international students, which helped Anna to connect with others in a similar position to her almost immediately. She met other Spanish speakers, with whom she quickly became close friends with. While Anna speaks English fluently, “it is different to be able to communicate with somebody in your own language” and finding this is what she identified to be the most helpful aspect in her transition to the U.S. Outside of her new friends from her university, Anna quickly discovered that there is a large Hispanic community in Atlanta, which helped her find places to go that felt more familiar to her. As a whole, Anna perceives her transition to the U.S. as relatively smooth and after learning her way around she “thought it felt pretty normal.” What she misses the most about Mexico is “the family and the food,” but in terms of food, she’s been able to find some hidden gems here in Atlanta that somewhat fill that void.

Emigrating from Mexico after 2015, Anna says she and her family were acutely aware of the controversial politics surrounding immigration within the US, the rhetoric of which often centers around Mexico specifically. As a young, light-skinned, female, in many ways Anna does not fit the stereotypical Mexican identity. She believes that if this wasn’t the case, she likely would have felt more hostility as an immigrant in Atlanta. She has generally found Atlanta to be a welcoming place for immigrants and feels more hostility in more rural areas of Georgia.

However, she notes that often times when she is speaking Spanish with her friends, she notices the people around them staring.

You get those looks of like, ‘who’s speaking Spanish?’ and then they kind of see whoever is speaking and they don’t understand why we’re speaking Spanish because we don’t fit the idea of what somebody should look like that would speak Spanish. So, I think we get away with it, but it’s just because of that.

When Anna came to the U.S. to pursue her graduate degree, she came on a student visa, which has led to some challenges, particularly in terms of employment. She notes that getting the visa originally was not a difficult process for her, since she has had a US visa since the age of 10. However, what made the process more burdensome was the limitations she had on where she could work. Because of restrictions from her visa, Anna, along with other international students in her same position, could essentially only work through an Emory program with extremely competitive admissions. This left Anna and many others unable to get a part time job while pursuing their education, which prevented them from gaining the necessary experience for their future careers. For this reason, Anna felt that her status as an immigrant caused her to fall behind relative to her peers with citizenship. Since then, she feels that these requirements have come to feel even more restricting, in the sense that she is increasingly aware of the limitations on the length of time she is allowed to stay and how far in advance she needs to apply to renew her status. Recent developments, such as travel restrictions due to Covid-19 and increasingly anti-immigrant rhetoric, have exacerbated these emotions. She specifically notes the pushback against immigrants who are allegedly taking away jobs from US citizens, to which Anna adds, “I don’t know which jobs they are talking about!” She ultimately concludes that “it’s become more of a strain and more of a stressful situation, the closer that I have gotten to finishing my Master’s.” Fortunately for Anna, she recently got engaged to a US citizen who she will be marrying next year, which will give her US citizenship and relieve her of these burdensome immigration

restrictions. She met her spouse about two months after her arrival to the US, which she also credits as helping with her transition.

When I asked Anna about any legal problems she has experienced outside of her encounters with immigration law, she recalled being pulled over while she was driving, shortly after arriving in Atlanta. She brought her car from Mexico, which was a model not sold in the US that also had a Mexican license plate. Furthermore, Anna had not yet gotten a US driver's license, so she was still driving with her Mexican license. While this was all completely legal, given that immigrants are allowed to drive their vehicles and with their foreign licenses for a one month after arriving in the state of Georgia, Anna recalls that she was very worried about how the officer would handle the situation. "You know that maybe not all police officers know the state, like know all the regulations or know all the laws about how international people can move around. So you might end up in a bit more of bind, where the officer is going to be like, "well, you don't have a license right?" Fortunately for Anna, after running her papers, the officer didn't give her any trouble. She speculates that he saw that she was a student and decided to give her a pass because of this.

I later asked Anna if a potential legal dispute or issue were to ever arise, if she would feel comfortable taking legal action. Despite having relatively positive experiences with the US legal system thus far, she says that she would feel comfortable utilizing the system herself only because her fiancé's dad is a lawyer, specifically a real estate attorney. "So, I feel that I am at ease because I'm in that privileged position of knowing somebody that has an idea about it or that they are able to put me in contact with somebody who knows about it." If she didn't have her fiancé's father in such a position, she doesn't think she would know how to navigate the system herself and doesn't think it is accessible to the vast majority of people. Aside from the

barrier of not understanding how the system works, Anna carries with her the perspective that Mexicans employ with regard to legal disputes. “In Mexico, you don’t usually do lawsuits or stuff like that, they are just things that are very expensive, and you just usually don’t, it’s not as big of a system as you see here. So I don’t think I would be willing to get into it because I would be feeling like, ‘oh it’s gonna be expensive, it’s gonna be so much time and like, I just don’t even want to’ so I just wouldn’t do it.” She suggests that having more individuals who speak the native languages of these immigrant groups working in various positions throughout the legal system may help to increase its accessibility. Speaking a common language is important “because it does help bridge a barrier outside of just understanding, one of trust.” “People just directly trust others who speak the same language.” Furthermore, Anna stresses the importance of offering legal guidance in areas that feel safe to these individuals, such as community centers. When people have to venture into areas where they feel out of place or intimidated to seek important information, it can further impede this information from being disseminated.

Chapter 6: Citizenship Class

In *Buddha is Hiding* (2003), Aihwa Ong discusses her own experience attending citizenship classes and what this experience taught her about “becoming American.” Inspired by this aspect of Ong’s study, I was eager to see what these classes entailed in Atlanta and if this could tell me anything about what citizenship means for immigrants in the area. As a result, I reached out to several organizations that provide citizenship classes and asked if they would allow me to observe. While organizations offering in-person classes regrettably declined my request due to limited capacities because of COVID-19 restrictions, one citizenship teacher, Ms. Diane, was delighted by my request and offered me the opportunity to join their class sessions, which took place on Zoom twice a week for two hours each. In her response, Ms. Diane

explained that “the students are very different, with fascinating stories about their journey to the U.S. They are largely from Mexico and Central America.” She further assured that I “will be inspired by their motivation to become U.S. citizens.” From this point on, I began attending their class sessions twice a week throughout the month of January, from which I gained valuable insight from their stories and perspectives on American government and politics.

In the first class I attended, I was struck by the group’s intimacy and friendly disposition. The class was quite small, with only six students, one teacher, and me logged on to the Zoom session. In fact, one of the six students didn’t join until 30 minutes into the class, so for the first half hour there were only five students in attendance. This particular class is comprised only of students from Latin America and is exceptional in the sense that most of them are college educated. According to Ms. Diane, the normal classroom setting has about 30 students, many functionally illiterate from Mexico and Central America. “They are the invisible people that cut your grass and scrub your toilets and the most rewarding ones to help.” The class began with chatter amongst the students and Ms. Diane. One student from Venezuela was even cooking a dinner of “arepas,” which she explained to me was a type of food made from ground cornmeal—“sort of like a special Hispanic crepe.” Ms. Diane kindly introduced me to the group, who all welcomed me with waves and hellos. She then checked in individually with each student about when they are eligible to apply for their citizenship, explaining to me that each of them must have their green card for five years before they are eligible for citizenship, which they can apply for 90 days in advance. She further explained that as of December 1st, 2020, the Trump administration revised the naturalization civics test to be comprised of 20 questions, rather than 10, with more potential questions that could be asked. The group is therefore studying for a

different test than they were studying for last semester and Ms. Diane sent out a copy of the potential questions and correct responses to each of us prior to the start of class.

Every class session follows roughly the same format—the first hour or so is spent discussing the news and current events and the remainder is spent reviewing the specific questions that may appear on the citizenship test. This structure alone stood out to me, as it is obvious that the purpose of the class goes far beyond providing these individuals with the tools required to pass the citizenship test. Rather this is a civics class, with the intention of producing informed future voters. In fact, this is something that is frequently emphasized throughout the class sessions. On more than one occasion I have heard Ms. Diane say something along the lines of “you won’t be asked this on the test, but I want you to know this and it is important that you know this because you are all future voters.” At the onset of one class, one of the students excitedly held up a “future voter” sticker for the class to see. “Ms. Diane, look what my husband gave to me!” She was overjoyed. These students do not just want to be U.S. citizens, they want to be productive, informed, contributing U.S. citizens.

Ms. Diane fosters a class environment that is both lively and engaging—often asking probing discussion questions or showing relevant video clips. The class has come to refer to the recent political events in the U.S. as its own “telenovela,” a Spanish word which translates to “soap opera.” When Ms. Diane pulls up a news article to share with the class, she will often say “you need to know this to keep up with the telenovela!” before discussing the innerworkings of Trump’s impeachment, or other similarly gripping news stories. During discussion of current events and governmental structure, Ms. Diane often makes an effort to involve comparisons between the United States and the countries of origin of her students. Such contributions help to conceptualize the framework of government that these immigrants lived within for most of their

lives, as is the case of the students in this particular class. It is obvious that different cultural backgrounds affect the political consciousness in which they view U.S. politics. One example of this that was particularly striking occurred during our discussion of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building that occurred on January 6, 2021. One student from Venezuela said when she heard the news of the insurrection and violent attack, she started crying. “I left Venezuela so I would no longer have to experience this, but here it is!” The teacher later asked the class if they thought these groups would continue to conduct similar demonstrations following the presidential transfer of power. Another Venezuelan student said no. “There will be a few months of tension and then it will deescalate. Their reason for protesting will be gone.” “It’s going to fade out, but it’s going to take time.” He bases such predictions on his own experiences in Venezuela, where he protested a handful of times himself. After several protests to no avail, “you grow tired and immigrate to a new country.” He defeatedly concedes that “we gave up on our country.” Those who had the means left Venezuela, only worsening the national turmoil.

My biggest takeaway from attending these classes was the degree to which these individuals are educated on the current state of U.S. politics and the innerworkings of the American government. They certainly know more than the average American voter, which was obvious in their fervent discussions of current events. An illustrative example of this occurred during yet another discussion regarding Trump’s impeachment hearing. After debating whether or not we thought he should be convicted, Ms. Diane explained what would theoretically occur if he was—Vice President Pence would serve in his place. She then asked me who would be in command if the President and the Vice President could not serve. “This will show you how good they are” she assured me. Frankly, I had no idea. I took a guess and said that it was the Secretary of State, which was wrong. All of the students chimed in that it is in fact, the Speaker of the

House. “I always tell them that after this class, they will know more than the gringos!” Ms. Diane said cheekily.

These immigrants certainly know vastly more about American politics than the average U.S. citizen, which is not only the result of Ms. Diane’s effective teaching and the students’ determination to learn, but in many ways such an understanding is required by the very nature of the citizenship test. As of December 2020, the U.S citizenship test requires you to answer 20 questions from a list of 128 potential questions, of which you must answer at least 60% correctly. Some of the questions are relatively simple, but others are more challenging. Some examples of the 128 potential questions are “What is the purpose of the 10th Amendment?” “What war did the Americans fight to win independence from Britain” and “There were 13 original states. Name five.” In a survey released October 3, 2018 by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation that sampled 1,000 American adults, they found that only 36 percent actually passed the test (Escobar 2018). While the content itself is evidently quite challenging, the main caveat is that the test is conducted completely in English and applicants must prove English fluency in order to successfully pass. This does not only mean that they must understand and be able to respond to each of the 128 questions that could be asked, but they further must be able to fluently converse with their immigration officer, pass a literacy test, and be capable of defining any vocabulary used in the questions leading up to the civics test itself. By this I mean the opening questions such as, “what is your current legal name?” “what date did you become a lawful permanent resident?” “what is your country of birth” or “have you ever been a member of the communist party?” The immigration officer further has the right to asks the applicant to define any of the words in these questions to ensure comprehension. For many immigrants who have just recently begun to learn English this is understandably a very challenging task.

While the process of applying for citizenship and adjusting to life in the U.S. can be extremely intimidating, services such as these classes, with the help of dedicated and passionate individuals like Ms. Diane, can have an enormous impact on the lives of immigrants. It not only provides them with a sense of community among other immigrants in the area, but also an immigration expert, mentor, and friend who is in their corner. Ms. Diane connected me to several of the individuals I spoke with for this project, and almost every single one of them mentioned her by name when I asked who or what was most helpful throughout their adjustment to the U.S. One individual said no other service can even compare to the help she provided him.

[Diane]. She's the only support I got. For the last eight years I've been here this woman has supported me, she has helped me to find a lawyer, she has been with me throughout all of the process, sometimes she has even paid some fees. I don't know how she does it. And that's wonderful, because I think also when God puts you in some situation, he is always gonna provide in some way. He is going to give you the minimum of what you need to survive, and she is one of the people he put in my life, for the last eight years.

It is clear the impact Ms. Diane and the nonprofit organization more generally, has had on the lives of these people. From citizenship classes, to legal services, to a sense of community in a new and unfamiliar place, such services have been formative for so many immigrants. Observing these classes and seeing the impact one person was able to have on countless immigration journeys was truly inspiring and further impassioned me to share the stories of these individuals.

Chapter 7: Results and Discussion

What follows is an analysis of the interviews and class observations according to the previous themes outlined in the literature review, commonalities identified among the interviews, and new themes that emerged during specific interviews.

7.1 National Belonging and the Ambivalence of Citizenship

Many immigrants lack a sense of belonging, particularly when they emigrate from a country they cannot return to. This was the case for Grace, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who immigrated to the United States between 1995 and 2005, along with her eight-year-old son and her sister's family. The six of them were rescued by the UN, who had declared a genocide in the Congo against the people of Grace's tribe, the Tutsis. After 18 months in hiding, Grace was rescued by the program and brought to a refugee camp in Atlanta with her son. While grateful to be safe from any immediate danger, Grace's new situation presented challenges of its own. She suddenly found herself as a single mother in a foreign country where she knew no one nor spoke the language. Grace essentially had to start a new life in the U.S. completely from scratch. "I am already established, I'm working, I'm fine, I'm stable and then literally from one day to the next, you have to start over. At 36. And then having a kid on top of that, it's not just me. How am I going to deal with this and make sure my son is also cared for?"

Fortunately, Grace is extremely bright, personable, and determined and was ultimately able to begin a new career in the U.S. and obtain her citizenship. After several years of working as an assistant teacher in an after-school program, as well as in other positions, Grace was hired by the refugee settlement agency that helped her and her family settle years prior. "It was the best feat for me." From that point on, Grace began working as an immigration specialist, where she is able to help others like herself with their own resettlement and citizenship process.

One year after their arrival, both Grace and her son were able to obtain their green cards and in 2007, seven years after they arrived, they obtained their citizenship. On the day of her citizenship test, Grace was exceedingly nervous. While she was already familiar with the paperwork and the process more generally from her work, it was completely different now that it

had to do with herself. “When it was my turn, I got there and I’m shaking. Literally my hands were sweaty. I’m sitting in the waiting room and I’m supposed to be reviewing my 100 questions and I wasn’t able to do that.” Grace recalls having a nice immigration officer who assured her that she didn’t have anything to worry about. She even said she recognized Grace’s name from other people’s applications who she had assisted through her work at the resettlement agency. While in some ways this was comforting to hear, Grace couldn’t compare this experience to that of those she has helped. “Now it’s me.”

“They had my folder thick like this [holding fingers to show multiple inches] from the process from the Congo, from the camp, all the way to the US and my green card. *Everything* was in that folder. I told her, “you literally are holding my life in your hands. Maybe for you it’s just one client after another. ‘Next!’, you know, but for me, *this* is my life.” I sat there in a waiting room and I could see a whole journey. And I’m like, “Yes, finally, this is the end of the road. The point where I can finally hold a passport and say, ‘this is mine.’” I was in tears.”

Grace then proceeded to take the naturalization civics test, which she handily passed. After seven years of living in the United States and even longer without any sense of national belonging, it was at this point that Grace knew she had reached the end of her immigration journey. “Although I had Congolese citizenship, when the war started, they reminded me that I don’t belong there. So, *finally* I have the sense of belonging somewhere. That is priceless.”

For Grace and many others, citizenship is largely about rediscovering this sense of belonging. For most of those I spoke with, they did not leave their home countries by choice and almost all of them said they would return if it was safe and feasible for them to do so. While they were not all refugees, they often faced danger or poverty back home and came here to seek safety for themselves and their family. According to Grace, “for refugees and immigrants, the struggle was the same back home. Nobody leaves home by choice.” As a result, newcomers often find themselves grieving the sense of belonging they had as citizens of their home country. Obtaining

citizenship not only grants one increased legal rights and freedom, but is further symbolic in the sense that it provides an official badge of national belonging.

Farid, an immigrant from Syria, echoed Grace's sentiments about leaving his own country. It was an extremely challenging decision for him to leave home, but he ultimately "felt that there was no more hope in Syria." He says he wishes everyone could see what is happening there, so they could understand the magnitude of the crisis and the necessity for individuals like himself to immigrate to the U.S. "There was death everywhere and when there is blood it's very hard to make peace." He told one story where there were attacks occurring in his village and when he called his mother-in-law to make sure she was safe, she assured him not to worry, "the rockets are far away from me." But in reality, the rockets were only two houses away. The attacks had gotten so severe that merely two houses away had become considered a safe distance. At this point, Farid knew it was no longer safe for him and his children to remain in Syria. His mother and brother already lived in the United States, so he decided to immigrate here with his family. It was an excruciating decision for Farid to leave. "It was very very tough for me, but I knew in the end that it would be good for the kids."

While the transition has been challenging, Farid is extremely grateful for the expanded sense of freedom he now feels living in the U.S., particularly regarding freedom of religion. He advises other immigrants to "respect, but also enjoy the rules" for here we have the opportunity to make our voices heard. "You can stand up to governors, to presidents. Feel it and enjoy it." He stresses that immigrants typically want to live here and are petrified of losing the freedom offered to them in this country. "They are far more scared to commit crime than nonimmigrants." Furthermore, American citizens should not be afraid of immigrants because they are "really bringing good things from the outside." "For people to reach America, it is not easy. Those who

come here have the intelligence to come here, stay here, and work here. Immigrants are hard workers and really care about what they are doing.” According to Farid, most immigrants are exceptionally proud to live in the United States and in his case, he cherishes the freedom accorded to him here that he did not have living in Syria.

In the case of immigrants like Grace and Farid, the immigration experience is largely characterized by a degree of ambivalence. Leaving one’s home country is an extremely challenging choice to make, but for many, staying is no longer a viable option. They ultimately mourn the loss of their home countries, while they simultaneously recognize the horrors that characterized their lives prior to immigration. Once in the United States, they seek to regain this sense of belonging in their new country, often through efforts to obtain U.S. citizenship.

7.2 Social Capital and the Power of Institutionalized Authority

While the U.S. legal system provided benefits to respondents such as Grace and Farid, the success of such outcomes largely depends on the circumstances in which one immigrates and the relative degree of social capital they have and/or establish upon arrival. Social capital generally refers to networks of personal relationships and contacts aid an individual in some way. Networks of relationships constitute a valuable resource in a variety of social spheres and accord individuals with certain social ‘credentials,’ which provide them with different societal privileges (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998:243). For immigrants navigating their own immigration process, vital social capital often comes in the form of connections to the legal system and proximity to institutionalized authority. Such connections are particularly influential in the experiences of immigrants, as the legal system is often largely unfamiliar to them. As previously outlined in my interview with Anna, she is engaged to be married to a U.S. citizen, whose father is a lawyer. When asked if she would feel comfortable pursuing a legal issue, should one arise, Anna stated

that while she would, this is only because her fiancé's father works within the system. "So, I feel that I am at ease because I'm in that privileged position of knowing somebody that has an idea about it or that they're able to put me in contact with somebody who knows about it."

This idea that one needs to personally know someone from within in order to successfully navigate the system depicts the U.S. legal system as one that is overly complex and inaccessible to those who are not intimately involved with its inner workings, as is the case for many immigrants. In this scenario, critical to its interpretation, Anna is a 29-year-old Mexican American woman who has been living within the U.S. for just two years. She is still a student and is currently in the process of completing her graduate degree. Alternatively, her fiancé's father is a U.S. citizen who has lived here for his entire life and has a career as an attorney, a generally respected and well-paying profession. While Anna does have a high educational status, these alternative factors impede her ability to interact with the system, the same system her fiancé's father works within every day. Anna's confidence in using the system ultimately rests on her fiancé's father's access to greater resources. In receiving help from him for the purpose of attaining her citizenship through marriage, Anna was able to rely on her proximity to an individual in a dominant position in the realm of the law to escape her own subordination. Ewick and Silbey, who had similar findings in their own research among New Jersey residents, summarized a similar situation as "the typical story of American racism," where in their scenario, "to get justice the poor black woman needs a rich white lady" (Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey 1998). While Anna's situation is obviously different in a number of ways, it is still along this same vein. Her power in the realm of the law comes from her proximity to an individual in a dominant position and without this, she would most likely lack the confidence, knowledge, and resources to handle a legal dispute in this context.

Grace similarly reports the crucial role her network of support played in helping her obtain a restraining order against her abusive ex-husband.

My coworkers had to help me because I had no clue where to go. I kept saying how I felt scared and all of them told me ‘you can do this; you can do that.’ I had no idea. I had *no* idea. Even when I went to the court, they all kept their phones open just to keep up with me to make sure that I’m okay going through the process and I had a friend go with me. They told me ‘don’t go there alone because you may break down.’ So I needed a driver.

Without the support of her friends and coworkers, Grace says she wouldn’t have been aware of the legal options that were available to her, let alone how to pursue them. Furthermore, given that Grace works at a refugee resettlement agency, her coworkers are particularly knowledgeable of a variety of legal resources from their work. In her own role as an immigration specialist, Grace works with other refugees like herself who are likewise unaware of the legal options available to them in the face of domestic abuse.

It’s a long process for refugees to learn all of that stuff outside. When clients come to complain about domestic stuff, or after they left their husband, they are scared to file for divorce because culturally no woman files for divorce.

Such cultural differences serve as an additional barrier between many refugees and immigrants and their access to legal resources. Grace summarized a situation she sees frequently with her clients as such:

So, you don’t have one, you have six kids. You don’t want to file for divorce, and you don’t have child support? So I ask: ‘why don’t you get child support?’ One of them answered me and said, ‘oh somebody told me it’s like putting him in jail if I file for child support.’ So, they don’t do it and they are travelling with the kids alone. I can’t help you until you understand that this man is supposed to be accountable for all six of his children.

Thus, while some immigrants have access to individuals who could help them navigate legal matters, cultural barriers prevent them from pursuing them. For these reasons, their supposed social capital does not affect the way they interact with the legal system in the ways we might predict.

The power of institutionalized authority produces both opportunities, as in the cases of Anna and Grace, as well as constraints for those who lack this positionality. In the case of Jennifer, she and her family lacked such proximity to institutionalized authority and ultimately paid the price.

Regarding her brother and his legal troubles, Jennifer states that:

My parents have not ever been able to assist him with his mental health needs or his legal needs and so, I think them not being here, them not knowing the system, me not knowing the system, like all of that has compounded factors. Like if we had been able to figure out how to get him better access or if we had been able to figure out how to declare a guardianship for him where we would make decisions, I think that would have been different had we grown up here or we knew more about the system.

In Jennifer's situation, without proximity to institutionalized authority, she and her family lacked the resources available to those in more dominant societal positions. As Jennifer said herself, had they known the system more intimately, or had connections to someone who did, they would have had greater access to the resources necessary to escape subordination under the law. Specifically, had they had access to someone who regularly operates within the space of law, Jennifer's brother may have been able to avoid incarceration. Many immigrants lack this proximity to institutionalized authority shortly after their arrival, as well as often for years to come. This positionality can lead to adverse experiences with the law, while also encouraging individuals to avoid pursuing legal matters altogether.

7.3 The Capriciousness of Law and Authority

While proximity to institutionalized authority clearly gives individuals greater access to the realm of the law, in some cases those I spoke with indicated concern as to how knowledgeable law enforcement was to relevant laws and regulations affecting immigrants. In my conversation with Anna, she indicated feeling extremely uneasy when she was pulled over while driving by an

Atlanta police officer because she was worried that he wouldn't be fully informed on the laws that permit her to drive.

Anna's heightened anxiety regarding the situation due to her concern that the officer wouldn't know that she was driving her vehicle here legally suggests a perceived distance from the written law and those who enforce it. Anna indicates that herself, as well as other immigrants, feel obligated to get their U.S. license earlier than they are legally required to, in order to avoid this sense of insecurity around officers that don't know the law. So, while there is power in proximity to institutionalized authority, these authority figures are not always perceived as well-versed in the law itself.

Furthermore, the law and those who enforce it are often construed as capricious and unpredictable, as opposed to the "permanent, remote, and solemn public realm of law and legality," which we tend to associate with law in its more bureaucratized form (Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey 1998). Ewick and Silbey found that many of the respondents they spoke with in their New Jersey study reported legal experiences that were "immediate, subjective, and trivial," which contrasted with their perceptions of law and legality as remote and unchanging, which they likewise expressed in their conversations (Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey 1998).

Rather than perceiving law and legality as a constellation of related actors and actions, objectified in particular material forms and enacted by historical subjects, for these and many other persons legality has an ontological status apart from its concrete manifestations. There is a dehumanized vision of legality (Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey 1998).

Through such perceptions, legal systems, roles, and norms becomes reified as "the law," despite contrasting with the variable experiences and outcomes most individuals typically encounter. Ultimately, we associate such concretized perceptions of law with law in its dehumanized form. Put simply, "legality appears most 'thinglike' in its most bureaucratized

qualities: those that are superhuman, impartial, rational objective” (Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey 1998).

People often perceive the law in its most bureaucratized form as objective and relatively permanent, however, I have found the law enforcement and authority tends to be construed in the opposite manner (Ewick and Silbey 1998:82). Typically, situations that involve a human actor are perceived as relatively unpredictable, as was the case for Anna when she was pulled over by a police officer.

Given the constant changes in immigration law, individuals like Anna who perceive law enforcement as potentially unaware of the current policies affecting immigrants are likely correct in this assessment. In my interview with Charles Kuck he discussed the remarkable number of immigration policy changes that have been instituted in the last four years under the Trump administration.

The thing is, the Trump administration can't change the law, but they can change policies, they can change regulations, and they have done those with a ferocity that we have never seen before. An average of one immigration change every day, *every* day, since he was inaugurated in 2017. So, 1,500 immigration policy and law changes. He has also, by rhetoric and by inciting violence in those that follow him, he has caused extraordinary anxiety and difficulty in these communities. Not such that they leave, but that they go further underground. Which is neither good for our economy, nor for our society.

With such a remarkable number of policy changes, it is almost impossible for law enforcement to stay updated on current regulations, not to mention the immigrants themselves. In this way, the law is construed as capricious and nearly impossible for immigrants to navigate on their own.

Such fluctuation was further evident in my observation of the citizenship class, where the citizenship test the students were studying for was changed by the Trump administration in the midst of their studying. The older version required applicants to answer ten questions from 100

possible questions, whereas the new version requires applicants to answer 20 questions from 128 possible questions. With twice the number of questions asked, this is no small change. Students who applied prior to December 1st, 2020 are required to take the older test, whereas everyone else is required to take the updated version. As a result, the class has some individuals studying for the old version of the test and others studying for the new version. Such changes to the citizenship requirements are representative of the unstable and increasingly punitive nature of the naturalization process as a whole, as well as many aspects of immigrants lives more generally.

In addition to the changes to the test itself, Ms. Diane further warned the class that their experience taking the test will largely be affected by the specific immigration officer who is assigned to their case. “Here’s something they don’t tell you in the [appointment] letter—sometimes you get immigration officers that are really hostile. They are humans. Some are really nice; others are really mean.” She then proceeded to tell the story of her friend who had the misfortune of being tested by an officer who was extremely callous and asked him for significantly more information than what was required. Rather than just asking for his birth certificate, he asked for the birth certificate of all five of his kids. He further asked for a copy of his taxes from the last five years, when they typically only ask for the last three years. “They can decide to ask you randomly for things even if they don’t put it on the letter.” Ms. Diane has personally overseen hundreds of citizenship processes and has seen such capriciousness among immigration authority figures first-hand. With this knowledge, she wants to prepare her students for the variable nature of the test day. She assured the class that, “I’m not here to scare you, but I don’t want you to have any surprises when you go in there.”

Grace similarly reports the capriciousness of immigration status among refugees, who are often unaware of the impermanence of their current legal status and benefits. For these

individuals, reaching the safety of the base camp often signifies the end of their immigration journey. After what is often many years of living in fear and danger, arriving in the U.S. brings with it a sense of finality.

I had no idea what the refugee process was like until it happened to me. I always saw it on TV, but it never happened to me, so it seemed far away. When it happened to me, I had a different way of looking at it. I'm still ongoing, I'm not done. Legally, this status is not permanent. No refugee has that in their mind. When you enter the US, in your mind it's like, "Oh, I'm finally done."

While refugee status in the U.S. is granted indefinitely, refugees are required to apply for their green card one year after their arrival. However, Grace's comments primarily refer to the Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) program, which expires after eight months.

Refugees think they're going to have free housing, they're going to have free, maybe car, because they have kids, they will have free food forever. But the food stamps expire after 8 months, Medicaid- 8 months. They don't know that. When they come and are treated like that, they think it's a lifetime thing because that's what they had in the camp. They never had to pay rent, they never had to pay for food or medicals. So, when the caseworker comes and takes them to get their immunizations, their medicals, they think they are going to have that service forever. No. Be ready to work, be ready to wake up at 4am, be ready to sometimes have two jobs because you have so many kids.

For recent and immigrants and refugees, their life is in constant flux. Not only is their immigration status subject to change, but so are their benefits. Sudden changes in immigration status often have very tangible impacts on one's day to day life, as Liam, an immigrant from Myanmar, so candidly described to me during our conversation. Liam first came to the U.S. in 2008 as a research fellow at an ivy-league University, after which he travelled back and forth several times before permanently moving to Atlanta in June 2014. In 2017 Liam planned to move back to Myanmar to raise his family near relatives. However, when he told his friends and family about his plan to return home, they warned him that it was not safe for him there. While Liam was living in the U.S., he was outspoken on Facebook about some of the issues currently ongoing in Myanmar. He specifically spoke out about issues regarding the treatment of the

Rohingya people, a stateless Muslim ethnic group that has been subject to institutionalized discrimination and genocide by the Buddhist Burmese government. After being warned by his family not to return, Liam reached out to a nonprofit in Atlanta who advised him to apply for asylum. They helped him to assemble a team of lawyers who assisted with his application for asylum, as well as for a two-year work permit. Today, nearly four years later, Liam's asylum status is still pending. He was able to get employment authorization during this time, which expired in December 2020. One month before this expiration date Liam submitted a request for an extension with the help of his attorney, however, he has yet to hear any information regarding this status of this request.

We are not given any information on the extension. We are still waiting on it. We don't even get confirmation of them receiving the application of the renewal of my employment authorization. Therefore, I cannot renew my driver's license and therefore, I am unable to drive at the moment.

In Liam's case, his asylum status and work authorization are impermanent and subject to frequent change. Such instability has not only been a source of anxiety for Liam and his family but has had profound effects on how they operate on a daily basis. Not only can Liam not work, but now he also cannot drive and with no communication from immigration officials, he has no way of knowing when or if this will be resolved.

7.4 The Inhumanity of Bureaucracies and the Punitive Turn

Liam's lack of information regarding his immigration status further reflects the inhumane dimensions of bureaucracies, which is a sentiment reported widely by many of the individuals I spoke with. Ben, an immigrant from the Congo, has likewise experienced the frustration of the bureaucratic process surrounding immigration law. He initially came to the U.S. on an existing visa and subsequently applied for asylum, which took more than seven years to be approved. At one point he could not even renew his work permit due to extreme bureaucratic delays. Now he

is in the midst of applying for his green card and is experiencing the same lengthy wait times as he did prior.

I feel like I have been in prison all of these years since I have been in the United States. You cannot go to school. You cannot pursue normal school without paying a lot and you cannot pay for it because they don't recognize you, so you end up doing a small job. A small job like I am doing right now. Right now, I work in a restaurant where I started as a dishwasher and now I am doing anything that they ask me to do, even though I have my degree in law school, but they don't recognize that.

Ben desperately wants to go back to school, but for more than eight years he has been stuck in a state of flux due to delays in the processing of his immigration status. "This part has been so difficult for me emotionally because I am the type of person who loves to talk and interact with people and then I came into a country where I cannot even further my education." He says that the years he has spent in the United States "have been the hardest time of my life." The uncertainty of his immigration status has trapped Ben in a life with very limited options. Safety reasons prevent him from returning to the Congo, while the inhumanity of the bureaucratic processes in the U.S. has left his immigration status uncertain, ultimately barring him from achieving his career and educational goals in the United States. Ben told me that "the United States broke me but elevated me too." While the challenges have been many, he ultimately believes that such an arduous experience has forced him to become a stronger individual who can withstand even the most emotionally draining circumstances.

Such bureaucratic indifference extends beyond just immigration law, effectively pervading nearly every aspect of governmental bureaucracy. Hertzfeld (1992) asks "how does it come about that in societies justly famed for their hospitality and warmth we often encounter the pettiest forms of bureaucratic indifference to human needs and sufferings, or that in democratic polities designed to benefit all citizens whole groups of people suffer from callous neglect?" (1992:1). He argues that "modern" bureaucratically regulated societies are no more rational or

less symbolic than those traditionally studied by anthropologists and that we therefore must understand national bureaucracies in context of local level values. Notably, legal regulations and bureaucratic practices often heavily rely on rhetoric that justifies the moral boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Such official practices of indifference and intolerance are largely a reflection of popular attitudes “which official discourse builds to make its own case” (Hertzfeld 1992:42). As a result he argues that “indifference to the plight of individuals and groups often coexist with democratic and egalitarian ideals” (1992:1).

Hertzfeld’s comparison between racism and bureaucracy is notable for both divisive forces generate categories of people that converge in the sphere of citizenship and immigration policies (Stewart 1996:677). Liam’s experience with the bureaucratic offices handling his asylum application and work permit extension demonstrates the relative carelessness of U.S. bureaucracy and the capriciousness of his immigration status that resulted from this. Ben’s experience with bureaucratic delays further demonstrates this concept and the distress which has characterized his experience in the U.S. as a result.

7.5 English Language

The immigrants I spoke with overwhelmingly reported learning English as the most challenging aspect of their adjustment to the United States. English fluency is not only required to pass the U.S. citizenship test, but as the primary language of the country it is onerous just to exist and operate in the official and public domain without this skillset. Governmental structures and societal perceptions thereby make learning and speaking English an integral component of becoming a citizen.

During Grace’s initial years in the U.S., she says her language abilities largely restricted both her and her son from engaging in their school system. Despite living in Clarkston, Georgia at the

time, where over 30% of residents were not born in the U.S., she and her son still faced exceeding difficulty overcoming their language barrier (Stump 2018). Such difficulty began even prior to the start of the school year, as Grace was responsible for buying her son's school supplies from a list that was sent out by the school, in English. "I had no idea what to do for my son's education. I had no idea what the PTA (Parent Teacher Alliance) is or about any notice of school supplies. My English was limited, and I was lost." Fortunately for Grace, the volunteers who were working at the refugee base camp were extremely supportive in helping her navigate these challenges. One volunteer was particularly generous throughout this process.

She took me to Walmart, and we put the list together. She had a calendar for me of when my son had a doctor's appointment or other things. If there was a PTA meeting, she would go with me and kind of explain what they're talking about, just by taking the time to speak slower. She was understanding of my English, which was amazing [laughs].

While Grace had taken two years of English classes at the British embassy years prior, she says it was utterly useless here. "it's just the fact that American English is so fast. I came with my cute English, greeting people, 'how do you do?' and then they look at me and say, 'what's up?' I had no idea what they were talking about!"

Once the school year began, things became even more challenging for both Grace and her son, Alex. Alex was frustrated by his lack of comprehension at school and Grace was further discouraged by her inability to help him.

At school Alex's teacher asked to meet with me because he was out of control. He just didn't care. At the time, I had just got married and I was pregnant and now he is acting like he really does not care. When I asked my son to explain his attitude he said 'Mom, this is the meanest teacher I ever had. She knows I don't understand English, I don't speak English, and she stands there talking for hours. Then she asks me questions, just to make my friends laugh at me because she knows I won't answer. Why is she bothering asking me, knowing that I won't be able to answer?' That was how he perceived the class.

He was frustrated and so was Grace. At this point, she knew she must meet with the school to discuss these issues, despite her own limited English abilities at the time.

I did what I had to do. I had a meeting with the principal, principal's assistant, counselors, teachers, a whole team for Alex. I said to them "this boy is nine. Second grade. He went through a lot. We spent almost two years in a war, eight months in the camp, and then he comes here Mommy is getting married, and now I am pregnant. His whole world is crumbling, not even mentioning the people that we lost during the war and we got no time for mourning. So, I can't do this on my own, because I don't have any clue how to do it. I need your help."

The teachers and faculty listened to Grace and were both shocked and moved by her story.

By the end, they were all crying after hearing what the two of them had been through.

They kept repeating "we didn't know, we didn't know," and I was like "well you should know, because Local Elementary is 98% refugee kids. So, this is not a one-time case. Just know that all the new students that you have are going through almost the same struggles."

Fortunately, the school was receptive to everything Grace told them that day. They set up a plan to help Alex catch up, which completely changed the trajectory of his educational experience. "They kept him after school, no fee asked for and they helped him. In six months, Alex was out of ESL classes. Once he caught up with his English, it was peace of mind for me. But if I didn't even have the right people, it would have been a struggle for much longer."

For immigrants and refugees, citizenship is "not a matter of acquiring multiple passports or identifying business opportunities, real estate deals, or top universities in global cities, but rather a matter of figuring out the rules for coping, navigating, and surviving the streets and other public spaces of the American city" and for all newcomers, this inevitably requires navigating the English-speaking world (Ong 2003:xiv). Immigrants who don't speak English are effectively barred from access to official institutions, such as the education system, without assistance from an English-speaking individual. Grace experienced this reliance even before her son entered the classroom, with the required school supplies list that the base camp volunteer assisted her with. Alex likewise experienced the frustration of this language barrier in his second-grade classroom, which despite offering ESL (English Second Language) classes, clearly did not provide the

support he required. Thanks to receptive school faculty and Grace's resolve to help her son, Alex was ultimately able to learn English and succeed academically. However, it is easy to see how a child without this same support system could slip through the cracks.

It is not only in the U.S. education system that such English proficiency is required, but in every official institution, and after over 20 years, Grace says she feels like she is still learning. "My kids are still correcting my English, especially my son because he speaks English and French. He will be like, 'Mom, no that came out wrong. You're thinking in French. Don't do that, it's not the same in English.' It can be embarrassing at times because I don't know what comes out!" With such an emphasis on English proficiency, both officially and unofficially, the learning process is a central component to all non-English speaking immigrants' adjustment to life in the United States.

A lack of English proficiency can be grounds for discrimination, which many of those I spoke with are quite familiar with. Liam, an immigrant from Myanmar, reports that the immigrants and refugees who live in his apartment complex are treated unfairly by their leasing office because they know that these residents will not challenge such treatment due to the existing language barrier. Liam says they have had countless issues within the apartment, a notable instance was when their refrigerator broke. "This happened to me when I had just had my son. He was about three or four months old, so we had everything, his food and medicine, in the refrigerator. My son's food was decaying, and this was in August, so it was so hot." On another occasion the air conditioner broke in one of Liam's neighbor's rooms, who was also an immigrant, and it became so hot that he had to take his child to the emergency room. When they report these problems to the leasing office, the managers do nothing. "They say they will come, but they never come. It takes two to three months." On several occasions when Liam and his

neighbors could no longer tolerate such unresponsiveness, they turned to a local nonprofit organization that has a housing department recognized by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development to express their concerns. The organization wrote a complaint letter on behalf of the tenants and sent it to the complex, who immediately began working on the reported issues within a day. But if they hadn't taken such measures, these housing problems undoubtedly would have remained unsolved.

Liam says he had a next-door neighbor who was not an immigrant who assured him that if these same issues were happening to her, they would be handled differently. "She told me that if they did this to her, they would learn a big lesson." Unfortunately, the complex knows that many of their immigrant and refugee tenants lack the ability to advocate for themselves in this same way. "We do not have someone to talk to. We don't even know how to speak the language. That's the main reason why they have done what they have to us." In fact, Liam says the complex is very much aware of the discriminatory treatment to which they are subjecting their immigrant tenants. "Ironically, one of the complex employees asked me out of the blue, 'do you feel discriminated living here in this complex?' Out of the blue, completely off topic, she just asked me. So, she knew it. She knew exactly what she was doing."

Aside from the language barrier alone, Grace reported instances of discrimination based on her accent. "I speak six languages, so I don't even know what accent I have in any of the languages!" Prior to her current job as an immigration specialist, Grace worked as a teacher's assistant in an after-school program, where she says the center coordinator would laugh at her accent in front of the kids. "She would laugh at it, just repeat what I said and laugh. I told her, 'I don't appreciate your attitude with me, especially in front of the kids. If you cannot understand me, I'm fine with that. The kids understand everything I say and that's what matters.'"

Unfortunately, the center coordinator's behavior continued, and Grace grew increasingly frustrated with such outright discrimination.

So one day it was the last drop of patience that I had...I asked her, 'how many languages do you speak?' She said, "I speak English" and I was like 'and...?' She said, 'just English.' So I told her, 'Ok, so if you only speak one language, what gives you the right to laugh at anyone's accent? If you didn't check my resume, I speak 6 languages. So as a refugee, please go educate yourself and learn about refugees. I get up every morning trying to make it work in this country. The last thing I need on my way is ignorant people like you.' So, I grabbed my purse and I left. I was really crying.

After that experience, Grace didn't return to that job and luckily, she has never once had a similar experience at her current position as an immigration specialist at the refugee settlement agency. "Now, everybody in my office has an accent."

Almost all of the individuals I spoke with emphasized that learning English was an essential part of their vocational and social integration into American life. In Mortland's research in the Bataan refugee processing center (PRPC) in the Philippines, she likewise examines how English language training is highlighted among Southeast Asian refugees in their preparation for resettlement in western countries. She writes that, "staff agree that a 'transformed' refugee will be able to speak good English, be employable, be unwilling to accept welfare, and be happy. The ultimate goals of PRPC staff is for refugees to *become* Americans by practicing Americans ways and not isolating themselves in ethnic enclaves in the new country" (Mortland 1987:385). She finds that a hierarchy of prestige that mirrors American values, likewise, emerges within ethnic groups at the center as well, English proficiency playing a determining factor. She further asserts that Americans prefer not to "deal with refugees" except as superiors and other business professional and in the camp, "when higher status residents wish to emphasize their power, refugees are forced to demonstrate their own humility by physical as well as verbal gesture" (1987:391). Thus, even in the refugee camp, the acquisition of English was associated with

ideals of subordination present in the process of resettlement in America. Ong (2003) further notes that among Cambodian refugees, “as the children picked up English more rapidly than their parents, adults began to lose prestige in their children’s eyes. Thus—especially for refugees who had been elite members of the old Cambodian society—the experience of social reversal foreshadowed their experiences in the Land of the Free” (2003:67).

As Mortland and Ong demonstrated, one’s societal prestige is highly influenced by their English competency, something most native-born residents take for granted. Therefore, immigrants with limited English abilities not only face the challenges of navigating English speaking institutions on a practical level, but they are also subject to discrimination and unfair treatment based on this language barrier. Unfortunately, immigrants such as Grace and Liam experience this reality on a daily basis, as seen by the prejudice they each faced at home and work.

7.6 Individual Responsibility

One interviewee who I spoke with had a unique perspective on the U.S. immigration system compared to the rest of the individuals I interviewed. Rather than the overwhelming frustration with the inaccessibility and capriciousness of the immigration system and laws, John, who immigrated from Taiwan at the age of five, feels that such a mindset hinders immigrants’ potential for success in the U.S.

I see the differences between mentalities. You can have one mentality where it's kind of like a victim mentality, where you come here, the greatest country in the world, and you can say, ‘it sucks because I came here illegally, I can't do this, I can't do that.’ But nobody's knocking on your door with a gun every day. It would be more dangerous in third world countries where you can pay the police and do this and do that and there's a lot of cartels and stuff like that. So, what my wife and I always strongly believe is that having this victim mentality really hurts you in the long run.

John largely bases this perspective on the experience of his own parents, who immigrated to the U.S. shortly after 9/11, when there was heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and restrictions. They initially came on a work visa, which later expired. His parents were relatively private with their children about their evolving immigration status, but John understands that “staying here legally was really tough.” While he doesn’t know the details of how his parents handled the situation, they were ultimately able to obtain status as legal permanent residents and still live in the U.S. today, a reality that largely colors John’s perception of immigration in the U.S., particularly regarding those who are undocumented. “[Immigrants] who are ungrateful will continue to suffer because they won’t find out solutions on how to legalize their status or go through different individuals to find the ones that will help them.” John feels it is particularly unrealistic to expect the immigration system to change and that ultimately it is an individual responsibility to navigate the laws as they currently exist.

As we look at the immigration problem now, there are a lot of families where, let's say one of their family members gets detained. What they expect is the government or the system to make it right. When in reality, they can't. The system is what it is, you as an individual have to be solution oriented to figure out what's the processes, and the right people to talk to, to maybe get this person out, or maybe go through the legal channels to provide a path to citizenship or something like that.

As for John’s own immigration status, he currently has his work visa and is living here as a permanent resident. He was previously protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which grants individuals who were brought to the U.S. as children two-year renewable protection from deportation, as well as eligibility to apply for a work permit. John has since married a U.S. citizen and has begun his own process of obtaining U.S. citizenship, which is currently ongoing.

While John himself is a first-generation immigrant who has certainly endured many of the struggles that accompany this identity, it is notable that he came to the U.S. at a much younger

age than many of the other individuals with whom I spoke. He says he doesn't remember life before he lived in the U.S. and remembers very little about his family's transition to their new country. He has lived almost his entire life in America and has never been back to Taiwan since their arrival. In other words, John has had far more time to American culture than those who I spoke with who immigrated later in life and it is worth considering that such experiences have affected his view on immigration laws and policies.

The children of immigrants are often the most impassioned supporters of stricter immigration policies. In fact, according to Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut in their book *Immigrant America* (2014),

The political debate about immigration in the United States has always been marked by vigorous calls for restriction. The most ardent advocates of this policy are often children of immigrants who wear their second-generation patriotism outwardly and aggressively. This position forgets that it was the labor and efforts of immigrants—often the parents and grandparents of today's restrictionists—that made much of the prosperity of the nation possible (2014:26).

John is not a second-generation immigrant and I do not want to detract from his personal hardships as an immigrant living in the U.S., however, I recognize parallels between his views and those described by Portes and Rumbaut. Children of immigrants who have seen their parents struggle and persist in the face of an often-challenging immigration system, may view the process to citizenship or legal status as navigable to those who are willing and determined.

Worth further consideration is the fact that first generation Asian-American immigrants tend to be “educationally hyper-selected,” meaning that they are more likely to be college graduates than nonimmigrants and this advantage is often passed down to their children (Zhou and Lee 2017). In fact, in 2008, 71.6 percent of Taiwanese-born adults age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 27.1 percent among all immigrant adults and 27.8 percent among all nonimmigrant adults (Yi-Ying Lin 2010). Therefore, children of hyper-selected immigrant

groups often begin their quest to get ahead from more favorable starting points, which ultimately has significant implications for the socio-economic success of these groups (Zhou and Lee 2017). This is especially notable when compared to the other end of the extreme, where groups such as Mexicans are hypo-selected, meaning they are less likely to have graduated from college than their nonimmigrant counterparts and the U.S. mean (Van C. Tran et al. 2018:1).

Such hyper-selectivity has further associated these immigrant groups with certain positive stereotypes, which can help Asian-American students thrive academically. For example, the perception among educators that Asian American students are intelligent and hardworking positively affects the grades they receive and the likelihood that they will be placed into prestigious academic programs (Zhou and Lee 2017:13). As a result, the hyper-selectivity of an immigrant group can assuage a child's poor socioeconomic status and reduce class differences within an ethnic group (Zhou and Lee 2017:12). Thus, children of Asian immigrants who do not have a high degree of education are more likely to achieve stronger educational outcomes and ultimately a higher socio-economic status than the children of other immigrant groups, particularly those who are from groups that are hypo selected. Of course, such stereotypes have negative consequences as well, as both Asian American students and professionals are burdened by a model minority stereotype, which holds them to a higher standard than other groups (Zhou and Lee 2017:9). Furthermore, while children of hyper-selected groups tend to have higher achievement in education, this often does not correlate to the same achievement in the labor market, where they often learn less money and are less likely to hold supervisory positions compared to White Americans (Zhou and Lee 2017:13).

Clearly the hyper-selectivity of Taiwanese immigrants largely affects the immigrant experience they have in the United States. Not only do they often begin in more favorable

starting points, given their higher level of education, but public perception of these groups does not equate them with illegality, as is often the case with immigrants from Latin America or Africa. For these reasons, John's experience as an Asian-American immigrant were likely quite disparate from many of the other individuals with whom I spoke, which could partially explain the distinctiveness of his views.

7.7 Living Undocumented

Individuals living in the United States undocumented often live in constant fear of deportation (Abrego 2011). The slightest legal infraction can lead to confrontation with authority, which could result in detainment and eventually deportation. The fear of law enforcement is further exacerbated by the increasingly close proximity in which they work with ICE, making almost any legal violation an immigration violation as well.

In order to examine the effects being undocumented can have on one's life, I am going to look closer into the life of Carlos, a sixty-year-old man who immigrated to Atlanta from Venezuela in 1999. Originally in the U.S. on a tourist visa, Carlos was unable to secure a worker's visa to remain in the country and ended up living in the United States for "10 to 12 years without documents." Formerly an attorney in Venezuela, his undocumented status resulted in a complete lifestyle change for Carlos, who was then only permitted to work jobs that were available to undocumented immigrants. While Carlos and his family were economically well-off in Venezuela, he found himself struggling just to find minimum-wage work in the U.S. During this time, he worked "the whole spectrum, from landscaping, to construction, to cleaning."

Carlos recalls some of the daily obstacles he faced as such:

I was not able to have a driver's license or able to do things, go places, talk to people, get into offices, always fearing that somebody is going to stop me and ask me for any type of documentation I didn't have. I felt like I was all the time under the radar of cops, or any type

of authority waiting for me to sit somewhere and grab me and kick me out of this country. I was in fear...you're talking about fear, day in, day out, day and night.

Carlos lived in constant fear that immigration authorities would come for him. To avoid this, he did everything he could to bypass confrontation with the police. He abided by the law at all times, took English classes at a local church, and generally tried to live a private life. "I was always very respectful of the laws and tried to avoid stupid situations like speeding or drinking and driving, or stuff like that. I kept to myself and had a low profile."

Although Carlos was undocumented, he lived as a "model citizen" (Golash-Boza 2012:81). Unfortunately, circumstances out of Carlos' control led to several necessary interactions with police. Notably, he was robbed on several different occasions while he was living undocumented. In one instance Carlos was at a restaurant and somebody took his jacket, containing his wallet and car keys, while he was in the restroom. "I was in a very interesting situation because calling the cops, being an illegal person, is difficult. They're gonna ask you, 'do you have your driver's license with you?' They're gonna ask you questions, and you are not able to answer the questions."

For this reason, Carlos describes the crippling fear that would overcome him whenever he saw a member of law enforcement. "I used to shake even when I saw a Boy Scout in uniform. Anything in uniform makes me shake fearing like, you know, thinking that somebody's gonna come talk to me and ask for documents or paperwork." When I asked Carlos how he navigated these questions once police arrived at the restaurant, he said "obviously I lied." He told them that his driver's license was in the stolen wallet, which allowed him to avoid further questions regarding his documentation. Luckily for Carlos, the situation ended without revealing his undocumented status to the authorities, but it certainly could have had a very different result.

The crippling fear Carlos experienced is the reality every day for the 400,000 undocumented immigrants living in the state of Georgia. These fears further affect the 503,155 people in Georgia, including 236,662 U.S. citizens who live with at least one undocumented family member (American Immigration Council 2020). According to Charles Kuck, part of the issue lies in the fact that “the immigration laws themselves actually create the problem.”

Our system makes becoming “legal,” very difficult. It makes becoming a permanent resident, which is always a preliminary step to citizenship, very difficult. So, the laws themselves are actually causing a lot of both the undocumented immigration and making it difficult for documented immigrants to stay documented in the United States. For that reason, we are in desperate need of a massive overhaul of our immigration system to reflect the economic and societal needs of our country in the 21st century.

With this in mind, it is no wonder that as of 2016, undocumented immigrants comprised 36% of the immigrant population in all of Georgia (American Immigration Council 2020). The laws themselves are constructed in such a way that makes it nearly impossible for these individuals to obtain legal status once they become undocumented. Carlos was extremely fortunate in that he eventually married a U.S. citizen and was able to gain citizenship himself, which allowed him to attend Georgia State and obtain an LLM, a graduate qualification in the field of law. This degree allowed him to take the Georgia bar exam and ultimately become an attorney in Atlanta, where he works in civil practice and immigration. According to Carlos, obtaining citizenship changed his life “180 degrees.” “To the mere fact that I was able to go back to college, which was part of my dreams, coming to this country. Part of the American dream was, you know, practice law and you know do things that I was always hoping and dreaming to do.”

Carlos referenced the American dream as what initially drew him to the United States in the first place, which he says turned out to be “an absolute lie.” “The American dream somehow is Hollywood. It’s what we watch on TV all the time and, you know, having a nice job, having a house, having a family.” But “the picture of the media is the happy side, not a real side” and

Carlos' life during the 10 to 12 years in which he was undocumented, was far from the American dream he had envisioned. After gaining his citizenship and attending college, the American dream became more of a reality for Carlos who had always imagined furthering his education as part of this dream. Carlos says that his decisions to immigrate was not primarily economically motivated, given that he and his family were financially well situated in Venezuela.

Alternatively, his dream "was being in a classroom with an interesting professor discussing things related to law." In some ways, Carlos' idea of the American dream came true. He was able to further his education and become a practicing lawyer and in doing so, is now able to help other immigrants who are currently in the position that he once was. However, such success only came after a long period of living undocumented, which Carlos remembers as a time of intense and constant fear.

7.8 Racism and Anti-Blackness

The racialized police state in the United States largely affects the experiences of immigrants, many of whom suffer the effects of structural racism in immigrant policing. This concept arose in several of my conversations, even among those who didn't encounter the effects of this discrimination firsthand. These individuals often indicated that their own experiences with law enforcement or lack thereof, would likely have resulted far differently had they been of a different national origin, particularly one that suffers the effects of anti-Blackness in the U.S.

In my conversation with Carlos, he indicated that if he had been Black, his situation with the police following his robbery, would likely have turned out very differently.

I am white. I am tall. If this same thing happened to a black person, to a brown person, to a person looking like an American Indian from Central America or somewhere in South America, this could be absolutely different. They are treated differently. And that's the hateful part about the system. Because I am white, because I am tall, they see me from a different perspective than the way they see my friend next to me who is from the Dominican Republic and he's black.

Unfortunately, Carlos is right. Immigration agents use racial profiling to deport as many people as possible, which is likewise ubiquitous among police enforcement more generally. Given that these two institutions often work closely, the chances that a Black immigrant will be questioned, detained, or deported by the officers is far greater than that of a non-Black immigrant (The Stanford Open Policing Project 2016; The Sentencing Project 2015).

In my conversation with Anna, she expressed similar sentiments regarding perceptions of Mexican immigrants. While Anna often speaks Spanish with her friends, she describes the judgmental stares and looks of confusion they often receive when they do so in public.

Whenever I'm speaking Spanish, like with my friends, you get those looks of like "who's speaking Spanish?" and then they see whoever is speaking and they don't understand why we're speaking Spanish because we don't fit the idea of what somebody should look like that would speak Spanish.

Anna describes that she is not the person people typically envision when they think of a Mexican immigrant. She is a young, light-skin, female who speaks fluent English and is in the U.S. as a student, which contrasts sharply with prominent stereotypes in much of the U.S. public perception, where "Mexicanness is equated with illegality" (Golash-Boza 2012:84). Anna presumes that if she more accurately fit these stereotypes, she would likely have felt less welcome as an immigrant living in Atlanta. She further suggests that in her experience being pulled over, the officer "gave her a pass," once he ran her papers and saw that she was living here as a student.

In some of my discussions with African immigrants, we spoke about the racism they have experienced more generally, aside from discriminatory policing practices. In my conversation with Ben, an immigrant from the Congo, he told me that "it wasn't until I came to the United States that I realized my skin color was an issue." In fact, he said this was what surprised him

most about the United States, which is saying a lot given the journey he has had. Ben was a human rights attorney in the Congo and was arrested for demonstrating at the United Nations in New York City against the autocratic regime. When he returned home, he was imprisoned and tortured. He was eventually released and came to the U.S. on an existing visa and applied for asylum, leaving his wife and son behind. When he arrived in September 2012, he came with nothing and spoke no English. He says his decision to come to U.S. “was like jumping in the dark and hoping it will work out.”

Since his arrival, Ben has only lived in Atlanta but has visited other states throughout the U.S, where he says his most notable first-hand experiences with racism have occurred. One particularly disturbing incident occurred during a trip to visit a friend in Spokane, Washington while Ben was walking to a barbershop in the area. As he was walking, a car with two young white boys, around ages 17-20, drove by him slowly and started waving their hands in the air and making screeching noises. “At first, I thought they were saying hi to me, so I actually waved back at them. But then I realized they were calling me a monkey.” Ben said this was his first experience with such outright racism and he was utterly shocked. “It is the 21st century in America and people are still thinking like that?” This experience occurred during Ben’s first year here, so he says his perception of the U.S. was still primarily based on what he had seen on TV. “On TV, everything is big, beautiful, flashy, they respect people, love each other. Everything is beautiful and people are open-minded. So, it was really hard. That was a really hard realization to come to, that what I had seen on TV wasn’t the truth.” Fortunately, Ben feels a lot differently about Atlanta specifically, where he has not experienced racism to the same degree that he has in other, more rural, areas of the country. After this two-week trip in Spokane, Washington, Ben

said “when I flew back to Atlanta and I got to the airport, I felt home. I felt home because finally, I see other Black people.”

In the U.S., immigrant and minority experiences more generally are largely characterized by race, particularly racial bipolarism, which Aihwa Ong says shapes, “unequal and differentiated types of belonging for minority populations” (Ong 2003:10). An immigrant’s racial identity infiltrates nearly every aspect of their life—from where they live to their interactions with police enforcement to their likelihood of being deported. “Racial logic has always lain like a serpent in the sacred ideal of American citizenship” (Ong 2003:10). Immigrants are located along the continuum from black to white and are thereby “situated as either integral or marginal to the nation” (Ong 2003:10). Ben’s immigration story is a clear example of this. In the Congo, he was never subject to discrimination based on his skin color, something he experienced almost immediately upon his immigration to the United States. He felt othered during his travels to more rural, less diverse areas of the country, where he was singled out and the victim of intense racial prejudice. Likewise, the association of “Mexicanness with illegality” further contributes to the phenomena of racial bipolarism, where everyone is identified based on where they lie on the racial continuum to whiteness, an identity which largely determines whether or not one is deserving of U.S. citizenship (Golash-Boza 2012:84). Brackette Williams has indicated that this black-white continuum likewise translates to a continuum of status and dignity and the positioning of a certain group on this scale determines “its perceived moral claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage, as well as conditioning fear of threats to these prerogatives from subordinates races” (Williams private communication with Ong 2003:11).

Black and Latino immigrants are further vulnerable to the status of “partial citizenship,” meaning that they are deprived of certain core rights that define citizenship in the United States

(Bauböck 2011). Aimee Meredith Cox (2015) discusses how this reality largely hinders the utility of normative markers of success for Black Americans in the first place. In her research of Black women in Detroit homeless shelters one doctor sees himself as distinct and separate from the lower-class Blacks, “until he reminds himself that regardless of their material differences, he and they are united by their status as only contingent and partial citizens because they are Black” (Cox 2015).

Ben’s encounters with anti-black racism have in large part defined his experience as an immigrant in the U.S., which remains the most shocking component of his transition to life following his immigration. According to Ben and others I spoke with, they felt racial discrimination most prominently in more rural areas of the country and reported feeling generally welcome in Atlanta specifically. The diversity of metropolitan areas allows for the representation of more immigrant groups and racial identities, which helps mitigate feelings of otherness and discriminatory attitudes. In Spokane, Washington, where Ben’s most notable racist incidents occurred, the population is composed of just 2.3% Black or African American individuals, whereas the population of Atlanta is composed of 51% Black or African American individuals (United States Census Bureau 2019a). Such a striking disparity in the Black populations of these cities explains why Ben “felt home” when he returned to Atlanta. “Finally, I see other Black people.” Jennifer likewise reported that her most notable experiences of racial discrimination occurred in Salt Lake City, Utah, where only 2.6% of the population is Black or African American, but has typically felt welcomed during her times living in both Miami and Atlanta (United States Census Bureau 2019b). While discrimination and racial prejudice is prevalent throughout the entirety of the United States, the lack of diversity in more rural geographic locations seems to intensify these issues. Ideas of partial citizenship and the

determination of one's dignity based on their positionality on a black-white continuum exists in the entirety of the U.S., however, those I spoke with indicated that these feelings were lesser when compared to their experiences in other, more rural, areas.

Chapter 8: Discussion

In this thesis, I have attempted to portray a snapshot of some of the common themes that characterize the experience of immigrants living in the Atlanta area. This analysis encompasses their challenges resettling in a new country, their experience with and perceptions of immigration law, and stories of those who have both helped and hindered them along the way. In examining the questions: "What characterizes the immigrant experience in the Atlanta area?" "What distinguishes the immigrant whose experience is predominantly one marked by fear and angst from that of the immigrant who receives support from insiders and is successful in their path towards resettlement?" and "What defines the legal consciousness of immigrants and how does their access to the legal institution, both regarding immigration law and other matters, compare to that of nonimmigrants?" I have attempted to address the specific ways in which the structure of the U.S. legal system and the challenges associated with its flaws, characterize the immigrant experience in Atlanta.

I have found that the path to citizenship is arduous and often marked by frustrating bureaucratic indifference, deprivation of certain core rights, intense fear of institutionalized authority, structural racism, and prejudice. Immigrants simultaneously mourn the sense of belonging they had in their home country, even in cases where dangerous threats or unsafe living conditions forced them to leave. They overwhelmingly reported a lack of English abilities as the most challenging aspect of their resettlement, which effectively barred these individuals from accessing all official institutions. They further construed the law and law enforcement as

capricious and unpredictable, likely as a result of the perpetual changes that are made to immigration policy. While the majority of those I spoke with emphasized these challenges, some were able to overcome such adversity and obtain citizenship or otherwise successfully adjust in the United States. I have found that these individuals are largely distinct in their access to vital social capital, particularly regarding proximity to institutionalized authority. This not only helped immigrants navigate immigration law, but also the legal system more generally. Racial prejudice also plays a prominent role in determining many aspects of the immigrant experience, particularly regarding racial profiling in law enforcement, which often coincides with the enforcement of immigration law. While most respondents reported experiencing such discriminatory incidents, they often occurred outside of Atlanta in more rural areas of the United States. As a whole, most of the individuals I spoke with felt Atlanta was a welcoming city for immigrants.

However, there are some significant limitations to this research that I would be remiss not to address. Primarily, my small sample size of twelve individuals limits the conclusions I can draw from my findings. I ultimately contend that the depth into which those I spoke with went into their lives, beliefs, experiences, and challenges provides valuable ethnographic data; however, I recognize that these findings are not statistically significant nor representative of the experience of all immigrants. My findings in these interviews were further complemented by my observations of citizenship classes, however, the makeup of this class likewise poses limitation to the conclusions that can be drawn. Notable is the small class size, which ranged from only five to seven students on a given day. This class was also exceptional in the sense that the majority of them were college educated, as were the majority of my interviewees, which of course is not the case for all U.S. immigrants. However, while I observed a relatively small number of students,

the class structure more generally provided insight as to how citizenship classes held by this organization are typically run. It is worth further noting that while my interviewees were unrepresentative in the sense that they were primarily college-educated, this potentially provides compelling contributions to the existing field of literature, which chiefly focuses on immigrants who have received less education. Such findings emphasize the intensity of these issues, for they are deeply affecting even the most privileged demographic of immigrants.

The very topic of this project also lends to biases in the sample, for immigrants who have had the most adverse experiences with the legal system and law enforcement are likely to be the most hesitant to partake in an interview. For this reason, I believe that my findings underrepresent the effect that the punitive turn has had on immigrant communities. The individuals I spoke with had certainly faced intense challenges throughout their immigration experience, however, they had almost all overcome such challenges or were in the process of doing so. I did not speak to anyone who had been arrested or deported and most respondents had earned citizenship or permanent residence through the assistance of key advocates. Immigrants in more precarious situations would likely be less willing to share their immigration stories with an unfamiliar researcher, which may have caused my results to disproportionately reflect positive immigration outcomes.

Perhaps the most significant limitation I faced throughout my research was the impact of COVID-19. Conducting research, particularly that which is ethnographic in nature, is critically limited by the inability to interact with one's interlocutors in person. It was my initial hope to meet interviewees in person, where I would be better able to build rapport and establish a level of comfort throughout the conversation. I was, however, able to conduct one interview in person while practicing proper social distancing, through the assistance of Ms. Diane. I likewise faced

challenges recruiting interview participants, as these communities were disproportionately fatigued by the pandemic and understandably had more important matters to consider outside of participating in a research study. If this had not been the case, I believe I would have been able to recruit a larger sample size for my study.

Ultimately, I feel that the significance of studying this particular population is not diminished by these limitations. Rather the challenges I face offer potential new directions for further research. In particular, it would be interesting to examine how the immigrant community has been affected by COVID-19. Most of my conversations centered primarily on challenges and experiences these individuals had in years prior and not the more recent struggle brought on by the pandemic. Another interesting direction for study would be to look more closely at the relationship between key immigration advocates, like Ms. Diane, and those who are most significantly affected by their help. I was struck by the impact one individual was able to have on countless immigration journeys and it would be compelling to examine an immigration non-profit organization and the individuals who work there.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

It has been just over a year since I initially submitted my proposal for this project and much has changed in the sphere of immigration between then and now. Immigration law in the U.S. has always been defined by its dynamic nature and this past year has been no exception. Unprecedented challenges brought on by COVID-19 in conjunction with a transition to a new presidential administration has made 2020-2021 a period of change, which has had considerable impact on the lives of immigrants.

On a federal level we have already begun to see considerable reform to immigration policy under the Biden administration. Some of his very first executive orders as president

included rescinding the Trump administration's Proclamation 9844, which declared a national emergency at the southern border. He further diverted all funds that would have been directed to constructing a border wall, among several other executive actions related to his immigration policy (Law 2021). Furthermore, on March 18, 2021, the House overwhelmingly passed two immigration bills aimed at amending the immigration system: the American Dream and Promise Act and the Farm Workforce Modernization Act. The American Dream and Promise Act would allow immigrants brought to the U.S. as children to earn permanent residence and eventually citizenship, while the Farm Workforce Modernization Act would provide temporary legal status to agricultural workers and likewise provide them with an option to eventually become permanent residents (Sprunt and Grisales 2021). The passage of these bills in the House is promising, however, their future in the Senate remains uncertain. Notable on a local level is the rescission of 287(g) agreements by two counties in the metro Atlanta area. Both Gwinnett County Sheriff Keybo Taylor and Cobb County Sheriff Craig Owens have ended the program in their county's as of their recent election this year, ending the partnership between their local law enforcement and ICE. These policy changes certainly mark a shift from the restrictionist rhetoric that largely defined the previous Trump administration and potentially suggest the beginning of a more immigrant-friendly era in the United States. As debates and policy inevitably continue to evolve, it is vital we remember the real people affected by these decisions. Immigration is not just an economic or political issue, but a humanitarian issue and we must bear this in mind moving forward.

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