BECOMING A CALIFORNIA CITIZEN:
PERFORMANCES OF ALLEGIANCE AS ROUTINIZED RITUAL IN A U.S. NATURALIZATION CLASS

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Bless yourself with holy water, have Masses said, and so on;
by a simple and natural process this will make you believe,
and will dull you - will quiet your proudly critical intellect.

—Blaise Pascal, Pensées (1669)

ABSTRACT
Building on work on language and national identity, this study examines the role of language and interaction in the construction of U.S. citizenship in California. I argue that U.S. citizenship, in the site of citizenship education, is collectively performed through the ritual recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Oath of Allegiance to the United States. In addition, I highlight the decontextualized and routinized nature of the ritual and argue that this embodied and repeated action fosters immigrants’ transition to citizenhood.

THE RITUAL TEXTS OF CITIZENSHIP

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
“The pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands: one Nation under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.”

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE (RECITED AT NATURALIZATION CEREMONIES)
“I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will perform nonobstante service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.”

EMBODIED RITUAL THROUGH OATH TAKING
- The ritual texts rehearsed in class are not those required in the naturalization ceremony
- Pledge: not required at all in the naturalization process
- Oath: performed noninteractively in the naturalization ceremony

(1) 080708 00:13:08-00:14:00
29 C: <raises his right hand> Please raise your right hand.
30<br>31 C: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?
32 Ss: Yes I do.
33 C: Do you believe in the Constitution and form of government of the United States?
34 Ss [Yes I am.]
35 Ss [Yes I do.]
36 C: Are you willing to take full oath of allegiance to the United States?
37 Ss: Yes I am.
38 C: If the law requires it, are you willing to bear arms on behalf of the US military?
39 Ss: Yes I am.
40 C: If the law requires it, are you willing to perform work of national importance under civilian direction?
41 Ss: Yes I am.
42 C: Do you swear to tell the truth?
43 Ss: Yes I am.
- Ms. Castillo prompts bodily action from the students (lines 29)
- Question-and-answer sequence of the Oath of Allegiance (lines 31-43)
- Line 31 (Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?) not in the actual oath
- Varying uses of modal is by subjects (lines 34 and 35)
- This interactional text does not in fact occur in the naturalization ceremony

DISCUSSION
- The symbolic act of the Pledge and the Oath is embodied and repeated in the class
- However, the act of saying the Pledge and the Oath is decontextualized
  - absence of the American flag in many cases
  - students’ bodily orientation to the instructor rather than the flag
- The routinization contributes to the loss of performative power of the Pledge and Oath
- Illusionary force (Austin 1975) is lost even though the symbolism of the act still remains
- Through embodiment and repetition of the ritual, immigrants transition into citizenship

CONCLUSION
In the institutionalized setting of citizenship education where a growing number of California immigrants participate, U.S. citizenship is performed through the ritual of saying the Pledge of Allegiance and making the Oath of Allegiance to the United States. The decontextualization and routinization of these texts emphasizes the performative aspect of citizenship regardless of individual beliefs. By performing the action, even incorrectly, students participate in a symbolic form of American citizenship.

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