Shame entangles the linguistic lives of many first and second generation Latinx Americans. On the one hand, it is easy to find videos and accounts of public acts aimed at shaming Spanish speakers in America. On the other hand, it is also common to hear first-personal accounts of the shame some members of the Latinx American community feel for living an “English-only” existence. I advance an account explaining how one’s linguistic choices can be influenced by acts intending to shame other members of their culture. Further, I analyze the complexities of the shame that results in some of those who decide to live an English-Only existence as a result of the pressures to assimilate into mainstream American culture.

My discussion is centered around a collection of narratives by people identifying as “English-Speaking” and “English-Only” Latinx Americans. After clarifying what is meant by a linguistic life (Section 1), I present the narrative of a young writer named Amanda Machado. Machado describes the source of the shame she once felt about the residual Spanish lingering in her father’s accent (Section 2). I then describe various ways in which an anti-Spanish sentiment has been codified and enforced via public harassment targeting Spanish speakers. I explain how these realities can pressure some Latinx Americans to adopt standards deeming Spanish speakers, like them and their families, less worthy (Section 3). I analyze the resultant shame described by a smaller group within the Latinx American culture who identify as “English Only”. Within this discussion I argue that the resultant shame is a form of what some in philosophy and psychology have termed “epistemic shame” (Section 4). This conclusion motivates me to extend the concept of epistemic shame in the existing literature and to further support the upshots that theorists studying it claim it has for our overall belief improvement (Section 5).

1. A Linguistic Life

Within the borders of one’s social life is what I refer to as one’s linguistic life. One’s linguistic life is made up of one’s first-personal experiences related to linguistic choices. Linguistic choices are any choices related to language use. These include choices about the

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1 Here I use “English-Speaking Latinx Americans” to refer to those who are bilingual and speak both English and Spanish. “English-Only Latinx Americans” is used to refer to those who speak only English.

2 While the term “linguistic life” was arrived at independently, it is important to note its difference from a related term. In linguistic data analysis some use the phrase “linguistic life expectancy” to refer to the number of years or generations that a mother tongue can survive in immigrant communities after arriving in the United States (Rumbart, Massey, Bean, 2006; p. 448). In this body of research the term is used to refer to a language as a whole; whereas my term is used to refer to the experience of language use as a whole. This could be one or more than one language.
words to use in any given context, one’s tone or pronunciation, the length of one’s contributions to discussions, to whom one is addressing, which language one speaks, and more.

Many factors influence our linguistic choices. Yet, for the most part these choices are not explicit. Instead they take place without too much thought. So often our linguistic life is not experienced with presence. Instead it feels like a subtle component of our broader existence. For instance, one might use a soft tone while asking a young child to stop staring at a stranger; yet the same one might scoff at an adult breaking the same social rule. Ordinary linguistic choices like this can feel somewhat automatic. However, it is a familiar experience to be faced with linguistic choices that demand more awareness.

In important social interactions our linguistic choices have more weight and this raises an emotional element to our linguistic lives. Consider how this could occur while one is addressing a close friend who has just transitioned and changed their name. It is reasonable to imagine that until it becomes more automatic for one to use their friend’s accurate name and preferred pronouns the care one takes in making those linguistic choices might be driven by mild anxiety or fear. These emotions would seem apt given that a mistake could deeply hurt the friend.

For some Latinx Americans the significance of whether to speak Spanish in public, or at all, raises similar mindfulness and a wave of negative emotions in their linguistic lives. Their linguistic lives are surrounded by shame in a multitude of ways. In the following section I describe how acts of shame can shape the choices making up one’s linguistic life. This is so even when one is not the direct target of such acts. Proceeding that I describe a distinct form of shame that arises when acts of shame targeting Spanish speakers successfully pressure Latinx Americans to drop the Spanish language.

2. A Language Targeted by Acts of Shame, A Culture Defined

In “How the U.S. taught me that Spanish was Shameful” Amanda Machado (2019) shares a narrative about the shame she once felt in her father’s Spanish accented English.

One night over dinner, my father made an English grammar mistake and I snapped: “How have you let your English get so bad, Papi. No wonder you can't get a job.”… My mother immediately came to his defense, scolding me for being so disrespectful. Where was this spite coming from? At some point during my 15 years living in the United States, I had learned to become ashamed of my own father. I had bought into the idea that his deeply accented and imperfect English made our family less worthy than others. (2019)

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3 The same is likely to be said about people identifying as first, second, or even third generation Americans from various backgrounds. This essay is concerned with one such group and the narratives I have gathered representing this particular culture’s experiences of the significance of their linguistic choices.
Here, Machado implies that her experience of shame was not solely caused by this incident. Instead, Machado is confessing shame for knowing that her father spoke with his deep accent in public which could reveal to others that he was a Spanish speaker in the first place. Simply put, Machado’s belief that others would know her family spoke Spanish was part of the cause of her experience of shame at the dinner table. Key to this narrative is the following admission. Machado implies that at the time she genuinely believed that her father’s Spanish accent diminished her family’s worth.

On the one hand, this belief may be a natural consequence of a belief that is common to many in the Latinx American culture. According to a 2011 poll by the Pew Research Center, 87% of all Latinx people polled report having the belief that English is a key to success in America (Krogstad, Gonzalez-Berrera, 2015). However, there are reasons to think that this shared belief does not alone explain why Machado felt shame about her father's Spanish accent.

In fact, the above poll represents the opinions of the general population of Latinx people in America. This includes people who predominantly speak Spanish. So, this belief can explain Machado’s awareness that society values English. However, considered alone this belief cannot explain why speaking a second language or speaking English with a Spanish accent would be devalued in the way her narrative suggests. This becomes clear in Machado’s explanation of how she “bought into the idea” of her Spanish speaking family's lower worth.

3. The Codification and Social Enforcement of English-Only Standards

The realities of discriminatory legal policies and social practices in the U.S. lay the foundation for a culture-wide awareness among Latinx people: speaking Spanish is considered a shameful thing in America. Pressure to suppress the Spanish language has been codified across the United States and manifests in public acts intending to shame those from Latin or Hispanic descent who speak Spanish in public. For example, although the United States has no official language a number of policies and legislation bills have been proposed on the Federal and State levels to restrict the use of non-English languages in formal documents, processes, and in public education. The policies on the Federal level have been largely unsuccessful. However on the state level the story is different.

4 For example, the House of Representatives bill H.R. 997 “English Unity Act of 2019” has been reintroduced to congress for the 9th time since 2003 by Iowa congressman Steve King. This bill has not yet been successfully passed through committee review for a vote (GovTrack.us, 2020).
At the time of this writing 32 U.S. States have formally adopted English as their official language. Among these are states with a high density of immigrants identifying as Latinx, Latino/a or Hispanic like those along in southwest region and Florida. So, these official declarations sometimes imply a formal stance against the Spanish language that is commonly used among these populations. To see this one need only to consider the public discussion surrounding successfully enacted measures aimed at curbing the use of foreign languages in U.S. regions heavily populated by Latinx people. Here I will briefly discuss the example of California’s Proposition 227 aimed at cutting bilingual education programs in public schools.

In 1998 Proposition 227 aka the “English in Public Schools Initiative” was passed with 61% of the state vote. Here I want to highlight the themes seen in the public opposition to Proposition 227 at the time it was being discussed. Many, Latinx members of the California school districts thought of this as a formal effort to erase Spanish and other Native languages that were central to the growing population of Latinx people. Further, many opponents of the law saw it as “racist” and “anti-hispanic” (Lampros, 1998). Part of the basis for this implication will be familiar to the current reader.

An in-depth historical analysis of Proposition 227 by legal scholars Kevin R. Johnson and George A. Martinez (2000) highlights the role that anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Mexican animus and rhetoric shaped legal and political landscape in California in the face of a growing Latinx population. Johnson and Martinez explain that by 1998 40.5% of the state’s public school students were Latina/o or Hispanic compared to 38.8%. That amounts 2.3 million public school students of the state's 5.7 million (2000, p. 1242). In light of this a wave of reactionary anti-immigrant animus became a central theme in California politics and the judicial system.

Prior to Proposition 227 there were other pieces of reactionary legislation introduced like Proposition 187 which, if passed, would have made it illegal for undocumented children to attend public schools at all and for immigrant families to receive any public benefits (Johnson and Martinez, 2000; p.1244). In supporting reactionary measures political candidates like California Governor Pete Wilson relied heavily on messaging about the immigrant threat to “American Values” (Dewitt, 1997), focusing heavily on the fear of job loss and foreign invasion among resident White Americans. Johnson and Martinez explain how amid this anti-immigrant focus in the political sphere the community also saw a rise in hate crimes and harassment against Latinx

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5 This number reflects the 7 states who have English as well as another language as an official language (Crawford, 2008).

6 Prop. 227 was eventually repealed in 2016 (Mongeau, 2016).

7 Here I am using the term “Latinx” to be consistent with earlier use. It is worth noting that Johnson and Martinez use the terms “Latino/a and Hispanic” (sometimes interchangeably). My use of the term “Latinx” is intended to capture the same cultural group.
people (Joge and Perez, 1999). While this is only a brief account of the codification of anti-Spanish standards (in the form of English Only policies) in one state, similar measures have been passed in other states with large Latinx American populations like Texas, Florida, and Arizona (Crawford, 2008). As in California, the support for such legislation was largely fueled by strong anti-immigrant rhetoric that specifically targeted the Latinx community.8

Machado’s narrative does not mention the specific laws and policies above. However, Machado claims that her shame is partly explained by what is represented by anti-immigrant (specifically anti-Mexican) rhetoric in President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign.9 To Machado, the ideas behind this rhetoric and the fact that it resonated with many Americans explained why it would be reasonable for any Latinx American to think less of their own families and language. So, given the use of similar rhetoric in the history of legal efforts to keep Spanish out of public schools and public spaces one can reasonably conclude that a negative self-assessment would have been available to other members of the culture through time. If not that, at the very least it is clear that there is a shared awareness that Spanish is something that a large part of American society looks down on. This is also evident to people like Machado through the public shaming practices aimed at enforcing the anti-Spanish viewpoint in the above legislation.

A basic web search turns up countless examples of people being called derogatory names or being aggressively urged to “go back to their country” for speaking Spanish in American public spaces (Machado, 2020). For instance, one viral video from May 2018 shows New York city lawyer Aaron Schlossberg aggressively harassing Spanish speakers in a restaurant. In this video viewers hear him state to a manager that, “[…]staff is speaking Spanish to customers when they should be speaking English” and “[m]y guess is they're undocumented, so my next call is to ICE to have each one of them taken out of my country.” Schlossberg continues further by stating, “[i]f they have the balls to come here and live off my money — I pay for their welfare. I pay for their ability to be here.” (Suazo, 2018) Examples like this are common in our time and in history. One, Patricia Sulbarán Lovera, describes having her mouth washed out with soap in school for speaking Spanish in a Texas public school when she was a child in the 60’s (Sulbarán Lovera, 2019). Further, this type of harassment does not only target people speaking Spanish instead of English. Now, the mere hint that someone speaks Spanish in addition to English is often enough to trigger condemnation against members of this culture.

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8 We can see this merely by acknowledging that pushes for this legislation across the U.S., have been supported by funding and lobbying efforts by the organization ProEnglish. ProEnglish was founded by white nationalist John Tanton and is on the list of hate groups collected by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

9 As seen on the debate stage and reported in many outlets Trump chided Jeb Bush, then opponent for the Republican presidential nomination, “This is a country, where we speak English, not Spanish” (Goldmacher, 2016).
In 2015, Vanessa Ruiz, a bilingual news anchor for a local network in Phoenix, Arizona made national news for addressing some negative feedback she received from English speaking viewers during a live broadcast. Some viewers wrote letters and phoned the network directly, to question her choice to “roll her Rs” and pronounce the names of local cities, neighborhoods, and streets with their authentic Spanish pronunciations. This prompted Ruiz to speak out in defense of her linguistic choices saying,

I was lucky enough to grow up speaking two languages, and I have lived in other cities, in the U.S., South America, and Europe… So yes, I do like to pronounce certain things the way they are meant to be pronounced. And I know that change can be difficult, but it’s normal and over time I know that everything falls into place. (Santos and Hauser, 2015)

This ridicule for Spanish pronunciation also extends to individuals’ own names. The following displays how entitled people feel towards mocking and condemning Latinx Americans in public.

U.S. House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has repeatedly faced judgement and mocking for pronouncing her own last name with a Spanish accent. Specifically, in March 2019, Ocasio-Cortez found herself the target of mockery by the host and the guest of Fox News’ segment “The Ingraham Angle”. In this segment the host, Laura Ingraham and her guest chided Ocasio-Cortez for doing the “Latina thing” and accused her of using a a fake accent to pronounce her Spanish name (Daugherty, 2019).

In reply Ocasio-Cortez mocked the thinking that would lead someone like Ingraham to attempt to shame someone for correctly pronouncing their own name,

How dare they refuse to say their name in a wrong accent & not mangle their own family name so that I can feel more comfortable instead of look inside myself & examine why something as small as *a person’s name* makes me uncomfortable in the first place?? This is an outrage! (Daugherty, 2019)

Ruiz and Ocasio-Cortez’s confident responses to those intending to shame them illustrate a divide within the English speaking Latinx American culture. Within this culture there is a common awareness of the existence of standards ranking Spanish speakers with low worth. Yet, despite knowing that the broader American society treats Spanish as a shameful thing, only some people identifying with this culture internalize the normative standards being enforced by the

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10 In fact, some claim that America's disapproval of Spanish is particularly strong and unmatched by the disapproval, if any, of other foreign languages like Dutch or French, etc. (Diez, 2019).
acts of shame described above. Thus, only some within the culture actually feel shamed for speaking Spanish.

This divide reflects a distinction by Cecilea Mun between “acts of shame” and experiences of “being shamed”. Acts of shame are acts performed by some agent or group of agents, A in an attempt to produce an experience of shame in another agent or a group of agents A*. These are importantly distinct from experiences of being shamed. According to Mun, being shamed is a way we describe the result of a successful act of shame (2019, p. 59). That is, our colloquial phrase “being shamed” refers to the situation when an act is successful at producing shame in someone. This distinction helps a reader illuminate a key point in Machado’s narrative and other experiences within the culture of English-speaking Latinx Americans discussed below.

In particular, Machado never says that she was the direct target of an act of shame for speaking Spanish. Nor does Machado say that her parents were ever a target of these acts for their Spanish pronunciation. Yet, Machado’s narrative suggests that public acts of shame targeting Spanish speakers are causally related to her shame. This leads one to conclude that public acts of shame have a social function (unintended or intended) in addition to their intended function to shame their targets. Public acts of shame function to signal a warning to members of the Latinx American community. Any Spanish speaker could be the target of similar acts aiming to enforce of the societal English-only standard. If you speak Spanish in public, or even hint at an ability to do so, you could face harassment. This is the price that your family will pay for holding on to the Spanish language. Therefore, as in Machado’s experience, being the target of these acts is unnecessary for these acts to shame. In this culture, one might be shamed given the following:

a) One’s belief that such a standard ranking Spanish speakers as lower than non-Spanish speakers exists;

b) One’s adoption of that standard to evaluate one’s own worthiness.¹¹

In the experiences of Ruiz and Ocasio-Cortez b) does not hold. This is why we would not describe them as being shamed despite being the targets of acts of shaming. However, for other Latinx Americans b) may follow from a reasonable desire to avoid being the target of harassment, an awareness that one needs English to succeed in America, and the lack of clout that public figures like Ruiz and Ocasio-Cortez have to speak up in the face of acts of shame. All things considered, this is one explanation available for how some individuals within this culture

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¹¹ Whether or not one actually needs to agree with the standard to feel the shame for violating it is an open question here. Some people
are successfully shamed by the Spanish spoken in their homes. This is one explanation of why their linguistic lives are immersed in shame if they choose to speak Spanish themselves.

Policies and acts of shame are the American tool for enforcing an English-only linguistic convention representing decades of political and social work to suppress the presence and potential of Latinx people in America. The narratives above show how acts of shame could play a contributing role in the decline we see in Spanish use among Latinx Americans. According to a recent poll by the Pew Center for Research although a majority of Latinx Americans are bilingual, the overall share of Latinx Americans who speak Spanish at home is declining. One report shows that in major U.S. metro areas the share fell from 78% of Latinx people in 2006 to 73% in 2015 (Krogstad, Lopez, 2017). More recently, the Pew Center’s 2015 National Survey of Latinos shows how this share declines in higher generations of the Latinx community. This survey showed that most Latinx immigrant parents speak Spanish to their children (97%). However, among U.S.-born second-generation Latinx parents and third or higher generation Latinx parents the share drops to 71% and 49%, respectively (Lopez, Krogstad, and Flores, 2018). So, there are a number of individuals who identify as Latinx (i.e., Hispanic or Latino/a) yet do not speak Spanish. For some, these acts of shame are one factor leading to an unfaltering rejection of the Spanish language spoken in their homes. Now I turn to some of these stories.

4. Fallout from the Successful Enforcement of America’s English-Only Standard

These narratives illuminate three bases of shame within the English-Only Latinx community: shame for lacking Spanish language skills, shame for lacking information and cultural connections that seem only acquirable through Spanish, and shame for employing an oppressive inference pattern. Although I try to discuss each in its own right, the following narratives also show how within this culture these results of an English-only existence are importantly intertwined.

4.1. The Complexities of Shame for not knowing Spanish

In “Dispatches from the Language Wars” Daniel José Older explores the shame following his realization of the losses resulting from his childhood rejection of Spanish. This is presented via an exploration of two major consequences following his 20 year English-only existence: lacking a skill and the perspective one gains with the Spanish words themselves and employing the internalizing mainstream society’s bigoted viewpoint against the Spanish language (Older, 2019). Older’s realizations came at the age 21 prompting him to learn Spanish. Through the process of learning Spanish as an adult and as a writer he discovered how a monolingual life previously limited his existence and his perception of the world itself.

12 The Pew Center uses “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably. Here, I am merely trying to clarify that by Latinx I am referring to the same group.
When you translate, something is always lost and something else gained. These are the immeasurable units of language, the tumbling impossibility of meaning stretched over the equally impossible borderlines of culture and perception. In English, we are born, passively. It happens to us. In Spanish, nacemos: we actively enter into this world. “Consúltalo con la almohada,” the Argentine journalist Marcos says to his bullfighter girlfriend in Pedro Almodóvar’s 2002 film Hable con Ella. Talk it over with your pillow. “Sleep on it,” the subtitle lazily translates, and I think: I guess...
(Older, 2019, p. 210)

Here, Older observes one valuable feature of being multilingual. Translation and working with the words of multiple languages broadens one’s perspective on the reality around them. Each language facilitates a different way of relating to the world and processing it. This is an acute point in this context. When we reject our multilingualism, Older implies that we reject the central purpose of language itself, meaning. While Older’s observation illustrates how this shameful lost meaning is a loss in its own right, other comments by Older show how this is also social loss and a loss of one’s own identity.

At some point, very early on, I must’ve looked out at the world, looked into my television set, looked to the non-Spanish-speaking people around me with the question: Is Spanish something I need in life—is it a necessary part of me? And the answer came back a resounding no, tempered only by plain indifference.

It was almost two decades before I was able to look back and hear the quiet yeses that had been whispered in my ear all along. To her credit, my mom knew enough not to try to force it on me, that if I was going to come around at all, I would have to do it by myself. I dug into my memories, catalogued the disapproving stares, the subtle hints, the blatant threats. Then I stepped back to take it all in. And because the fallout from the language wars reaches far deeper than the headlines, burrows like a parasite through the branches of our family trees and into our very hearts, what I looked back on was a lifetime spent allowing one part of myself to devour another. I had internalized the same bigotry I cringed at in the newspapers, and I had turned it against myself. (ibid., p. 209)

In this passage we see these two forms of loss. We see the first in his use of the phrase “fallout from the language wars” by which Older means the internalized standards that many English-only Latinx people carry ranking the Spanish as shameful and worthless. In Older’s description of the “disapproving stares, the subtle hints, the blatant threats” he recalls his family’s response to his strict adherence to an English-only existence. In this way Older captures the disconnect within families caused by relying of these standards to guide our linguistic life. Moreover we see
how this disconnect is now understood by him as deeply negative, shameful, and regretful through his use of imagery characterizing the use of this standard as a “parasite through the branches of our family trees”.

Other narratives also explore the intertwining of the linguistic loss with the loss of belonging in one’s family and the broader Latinx culture. Consider a passage from Kevin Garcia’s essay, “Can You Lose a Language You Never Knew?” (2019). Despite his family’s efforts to welcome his aunt into his childhood home in an aim to help her make her place in the U.S. while also teaching Garcia and his brother Spanish he remains English-Only Latinx. Describing this result he states simply, “[…] much to everyone's chagrin […] I can't speak Spanish. It's a simple fact that fills me with shame” (Garcia, 2019). Complicating his English-only existence were incidents like the following that triggered this shame:

Other times, it was more explicit — the gentle (and not-so-gentle) teasing from family and friends for mixing up ser and estar; the uncomfortable silence that fell between my cousins and me, neither of us able to communicate during my family's trips to Mexico (ibid.).

Garcia’s experience of making these linguistic mistakes illustrates both the shame in lacking the ability to use the language itself and the shame in missing out on the social meaning that Spanish has in the culture. Here we also see that it is not merely the lack of the language in general that is inextricably connected to how individuals fit into the Latinx culture, but their mastery of Spanish that sometimes raises negative intra-group responses that result in the shame felt by many English-Speaking and English-Only Latinx people.

The short-run Arizona-based podcast series Mira Listen covers stories of English-Only Latinos feeling similarly in the episode “Latinos who Don’t Speak Spanish - The Shame in It” (Juarez, P. & Chavarria, C. & Medina, D., 2017). The focus in this episode is about the various reasons that some Latinx people feel ashamed of not knowing Spanish. One guest, Dominique Medina explores how the basis of his shame for being an English-Only Latino comes from intra-group judgement. Medina says, “It’s everywhere (i.e., the feeling of not being Latino enough) [my words], but it’s also in my own family. So my family members [who] learned Spanish they definitely have that attitude ‘you know what […] we are more Latino than you’” (Juarez, P. & Chavarria, C. & Medina, D., 2017). Co-host Carla Chavarria echoes these considerations while describing the isolating experience of being addressed by a Spanish speaker while attending a Latino community organization event in college,

I remember […] going to an event at a friend's house […] for a Latino organization and the club that they [were] in. And when someone speaks Spanish to me … suddenly the gig is up. And feeling that otherness in that space, too…”(ibid., 2017).
Accounts like this are common despite some data suggesting that there is no language requirement to be a member of the Latinx culture.

In 2017 the Pew Research Center published data showing that 71% of self-identified Latino/a or Hispanic adults claim that one is not required to speak Spanish to be considered Latinx. In slight tension with this belief, however, is the other view on Spanish represented in this same data set. According to this poll 88% of people identifying as Hispanic and 64% of people identifying as non-Hispanic with Hispanic ancestry claimed it was important for future generations of Latinx American people to speak it. (Lopez, Gonzales-Berrera, 2017) Given this data we can see what might be expressed through the intra-group practices described in the above narratives. The deriding glances and judgement described in the narratives above seem to reflect the the largely shared belief in the importance (albeit not requirement) of Spanish speaking in the culture.

The sentiment also extends to even bolder claims about authenticity which are widespread in media covering Latinx politicians and celebrities. For instance, in 2015 there was light speculation that Julián Castro (at the time the Housing and Urban Development aka HUD Secretary) might be on Hilary Clinton’s shortlist for the Vice Presidency should she win the 2016 Democratic Party endorsement for U.S. Presidency. At the time Politico published an article covering this speculation, but closed it with this:

Even so, Castro’s ethnic background may not be as effective in appealing to Hispanic voters as some believe. As one Clinton ally put it: ‘Tim Kaine speaks Spanish much better than Julián Castro does.’ (Debenedetti and Karni, 2015).

This comment by authors Debenedetti and Karni implies that even external to the culture this viewpoint exists: no matter what your heritage, if you do not speak Spanish perfectly some may not consider you to be an authentic Latinx. These assessments of English-Only and English-Speaking Latinx politicians is commonplace and I return to them in the section below. For now the example of Castro’s appeal to Hispanic voters is only meant to show how the public polices the viewpoint that it is important for Latinx people to speak Spanish. This is also depicted in Natalia Sylvester’s essay, “In No Uncertain Terms”, on political Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s flawed Spanish. In this Sylvester describes the other side of these interactions, those who cringe or feel deep discomfort the other Latinx people speak Spanish imperfectly.

Listening to her talk about the Green New Deal, I found myself taking mental notes of her slight errors in the conjugations of her words, wincing when her plural nouns didn’t match up with her singular verbs. When she paused longer than expected midsentence, I
knew it was because she was translating in her mind, searching for the right word. I recognized the silence, the moment when you realize certain words have escaped you, and you have to make do with the ones you have. Her accent, laced with the most subtle traces of English, reminded me of my own.

In that moment I felt embarrassed for her, embarrassed for myself. To deal with the shame of hearing my own flawed Spanish come out of someone else’s mouth, I first reached for the cheapest of coping mechanisms, comparing and critiquing AOC’s fluency. How easily we perpetuate internalized harm, especially if we’ve never stopped to interrogate its roots. (Lopez, 2020; p. 62)

Examples like this show the scrutiny faced by public figures in the Latinx community by other group members. Thus in addition to the negative intra-family responses some face, examples like this give a reason why some English-Only Latinx Americans feel a sense of shame arising from their lack of Spanish skills. Visible intra-group assessments of imperfect Spanish speakers in the community raise the salience of their otherness. This sense of otherness and inauthenticity that is made available in critical public commentary is one of the bases for their shame related to being English-Only. However, again it is worth noting how importantly distinct this is from the shame expressed by Older above.

Although some like Medina and Chavarria might only feel shame about the loss of belonging and the sense of inauthenticity illustrated by their first-personal responses to such intra-group practices, we can see that for other English-Only Latinx people the basis of their shame is more complex. In the narratives by Older and Garcia it is the also the loss of the language skill and the ability to process the world in Spanish that prompts shame. Now I turn to another basis which gives rise to shame within the English-only Latinx culture.

4.2. Shame for Internalization and Applying English-Only Standards

In the previous section I described two ways in which the narratives suggest shame arises in English-Only Latinx. One was shame for missing out on meaning. That is, shame can arise for not having the language skills itself. This results in an immediate loss of not being able to perceive and process the world in the multifaceted ways that one can as a multilingual. The other reason is that having this ability (and likewise, not having this ability) implies something about the degree to which one belongs to the broader Latinx culture. For many English-Only Latinx, the lack of Spanish skills places them in a position to miss out on connecting with Spanish speaking members of their culture and their own families. Thus, they feel a sense of “otherness” in the spaces one would traditionally take to be important bases of their identity. So we see how
it is that some wonder whether or not they genuinely qualify as Latinx. Here, I extract an additional reason that some English-Only Latinx feel shame in their linguistic lives, relying on an English-Only standard to guide their early linguistic lives. I return to an excerpt from Daniel José Older’s essay. I restate it here for convenience.

And because the fallout from the language wars reaches far deeper than the headlines, burrows like a parasite through the branches of our family trees and into our very hearts, what I looked back on was a lifetime spent allowing one part of myself to devour another. I had internalized the same bigotry I cringed at in the newspapers, and I had turned it against myself. (ibid., p. 209)

To Older and to other English-Only Latinx an influential factor in their linguistic lives was the broader society’s viewpoint against Spanish speakers. Early in their lives they internalized this viewpoint that living an English-only was the safest and most valuable way to live. It is easy to see how this internalization happens for some. For some there is a strong sense of fear associated with their decision to speak English and drop Spanish. You want to fit into mainstream American society and you are afraid of not fitting in. Wherever this fear comes from it might be exacerbated by the decades of political platforms taking a harsh anti-immigrant stance, the policies aimed at enforcing English-Only standards in our public spaces, and the various public acts of shaming done by everyday people against Latinx people when they speak Spanish. What we see in narratives by people like Older is that the enforcement did not stop there. The internalization led to some Latinx people enforcing this English-Only stance on themselves and their families. Here I recall one of my own experiences growing up in Tucson, Arizona in a bilingual household.

For the most part, I understood my mom perfectly well. Yet, I can recall countless incidents in which I firmly denied this fact. I denied my understanding of her Spanish words and sentences until it was true that I did not understand. For instance one time we were standing in the aisle of the grocery store looking at various boxed juices for the school lunches she would be packing us in the coming weeks. “Pásame el jugo de manzana, por favor” she repeated. I replied with a loud and firm, “I don’t speak Spanish” knowing there were other people, strangers, in the aisle. Interactions like this were common between my mother and me. She was an American who married into my Dad’s Mexican family. She saw the value in connecting to members of the family through their native language whereas all I saw were the risks. The further associated I am with this language, the more successful I will be. Now as an adult I, like many other Latinx Americans, feel as though my strict adherence to English-Only was a form of Anti-Latinx rationale being applied from within. I see that to allow this reasoning to guide my linguistic
interactions with the world, my linguistic life, was flawed. Employing this reasoning, much like Older, left me with the belief that I had done something destructive onto myself.

Here, this basis of shame is not with the results of the belief or the content of the belief itself. It is not about the lack of the language itself or the fact that I cannot connect with family members and other members of the Latinx community because I don’t speak Spanish. It is shame about the reasoning process that led me to this place. Given the above discussion about the political and social reality making such a rationale a reasonable one, one may ask how can I feel shame at this? Employing this line of reasoning was rational. Yet, I am ashamed for it.

The fact that a line of reasoning can make your life easier in a discriminatory world can serve as a reason to adopt it. Yet, looking back one sees how using that reasoning to guide one's linguistic choices, upholds standards that make things harder for other Latinx people in the future. It is a line of reasoning I would be ashamed of employing with regards to the language/s of any people of any culture. In denying my ability to partake in Spanish conversations and demanding my family speak to me in English only, I was supporting the success of a system of policies and fear to control language in America that has moved countless peoples to lose their linguistic bonds to their cultures. For that I am ashamed, a separate shame from merely lacking the language or benefits of speaking Spanish. This particular basis of shame is seen in Older’s comments, too. Older writes, “I had internalized the same bigotry I cringed at in the newspapers, and I had turned it against myself” (Older, 2019; p. 209).

Thus, the narratives in Section 4 demonstrate three distinct bases for shame in English-Speaking and English-Only Latinx. The shame for lacking the skills of speaking Spanish themselves, the shame for missing out on connections valuable to one’s identity, and the shame for becoming English-Only as a result of employing a bigoted line of reasoning against one’s own culture. At this point I want to turn to some lessons we might gain from acknowledging the complexities in the various shame experiences surrounding Spanish language use in the Latinx American culture.

5. Lessons about Epistemic Shame

5.1. Current Accounts of Epistemic Shame

Current work in philosophy and psychology takes epistemic shame to be the shame that one feels as a result of holding a belief that leads to contradiction or holding a false belief. Of course, the specifics are put forth using different theoretical tools and concepts special to the relevant disciplines. For instance, Ancient Greek theorist Laura Candiotto (2019) offers an account of epistemic shame based on the role it played in the process of belief purification in Plato’s Socratic dialogues.
Candiotto shows that shame, captured by the Greek terms *aidôs* and sometimes *aischynê*, was an affective state that some of Socrates’ interlocutors would enter upon finding themselves in the unpleasant state of *aporia* (i.e., finding themselves lost or without a path forward towards knowledge). However unpleasant, the result of discovering that one of their own beliefs lead to contradiction and the shameful feeling following Socrates’ elenchus were necessary components of improving one’s beliefs (2019, pps. 76-78). Candiotto writes,

This feeling of inferiority is a prerequisite for purification. Shame was a virtue, the one that allows an agent to recognize their inadequacy, and through it to purify them from wrong behaviors—from those wrong behaviors that are false beliefs according to the Socratic tradition—and, thus, to activate a process of purification. (2019, pg. 77)

That is, to experience epistemic shame one must hold a false belief and believe that one is an inferior thinker when compared to others (implied by “inferiority” in the above). These beliefs are necessary (i.e., prerequisite) steps for one to feel motivated to improve their beliefs. Furthermore, Candiotto notes that the degree of shame one felt as a result of being brought into a state of aporia from one’s own beliefs is often a function of other people’s judgements of one.

Specifically, Candiotto notes that the level to which one feels ashamed for their false beliefs differs across group-facilitated processes of belief improvement (e.g., discussion based inquiry) and individual processes (e.g., private meditation). They write, “[…] group *aporetic* states, described as the social procedure of belief-purification, may be more painful than the recognition of our faults while ruminating alone[…] they unmask the agent’s inadequacy to the other members of the group that are evaluating the agent’s beliefs[…]” (2019, pg. 79).

Similarly in psychology Elisabeth Vogl, et al., (2019) treat epistemic shame this way. They liken it to an achievement emotion. Achievement emotions are those arising as a result of some agent’s partaking in an action at which they can fail or succeed. Two prototypical ones are pride and shame. Put simply, many psychologists think that we tend to feel prideful when we win and shameful when we lose. The epistemic variants would be emotional states arising when one learns whether or not one has achieved true belief or succeeded at some cognitive task like correctly answering a math question (Pekrun, 2018; Vogl et al., 2019).

13 Here Candiotto also argues that group judgement and esteem for one as a thinker can shape how likely it is that the experience of epistemic shame triggers belief revision. Partially because in groups where true belief is valued there will be considerable pressure to revise. Limited space prevents me from discussing the full account and upshots of epistemic shame in this paragraph.
5.2. Extending the Standard Account

In the above epistemic shame is taken to be an emotion which can arise in one upon the discovery that one holds a false belief. Simply put, one has to have a belief to feel epistemic shame about it. This is because the belief’s being false is what the subject of the shame believes to be a failure on some standard of evaluation. This may a standard that either they or their community take to be important to meet which is clear from Candiotto’s true insight into the nature of the shame experienced when someone learns about their false beliefs in a public learning experience versus a private discovery of a false belief. Put simply, Candiotto’s claim is that much like the experience of epistemic shame in Socrates’ interlocutors triggered the process of epistemic improvement our own experiences might. However, the extent to which they might depends on the standards people in our broader community employ in evaluating us as believers. In the Socratic dialogues it was clear that witnesses evaluated one another (or at least those Athenians who played important or influential roles in society) on the basis of having true beliefs and beliefs that do not lead to contradiction.

However, what we see in the narratives from select subsets of the Latinx American culture is that truth of content is not the only component of people’s beliefs that they care about. One may evaluate the kind of believer one is on the basis of various standards. Further, one may evaluate the beliefs that guides one’s actions and behavior on the basis of various measures. Whether we hold true beliefs is only one basis upon we evaluate ourselves as believers. So what these narratives provide is some evidence that our story about epistemic shame, and perhaps other epistemic emotions (like pride etc.) would benefit from acknowledging these differences.

Ought we to care about such emotions when they are not directly related to the truth or falsehood of a belief? In a way, I think that the answer to this depends on the priorities in one’s epistemological theory. To some extent all epistemologists care deeply about uncovering the ways in which we as rational beings ought to be qua belief gatherers in the world. While prescribing ways of how to be as belief gatherers one theorist may prioritize the development of epistemic virtues (e.g., a concern for truth in the vein of Linda Zagzebski (1996), epistemic justice in the being of Miranda Fricker (2007) etc.); other theorists may prioritize the gathering of evidence or the causal relationship between beliefs and reliable processes of perception etc. I think we ought to care about such epistemic emotions regardless of how we approach the project of understanding what a good belief gatherer looks like. Partly, I think this because of the role that epistemic emotions play in uncovering the bad or regrettable ways in which we come to have the beliefs that we do.

Similarly, we are not as prideful in answering a question correctly by luck than we are by effort and this says something about what we take to be vital in our belief system. It says something about the standard we think ought to guide our path to beliefs. This is exactly the role...
that epistemic shame plays when it arises in response to a false belief. Yet, I think it plays a similar role when it arises in an agent because that agent recognizes the path they arrived at a belief is not a good one or could even have harmful effects in the world around them.

As seen in Older’s narrative, it may be all true that speaking English in a bigoted society is more valuable; but in relying on the bigot’s rationale to get to that belief, Older acknowledges that this has the result of making that belief true in the first place. That is, by employing this reasoning, Older took himself to be part of the basis making the beliefs falling out of it true which is just as harmful as being the bigot in the first place.

Yet, in sharing these experiences we see the value that these instances of shame can bring the Latinx American community as a whole. Sharing these experiences with candor brings vulnerability, but it also brings insight into what newer generations may lose if they, too, forego the Spanish language for the sake of ease alone. The acknowledgement of the understandable rationale leading one to that linguistic choice is important, but these narratives highlight the reality that a linguistic life shaped only by fears of standing out in an unwelcoming America can result in a linguistic life that is riddled with epistemic shame. Thinking of this shame as such may be vital in reflecting the true effects that the pressures to assimilate have on those people who find themselves under such pressure. It may provide a gesture of solidarity with them and hopefully also see the risk in rejecting the language of their loved ones. With this fair warning in place, we may just see that the employment of bigoted rationales leading to an English-only life is less and less compelling to newer generation Latinx Americans. For this reason, it is important to consider these other ways in which shame can be uniquely epistemic and can illuminate better ways of leading one’s linguistic life.

**Bibliography**


