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Designing the 'good citizen' through Latina identity in USCIS's virtual assistant 'Emma'

Melissa Villa-Nicholas
University of Rhode Island, mvnicholas@uri.edu

Miriam E. Sweeney

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Designing the 'good citizen' through Latina identity in USCIS's virtual assistant 'Emma'

Abstract
Virtual assistants are increasingly integrated as 'user-friendly' interfaces for e-government services. This research investigates the case study of the virtual assistant, 'Emma,' that is integrated into the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) website. We conduct an interface analysis of Emma, along with the USCIS website, and related promotional materials, to explore the cultural affordances of Latina identity as a strategic design for this virtual assistant. We argue that the Emma interface makes normative claims about citizenship and inclusion in an attempt to 'hail' Latinx users as ideal citizens. We find that the 'ideal' citizen is defined through the Emma interface as an assimilated citizen-consumer that engages with digital technologies in ways that produce them as informationally 'legible' to the state.

Keywords: Citizenship; Immigration; Latinas; E-government; Virtual Assistants

Introduction

 The contemporary political landscape of the United States is characterized by anxieties about immigrants and immigration, mainly focused on Latinx communities and the geopolitics of the U.S./ Mexico border. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly integral to surveillance projects targeting undocumented people and have provided the means to collect and mobilize data in ways that informationally constitute (and reconstitute) citizens and citizenship. Virtual assistant technologies are a particular kind of ICT, defined as computer programs with human characteristics and personality traits that act on behalf of users in digital environments (Laurel, 1997). As more government services have moved to online portals (e-government), federal agencies essentially require user-engagement with ICTs to access information and services. This influx of online services has led federal agencies to explore new technologies, such as virtual assistants, to manage online traffic, enabling new possibilities for both sharing and collecting information from site users. One such virtual assistant, "Emma," is integrated into the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) website as a kind of digital border agent, assisting users with questions about legal processes of immigration, naturalization, and citizenship. Given this landscape, it is critical to explore the design and deployment of virtual assistants in e-government services as ideological artifacts, and as extensions of information-based citizenship projects.

 Virtual assistant technologies are overwhelmingly represented as women (e.g., Siri, Alexa, Cortana), conforming to gendered labor roles that position women as "ideal" for service and helping industries (Zdenek 2007). Additionally, virtual assistants (in the United States) are commonly represented as white, Anglo, middle-class women (Sweeney 2016). This is explicitly coded through embodied representations of phenotype and linguistic constructions and is otherwise implicitly coded by assumptions of technologies as "default" white (Nakamura 2002). Interestingly, the Emma interface departs from this design and is culturally coded as Latina

through her phenotype, language skills, and positioning on the USCIS site. This suggests that USCIS is employing Latina identity as a strategic design choice, which raises the question: What are the affordances of Latina identity for Emma as a technological, ideological, and informational extension of the USCIS?

To explore this question, we conduct an interface analysis of Emma as a Latina virtual assistant, including a close reading of the USCIS website and related promotional materials for Emma. We ask how the Emma interface leverages Latina identity as a strategic design choice, along with what kinds of normative claims about U.S citizenship, immigration, and Latina identity are inscribed in the design and positioning of the virtual assistant. We take cues from Latina Feminist Media Studies foregrounding of "the female/Latina body as an analytical cornerstone" (Cepeda, 2016, 345), with critical technology studies' use of interface analysis (Brock, 2012; Stanfill, 2015; Sweeney & Brock 2014) to consider how affordances structure the interface ideologically. We argue that Emma's design mobilizes Latina identity to interpellate the "ideal" citizen as well as the undesired immigrant. We find that the 'good' citizen-consumer is defined in the interface as assimilating into white, Anglo U.S. culture, and engaging with digital technologies (like virtual assistants) in ways that produce them as informationally 'legible' for the state.

Interface analysis

Our approach to interface analysis prioritizes the relationship of the technological artifact (the virtual assistant) and the cultural contexts through which the artifact is produced and attains meaning (Sweeney 2016). We use strategies from critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2001) to perform close-readings of the virtual assistant technology as a textual object. Taking cues from Brock's critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) method, we operationalize the technological artifact as discourse using the concept of "affordances" (Brock 2016; Sweeney & Brock 2014). Affordances are features (material and semiotic) that constrain the ways that technology might be designed and configured, as well as interpreted by users (Hutchby 2001). Stanfill (2015) argues that affordances draw on Foucauldian notions of productive power to make "normative claims" about the purpose and appropriate use of the technology, building a set of interpretive possibilities into the interface. The normative claims work to establish a "cultural common sense" about the users of the interface (Stanfill 2015).

In the same way that Althusser (1970) described interpellation as the ways in which the state may 'hail', or address, an individual as a subject, affordances function in the interface as an ideological 'hail' to the user. In the case of Emma, the embodied interface acts as the 'hail' from the state to Latinx users, recruiting them into desirable subjects. In much the same way that Cepeda (2016, 349) describes the primacy of the Latina body in Latina/o Feminist Media Studies as "the slate upon which happenings are inscribed," Emma explicitly invokes the Latina body as the context (and site) for interaction, interpretation, and interpellation. Interface analysis allows us to investigate the normative claims about U.S. citizenship and immigration inherent in this

design strategy, along with how the Latina identity is used as a part of the 'hail' to recruit Latinx users into desired forms of citizenship.

Literature Review

Emma as a virtual agent of USCIS invokes a historical foundation of fear around Latinx immigration. Latinas have long been represented as non-citizens and foreign outsiders, with the rhetoric surrounding Latinas as politically charged especially around the topics of immigration, the law, and cultural xenophobia, that renders Latinas as a "threat" to the United States nation-building (Chavez 2008). Although Latinxs have been in the United States since the early 17th centuries, they are always rendered as cultural outsiders and "invaders", posited to destroy American culture (Chávez 2008, 2). These 'threats' are productive for nation building; there is no 'insider' to citizenship without a feared 'outsider (Esposito 2009). Fear of the Latina body has circulated in national discourse for decades, rendering the Latina body 'over productive' through reproducing children, and overly sexualized through stereotypes of fiery Latinas. The Latina threat, then, is nationally imagined through the productivity of the Latina body. Designing Emma, a Latina virtual agent, renders the body passive enough to separate Latinas from the national stereotypes and productively engages the Latina body to perform another action for the U.S.- citizenship building.

Latinas-as-interface is a unique and understudied approach to the national discourse of the Latina body as productive. While there is burgeoning scholarship on the use of information technologies by Latinx immigrants as an avenue to, or substitute of, citizenship (Báez 2016), work on information technologies designed as Latinas is yet to be explored. Latina/o Feminist Media Studies (Cepeda 2015) has laid a foundation of research into how Latinxs are interpellated by and engage with information technologies, interrogating new medias as "both a liberatory resource and a troublesome entity in need of constant surveillance and self-discipline (Rosalind Gill 2007, 137).", and demonstrates that information technologies are deeply embedded in discussion around and used by immigrants in the U.S. (Báez 2016). ICTs have served as intermediary roles for immigrant Latinxs in various parts of their journey from Mexico and Latin America into the United States (Schaeffer 2012). For example, in the neoliberal market, Latina women's bodies are commodities idealized by the Western gaze as an avenue of immigration through the Internet, particularly valued in cybermarriages to U.S. men (Schaeffer 2014). Thus the adaptation of a type of Latina image to demonstrate the 'good' and legal immigrant through virtual assistants builds on this notion of the body as a surface of legal or illegal ways of being for Latina immigrants.

There is also a historical precedence of information technologies used for agency by undocumented Latinxs to tell their story, such as through the use of Spanish radio for immigrant stories of border crossing and warning of ICE raids, and a response by USCIS to use that technology as a mode of surveillance and control (Casillas 2014). Similarly, as Latinxs have increasingly used the Internet, mainly through smartphones (Perrin 2017), we see USCIS adapting this message online through AVAs. The state deploys AVAs as an extension of these

information technologies. The Latina body has also been employed along the borderland in the production of machinery and technology at the maquiladoras, where Mexican women use their agency through machinery sabotage during their labor and analytical critique of technological determinism social and environmental impact (Peña 1997). The Latina body, then, acts as a circuit of culture (Hall 1997) through which information technologies are produced, circulated, challenged, and invoked to surveil citizenship.

Traditional methods of interrogating the intersectional frameworks around ICTs have often occurred in disciplinary silos. Latina/o Feminist Media Studies has called on traditional Feminist Media Studies to bring the focus of Latinas out of the margins and understand that the Latina body is the surface in which media is imprinted (Cepeda 2016). Although Latina Feminist Media Studies (LFMS) has decades of scholarship exploring Latinx media use, representation, and circuits of culture (Valdivia 2012), it has often relegated information and ICTs) as just another 'form' of media, rather than as the primary function from which media is now launched. Conversely, fields that center the critical technological analyses tend to relegate the study of Latinas and technology as a marginalized and infrequently discussed subgroup of users (de la Peña 2010), and have generally neglected Latinx perspectives, subjectivities, epistemologies, and histories as lenses for technology analysis. By bridging these fields, this article provides a discussion about the role of information communication technologies in Latinx citizenship and immigrant projects, providing context for USCIS's use of the Emma virtual assistant.

"Meet Emma, Our Virtual Assistant"

'Emma' is the computer generated "Intelligent Virtual Assistant (USCIS, 2016a)" that greets viewers on the front page of the USCIS website (Figure 1).[1] Emma went live on December 2nd, 2015 on the USCIS website, and was advertised through USCIS's YouTube and Twitter accounts. According to the USCIS website, Emma "can answer your questions and even take you to the right spot on our website" (USCIS, 2017). She is available through the "Ask a Question" chat box on the main page of the USCIS website on desktop, laptop, and mobile devices.

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[1] At the time this article was originally written in 2017, Emma was represented by an image that depicted a photographic headshot of an actual Latina woman (Figure 1). Since that time, she has been replaced by a digital avatar that is more Anglo in appearance. This update occurred in mid-2018, though the exact date of this design change is unknown to the authors. In-depth analysis of the updated Anglo Emma is outside of the scope of this article, though this design certainly warrants further exploration in terms of how identity is deployed in the interface.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the USCIS virtual agent, "Ask Emma"

Emma is a product of Next IT, an artificial intelligence design company that specializes in "conversational AI technologies" for business solutions (Next IT 2017a).[2] Next IT describes their company as a producer of innovative technology that includes over 14 years of experience with government agencies. They describe their artificial intelligence as empowering employees and customers to "learn, do and achieve more" (Next IT 2017a). Next IT upholds the Western ideals of progress that position technology as a deterministic propellant for society and culture in their promotional materials: "Our conversational AI is a layer of technology that sits between you, your tea and your customers to answer complex questions, execute solutions and deliver the right outcomes" (Next IT 2017b). AI is framed throughout their promotional materials as the technological solution that will ultimately guide the user towards 'the right' outcomes, suggesting the technology offers not only ease but also efficiency and greater accuracy. The use of conversational AI in the context of USCIS suggests that the "right outcomes" for users are located in 'ideal' formations of citizenship, immigration, and national inclusion as defined through the Emma interface.

The (virtual) New Colossus

Emma is advertised as plain-speaking and easy to understand across the USCIS platforms. For example, the USCIS site proudly proclaims that there is "No need for 'government speak'" with Emma. Elsewhere on the website, USCIS describes Emma as:
A computer-generated virtual assistant who can answer your questions and even take you to the right spot on our website. 'Emma' is named for Emma Lazarus, who wrote the poem inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty about helping immigrants. Inspired by her namesake, this Emma can help you find the immigration information you need (USCIS 2017).

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[2] Next IT was acquired by Verint in December 2017.

In this way, users are encouraged to identify with Emma as a trusted ethnic friend who acts as a liaison between the Latinx user on behalf of the U.S. government. This is evident in the description of the interface where Emma is presented as an insider of the Latinx community and an entity outside of the government agency proper. For instance, Emma is described on the USCIS website as answering questions "based on your own words", indicating that "you don't need to know 'government speak'" to use the interface. The interface is designed to appear easy to access, friendly, and removed from governmental bureaucracy, functioning to move the user beyond anticipated government hostility towards immigrants. Thus, the Emma interface ostensibly seeks to remove Latinx immigrants from the context of ultra-nationalist attitudes of xenophobia, or "unwelcome" messages elsewhere directed at immigrants from both the U.S. government and nationalist citizens.

Emma's name is a homage to American poet Emma Lazarus, author of The New Colossus, the welcome message to immigrants etched on the Statue of Liberty that famously states "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" Lazarus 1883). This poem is often used as an activist mantra for immigrant rights in the United States. Repurposed by the USCIS, the moniker's meaning is recontextualized as a hail for welcoming in the "good" immigrant and offers paths towards acceptable forms of citizenship, defined through the formal government processes explained on the site. In this sense, Emma serves as an embodied welcome message from USCIS, a virtual New Colossus. However, the reformation of the welcome message from symbolic statue to informational technology refashions The New Colossus as part of the roving eye of immigrant surveillance, rather than a mobilization call for universal immigrant rights and aid.

Emma's naming symbolically recalls narratives of 'freedom' and 'liberty' that the United States presents for immigrants. Mimi Thi Nguyen (2012) names this phenomenon as *the gift of freedom*, but the receiver of this gift will always be indebted to the giver and never able to repay the gift. Thus Emma's name signaling that famous poem that greeted immigrants from Ellis Island. The gift is brought to the users' attention and built into the interface of Emma. Foucault wrote on these freedoms offered up to potential citizens, "inasmuch as it can only function as a number of freedoms actually exist: freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the free exercise of property rights, freedom of discussion, possible freedom of expression, and so on…" (2008, 63). Nguyen works from Foucault's theories of freedom but argues herself that freedom is always an exchangeable good, "that freedom as never anything other than an actual relation between governors and governed, and as that which functions as an object of calculable, quantifiable exchange between them, is precisely the story of liberalism as empire" (2012, 10). Emma acts not only as a marker of this freedom, this gift, but as part of the digital border that the user-as-immigrant must cross and receive the gift, becoming indebted to citizenship.

Emma's name often appears in quotation marks in USCIS descriptions and promotional materials. This qualification suggests that Emma occupies a kind of liminality regarding her own status as Latina, as a citizen, and as a surveillance technology. On the one hand, Emma represents the Latina information worker, providing the veneer of cultural authority and

familiarity needed to hail Latinx users. On the other hand, the quotation marks render her an outsider, destabilizing her identity and reasserting the authority of her creators. This destabilization mirrors the uncertainty of receiving citizenship status for immigrants coming to the site. Users interacting with Emma do so with an unsteady awareness that her liminal position mirrors their own.[3]

A (user-) friendly worker

Emma presents as an ideal worker who acts as a supplement to both the USCIS website and the USCIS call center, otherwise overloaded with questions about the immigration process. USCIS provides a brief video tutorial, featuring a smiling headshot of Emma alongside her textual greeting, "Hello, I'm Emma, how may I help you?" In answer to this question, a slideshow of smiling people representing different racial and ethnic identities scrolls slowly alongside the text of hypothetical questions that display next to them against the backdrop of cheerful instrumental music (USCIS 2016b). Questions such as, "How do I get a green card?", Along with statements like "I want to bring a relative to the United States," suggest the frequently asked questions of potential immigrant users of the site. These potential users do not speak for themselves, but remain silent and smiling while overlaid text banners suggest their hypothetical questions. The end of the video hints at the future applications of Emma, stating: "Emma answers over 1 million questions a month and she's just getting started. In the near future, expect Emma to provide more ways to assist people who want to live, work, or student in the U.S." (USCIS 2016b). Interestingly, Emma won a "Service to the Citizen Award" in May 2018 (Temin n.d.), underscoring her positioning as an ideal worker.

Through these promotional materials, Emma is positioned as an adaptable and intelligent alternative to a human operator. She is described as "available 24/7" (USCIS, 2016a), hinting at her capacity to work beyond the limits of human operators and the constraints of labor laws. Latina identity acts as an amplifier in the virtual assistant that merges beliefs about the efficient, tireless machine with sexist stereotypes that frame women as suited for repetitive and tedious work. Stereotypes about the "innate" abilities of women, particularly women of color, to take on repetitive and tedious informational and technological work pervades the history of women in computing and technology industries (Brahnam, Karanikas, and Weaver 2011; Green 2001; Hossfeld 1990; Nakamura 2014). Latina workers specifically have historically performed repetitive and tedious technological work as call center operators and technological assembly lines (Villa-Nicholas 2016; Peña 1997; Tiano 1994). Emma's design as a Latina draws on this labor history, overlaying gendered and racialized stereotypes about labor onto beliefs about technological efficiency to create ideological coherence about the virtual worker.

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[3] The sudden replacement of the original Latina Emma virtual assistant with the new, Anglo version in 2018 underscores the liminal position of the Latina virtual assistant. The authors likened this disappearance to a kind of virtual deportation, with Emma's own citizenship status subject to change in accordance to the state's agenda.

(Ironically) developers frequently present virtual assistants as "humanizing" virtual customer service and informational interactions. Vashon Citizen, of the USCIS contact center solutions branch, notes that:

If you ask Emma a question, she says 'here's the answer,' just like you're talking to a real person and, if applicable, she'll actually take you to the page where you can get more information...we really see Emma as shadowing the experience of chatting with someone versus just going in and searching for information. (Boyd, 2015)

 This description emphasizes the social-relational experience of Emma, rather than the technical-pragmatic experience. Similarly, *The Federal Times*, a media source on the federal workforce, describes Emma as a virtual assistant that is developed to understand language use to "provide a more human feel" (Boyd 2015). In her research on virtual receptionists, Poster (2016) argues that employers make conscious decisions about the aspects of identity and "humanness" with whom they want customers to interact. For Emma, Latina identity acts as a cultural affordance that creates "a more human feel" through the inclusion of gendered traits.

Many scholars have noted that virtual assistants are deeply feminized in a variety of ways that tend to draw on gendered (and racialized) stereotypes (Brahnam et al 2011; Sweeney B 2016; Zdenek 2007). These sexist stereotypes about women's' 'natural' capacity for service work, as well as affective and emotional labor (Sweeney B 2016). Emma is described on the USCIS website as a "friendly presence" (USCIS, 2016a), articulating emotional labor as an integral affordance of Emma's gendered design. Hochschild (1983) describes emotional labor as the requirement that an employee manages/shape their feelings (in this case Emma's coded affect and script) in ways that will support desired outcomes for those whom the feelings are directed (in this case Latinx users). Emma expresses welcome, hospitality, and the labor of care by making Latinx users feel at ease in a normally inhospitable borderland. For Emma, "friendly" becomes "user-friendly," merging desirable user experience (UX) with gendered labor scripts.

Linguistic assimilation

Emma is "fluent in English and Spanish" (USCIS 2017) and, having spoken English first, she is noted to have learned Spanish as her second language with the adaptability to learn other languages. Emma's design and adaptability to language reinforce an "ideal" path of citizenship suggested for the Latinx user. The construct of Emma mirrors societal hope for Latinxs of the 'future'- in that she embodies everything that Latinxs can become with assimilation, especially linguistically, and she is designed to skip past the first generation transitions of language adaptation.

Emma responds in text bilingually (Figure 2); however, she can only respond audibly in English. Her linguistic design and representation as a Latina information worker targets assimilated Latinx users as ideal citizens. Having flawless English speaking skills, with language adaptability, displays the English-only attitudes that have dominated discourse around Latinx immigration since the 1980s. Although Emma is noted on the USCIS website as able adapt to other languages, her programming has not been updated to include more language options in the

two years since her debut (at the time this article was written). The absence of languages other than English and Spanish signals Emma's role as a gatekeeper that excludes non-Spanish or non-English-speaking immigrants.

Figure2. Emma speaking Spanish.

Interestingly, Emma does not orally speak Spanish, only English. Her communication is solely through the written word in Spanish, and she can speak her answers only in English with the volume on the chat box turned on. Her cadence is robotic/digitized and does not attempt to sound fully human. In the YouTube video promo for Emma, there are also no human voices represented as asking or answering questions about immigration (USCIS 2016b). Actual immigrant voices and inquiries are illegible, although questions are written in text in front of multicultural smiling faces. Their lack of agency through voice nods to the virtual erasure that those smiling representations of immigrants are not present. These potential U.S. citizens are instead only imagined by the designers of the promotional video and in relation to their interaction with Emma. Actual users of Emma- undocumented, permanent residents, or DACA recipients, are not linguistically legible by or in relation to Emma.

In her work on language and borders, Bonnie Urciuoli notes "the rhetorical purposes that emerge in code switched discourse are very much tied into the long-term political economy of language (76) that shapes not only language situation itself but social actors' relations" (1995, 529). Language and code-switching are nuanced to different Latinxs ethnic, racial, geographic, and contextual experience. But Emma's bilingualism demonstrates that she has no community context, her 'code' switching is limited to her algorithmic code, imagined by designers and adapted by users, it lacks the context of Latinx experience beyond an imagined Latinx audience. The Western colonized imagination limits Emma's linguistic code switching- she is a native English speaker who can orally speak English, and respond in typed Spanish. For virtual assistants, code-switching is restricted by their written code, and, because they have no specific Latinx heritage, they lack the linguistic nuance that Latinxs experience in everyday settings depending on their race, gender, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, political, and geographic context. While Emma's code is adaptable, it lacks the social relations to actually pass as a specific Latinx- building on the cultural stigma of 'Latinidad' of represented in media- that there

is just one type of homogenous Latinx community in the U.S. that can be marketed to through familiar signifiers of language, phenotype, and culture.

Emma's ability to understand Spanish, although not audibly speak it, reflects the intense pressures that Latinx immigrants feel for their children to speak fluent English without an accent within one generation (Zentella 1997, 122). This symbolizes the subsequent phenomenon in the United States of second and third generation Latinxs to become native English speakers and less involved in their bilingual communities (Lopez, Krogstad, and Florez 2018). Emma's interface is reflects what Jonathan Rosa describes as multilingualism in the U.S.- the process of learning multiple languages reserved for elite Whites (2016 108), rather than English monolingualism-having learned and lost Spanish as an English language learner. In Rosa's engagement with linguistic *social tense*, Latinxs in the United States are always in a tense of the imagined future, for their potential to assimilate into light-skinned English speakers. For Rosa, narratives of the future "serve to legitimate contemporary Latina/o marginalization" (2016 108), however Rosa finds in these linguistic social tenses that "narrated futures in which Latinas/os are figures as an important ethnoracial population, and narrative presents in which they are understood as not yet having arrived" (2016, 108). Emma, then, is linguistically an AI construction of the Latinx "emergent population of future significance" (Rosa 2016, 110). Rather than wait for the idea Latinx population to emerge, Emma was constructed to bring what Rosa calls the raciolinguistic chronotope into the present.

Proximity to whiteness

Similarly, race operates in the phenotype interface as a critical signifier for the ideal citizen candidate. Throughout the USCIS website, Emma is depicted as a pretty, thin, young, light-skinned Latina woman. As a flawless English speaker with the potential to be Anglo-passing, Emma upholds whiteness as the central qualifier in the American nationalist criteria of belonging and citizenship. In this way, Emma enforces the digital border as a racialized border that is constructed by the U.S. government by way of acceptable Latinidad. Belonging and citizenship, as created through the USCIS, are predicated on proximity to whiteness; upholding gendered labor practices; and the potential to assimilate to U.S. culture (as evidenced by the restrictive language settings). Her presentation as the ideal 'olive skin toned' Latina also aligns with the colonized erasure of indigenous people of Latin America and Black Latinxs, repeating the "rigid raced and gendered visual discourse of the 'Latin Look' and the manner it reflects as well as it impacts popular conceptualizations of Latina/o Identity" (Cepeda 2016, 349)

Arlene Davila has discussed the "Latin look" that has been built into media advertising towards the Hispanic market, noting that the 'generic Hispanic' is represented as olive skin and straight dark hair (2001, 111). But the olive skin, 'mixed' look of Emma projects back further into the idea of the *cosmic race*, constructed by Mexican philosopher Jose Vasconcelos and rhetoric commonly found in Latin American nationalist ideologies. The cosmic race idealized post-colonial Latinxs for being less indigenous, but not quite fully European. Davila described the *cosmic race* "As opposed to Anglo-Americans, whose injustice and inhuman materialism

had led them to exterminate or exclude indigenous populations from their 'civilization,' Latin Americans had kindly 'mated' with them and assimilated them into a new culture where 'inferior' and 'lower' races could be improved and ameliorated" (Davila 2001, 111). Whether her manufacturers or USCIS intentionally know it, Emma is a signifier of these intentional phenotypes of historic United States media and Latin American colonization. Emma's phenotype and overall 'look' has historically been sought out by casting directors and acting agencies for commercial and film "Indeed, there is seldom an indigenous or black face in Hispanic ads, unless they are minimally included in group shots" (Davila 2001, 112).

Interestingly, those actors playing potential users of Emma in the USCIS Emma YouTube video are multi-ethnic with a variety of phenotypes (though no voices). Emma, as the naturalized citizen, slightly exotic and representing the cosmic race, is a symbol of possibility for assimilation. In traditional forms of media, directors and casting agencies would look for a specific 'type' of Latina. With AVAs, designers, corporations, and the government can construct the ideal Latina trope, rather than having to wait for Latinxs to assimilate.

Constructing the citizen-customer

Emma acts as a bridge from immigrant to citizenship, via capitalist inclusion. When describing the creation of Emma, Next IT refers to users as "customers," explicitly interpellating potential user communities as customers whose value lay in the consumption process. Rather than purchasing goods through the Emma interface, users are seeking information about their citizenship status and immigration processes. This suggests that users who interact with Emma are brought fully into citizenship once they are legible as consumers through the data they *produce* in the interface as a part of these informational interactions.

Marketing Latinxs as consumers and placing their value and rights alongside consumption is not a new phenomenon, with Latinx-generated ads beginning in the 1960s and 1970s (Davila 2001, 3). But Next IT naming the Emma user as a customer is a shift from previous modes of inclusion of Latinx communities into citizenship as consumers, therefore of data. Prevalent to the national past of Latinx identity and belonging in the United States national body is the discourse around Latinx "buying power" as a force in commerce, with a significant turn in the 1990s as viewing Latinxs as a potential for capital because of the influx of numbers of Latinx immigrants and Latinx identity inclusions in the census. While previous conversations around Latinx buying power centered on commercial goods, the Latina virtual assistant consumer-as-citizen is an indicator of the new market value of data and information in citizenship. Emma's algorithm learns and adapts through interactions with users. As the H1B Visa Lawyer Blog (Lego 2018) encourages, "Try it, it's easy and the more everyone uses it – the smarter and more helpful it becomes!" User interactions (in the form of customer service interactions) create data that are used to optimize and refine Emma to be more effectively used to run analytics back on the user.

Arlene Davila notes the emerging representations around Latinx communities by politicians, marketers, and writers represent Latinxs as a "politically and economically rewarding

group (2008, 2). Davila argues that public discourse around Latinxs relies on a duality that positions them as either a threat to 'American values,' or as having overwhelming profit potential that will boost the American project across multiple axes (e.g., economic, social conservatism, assimilation). Across both of these discourses, there is a projected hope that Latinxs will lose all 'differences' outside of assimilation. This *Latino spin*, around the public discourse of Latinxs "maintains that Latinos are simultaneously subjected to processes of whitening and racialization and the dichotomous framework reducing the fate of the totality of the Latino population to one or another process" (2008, 12). Building on these ideas, the interpellation of Emma's users as customers becomes another part of the racialized project that Latinxs are always already engaged in. Emma includes the user as an economic profit point, pinning the user in the spectrum between dangerous threat and potentially assimilated citizen into whiteness, and Latinxs as a growing consumer group. While they are imagined as 'illegal' and impoverished by the United States public, Emma's design signals that some Latinxs can be imagined into the consuming, assimilated middle class. Importantly, whereas Latinx users have been targeted for their buying power in the past, Emma hails Latinx users as citizen-consumers as primarily valuable for the data they produce as the by-product of their engagement with the interface.

Data, surveillance, and privacy

In a 2018 interview on the government podcast *Federal Drive*, USCIS's Vashon Citizen describes the information architecture and role of Emma as that of a "data scientist" who is " scaling and analyzing millions of unstructured data elements in conversation to identify trends...and make recommendations" (Temin n.d.). This statement reveals that internally the USCIS primarily understands Emma as a data-analytics platform. Emma's data--chats between the user and Emma--is saved for 13 months from the day of the chat interaction, with no further arrangements to store data after that point with the National Archives (USDHS 2017, 11). The extent of the privacy and accessibility of Emma's data is currently up for debate, with questions remaining about how this data is protected, archived, and stored in the public record. Johnston (2017) describes Emma as a secure bot that does not collect personally identifiable information (PII) of the customers. In May 2017 USCIS conducted a "Privacy Impact Assessment" for the Live Chat. This report affirms that all PII in the interaction with the customer is masked, but that the interaction is stored for two years, with no plan to retain the records with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) (USDHS 2017, 6). USCIS acknowledges that "there is a risk that USCIS will inadvertently share information without the records subject's consent" (USCIS 2017, 9). The information logged by Emma is positioned as necessary to collect to improve the AI for predicting human information behavior for better customer service, though it is unclear how else the state may use this data.

Emma's interface among the USCIS websites creates ubiquitous virtual borderlands, with Emma positioned as a virtual border agent. Martinez coins the term "borderlands milieu" as "unique forces, processes, and characteristics that set borderlands apart from interior zones"

(1994, 10). According to Martinez, the borderlands are simultaneously viewed as a threat to national residents, and as a place of potential for new social relationships and formations. However, the fluidity of commerce, culture, language and social interactions in the U.S. Mexico borderlands always includes the "Latinx threat"(Chavez 2008) among citizens who feel like outsiders because of their continued exposure to people of different ethnic backgrounds. The "Latinx threat" has mobilized a constant preoccupation with policing immigration, status, and movement of "unauthorized" bodies between borders. The result of these efforts produces the U.S Mexican border areas as highly surveilled and contested spaces.

Emma's surveillance capabilities invoke these digital borderlands, and all of their social relations, but through the screen of the user, rather than in the geospatial context of the American Southwest. Emma's design as a "good" Latina citizen--as evidenced by her through language, phenotype, acceptable citizen status, and role as government liaison-- tampers the Latinx threat without entirely removing it. However, Emma's virtual presence also harnesses the borderlands milieu, signifying the borderlands to remind users of a borderlands threat, and soften that threat through acceptable, consumer identity formations. Emma reminds the user that they are threatened, offering paths for national inclusion through the state reminder that re-establishes citizens' ties to security through information technology.

In her design, Emma symbolizes the biopolitical, or life-giving, necessity for passage into citizenship. Through this biopolitical circuit of information, data becomes both the standard and conditions for defining life chances. This represents the exchange of the corporeal body for information as a body. Data mining acts as a tool of biopower on the informational body, moving a potentially illegible subject out of the impasse of non-citizenship and into surveilled citizenship. The Latinx immigrant user of Emma is hailed in by their acquiescence to assimilation in language, culture, race, and gender, but also in the collection of information and data. While Emma is not a secure virtual assistant that protects undocumented people and permanent residents, the users' compliance with generating information that can be surveilled (as opposed to the un/documented- who require multiple surveillance methods by the state to map a data body) is also a marked form of acceptable citizenship in the United States. Emma marks a symbol of the information threshold that Latinxs can cross in becoming a citizen-consumer, and as data-consumable.

Discussion

The Emma interface reveals the complex ways that USCIS mobilizes Latina identity as a design feature that interpellates Latinx users as "ideal" citizens. Messages about good citizenship are communicated through Emma's phenotype as a light-skinned and white-passing Latina, and linguistic skills that indicate a preference for English first and Spanish as a secondary, add-on feature. Both of these traits speak to the desired qualities for successful assimilation into a hegemonically stratified United States culture that is predicated on whiteness and markers of European or anglicized heritage as claims to legal status and belonging. Emma's position as a government liaison also indicates that deference to state power and the ability to adhere to

governmental authority are desirable traits for a would-be citizen. By this formulation, the immigrant user can attain citizenship if they play-along with upholding the "borders" that prevent non-assimilating and non-white immigrants access to citizenship and rights. In this sense, Emma is an extension of the state in her functions as a digital border agent tasked with patrolling the digital borderland.

Emma's acceptability as a Latinx citizen is tied to her privilege and ability to use formal channels for citizenship, and her documentability through consumable data, which are required for formal processes of immigration. People who come to the United States without documentation are, perhaps obviously, un-documentable, meaning they do not have the appropriate data trail to be legible to the state. Consumable data and the ability to be surveilled is a necessary condition of acceptable citizenship in the United States and serves as criteria for national inclusion. Emma represents a new mode of transitioning the immigrant to citizen status through technological interventions and private enterprise. Emma is a coded, programmable, and measurable example of a Latina citizen, valued for her data and information. This suggests that the immigrant, once an outsider and "threat" to the national consciousness, can now transition to the role of "insider" through their new role as a customer/consumer. Emma is indicative of this shift in terms of the bridging of customer service and data-driven solutions for government services. The USCIS's use of Emma suggests that the customer/consumer role is integral to extensive information gathering practices, transitioning the Latinx immigrant into an ideal form of citizen who engages with technologies of the state in ways that render them legible.

Conclusion: The illegible, undocumented Latina

Where, then, is the undocumented Latina immigrant? We argue that she is simultaneously absent and present in the construction of the Emma interface. Emma's legibility as an ideal citizen is effective *because* undocumented Latina immigrants are made illegible in the U.S. Undocumented Latina immigrants are both highly surveilled/visible and politically invisible (Schrieber 2018), representing a kind of informational paradox and liminality. The undocumented body is the primary site where discourse around citizenship happens. Emma has no corporeal form, but she is written as a legible citizen in her code therefore readable as 'legal' in the interface. It is precisely through Emma's interpellation of the "good" Latinx citizen that the contours of the undesirable immigrant are mapped. Emma's perceived legality in the users' imagination, afforded by her presentation of Latina identity, is reliant on a presumed mutual understanding of her opposite: an invisible, un-documented (un-legal), Latina.

The undocumented Latina immigrant passing into the United States is viewed as already 'illegal' and devalued in terms of citizenship and personhood. Cacho describes this de facto criminalization as *social death,* wherein undocumented Latinx immigrants are positioned as permanent criminals "rather than as *effects* of the law or as produced by the law. When law targets certain people for incarceration or deportation, it criminalizes those people of color who are always already most vulnerable and multiply marginalized" (2012, 4). Therefore, Emma's

legality is afforded because of an unseen, but always present 'illegal' Latina lurking in the national imagination. Emma is the opposite of the Latina undocumented body.

Lisa Cacho says, "ineligibility to personhood refers to the state of being legally recognized as rightless, located in the spaces of social death where demands for humanity are ultimately disempowering because they can be interpreted only as asking to be given something sacred in return for nothing at all" (Cacho 7). Undocumented Latinx subjects of the United States are often deemed as "illegible" because they do not fit into a socially valuable category in the national consciousness. In this project, as in our related research projects, we observe an evolving pattern in which the Latina body--specifically the undocumented Latina body--is the object of (and motivation for) the development of new surveillance technologies and industries. Previously, Latinas were rendered invisible in technological manufacturing and information labor, but now we see a significant shift as the Latina body is designed *visibly* around Western anxieties of citizenship.

For Emma to be legible (and, for citizenship to have legality and an ideal typology to draw from), there must be the illegal, the outsider, an invisible threat that Emma guards against. Nation building is dependent on the existence of an outsider "threat" to map cultural boundaries and bind state identity. There is no interface, no code, no citizen, without the undocumented Latina. The Emma interface extends citizenship and nation-building projects, using Latina identity as a cultural affordance that masks underlying information and data gathering capabilities. Engagement with Emma provides for new opportunities for the state to interpellate Latinx users as citizen-consumers, ushering them through state-sanctioned processes of immigration and national inclusion. The undocumented Latina remains ever (un)present in the interface, serving as an invisible reminder of the digital borderlands.

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