

Javier O. Huerta

"A highly satisfying international, multilingual literary meal."

- Rigoberto González, author of *Black Blossoms*

American Copia An Immigrant Epic

by

Javier O. Huerta



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Recovering the past, creating the future

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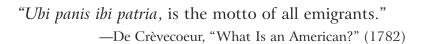
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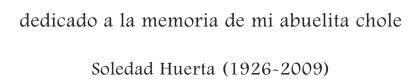
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The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) processes applications and determines eligibility of people who want to become naturalization Service (INS) processes application process, as INS Officer will interview you to determine if you are eligible for naturalization. An individual who stehs naturalization must meet the following requirements: Invited adminion for personnent realdency, a minimum realdency period, a minimum period of physical presence in the United States, demonstration of good moral character and attachment to the Committee'on, an understanding of the English Inaquage and Enrylodge of the Inland States. As the naturalization inserview, the INS officer will:

Provide Prefundensi, Efficient, and Courtoons Service and explain the nature of the interview and the requirement that the interview be conducted under outh.

Allow an Asserony or Other Representative who has find a Form O-28 with the INS to accompany you do interview. In addition, if you are exempt from the English Suspange requirements, you may bring an interpreta interview, or the INS may select an interpretar for you. If you have certain disabilities, a family assemble, guardian may accompany you during the interview, at the discretion of the INS officer.

Test Your Understanding of English and Knowledge of the History and Government of the United States, and provide you with the test results. Your understanding of apoles English will be judged by your asswers to questions acressly asked during the interview. It recensely, the INS officer will repeat or reward questions until satisfied this you understand the questions or do not understand spokes English. If you do not pain the name at the Sent accurational control interview, the INS will schedule a second interview for you to take the tests again. If you are exempt from any of these requirements, or if you present a certificate from as a authorized testing entity stating you passed the test, the INS officer will not test you at the interview unless there is evidence of fraud.

Receive Your Oral or Decumentary Evidence to support your claim to eligibility for naturalization. You must also answer all of the INS officer's questions during the interview that relate to your eligibility for naturalization.

If you have questions or comments regarding your inserview, you may sak to speak with an INS supervisor. You may also mail questions or comments to the district director or officer-ladange of the interview location, or to the INS Executive Secretaria. Attentione: Customer Service Comments, 423 I Street, NW, Washington, DC 2055%

After your naturalization tracretory, the INS officer will fill out the information below which you may retain with your naturalization records.

A. 90-89/-109
On 11-37-72 you were interviewed by INS officer QTEDWP. The results of the evaluation of
your understanding of English and knowledge of the history and government of the United States are:
4
15 You puned the English language test. 1 You failed to demonstrate the stolley to speak/ read/ write English.
O You failed to demonstrate the ability to speak/ read/ write English.
You are exempt from the English language requirement, or the requirement was walved.
4
You peased the history and government test. You failed to demonstrate a knowledge of the history and government of the United States.
Tou failed to demonstrate a knowledge of the history and government of the United States.
The history and government requirement was waived.
If during the interview you failed to demonstrate an understanding of the English language or a knowledge of the
history and government of the United States, you will not be scheduled for another interview

Preface

Mi abuelita Chole became a U.S. citizen in her seventies, and her decision to naturalize actually influenced my own decision to apply for citizenship. She likes to recount her INS interview and has related it to me several times. She says that somehow she managed to answer the questions the INS agent posed about her family, her home back in Mexico and her health. She says that the INS agent helped her with some of the words, and that throughout the interview she clutched the rosary beads in her pocket. Then the agent asked her to write the following sentence in English: "I Love America." She guessed "I," and "America" is spelled the same in English as it is in Spanish. This left mi abuelita with "Love." Clutching the rosary beads and praying to la Virgencita she looked around for an answer and noticed on one of her fingers a silver ring that my father had bought more than twenty years ago. On the ring, a serpent slithers and bends to form the letters L.O.V.E. My grandmother attributes this to the infinite wisdom and benevolence of God. I believe my grandmother may have cheated.

"Today I'm going to the grocery store"—this is the sentence that I was given. Inspector Stroup handed me a slip of paper and asked me to write it down. (I know the name of the agent not because I remember it but because I have kept a form she signed saying that I had my passed my exam. Considering that I have a passport and a Naturalization Certificate I probably don't need to keep any of these other forms. But having lived the undocu-

mented experience I have internalized the need to document my existence.) This requirement to prove proficiency in English as part of the naturalization process conflates citizenship and language. I was being tested not on my ability to speak and write English but on my love of nation, my love for America.

Being in the very awkward situation of proving that I belong in a country in which I had lived already for twenty years, I was rather offended by the simplicity of my sentence. I felt that in a way I had prepared my whole life, at least since the first day I arrived in the United States, for this interview. I arrived in 1981 in the midst of a legal battle between undocumented school children and the state of Texas. A Texas statute denied state funding to any school district that opened their doors to undocumented children. In the late 1970s lawsuits were filed on behalf of those children, and while the issue was undecided the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston established a couple of alternative schools. My family enrolled me in one of these schools, Guadalupe Aztlan in Houston's North Side.

In 1982, the "undocumented student" case reached the U.S. Supreme Court in Plyler v. Doe. In a 5-to-4 vote the Supreme Court ruled that undocumented students were not to be punished for the actions of their parents and that undocumented immigrants were to be considered as "persons" and were therefore protected under the Fourteenth Amendment, which calls for equal treatment under the law. The Texas Statute was deemed to be unconstitutional. Furthermore, the case raised the question of education as a right. Justice Powell in his concurring opinion wrote that because of the importance this society places on education the failure to educate a certain group of people would result in the creation of an underclass. Undocumented children, he commented, should not "be left on the streets uneducated." In the fall of 1982 I entered Houston Independent School District and through bumps and bruises, misunderstandings and mispronunciations I learned to read and write and speak English.

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By the time of my INS interview, I was an English major at the University of Houston. So I felt ready to pass any exam on or about the English language. And "Today I'm going to the grocery store" was my sentence?! I wanted to tell the INS agent that I could do things with the English language that she could never imagine. Instead I settled for showing her that the sentence scans as iambic pentameter.

u / u / u / u / u / Today I'm going to the grocery store.

"One day," I told her, "I will write an epic starting with that line." Poor Inspector Stroup. You were just doing your job. Accept my apologies. My mistake was to think that I or anybody else could master this or any other language. I have since learned of the abundance of language, which is both a great resource for writers and a daunting challenge. I consider this piece an epic about going to the grocery store. I am simply attempting to explore the abundance of experience found in that one sentence.