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From Civic Creed to Contested Belonging: Race, Citizenship, and the Politics of Historical Memory in the United States

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Abstract

This study examines the historical and changing relationship between race, citizenship, and national memory in the United States. It proceeds from the premise that American citizenship has not, throughout its history, been merely a legal status determined by the state; it has also functioned as a mechanism for producing the boundaries of national belonging and defining who is regarded as an authentic member of the nation. The study argues that the gradual expansion of legal recognition of citizenship has not necessarily resulted in a corresponding equality in social, symbolic, and historical recognition, making American belonging a continuing subject of negotiation and contestation. To account for this gap, the study proposes the concept of "Narrative Citizenship," referring to the recognition of an individual or group as legitimate actors and as having a rightful claim to participate in the national narrative and to interpret the nation's historical memory, rather than merely as holders of legal status. The study employs critical historical discourse analysis, conceptual analysis, and collective memory analysis by



tracing several historical moments, beginning with the Naturalization Act of 1790, through the Fourteenth Amendment and *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, and extending to the speeches of Frederick Douglass, the development of counter-memory, and contemporary debates over birthright citizenship. The study demonstrates that race has historically operated at three interconnected levels: defining the boundaries of legal citizenship, shaping patterns of social recognition, and influencing the position of groups within national memory. It further shows that contemporary conflicts over who deserves to be regarded as American cannot be understood through citizenship law alone, because they also involve a struggle over who has the right to define the nation and its history. The study proposes a three-dimensional model of national membership based on legal, social, and narrative recognition, thereby broadening the analysis of citizenship from the question "Who is a citizen?" to the question "Who is recognized as a legitimate owner of the national story?"

Keywords: American citizenship; race; civic creed; collective memory; counter-memory; belonging; narrative citizenship; birthright citizenship.

1. Introduction

American political identity rests upon a foundational paradox that is difficult to overlook. On the one hand, the republic has been associated since the Declaration of Independence with a universal language of liberty, equality, and natural rights. On the other hand, actual membership in the nation developed within a social and legal system that excluded broad segments of the population on racial, ethnic, gendered, and regional grounds. Thus, the question of who is "American" has never been merely a legal question; it has always also concerned the symbolic and social boundaries of the national community.

This paradox is particularly evident in the relationship between the American civic creed and the historical practice of citizenship. The language of liberty and equality made it possible to portray the United States as a nation founded more on political principles than on a shared racial origin.

Yet citizenship laws and social and institutional practices, at different historical moments, determined who could gain full entry into this community. Consequently, a gap emerged between “the nation as it defines itself” and “the nation as it distributes membership.”

The Naturalization Act of 1790 was one of the clearest early expressions of this gap, as it restricted naturalization to “free white persons.” In the twentieth century, cases such as *Ozawa v. United States* and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* revealed that whiteness itself was not a fixed reality that could be applied neutrally, but a changing legal classification associated with determining who could obtain full membership. These cases demonstrated that the relationship between race and citizenship was not a relationship between two independent categories; rather, the law itself contributed to producing the meaning of race and the boundaries of belonging.

The Fourteenth Amendment of 1868 brought about a decisive constitutional transformation when it provided that all persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to its jurisdiction are citizens of the United States and of the state in which they reside. Citizenship thus shifted from a model that depended to a considerable extent on naturalization requirements and racial classification toward a more inclusive constitutional principle. *Wong Kim Ark* in 1898 subsequently affirmed that birth in the United States confers constitutional citizenship, in the case decided by the Court, despite the Chinese origin of the parents. The case remains one of the most important milestones in the history of birthright citizenship in the United States.

Yet the expansion of legal citizenship did not resolve the problem of belonging. An individual may be a citizen in legal terms while remaining subject to social or symbolic questioning regarding their “Americanness.” Similarly, a group may obtain legal recognition without its history and experience becoming a central part of the narrative through which the nation defines itself. Here, the importance of historical memory becomes apparent. Memory is not merely a retrieval of the past; it is also a domain in which the events considered foundational by the nation, the figures regarded as historical actors, and the groups viewed as having a legitimate place in its history are determined.

Recent studies support this perspective. Cyr and Hirst (2024), in four studies of national collective memory, found differences between Black and White participants in the events they regarded as most important in the history of the United States. Black participants recalled race-related events to a greater extent, whereas White participants were more inclined toward conventional founding events. This does not imply the existence of two separate national memories; rather, it reveals that what is regarded as the “most important American history” is shaped by social position and the historical experiences of different groups.

The present study draws on this observation to propose the concept of “Narrative Citizenship.” This concept does not constitute a new legal status, nor does it provide a criterion for judging the degree of a group’s “Americanness.” Rather, it is an analytical tool describing the recognition of an individual or group as legitimate actors within the national narrative and as having a rightful claim to have their history incorporated into the history through which the nation defines itself.

Accordingly, the problem addressed by this study is that reducing citizenship to legal status does not adequately explain the persistence of conflicts surrounding race, belonging, and memory in the United States. The study raises the following questions: How has American citizenship historically become a mechanism for determining the boundaries of membership in the nation? How has race contributed to producing unequal degrees of belonging? How have excluded groups used the civic creed and historical memory to reclaim their place within the nation? And what does the concept of Narrative Citizenship add to the analysis of these conflicts?

The study employs critical historical discourse analysis, conceptual analysis, and collective memory analysis. It does not seek to provide a comprehensive history of American citizenship; rather, it selects specific historical moments as evidence of the transformation of citizenship from a legal status into a contested position within the national narrative.

2. Conceptual Framework: Citizenship, Belonging, and Memory

2.1 Citizenship between Legal Status and Social Relationship

In its legal sense, citizenship defines the formal relationship between the individual and the state. It entails rights and obligations and determines the possibility of political participation, legal protection, and membership in a particular political community. Yet this definition does not exhaust the experience of citizenship, because individuals do not live within the state merely as holders of a legal status; they live as members of a society that carries conceptions of origin, identity, merit, and belonging.

This observation helps distinguish citizenship from belonging. Citizenship answers a specific legal question: Does the political system recognize the individual as a citizen? Belonging, by contrast, concerns a broader question: Is the individual regarded as a natural and legitimate part of the national community?

This distinction becomes particularly important in the American context because of the long history of race in determining membership. At different historical stages, certain rights and statuses were associated with the idea of whiteness, which Obinna (2024) traces to a historical model that may be termed “whiteness as citizenship,” in which racial classifications became intertwined with the distribution of membership rights.

Thus, legal recognition does not automatically eliminate social hierarchies. The law may change while social perceptions of the “typical” citizen persist, as may perceptions of groups that are expected to demonstrate their loyalty and Americanness to a greater extent than others.

2.2 Race as a Mechanism for Determining Membership

Race in American history was not merely a social identity added to citizenship after citizenship had been legally determined. At certain historical stages, it formed part of the process of

determining who could become a citizen in the first place. This is evident in the history of naturalization laws and cases involving racial exclusion.

Yet the significance of race did not end with the abolition of racially discriminatory naturalization requirements. The effects of racial classification can persist in determining who is treated as American automatically and who is regarded as needing to demonstrate their belonging.

The study by Rodriguez and Macias (2023) helps clarify this point through the concept of "racial citizenship." Their ethnographic study of undocumented Latino youth showed that citizenship is not merely a set of legal categories; rather, it intersects with a broader racial hierarchy that determines the meanings and status of membership. This approach reveals that legal classification does not operate independently of social perceptions concerning who appears to "belong" and who appears to be a "stranger."

2.3 Collective Memory and National Belonging

If citizenship determines membership in legal terms, memory helps determine who appears within the image that the nation constructs of itself. Collective memory is not a neutral repository of the past; rather, it is a social process through which events are selected, interpreted, ordered, and reconnected to the present.

For this reason, the question of memory is also a question of power. Who decides which events should be remembered? Who is presented as a hero? Who appears as a victim? And who is represented as an actor in the making of the nation?

The findings of Cyr and Hirst (2024) reveal that differences in the recollection of the past do not necessarily correspond to differences in national identity; rather, they may reflect different understandings of what the nation ought to remember about itself. Memory therefore becomes a domain through which the relationship between national identity and social position can be understood.

3. From the Civic Creed to the Racial Boundaries of Citizenship

The American civic creed is founded on a set of political principles that include liberty, equality, constitutional government, and individual rights. These principles provided a strong foundation for defining the United States as a political nation rather than merely a racial community. Yet history reveals that this universal language coexisted for a long period with a restricted system of membership.

The contradiction between principle and practice was not accidental. The universal language itself became a resource that excluded groups could use to challenge the boundaries of the nation. At the same time, a narrow definition of the national community could be used to postpone the application of these principles to certain groups.

The experience of the Naturalization Act of 1790 illustrates this paradox clearly. Citizenship could have been presented as entry into a political community founded on principles, but the law restricted naturalization to “free white persons,” thereby making race a legal element in determining membership.

The cases of *Ozawa* and *Thind* subsequently revealed the instability of this classification. Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, attempted to establish his eligibility for naturalization through arguments concerning assimilation, culture, and color, but the Court rejected his claim. In *Thind*, the argument that Aryan Indians could be scientifically classified as “Caucasians” was insufficient because the Court treated whiteness as a different social and legal classification. The contradiction therefore became clear: if race was a criterion of citizenship, the state needed to define what race was; and if that definition was unstable, citizenship itself became tied to a shifting classification.

This historical experience is important because it demonstrates that the legal boundaries of the nation were not a neutral reflection of social identity; they also contributed to producing it. This makes Obinna (2024) important to the reinterpretation of the history of legal racial exclusion, as

the study connects the concept of whiteness to the distribution of rights and status within the American state.

Yet the civic creed was not merely a tool of exclusion. Excluded groups were able to appropriate it and turn it against exclusion itself. This duality is central to understanding American discourse on race and citizenship.

4. The Fourteenth Amendment and the Redefinition of Citizenship

The Fourteenth Amendment represents a decisive turning point because it reformulated citizenship on a more inclusive constitutional basis. It stipulated that all persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to its jurisdiction are citizens. The Amendment also linked equality to equal protection of the law and due process of law.

The significance of this transformation lies in the fact that it shifted the question from “Who can be naturalized?” to “Who is considered a citizen by virtue of birth?” Yet the legal change did not erase the social structure that had preceded it.

The experience of Black Americans after the Civil War reveals this paradox. The acquisition of citizenship was not automatically equivalent to the ability to translate it into ownership, independence, security, and equal social participation. Through an examination of Black claims to property during Reconstruction, Kelly (2025) demonstrates that belonging had a clear material dimension and that the relationship among political citizenship, property, and social loss remained complex after emancipation.

It thus becomes clear that legal recognition was a necessary condition for citizenship, but it was not a guarantee of equality in the national experience. A citizen who cannot translate rights into effective capacity to own resources, participate, and receive protection experiences citizenship differently in social reality from a citizen who can do so.

4.1. The Case of *Wong Kim Ark*

The case of *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* brought the principle of birthright citizenship under renewed scrutiny in the face of racial classification. Wong Kim Ark was born in San Francisco to Chinese parents, and the authorities initially refused to recognize his right to return to the United States after a visit to China. In 1898, the Supreme Court upheld the principle of his citizenship by birth. Records of the National Archives indicate that the case became a fundamental precedent establishing birthright citizenship for children of immigrants born in the United States, regardless of the national or racial origin of their parents in the case concerned.

The case reveals an important paradox: the state was able to restrict the naturalization of Chinese parents because of the earlier racialized system, but under the Fourteenth Amendment, it could not automatically transfer this exclusion to a child born in the United States.

Here, the shift from citizenship as a privilege granted by the state to citizenship as a constitutional right linked to birth becomes apparent. Yet this transformation did not eliminate the social question of the “real American.” It became legally possible for a person to be American without their racial origin corresponding to the historical image of the American.

This is precisely where legal history intersects with the concept of narrative citizenship. Legal recognition became more inclusive, while the incorporation of these citizens into the national narrative remained slower and more contested.

5. From the Right to Citizenship to the Right to Narrate the Nation

If the Fourteenth Amendment expanded the scope of legal citizenship, the struggle against slavery and the Civil Rights Movement demonstrated that excluded groups demanded not only their rights but also a reinterpretation of the nation upon which those rights were based.

Frederick Douglass provides a clear example of this process. In his famous 1852 speech on the Fourth of July, he confronted the contradiction between American rhetoric of freedom and the persistence of slavery. He delivered the speech in Rochester on July 5 before an antislavery audience and transformed the national occasion itself into an occasion for questioning the boundaries of the American “we.”

The significance of Douglass lies in the fact that he did not merely lodge a complaint against the state. He used the principles proclaimed by the nation itself to redefine the position of Black Americans within it. This pattern recurs throughout the history of civil rights: the demand for equality did not always entail a rejection of the civil creed; rather, it often took the form of demanding that the nation fulfill its own promises.

From this perspective, resistance can be understood as a form of “reclaiming” the civil creed. The excluded group does not merely say, “We are different”; it also says, “The principles through which you define the nation belong to us as well.” This transformation is important because it shifts the struggle from a demand for recognition to a demand for participation in defining the nation.

6. Narrative Citizenship: The Conceptual Contribution

This study proposes the concept of “narrative citizenship” to refer to the level at which an individual or group becomes a recognized agent within the national narrative.

Three levels can be distinguished:

Level	Question	Object of Recognition
Legal	Is the individual a citizen?	Citizenship and rights
Social	Is the individual treated as a full member?	Acceptance, participation, and equality

Narrative	Is the individual recognized as a legitimate owner of the national story?	Visibility, agency, and legitimacy
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This does not mean that the three levels are independent. Rather, they are interconnected and may vary in degree. Legal recognition may be high while social recognition remains limited, or cultural presence may be visible without the group becoming a full narrative agent.

The central contribution of the concept lies in moving from “representation” to “agency.” The presence of a group in a history textbook or museum does not necessarily mean that the group participates in defining the meaning of its history. A group may appear as a victim, a minority, or a recipient of assistance, while another group continues to occupy the position of national agent.

Narrative citizenship therefore requires three conditions:

First, visibility, meaning that the group is not excluded from the national narrative.

Second, agency, meaning that it appears as a contributor to the making of history.

Third, legitimacy, meaning that its right to interpret its experience and incorporate it into the nation’s understanding of itself is recognized.

Narrative citizenship, therefore, does not mean possessing a single national narrative or imposing a collective interpretation of the past. It means having the right to participate in the production of national meaning.

7. National Memory as a Site of Struggle over Belonging

Recent research demonstrates that national memory is not homogeneous. Cyr and Hirst (2024) showed that Black and White participants differed in the events they classified as the most important in the history of the United States, with Black participants tending to recall events

more closely associated with race and White participants showing a greater tendency to recall traditional founding events.

This finding should not be interpreted as evidence that one group possesses more of the historical “truth” than the other. More importantly, it reveals that an individual’s position within society influences what they consider worthy of remembering as part of the nation’s history.

From this perspective, memory becomes a political domain. The selection of what is taught, commemorated, and memorialized in monuments, museums, and national ceremonies contributes to determining who appears central and who appears marginal.

This struggle may become particularly visible when marginalized groups attempt to incorporate events that were previously absent from, or peripheral to, the dominant narrative. Remembering slavery, reconstructing the history of Black resistance, recalling the history of immigration and Asian exclusion, or incorporating the experiences of Latino groups into the national history does not merely represent an expansion of historical content; it constitutes a redefinition of what “American history” should mean.

From this perspective, counter-memory can be understood as a practice of narrative citizenship. It does not merely add new information; it demands a redefinition of the center of the national narrative.

8. From Legal Citizenship to Narrative Citizenship: A Synthetic Reading

A comparison of the preceding historical stages makes it possible to construct a concise explanatory sequence.

In the first stage, race was directly involved in determining who could enter the sphere of citizenship, as illustrated by the Naturalization Act and the practices associated with it. In the second stage, the Fourteenth Amendment broadened the basis of legal citizenship, and

birthright citizenship became a constitutional principle. In the third stage, the problem of the gap between legal, social, and narrative recognition emerged more clearly.

This gap does not mean that law is unimportant. On the contrary, legal change creates the framework within which rights can be claimed. Yet law alone does not determine how society imagines the nation.

Here, the importance of the concept of narrative citizenship becomes clear. If legal citizenship determines who is a member from the perspective of the state, narrative citizenship helps analyze who is recognized as a member of the story that the nation tells about itself.

Conceptually, full national membership can be expressed as follows:

Full national membership = legal recognition + social recognition + narrative recognition

This formulation does not constitute a quantitative equation. Rather, it indicates that national membership consists of different levels that may not coincide.

The strength of this model lies in its ability to explain why certain conflicts over belonging persist after earlier legal problems have been resolved. If a group can no longer be legally excluded on the basis of race, the struggle over its “Americanness” may continue in the form of questions concerning loyalty, culture, origin, or memory.

Exclusion thus shifts from an explicit legal question to a more implicit one: Who appears American? Who is required to prove their Americanness? Whose memory is treated as part of the broader national memory, and whose is treated as the private memory of a minority?

9. Birthright Citizenship and the Contemporary American Debate

Birthright citizenship provides an important contemporary test of this argument. In 2025, President Donald Trump again raised the issue of ending automatic recognition of citizenship

for certain children born in the United States to noncitizen parents. The debate thus became a direct confrontation over the meaning of the phrase “subject to the jurisdiction thereof” in the Fourteenth Amendment.

In *Trump v. Barbara*, decided by the Supreme Court on June 30, 2026, the Court addressed the constitutional question of whether children born in the United States to parents who are unlawfully or temporarily present are subject to the jurisdiction of the United States to an extent sufficient to acquire citizenship. The Court concluded that such children are citizens at birth under the Citizenship Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The significance of this case extends beyond its legal details because it reproduces the same historical question in a contemporary form: Is national membership determined primarily by place of birth and constitutional status, or can it once again be linked to the origins and legal status of parents?

The case also reveals the continuing strength of *Wong Kim Ark* within the legal structure of birthright citizenship. The Court’s opinions affirmed the relationship between the Fourteenth Amendment and the 1898 precedent, indicating that the principle that emerged in response to the exclusion of Chinese immigrants remains present in contemporary citizenship conflicts.

Yet the debate is not confined to the legal sphere. Drawing on Cooperative Multiracial Post-Election Survey data collected after the 2020 election, Lajevardi and Merolla (2025) found that a majority of participants supported birthright citizenship, while a substantial minority supported ending it, and that support for a ban was higher among White participants than among other racial and ethnic groups. Attitudes toward banning birthright citizenship were also associated with racial attitudes and views toward undocumented immigrants.

These findings are important because they demonstrate that disagreement over birthright citizenship does not concern only the interpretation of a constitutional text. It is also connected

to conceptions of the nation and to perceptions of who belongs within it. The contemporary debate can therefore be understood as a continuation of the historical struggle over the boundaries of membership, but within a legal framework that is more inclusive than that of the nineteenth century.

The case also demonstrates that the legal expansion of citizenship does not prevent questions of belonging from being raised again in political discourse. As the demographic composition of the United States changes, questions of origin, boundaries, and immigration can once again move to the center of debates over what it means to be "American."

10. Discussion

The historical and conceptual comparison reveals that American citizenship developed through a persistent tension between the principle of inclusive political membership and classificatory practices that restricted the scope of that membership. Race was not merely a backdrop to this tension; it was one of the mechanisms through which the boundaries of the American "people" were defined.

The significance of this history, however, lies not merely in demonstrating that the United States experienced racial exclusion. This fact is well established in the historical literature. The contribution of this study is to propose a way of connecting legal exclusion with the social and narrative persistence of these same boundaries.

This connection becomes apparent at three levels.

First, law can expand membership. The Fourteenth Amendment and, subsequently, *Wong Kim Ark* constituted two pivotal moments in this expansion.

Second, legal recognition does not guarantee equality in social experience. Citizenship may be equal in legal status while individuals differ in their ability to translate it into resources, status, security, and participation.

Third, belonging is not complete without narrative recognition. A group that is legally considered part of the nation but does not appear as a legitimate agent in the nation's history encounters a different form of incompleteness in membership.

The importance of counter-memory can be understood from this perspective. When groups reclaim their histories, they are not merely demanding recognition of the past; they are also redefining their relationship to the present. In doing so, they practice a form of citizenship that extends beyond claiming rights to claiming participation in defining the nation.

This conclusion should not, however, be transformed into the claim that memory alone can produce equality. Narrative recognition does not compensate for legal rights or material equality. Memory can also be a site of conflict and the reproduction of domination as much as it can be a site of emancipation.

Therefore, the concept of narrative citizenship should be used as a diagnostic concept. It reveals the position of a group within the national narrative, but it does not presuppose that narrative recognition will produce specific political outcomes.

From this perspective, contemporary conflicts over history curricula, slavery, racism, immigration, and birthright citizenship can be understood as part of a broader struggle over the definition of the nation. The question of the past is simultaneously a question about the present because the way the nation's story is narrated determines who appears within the national "we" and who remains positioned as the other.

11. Conclusion

The study concludes that the history of American citizenship cannot be reduced to a linear transition from exclusion to equality. Legal citizenship has indeed expanded, but its expansion did not end the negotiation over belonging. Rather, in some cases, it shifted the conflict from the question "Who has the right to be a citizen?" to the question "What makes a citizen a full member of the nation?"

The analysis has shown that race played a central role in this history, first through its direct involvement in determining legal eligibility for citizenship, then through its shaping of patterns of social recognition, and finally through its influence on the position of groups within national memory. The trajectory of the Naturalization Act, the Fourteenth Amendment, and *Wong Kim Ark* demonstrates that U.S. law gradually moved toward a more inclusive conception of citizenship, but this transformation did not eliminate all social conceptions that historically associated the "American" with a particular racial image.

The analysis of Douglass and counter-memory has also shown that excluded groups were not merely recipients of the expansion of rights. They participated in redefining the civil creed and reconstructing national memory. The struggle over history can therefore be understood as one form of the struggle over citizenship itself.

In this context, the study proposes the concept of "narrative citizenship" as an analytical contribution to the study of citizenship, race, and memory. Narrative citizenship does not replace legal citizenship, nor does it entail possession of an exclusive national narrative. Rather, it refers to the recognition of an individual or group as a legitimate agent in the national story. This recognition operates through three interconnected dimensions: visibility, agency, and legitimacy.

This approach reveals that national membership is not constituted by law alone. A citizen may be legally recognized without being socially treated as a full member, and may be present in history without being recognized as one of its producers of meaning. Accordingly, full national membership can be analyzed as the convergence of legal, social, and narrative recognition.

This finding is particularly significant in light of the continuing American debate over birthright citizenship, immigration, race, and national memory. The *Trump v. Barbara* case in 2026 demonstrated that birthright citizenship remains at the center of the struggle over the definition of membership, while recent studies of public opinion indicate that attitudes toward this principle are also associated with race and attitudes toward immigrants.

Accordingly, the struggle over “who is American?” does not end with determining who holds citizenship. It continues in schools, museums, political discourse, collective memory, national commemorations, and in the ways in which the story of the United States is narrated. If legal citizenship answers the question of formal membership, narrative citizenship addresses a different but no less important question: Who is recognized as a legitimate owner of the story through which the nation tells itself who it is?

The fundamental value of this concept does not lie in adding a new term to citizenship studies, but in revealing the connection among three domains that are often studied separately: the boundaries of legal membership, the racial hierarchies of belonging, and the politics of national memory. By bringing these domains together, it becomes possible to understand American citizenship as an ongoing process of redefining the “people,” rather than merely as a fixed legal status.

The history of the United States can thus be viewed not only as a history of expanding the circle of those entitled to be citizens, but also as a history of expanding the circle of those permitted to become part of the “we” in whose name the nation speaks about its past, present, and future.

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