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## Justicia del Lenguaje: How Language Barriers Affect the Lives of Immigrants in Kingston, NY.

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**Justicia del Lenguaje:  
How Language Barriers Affect the Lives of Immigrants in Kingston, NY.**

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Veronica Martinez Cruz

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2024



Dedication

**Para mis padres Eva y Marcelo**

Les dedico este proyecto a ustedes. Mil gracias por apoyarme siempre en todas mis locuras. Esto no habría sido posible de no ser por todos los sacrificios que han hecho ustedes. Los quiero y admiro.

**Para mis hermanas Carolina y Marcela**

I am fortunate to have you in my life. Son mis hermanas de sangre, mis mejores amigas, mis mejores aliadas y modelos a seguir. I admire your spirit and I am grateful for your unconditional support. Las amo.

**Para mis sobrines Juliana, Jose, Valerie, y Luka**

Los quiero con todo mi corazón y me siento bendecida por ser su tía Vero, estaré siempre para ustedes. Remember to always follow your dreams



**Para mis Language Justice compis**

The journey as LJ Collective started as a rollercoaster, but I wouldn't do it with anyone else. I appreciate your support and guidance throughout. Let's keep this dream of Language Justice going!

**Para mi familia at Bard | Bard BAC**

There are many things I would change about my time at Bard, though one thing that will always remain the same is the pleasure of meeting you. Thank you for your support, I will always cherish you in my heart.

**Para mis amigos que no están en Bard**

Thank you for your support in this adventure that began in 2020. Without your support I would not have been able to get to this point. I owe you one!



## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my SPROJ advisor, Miles Rodríguez for all of the support and resources he has shared during this entire process. I knew from the moment I took your Latin America: Independence, Sovereignty, and Revolution course that your knowledge would be of great value to me. Gracias por dejarme trabajar en este proyecto a mi manera.

I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Peter Rosenblum. Thank you for your support and advice on this project.

I would like to recognize the Bard Bac Program Team. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to embark on this educational experience which I thought I would never be able to experience, as well as your support during this experience. I appreciate you infinitely

I would like to acknowledge the Human Rights Project Team. Thanks for your continuous support in this project.



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## Introduction

The initial idea for writing this project came from my own experience as a new im/immigrant entering Kingston High School. My first language is Spanish, which meant that in my first year of school, Claudia, a student from Honduras would be my interpreter and I felt as if I was a shadow without a voice.

The language barrier not only meant that I could not communicate with my teachers and classmates. It also resulted in constraining what classes I could take since we had to take up to three ENL classes (depending on what level we were in) a day, limiting our academic opportunities. I will not deny the frustration I felt at times, being dependent on others to communicate was like being tied with a thick and hard rope, difficult to untie. It was in my senior year that I was assigned to be the interpreter for a classmate who was starting a new school year.

Unlike when I started school where I had to take classes alone, we would have three classes together (since she had three English classes a day) so during that year, we sat next to each other - me interpreting the class and her just nodding her head. At the end of each class, I would share my notes with her so she could copy them down. It was in one of these classes, biology, that when I went to talk to the teacher to introduce him to my classmate, he didn't hide his frustration when I told him that I would interpret the class to which he said "I don't know why they send me students who don't speak English". His reaction surprised me because I never thought a teacher would say something like that out loud. It's the first time I've ever talked about this, and it's still hard to believe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martinez Cruz, Veronica. "Why Language Matters" 2023. Bard College, unpublished paper

Although the United States is a country of immigrants, there are many gaps to be bridged. One of these gaps is language. Not only are there not enough resources for those who need interpretation and translation. There is the misconception that if a person is bilingual, they can translate and interpret regardless of skills. That's why we often see situations where children have to translate documents or interpret school and medical meetings for their parents.

My sisters and I had to do exactly that when we had to go with my parents to the doctor or to any type of office, the staff only spoke English so my sisters and I had to interpret for them. Many times if we had to fill out forms, the forms were difficult to understand because even though we could speak decent English, the forms' wording was very specific and complicated to interpret.

Being bilingual has opened many doors for me, including the opportunity to serve on the board of directors of various organizations, but it has also made me aware of the lack of language resources for immigrant communities in the area.

Language is the bridge of communication between communities. Many im/migrant communities do not have that bridge - or support - in the context of language. Thus, this is where Language Justice comes in, advocating for the right of each person to express themselves in the language in which they feel most comfortable but also to be understood, no matter how many languages are spoken in a room, that's why the creation of multilingual spaces and a form of inclusive, non-gendered language are one of the main principles of Language Justice.<sup>2</sup>

During the process of deciding what to write about for my SPROJ, I came to realize that I wanted to write about something that felt close to me. Taking into account my experience as an

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<sup>2</sup> Volkmer, Ada. "Episode 2, Se Ve Se Siente". Se Ve Se Escucha. Podcast Audio, February 6, 2020



im/migrant, and seeing the few changes that have taken place in Kingston in the context of language resources, despite the fact that different im/migrant communities, not only Latin American, have moved to Kingston that do not have the necessary support to be able to flourish in this diverse community, inspired me to create this project.

The focus is on the Latin American community, which is quite diverse and yet has not always been part of the many changes that have taken place in Kingston - while thinking of the other im/migrant communities that speak languages other than Spanish and Q'eqchi'; that reside alongside us in this city. I feel that this SPROJ has several arguments, one of which is that Latin American immigrants in Kingston face several barriers for not speaking English, encompassing social, educational and employment contexts and that systems in position to assist them do not have the necessary resources. Another point of argument is the importance of implementing Language Justice practices in professional and social settings and the ways in which these practices help communities develop better practices of inclusiveness and equality.

This project aims to contribute towards finding short and long term solutions to the language barriers that im/migrants in Kingston face on a day to day basis. Therefore, it is essential to know their stories and how they navigate the language barriers individually, family-wise and socially. Likewise, it is also essential to find out what similarities and differences exist among them, especially as they are from different countries, cultural backgrounds, languages, beliefs, etc.

The research for this SPROJ was conducted through trilingual interviews - Spanish, Q'eqchi' and English - centering on the experiences of the Latin American immigrant community

in Kingston, with the objective of determining the potential language barriers encountered upon arrival in Kingston. What is the purpose of the study - to understand not only how these barriers are being addressed, as well as what can be improved.

These interviews and the narratives contained within them serve as evidence supporting that there is a critical need for the Kingston city government, school and medical systems to provide resources accessible in the languages of the immigrant/immigrant communities that reside and arrive here.

In the same way, though there is criticism of the lack of resources, I am interested in studying how as a community we can overcome prejudice, intolerance and neglect towards non-native speakers, as we perhaps by listening to these experiences may see that we have more in common with each other than we think.

My research for this paper is primarily based on ethnographic materials from interviews conducted in three different languages - Spanish, Q'eqchi' and English. Throughout this project, I aimed to use simple language for accessibility purposes. For this work, it was crucial to maintain the original language of the interviews, because in Language Justice there is no dominant language. Additionally, I wanted to honor the languages that were recorded in those conversations.

Originally, this project was supposed to be a film. However, when I contacted the people who participated and told them that they were going to be videotaped, their faces showed me the uncertainty that this caused them. Therefore, I decided that a podcast would be a better choice as sharing these stories was difficult enough for some of the participants, and I didn't want to

complicate it any further for them. In order to get information for this project, community participation was necessary. Otherwise, the few data available would not have the same value.

Although most of the im/migrants I interviewed are Spanish speakers, for me it was important to highlight the uniqueness of each jargon and accents spoken in our communities; without forgetting the indigenous languages that are often ignored in our own post-colonized countries. Thus, for the interviews with the im/migrant from Guatemala, who is primarily a Q'eqchi' speaker, I had to rely on the services of an interpreter.

Some of the interview questions for the participants were:

- 1. What was your experience of migration to Kingston like?**
- 2. What are the barriers you have encountered while residing in Kingston? How have they affected you?**
- 3. If your native language is not English, how has it affected your access to resources - housing, school, medical?**
- 4. What suggestions do you have for the systems that are in place to provide services to the community?**

For this project, I wanted to use simple language for the purpose of accessibility. Even though most people have at least a basic level of linguistic capital, language of academia is privileged and inaccessible in certain contexts. Language can often be used not only to dehumanize people, but to further dominate them. Keeping in mind what accessibility means, this project was designed to be interactive from the very beginning. Beginning from the

interviews, once the interviews were finished, a presentation was held in one of the rooms of the YMCA, in Midtown Kingston. It is important that the immigrant/immigrant community can participate in this type of projects, as they are part of the local community and their feedback is very valuable.

In chapter one, I provide a brief overview of the history of Kingston NY and explore the migration patterns of Latin American immigration to Kingston NY. I included facts about their origins and the languages spoken by them.

In chapter two, I will explain what are some of the barriers these im/migrants are facing. I also compare the other side of this problem through the interview with L, the UIDN volunteer.

In chapter three I explore what Language Justice is and why it is crucial for the development of communities, especially those that have diverse populations.

## Research Methods

I decided to focus my research on interviews with Latin American immigrants who migrated to Kingston, New York in the last thirty years or so. As well with people or organizations that work/help these communities, as I am interested in exploring the other side of the picture. I want to see how organizations that assist these immigrants navigate these different patterns of immigration and what kind of barriers they have encountered in doing so.

While there is not enough data on the migration patterns of these groups changes have occurred and it has been noticeable to those of us who live and work in this area. In order to get participants who met the criteria for my senior project I made posters with information about what the project was about and contact information in Q'eqchi', Spanish and English and shared these on my social media. Similarly, I printed flyers to distribute in places where these communities congregate (stores, public laundromats, libraries, churches, etc). I also promoted this project on two of the local Spanish-language radio programs.

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED**

Study on language barriers faced by  
Latino/Hispanic/Latinx immigrants in Kingston, NY and  
how they affect them.

**eligibility:**

- Be 21 years of age or older
- Identify as  
Latino/Hispanic/Latino/Latinx
- Live in Kingston, NY
- It is okay if you only speak  
Spanish or Q'eqchi'.



Please email [vm5392@bard.edu](mailto:vm5392@bard.edu) for more information and ways to  
participate..

## SE NECESITAN PARTICIPANTES PARA INVESTIGACIÓN

Estudio sobre las barreras de lenguaje a las que se enfrentan los inmigrantes latinos/hispanos/latinx en Kingston, NY y cómo les afectan.

### elegibilidad:

- Tener 21 años o más
- Identificarse como latino/hispano/latinx
- Vivir en Kingston, NY
- Esta bien si solo habla Español o Q'eqchi'



Por favor, envíe un correo electrónico a [vm5392@bard.edu](mailto:vm5392@bard.edu) para más información y formas de participar.

## Ántaktal taq relanechachik xchikiniketa

Untuq' letalitzijilab' kisabaj pa latinomaq'hisp'anq'/latinixk'et ij kiwachirib' Latinomaq' Kingston, NY xeha nk'ob'aaq' te latina ixkriub' q'ij Qeqchi uwanb'al, qanik nunixtikaxh

### chi chaqanik:

- 21 lumawalik oqoq'
- Rinumatzal rumal bizilal Latino/hispano/latinx
- Wujew til Kingston, NY
- Ri táan b'e'ib'ij Xolon tihkaj ri qatay chqi



K'anik, choniin b'eytxe' ri [vm5392@bard.edu](mailto:vm5392@bard.edu) re ru teq kchaam vix reyaal ri ajcanal ri wihe' b'e.

When a prospective participant contacted me via social media or email, I would send them a digital copy of the consent form, outlining the risks and benefits of the study, confidentiality and who to contact with any questions or concerns.

All interviews were conducted in private, in one of Radio Kingston's recording studios (which I was given permission to use in advance), and before they began, a hard copy of the consent form and questionnaire was handed out and signed. Typically an interview lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour, which was recorded with RK's recording equipment and kept in a private secured folder. These interviews were conversational and did not follow the topic set of the interview questions as written. Furthermore, to protect the identity of the participants all names were omitted in the interviews and in this thesis.

I conducted five interviews in total.

- Two in Spanish, with two im/migrant women.
  - **A** from Uruguay, who has lived in Kingston for 22 years. Works in a dental laboratory and has two adult children.
  - **C** from Mexico, She has resided in Kingston for 24 years. A stay-at-home mom, she has one child.
- One in Q'eqchi' with Spanish interpretation.
  - **M** from Petén, Guatemala. He has lived in Kingston for 5 years. His family lives in Guatemala and he works in landscaping.
- Two in English.

- The first one with **A**, an im/migrant from Belize who speaks English and Q'eqchi'. She moved to the US in 2022, and has lived in Kingston for only a few months. She does not have any family here.
- The second one, with **L**, a volunteer from the Ulster Immigrant Defense Network (UIDN) in Kingston. No personal information was collected from her.

I will explore their stories through this thesis.



## Chapter One

### Kingston NY | Im/migration to

“An immigrant? An immigrant feels like when you go to the movies and you get there late. You can’t see, and the people are not happy you’re there. The movie has already started, and you missed parts. You have a lot of catching up to do if you’re going to get it, and you need to find your place in the dark without stepping on people. Then, if you find your place, shut up and pay attention; you might get what the movie is all about.”

– Amariyls Gacio Rassler

When you search for Kingston, which is located in upstate New York, you will find images of the natural scenic beauty that surrounds it as it is part of the Hudson Valley. This city, which once served as the first capital of New York until the Battle of Saratoga, when it was burned by the British in 1777, is rich in history as it became an important transportation and shipping center after natural cement was discovered in the region during the 1800s, connecting it to the railroad and canal which was a cargo depot for the transportation of coal shipments from Honesdale, Pennsylvania, to New York City by way of the Delaware and Hudson Canal. Subsequently, this hub served also to transport other commodities, including bluestone. Most of the manufactured bluestone was shaped and shipped by Kingston and was used to create the sidewalks of New York City.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Welcome to the City of Kingston, NY.” *The City of Kingston, NY*, [www.kingston-ny.gov/](http://www.kingston-ny.gov/) .

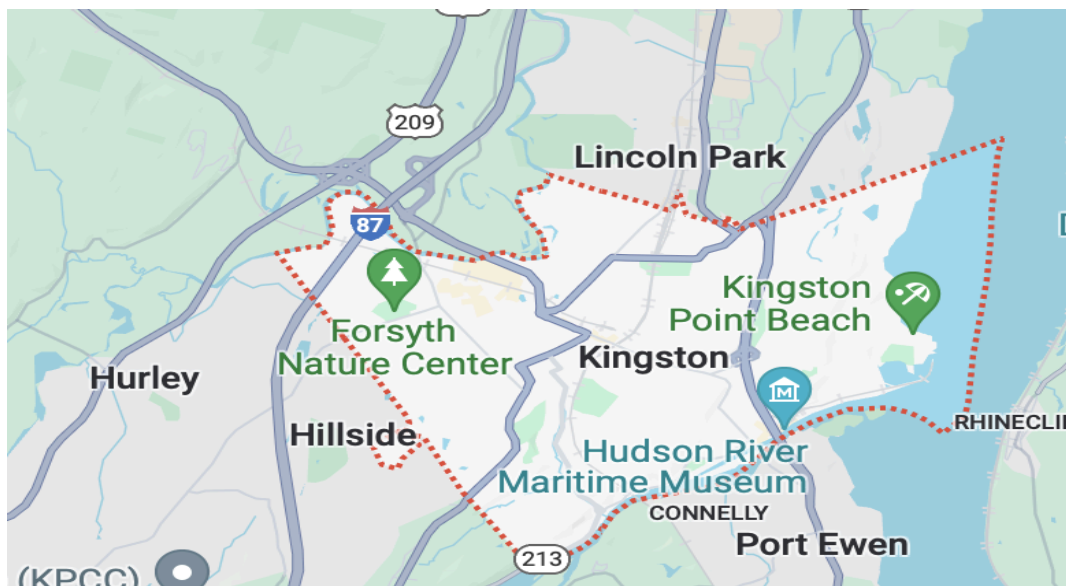


Fig. 1 Map of Kingston, N.Y. (Google Images)<sup>4</sup>

According to the US Census Bureau, an estimated 15.2% of the total population in Kingston was Latin American in 2022, not including natives of Puerto Rico and undocumented immigrants who are excluded due to their lack of status.<sup>4</sup>

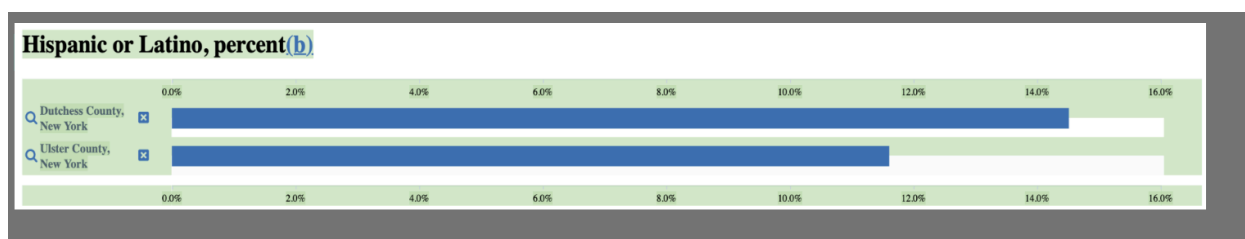


Fig. 2 Percentage of Hispanic or Latino Population in Ulster and Dutchess Counties (US Census)<sup>5</sup>

The migration of the Latin American community to Kingston has changed significantly. It could be divided into two groups - the old migrant group and the new migrant group. Most of the immigrants in the older group are from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras,

<sup>4</sup> Source: Google Images

<sup>5</sup> Source: US Census Website.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/.kingstoncitynewyork/PST045222>

among other countries in the southern part of the American continent; all Spanish speakers, and most of them speak English fluently, which has led many of them to have small businesses - restaurants, landscaping, etc. in the area.

**PLACE OF BIRTH** 138 RESPONDENTS

Belize	1
Colombia	2
Costa Rica	1
Ecuador	4
El Salvador	23
Guatemala	16
Honduras	4
Mexico, Guanajuato	1
Mexico, Guerrero	1
Mexico, Hidalgo	1
Mexico, Mexico City	4
Mexico, Morelos	2
Mexico, Oaxaca	15
Mexico, Puebla	36
Mexico, San Agustin	1
Mexico	13
Venezuela	1
?	13

Fig. 3 Country of Origin 2017<sup>6</sup>

This table shows the results of the country of origin of some of the participants in the Kingston Latino Cultural Study survey conducted by Arts Mid Hudson. We were able to interview around

<sup>6</sup> Source: Arts Mid Hudson. "Kingston Latino Cultural Study Phase I and II." *Arts Mid-Hudson*, Arts Mid Hudson.pp8

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607737d89beecf6bcb2caa77/t/621e8e091ba13842d07f040b/1646169613025/Kingston+Latino+Cultural+Study.pdf>

150 people in total from the Latin American community to determine what cultural programs that they would like to participate in.

#### OCCUPATION 138 RESPONDENTS

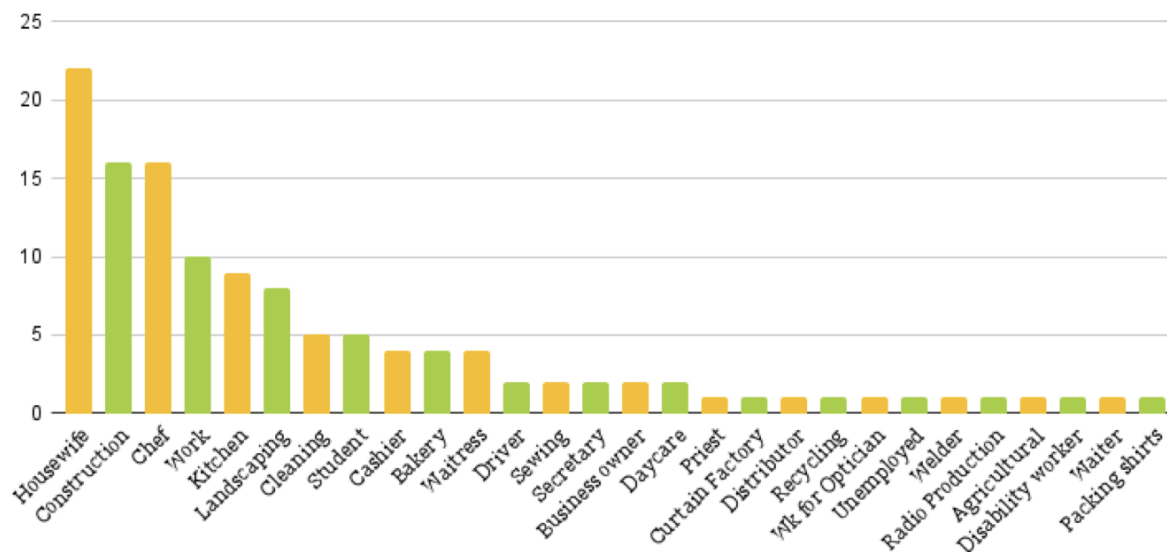


Table 4 Occupations<sup>7</sup>

However, this migration shift has been demographically changed from about ten years ago to the present. Most of the migrants who arrived in Kingston in this period are from Petén, Guatemala, an indigenous group of people whose first language is Q'eqchi', and very few speak very limited Spanish. In the interviews conducted among these two groups, I explore the barriers they have encountered while navigating the different administrative systems of this city, as well

<sup>7</sup> Source: Arts Mid Hudson. "Kingston Latino Cultural Study Phase I and II." *Arts Mid-Hudson*, Arts Mid Hudson. pp 7

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607737d89beecf6bcb2caa77/t/621e8e091ba13842d07f040b/1646169613025/Kingston+Latino+Cultural+Study.pdf>

as how this has affected their access to or lack of access to the most basic needs (housing, education, medical services, etc.).

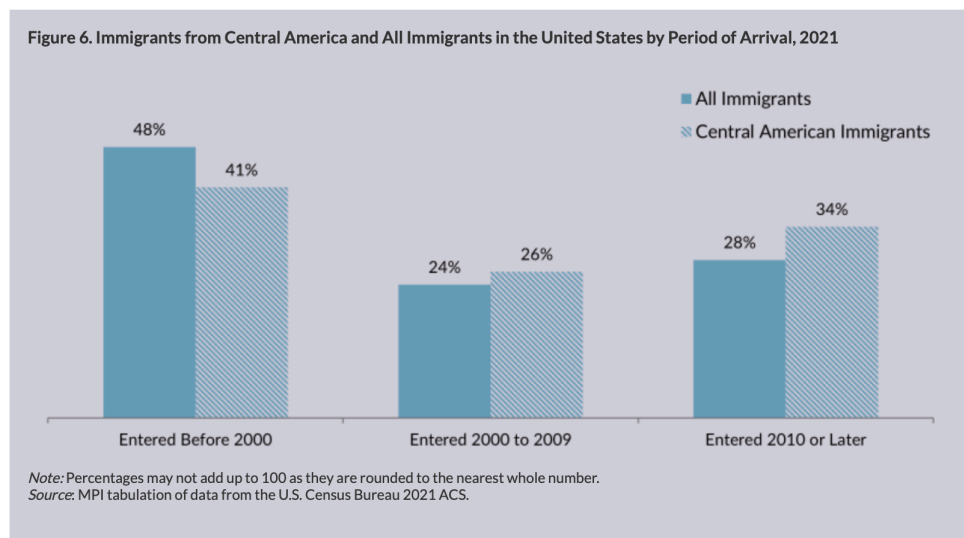


Figure 5 Data of Im/migrants from Central America vs All Im/migrants in the US<sup>8</sup>

I argued that from 2010 onwards, the influx of Central American im/migrants has increased in Kingston, and even though, at a local level, it was difficult to obtain information on the numbers of Latin American im/migrants arriving in Kingston, it was difficult to obtain information on the numbers of Latin American im/migrants to Kingston. However, as we can see in the table above, the number of Central American im/migrants that have migrated to the United States has increased considerably. This means that Kingston is not an isolated case.

In the context of education, the number of students in the Kingston City School District alone has increased in recent years, as can be seen in the graph below, as students of Hispanic or Latino origin were the second largest group of students in the district in the 2021-2022 school year.

<sup>8</sup> Source : “Central American Immigrants in the United States.” *Migrationpolicy.Org*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states-2021#english>.

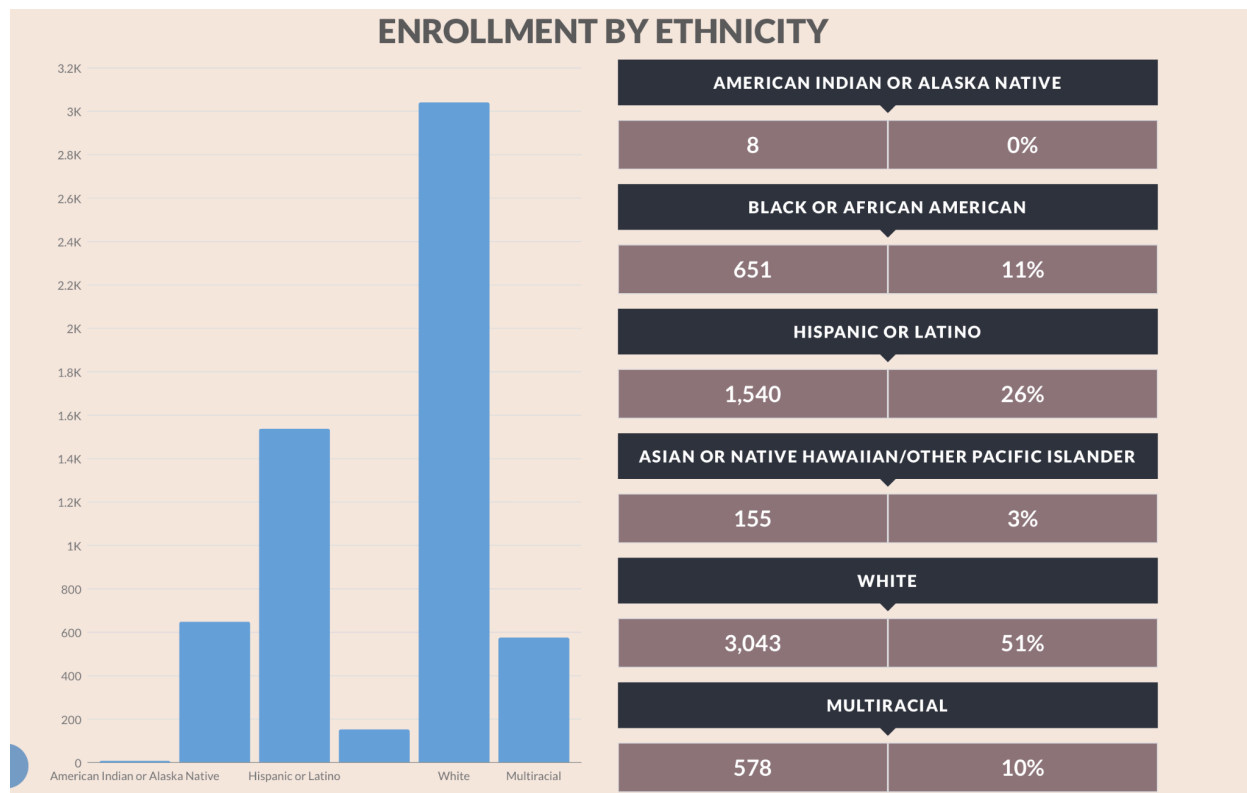


Fig. 6 Students enrolled in the KCSD 2021-2022 term<sup>9</sup>

Although not a large increase is seen in the number of students enrolled, in Figure 4 below shows that for the period 2002-2023, the number of non-white denominated students increased slightly.

<sup>9</sup> Source: “2021-2022.” *NYSED Data Site* [enrollment.php](https://enrollment.php)

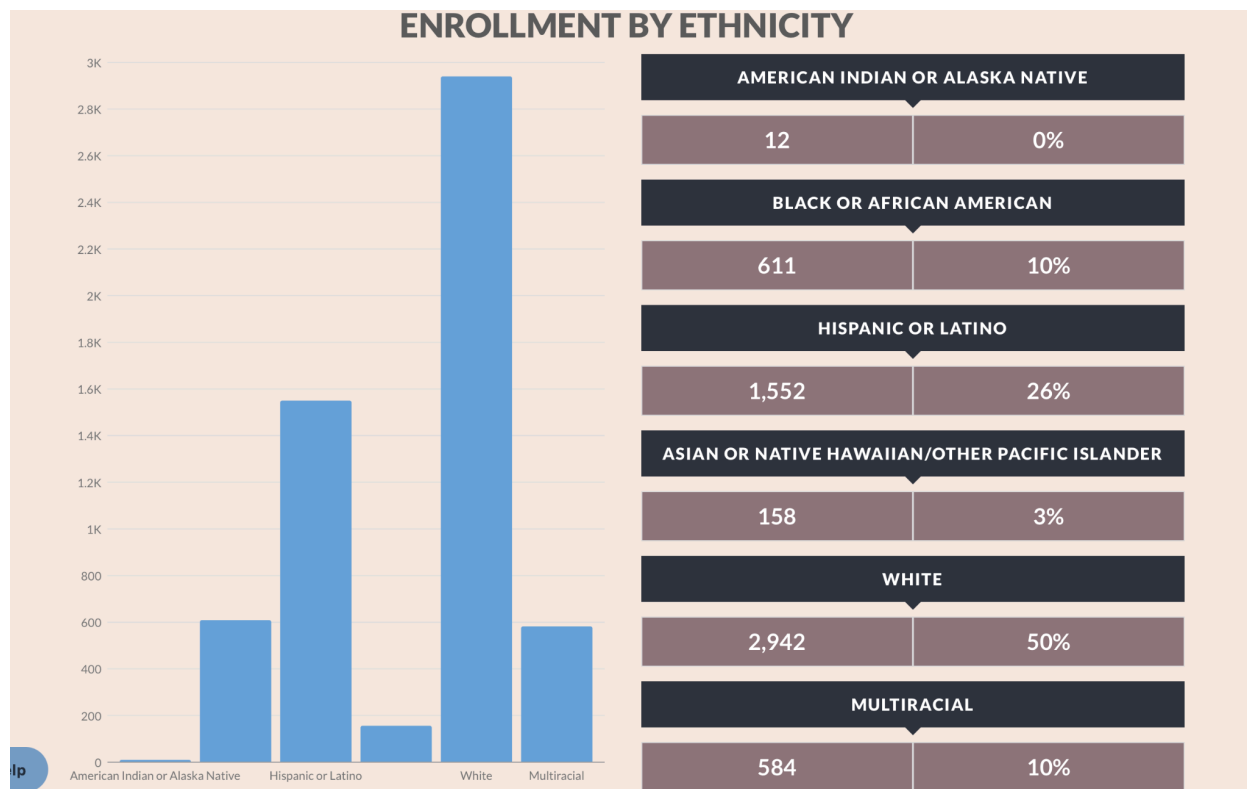


Fig. 6 Students enrolled in the KCSD 2022-2023 term<sup>10</sup>

Although many school districts are as diverse as KCSD is, that does not mean that students have access to resources in their native language or that the staff members are bilingual and trained to support them through their school years.

<sup>10</sup> “2023.” *NYSED Data Site*, <https://data.nysed.gov/ell.php?year=2023&instid=800000036308>

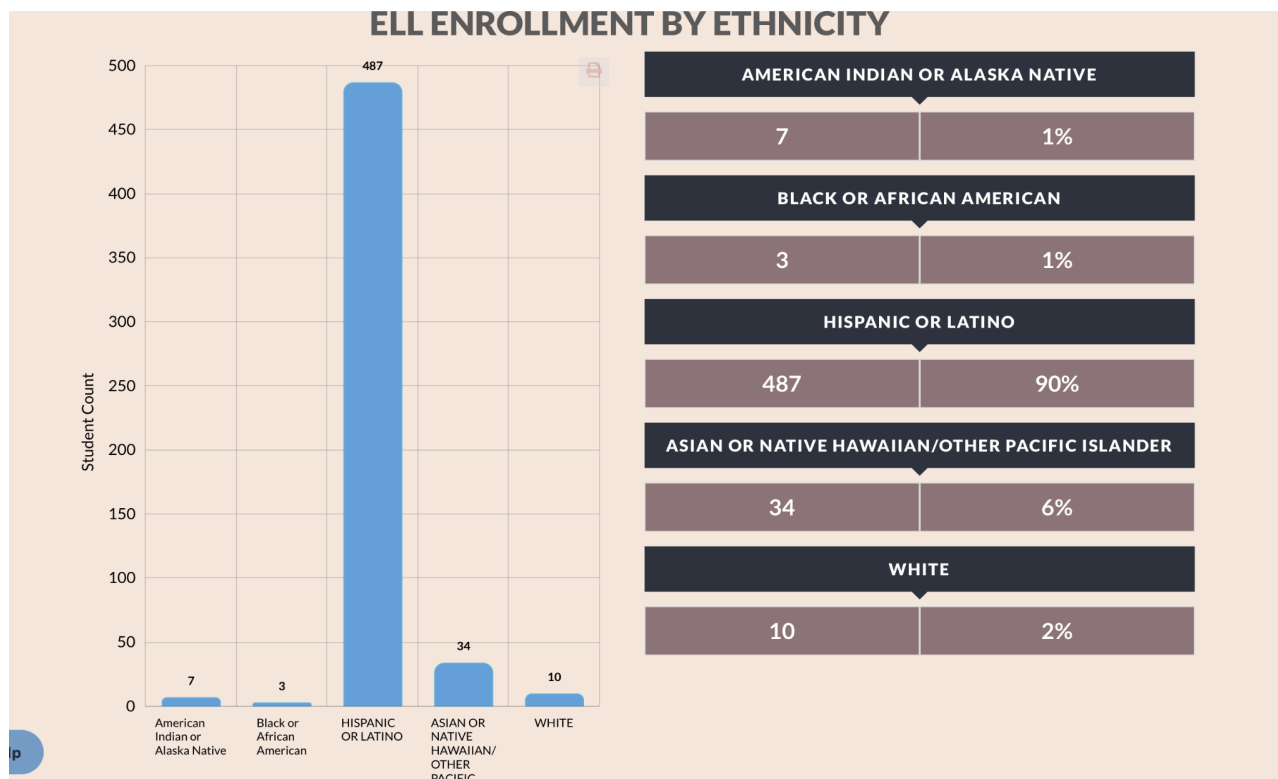


Fig. 7 English Language Learner Enrollment<sup>11</sup>

As shown in Figure 7, in the 2022-2023 school year, 90% of the students registered in the English Language Learners (ELL) program enrolled in the Kingston City School District were of Latino or Hispanic origin.

Unfortunately there is not much information or statistics on the number of im/migrants of Latin American origin in Kingston or the languages they speak. I contacted the City of Kingston and Ulster County Governments seeking information on the percentages of Latin American im/migrants but did not receive a response. I managed to gather some data through the New York

<sup>11</sup> 2023. (n.d.). NYSED Data Site. [https://data.nysed.gov/ell.php?year=2023\\_instd=800000036308](https://data.nysed.gov/ell.php?year=2023_instd=800000036308)



State Education Department website and the Kingston Latino Cultural Study conducted by Arts Mid Hudson.

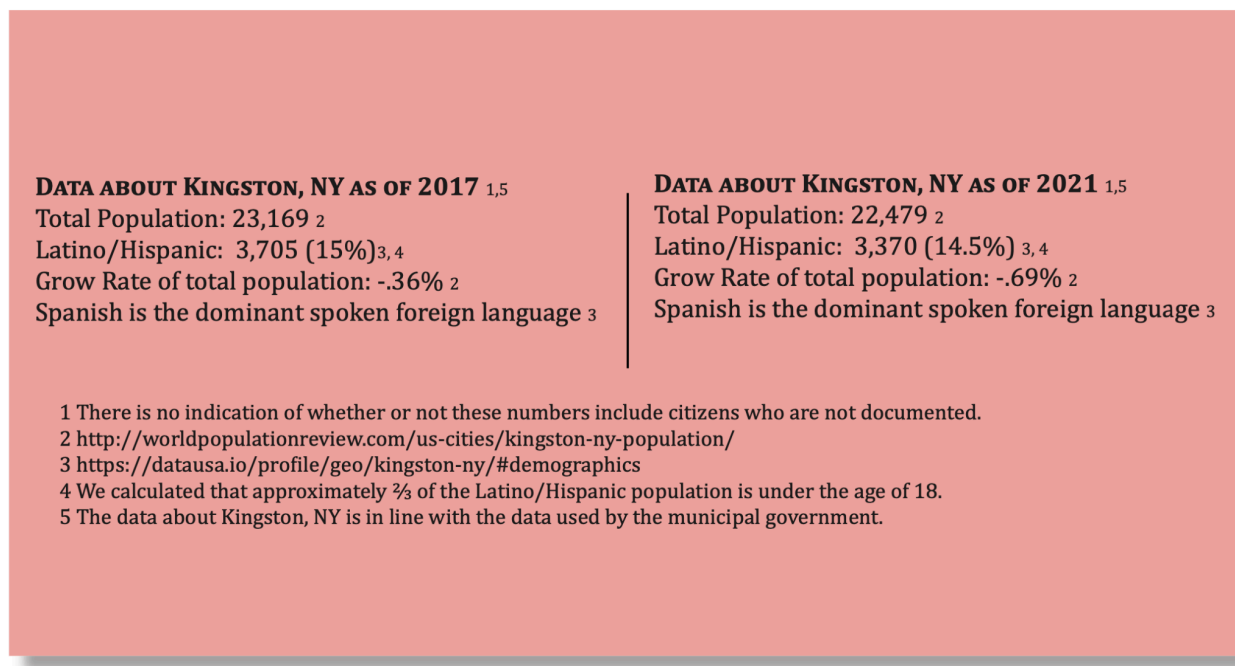


Fig. 8 Kingston Latino Cultural Study<sup>12</sup>

Although Fig. 6 shows a decrease in the number of Latin American im/migrants in Kingston between 2017 and 2021, it is important to note two important facts. First, if this information was taken from Kingston government records, it is most likely that they obtained this data from the last national census which was in 2020. If we recall correctly, the census does not count undocumented people in their enumeration. Second, according to UIDN, at least twenty new families arrive in Kingston every month.

<sup>12</sup> Source: Arts Mid Hudson. "Kingston Latino Cultural Study Phase I and II." *Arts Mid-Hudson*, Arts Mid Hudson.pp3  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607737d89beecf6bcb2caa77/t/621e8e091ba13842d07f040b/1646169613025/Kingston+Latino+Cultural+Study.pdf>

## HOME LANGUAGES

1	Spanish
2	Mayan
3	Urdu
4	English
5	Miscellaneous

Fig. 9 Three Top Languages <sup>13</sup>

Figure 9, highlights the three most spoken languages in the homes of students enrolled in the ELL program, which are Spanish, Mayan (Q'eqchi') and Urdu.

In their journey to the United States, Latin American im/migrants may encounter different challenges. These include geographic distance, social and natural barriers, and the cost they have to pay depending on the method of travel - legal vs. unauthorized.<sup>5</sup> Many of the anti-immigrant zealots neglect to realize that even if they intend to come the "right way" it is almost impossible for these im/migrants to obtain a visa, whether it is because of high fees or because they cannot meet all the requirements.

Although not discussed in the interviews, it is important to note that many of the Latin American immigrants living in Kingston may live in mixed-status households.

*Q: How was your experience migrating to Kingston?*

One other difference is the reason for their decision to migrate. In the interviews, one of the questions I asked was "What was your experience of migrating to Kingston like? When I

<sup>13</sup> "2023." *NYSED Data Site*, <https://data.nysed.gov/ell.php?year=2023&instid=800000036308>

conducted the Spanish interviews with A and C, their answers were completely different. In the case of A, an immigrant from Uruguay, she came because she was offered a job before leaving her country and little by little she was able to find a better job. In contrast, C, from Mexico, was still a minor so she did not have the opportunity to decide whether she wanted to come or not. In her own words "*No tuve opción, a mi nada mas me dijeron que nos íbamos a ir*".<sup>6</sup> ("I didn't have a choice, they just told me that we were going to leave".)

## Chapter Two : No Hablo Inglés

“Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.”

– Gloria E. Anzáldua

### 2.1 Barriers

*Q: If your native language is other than English, do you feel that this has proven to be a problem for you in terms of accessing resources?*

Imagine you are pregnant, about to give birth in the hospital. You are in pain, and the staff is trying to explain something to you, but they can't explain it to you because they don't speak your language. This could be a life-threatening situation for you because they are trying to explain to you what an epidural is, and they don't speak your language, so they can't explain it to you. After what feels like an eternity, someone shows a video in a language other than your own about what an epidural is.

Now imagine you are a child in elementary school. You arrived from your country two years ago and are learning English. Your mom comes to the meeting but doesn't speak English because she has to work two jobs. The teacher doesn't speak Spanish, so she asks if you can interpret English and Spanish for your mom and the teacher so she can tell her how you are

doing in school. There is no way you can say no because how are you going to say no to a person of authority like your teacher? You are afraid to say yes, even though you don't know much English.

These are just a few situations encountered by Latin American immigrants upon arrival in Kingston, New York. Language barriers can cause inconveniences in cases like the two explained above.

*Q: During your time living in Kingston, what are some of the barriers you have encountered?*

One of the hardest aspects of these experiences is the social component, particularly if one does not have family or know someone where they are moving to. Family separation is one of the struggles that many im/migrants in Kingston often face. As A mentioned “fue como un poco de soledad, porque empiezas de cero. Además de que si no hablas el idioma como que eso te aísla.”(It was lonely, because you are starting from zero. Besides, if you don't speak the language, it kind of isolates you. )<sup>14</sup>

Language plays an essential role in the development of migrant communities; however, it also highlights the inequity faced by minorities in the United States that don't speak English. In the interviews, I explored the various barriers that these migrants have been facing during their immigration journeys. The following are some of the barriers:

1. Language barriers: Lack of English proficiency can make accessing educational opportunities, employment, and public services difficult. Im/migrants who do not speak English fluently may face discriminatory and limited life choices.

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<sup>14</sup>A. Personal interview with the author. March 3,2024

### Interview with M | Q'eqchi'- Spanish

**Q:** *If your native language is other than English, do you feel that this has proven to be a problem for you in terms of accessing resources (housing, educational, medical, etc.)?*

“Ri walxaj rech wa' jool ka a weebaab'al ru ri' cheo' ki'r ru' b'anochik, rech b'i ru tioxik ri ri' cheojaj. Rati xchaq chaqal xqe' ti jixch'we' ri jun chomal ri qach'alel, xqati jix ya chuwiq ri chik ri jilom ruwi' at tamaj ri chik ruwi' atz'amal.” (When we go to a school or medical center, the difficulty is always with the language. If there is someone who can help us in Spanish, then the visit we make can be effective, otherwise we have to return home without having accomplished anything.)<sup>15</sup>

### - Interview with A | English

“What helps me is the language, that helps me a lot. I think a lot about it. What if I never knew english? What my life would have been like? I always think of others, especially when they don't speak english completely, how do they get services? It is hard.”<sup>16</sup>

Comparing the experiences of *M* and *A*, although both are native Q'eqchi' speakers, *A* grew up in Belize and learned English. As she herself explains, she did have difficulties when she arrived in Kingston, but speaking English made it easier for her to cope with them. Like *M*, many im/migrants (not only from Latin America) are facing the challenge of accessing resources because they are not available in their native languages, plus the lack of bilingual staff or if they don't know someone who can help them, means they are unable to access the services they need, thereby jeopardizing their immigration experience.

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<sup>15</sup> M. Personal interview with the author. March 10, 2024

<sup>16</sup> A. Personal interview with the author. March 10, 2024

2. Language Discrimination: Use of Spanish can lead to discrimination in employment and social settings. These populations may face prejudice and negative stereotypes based on their language and ethnicity.

- **Interview with C | Spanish**

“ Fue difícil llegar a un país extranjero donde no hablaba el idioma. A eso se suma la gente que te desprecia por ser im/migrante. Aunque pasen los años, eso siempre pasa. La sensación de no poder expresarte y aunque busques apoyo no hay nadie que te ayude.” (It was difficult to arrive in a foreign country where I didn't speak the language. On top of that there are people who look down on you for being an im/migrant. Even though years go by, that always happens. The feeling of not being able to express yourself and even if you look for support there is no one to help you. )<sup>17</sup>

- **Interview with A | English**

“It wasn't an easy journey, because I didn't know anybody. It was difficult, because I moved from Louisiana and was living among strangers. I'm not from Kingston so I didn't know where to go. I asked them where I could work and they didn't know either. In my case I didn't know anyone who could advise me or help me.”<sup>18</sup>

3. Educational Gap: Spanish-speaking students in the educational system could face additional challenges due to the language barrier. Consequently, this may result in lower academic performance and fewer opportunities for higher education and well-paying jobs.

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<sup>17</sup> C. Personal interview with author. March 3 , 2024

<sup>18</sup> A. Personal interview with the author. March 10, 2024

- **Interview with A | Spanish**

**Q:** *During your time living in Kingston, what are some of the barriers you have encountered?*

“Siempre te limitas al grupo que habla español. La parte del idioma te limita socialmente. La parte del estudio, quizá hay muchas oportunidades, pero si no hablas el idioma no puedes accederlas. Y la parte económica, si eres profesional tener que laborar en un trabajo con un pago bajo por no hablar el idioma.” (You limit yourself socially to the group that speaks Spanish. Language limits you socially. The education part, maybe there are many opportunities, but if you don't speak English you can't access them. And the economic part, if you are a professional you have to work in a low paying job because you don't speak the language)<sup>19</sup>

Ideally, a lack of language would not be an impediment to finding resources or employment, in reality it has been the case. This, coupled with a lack of "legal" status to work, creates professional gaps that often cannot be bridged.

As explained by A - in the interview in Spanish, many times if an im/migrant does not have an assured job beforehand, the chances are that he/she will have to work in an area that is not related to his/her career and/or at a lower salary than normal.

Though there are instances of employers who take advantage of the desperation of im/migrants, who often have to pay high costs to come to this country, by making them work long hours and with low pay.

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<sup>19</sup>A. Personal interview with the author. March 3, 2024



4. Limited access to information: Insufficient translation services and resources in Spanish complicate access to crucial information about rights, health services, government benefits, and other resources available to the Spanish-speaking community.

- **Interview with L | UIDN | English**

Q: *What do you believe are the barriers these im/migrants face once they arrive in Kingston?*

“Language is the main barrier. I know that different organizations are working to reduce language barriers through LJ, but it is difficult because, particularly for Guatemalan immigrants, their main language is Q'eqchi', so even if organizations have resources in Spanish, Guatemalan immigrants are not familiar with it.”<sup>20</sup>

- **Interview with C | Spanish**

““Cuando llegué, no hablaba inglés. No sabía que había organizaciones como Ulster Literacy Association - donde voluntarios hacen tutorías de inglés. Si yo hubiera sabido, yo hubiera ido a pedir ayuda. Las escuelas, oficinas de doctores y de gobierno podrían difundir información sobre estas organizaciones, y esto ayudaría a la comunidad migrante de gran manera.” (When I arrived, I didn't speak English and didn't know that there were organizations like Ulster Literacy Association - where volunteers do English tutoring. If I had known, I would have gone to them for help. Schools, doctors' offices and government should make information about these organizations available, and this would help the migrant community to a great extent).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> L. Personal interview with the author. March 10, 2024

<sup>21</sup> C. Personal interview with the author. March 3, 2024

The first time I interviewed UIDN volunteers, I was surprised by the number of cases in which Latin American im/migrants were unable to access the services they needed because there were no resources. For the Guatemalan community, these cases are recurrent, because while some of them speak Spanish, it is limited, and schools, doctors' offices and the local government itself do not have resources in Q'eqchi' or even staff who speak this indigenous language.

## **2.2 Divisions within the im/migrant communities**

While there are many similarities in how Latin American im/migrants experienced language barriers, there is one question that yielded two different opinions that I want to explore:

**Q:** *Do you feel there is a division between your migrant group and other Latin American im/migrants who arrived in Kingston before/after you?*

**A | Español**

“Definitivamente, ellos son un grupo muy cerrado entre ellos. Solo acceden por el tema del trabajo, pero no veo que tengan una integridad con el grupo de habla hispana. primero que nada es que no hablan mucho español, Pero es igual como cuando nosotros venimos y no hablábamos inglés no íbamos a reuniones donde se hablaban inglés. Ellos son mucho más introvertidos.” (Definitely yes, they are a very close group among themselves. The only reason they join is because of the work, but I don't see that they have any integration with the Spanish-speaking group. First of all, they don't speak much Spanish, but it's the same as when we

came here and we didn't speak English, we didn't go to meetings where English was spoken. They are much more introverted. )<sup>22</sup>

### **C | Spanish**

“No sé, no me he encontrado con ese grupo de in/migrantes. He escuchado de otra gente ,que si hay división porque la gente que va llegando recibe mucha ayuda, un estatus legal que la gente que ya tiene mucho tiempo no han podido tener. Y piensan que es injusto que esa ayuda no se les dé a las personas ya establecidas aquí, que pagan taxes, tratan de hacer lo correcto, pero yo personalmente no conozco a nadie que pertenezca a ese grupo indígena de Guatemala” (I don't know, I haven't met that group of im/migrants. I have heard from other people that there is a division because the people that are arriving are getting a lot of help, a legal status that the people that have been here for a long time have not been able to have. And they think it is unfair that this help is not given to the people who are already established here, who pay taxes, who are trying to do the right thing, but I personally don't know anyone who belongs to that indigenous group in Guatemala.)<sup>23</sup>

### **A | English**

“I think for me, there is one. Especially for the ones that came before. There shouldn't be a division, we should all help each other. Because everyone faces the same. So they shouldn't divide the community.”<sup>24</sup>

### **M | Q'eqchi'- Spanish**

“Mach ajnoj re ri' uquib'aj chik'oq ri mane' ki', ri uk'ux yalq'u'in chik ri' le awoq' ajnuq tienda. Qichin saaqil wakash ri toq ri k'ajolob' rech k'ak'aw ri tuqu' ri wi, q'ati aqil ja' xna'oj rech ri k'ak'aq'

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<sup>22</sup> A. Personal interview with the author. March 3, 2024

<sup>23</sup> C. Personal interview with the author. March 3, 2024

<sup>24</sup> A. Personal interview with the author. March 10, 2024

ep wa' Ecuador, El Salvador, México ritz'al chi kek'u ra tz'onol xaq chi'oj chi chi'echik ri xaq chi'oj ri xaq chi'nab'e." (I don't see much difference or division, we spend time together for work, or to go to the store. When we have lunch at work, we talk with people from other countries like Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico and we have said that we are not different, we are the same.)<sup>25</sup>

The responses demonstrate the way the Spanish-speaking im/migrants perceive the Q'eqchi'-speaking im/migrants. The two Spanish-speaking participants are aware of the division between the two im/migrant groups; on the one hand, A believes that this is due to the lack of language. But C, despite not having had contact with the Guatemalan community, is somewhat influenced by other people's opinions of that community.

From the Guatemalan im/migrants' perspective, only A has noticed this division of the communities. M, on the other hand, does not feel that this division exists. I would question whether the fact that A speaks English has anything to do with her noticing the relationship between these two groups of im/migrants.

This is not the first time I have heard the feeling from the Spanish speaking community that these "new" im/migrants receive all kinds of help - from housing to legal immigration status, which many of the im/migrants who arrived before 2010 have not been able to obtain, further dividing them. On top of that, negative information about these new im/migrant groups is spread through social media, particularly in the Spanish-language news outlets - although it is also seen in the mainstream English-language media - making this division worse.

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<sup>25</sup> M. Personal interview with the author. March 10, 2024

Arguably, some members of the Spanish-speaking community have developed feelings of resentment towards the Guatemalan community. These assumptions could lead to situations of discrimination, a serious concern because they would shift their roles from victim to offender. Further aggravating this visible division between the communities, which ultimately harms the people involved as there is no support within and between the communities. To quote A from Belize, “we should work together, We should help each other because you don't know, tomorrow could be your turn to ask for help.”

### Chapter 3 : Justicia del Lenguaje

“For us, language justice is about building and sustaining multilingual spaces in our organizations and social movements so that everyone’s voice can be heard both as an individual and as part of a diversity of communities and cultures.”

– Lala Montoya

Language is intimately connected to who we are: our thoughts, our way of seeing the world, our emotions, cultures, passions, and politics. It is the bridge of communication between communities.

Language Justice is defined by Antena Aire as *the right of each person to express themselves in the language in which they feel most comfortable*. In a social justice context, language can be a tool for empowerment. Multilingual spaces provide the opportunity of listening live and direct to a person speaking in another language for the first time for some monolingual speakers of English (or other dominant languages). And for some speakers of non-dominant languages, it may be the first time they have the opportunity to speak openly and publicly in their own language with people who do not speak their own language.<sup>26</sup>

It wasn't until 2018, when I was invited to a language training for local translators and interpreters provided by a local organization focused on the curriculum of *The Center for Participatory Change*. There I met fellow community members who were doing the same work as I was, and who somehow felt the same as I did as if they were in a spiral because of the lack

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<sup>26</sup> “Language Justice — Center For Participatory Change.” *Center For Participatory Change*, <https://cpcwnc.org/language-justice-resources>.

of language resources. In that training, I heard for the first time the term Language Justice.

A few months later, together with some of our fellow colleagues who attended this training, we founded the Hudson Valley Language Justice Collective.

Our goal was to raise awareness among the local organizations we were working with, of the importance of providing language resources if they truly wanted to outreach to the different communities often underserved as a result of language barriers. In addition, we have raised awareness among volunteer interpreters of their rights to be remunerated for their work and skills by providing training and education on professional language practices. Promoting best practices in creating inclusive multilingual spaces that value all languages equally and in which speakers of different languages can mutually benefit from listening to and sharing with each other is another priority of our collective.

Although the advocacy for Language Justice has been in the works for many years through other organizations in the United States, in Kingston and the Ulster County area and beyond it has not been an easy process. In the first place, most organizations have only recently realized that these services must be included in their annual budgets. Second, the hardest part is the challenge of reaching out to those communities that are used to being excluded to become part of the conversations and changes, so they know that these services are available to them.

It is useless to have interpretation at an event, if the organizers - no matter what type of organization or system they are from, do not put into practice the translation of materials, getting to know the communities they serve, not taking the time to understand what prevents them from attending - work hours, lack of child care, etc. Unless this awareness is taken, nothing can be achieved.

We continue to progress in this process of learning and mutual support. While our team is small - we are nine people from various Latin American countries, through our language work we have been able to make connections with organizations that advocate for language justice, locally and outside of the Hudson Valley.



## Conclusion

These interviews show us that although migratory experiences vary from person to person, many similarities exist, especially in the context of language and the constraints placed on them. The participants of this SPROJ were in agreement that many changes are necessary regarding accessibility of resources for the im/migrant communities in Kingston.

The following list includes suggestions for solutions that were discussed in these interviews:

- Government, medical and school offices should provide materials and resources in the languages of the im/migrant communities, with information on the services they provide.
- Provide language classes for immigrants, to help them develop the skills they need to communicate effectively. These classes can be provided by schools, community organizations or government agencies, and should be customized to meet the specific needs of the different communities.
- Recruiting bilingual staff to ensure that immigrant communities will have access to meaningful communication with service providers. Recruiting bilingual staff can also contribute toward creating a workplace that is more diverse and inclusive, potentially improving the quality of care or services provided.
- Another possible solution to the language barriers is the training in translation and interpretation skills among the bilingual people in the community, many of whom are already doing this work - often on a volunteer basis. There should be as diverse a range of languages available to accommodate the different languages spoken by the immigrant communities.

The majority of im/migrants come in search of the "American dream," meaning that they are simply looking for a better life here that is often impossible in their countries of origin. However, the language barriers they face on a daily basis mean that an even greater effort is required if this dream involves building a stable and comfortable livelihood that can last for generations, working our way through the social and economic ladder, developing strong social ties, and actively participating in civic life.

I personally believe that if we include immigrant communities in the decision making of our cities, we truly could make a difference. For this to be possible, it requires more than ensuring access to essential social services - such as housing, fair jobs and wages, and the opportunity for education, among others; it also involves enabling a comprehensive process of social, political, and economic integration that will lay a solid foundation for lasting success for the generations to come.

### **Author's Note**

At the beginning of this project my idea was to make it a visual documentary, but eventually I realized that this would not be possible. For im/migrant communities it is very difficult to share their experiences - much less on video. While my original plan had to change, it was paramount to be able to capture these stories, to explore these testimonies and to learn what is necessary to break down the language barriers they face, as well as to learn from their experiences - which I somehow connected with because I lived through them myself.

In conversations before and after this project, I have often heard of resentment between immigrant/immigrant communities because some receive help and others do not. Unfortunately, these are situations caused by the systems in this country that "help" some groups but exclude others, with the intention of further separating our communities.

The decision to make this project public is not only so that I can learn what is being addressed in terms of language barriers, but so the Kingston community can understand who is living in their community so that we can mutually support each other. That's why I decided to present this project to the public in a room at the Kingston YMCA. Even though there was an option to present it at Bard, I felt that it would not do any justice to the im/migrant community of Kingston.

The idea of this interactive presentation is that attendees could listen to crucial parts of the interviews, relate to them in some form, and finally share their experience of migration and language justice (or lack of).

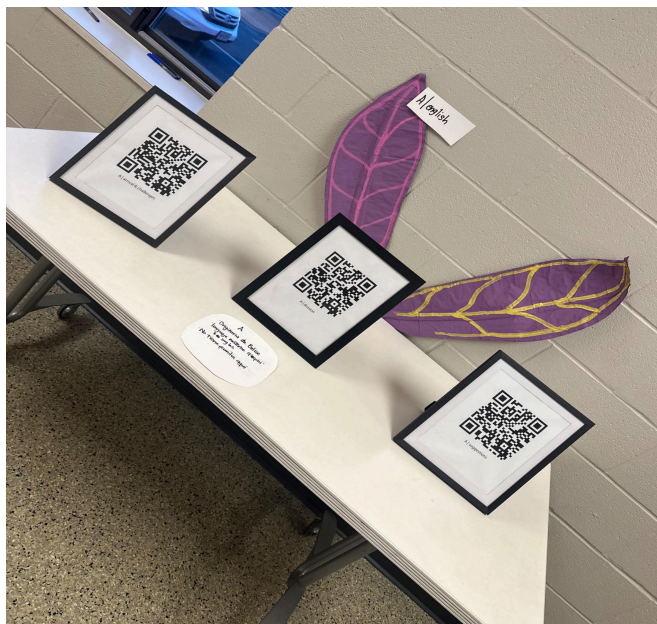
The interviews were shared in anonymity. To access the interviews, attendees were prompted to click on QR Codes that were framed in picture frames, separated by language - Spanish, Q'eqchi' and English. The idea of having these photo frames was that normally these frames have pictures of smiling people, yet in the case of the interviewees their personal identities are anonymous, though their stories are repeated over and over again. Interview questions were spread throughout the room, and with pots-its attendees were able to share their experiences too.

Likewise, the attendees were able to experience Language Justice, as it was a multilingual space where, when I briefly spoke about the project, I spoke in Spanish, accompanied by interpretation into Q'eqchi' and English. For some of the people who attended, it was their first time experiencing something like this. They said it was amazing to think that all the people present were able to be part of the experience regardless of what language they speak.

This project does not end here. I look forward to continuing it even after I graduate from Bard.



Flier for SPROJ Presentation



Feedback from attendees.

lack of knowing  
how some systems  
work  
~~knowing~~  
know where to  
ask for help.

Emigramos a  
Carolina del Norte  
cuando tenia 8  
años.  
En la escuela  
pasé por mucha  
confusión y bullying  
hasta que aprendí  
para: defenderme/  
participar/  
sentirme incluida

We migrated to  
North Carolina when  
I was 8.  
In school I experienced  
a lot of confusion +  
bullying until I learned  
English to:  
defend myself  
participate  
feel included

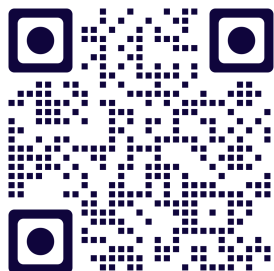
There needs to be  
diversity among the  
the staff/board of  
the institutions that  
help migrants.  
People have to be able  
to help themselves. (to feel empowered)  
and by being represented  
in leadership, that is action



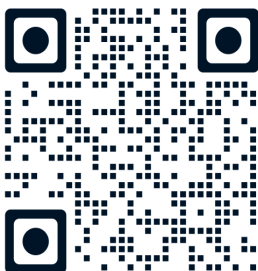
## QR Codes

Audio from interviews, in original language.

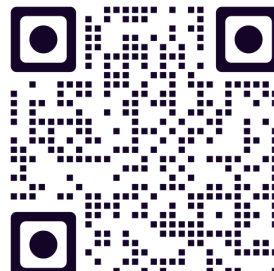
*A & C | Spanish*



Experiencia & Barreras

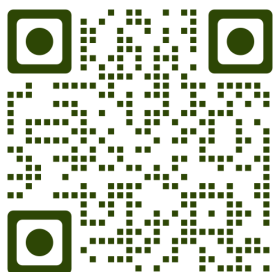


División

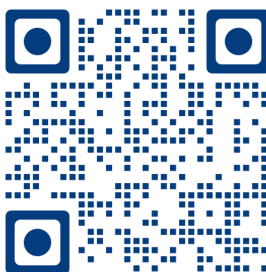


Sugerencias

*M | Q'eqchi- Spanish*

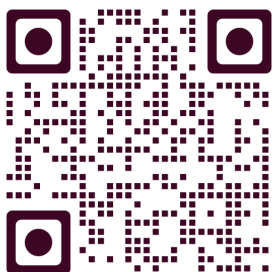


Barreras

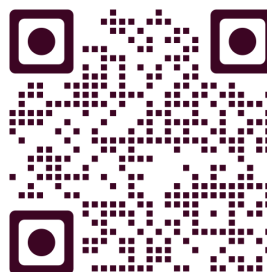


Sugerencias

*A | English*

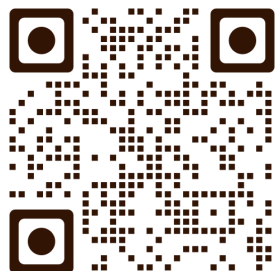


Arrival & Barriers

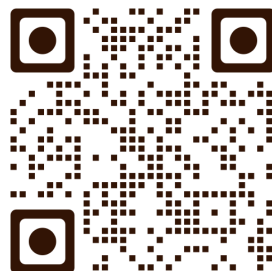


Division

L | UIDN | English



Services & Barriers



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