

Citizenship and Belonging in Uncertain Times

by Marcela Mendoza

Marcela Mendoza presented this talk on September 15, 2013, and was one of ten regional scholars featured in the Oregon Historical Society's "Summer of Citizenship" series. This essay is a record of her presentation and ongoing research on civic integration and belonging in the lives of Latin American immigrants in the United States.

NATIONAL BELONGING MATTERS

In early April 2013, Eliza Canty-Jones at the Oregon Historical Society asked me if I would like to participate in a series of talks on citizenship during the summer. Of course I agreed and started to think on how to approach the topic from my experience as a naturalized citizen. At that moment I had something different in mind, but just two weeks after receiving her request, the tragic event at the Boston marathon occurred. We (you and I) all started to read and listen to reports about the details of what happened and people's responses to the tragedy; we also began to learn more about the personal stories of the perpetrators. That is why I titled this presentation "citizenship and belonging in uncertain times" — I mean uncertain as in "unsettling" because things are not supposed to be that way. Immigrants usually want to belong; those who have chosen to come to a new country usually make their best effort to integrate. For the most part, immigrants want to be part of the nation. At least, this appears to be true for the majority of those who, like me and my family, have emigrated from Latin America.

Psychologists say that all people want to "belong" to something.¹ "Belongingness" is an emotional human need of being accepted as a



Belonging is an emotional human need, and the person who wants to belong is expected to express commitment and loyalty to a common purpose, as these recently naturalized citizens demonstrate by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. This photograph was taken on October 15, 2009, and published in the Oregonian with the following caption: “Roy Flores, Portland, recites the Pledge of Allegiance just before getting a certificate of his new Citizenship at a Naturalization Ceremony at the Bonneville Power Administration building in Portland Thursday in observance of National Hispanic Heritage Month.”

member of a group, a feeling of “fitting in” and being valued for who one is. In the context of democratic states, national belonging refers to a subjective dimension of being part of the nation.² The person who wants to belong is expected to express commitment and loyalty to a common purpose — to the nation’s values, culture, history, and way of life. The collective call for commitment and loyalty is strong; immigrants can feel it and natives can communicate it in myriad ways too.

When people say that someone “belongs,” they are bringing to light certain implicit membership requisites, expressing the difference between a person being included or excluded from the collectivity. Thus,



This photograph was taken on October 15, 2009, and published in the Oregonian with the following caption: “Sister Juana Gutierrez, Beaverton, is congratulated by Nelly Rodriguez just before getting a certificate of her new Citizenship from Evelyn Sahli at a Naturalization Ceremony at the Bonneville Power Administration building in Portland Thursday in observance of National Hispanic Heritage Month.”

becoming a member requires effort on the part of the immigrant, such as acquiring language proficiency, learning about values, and striving for cultural integration.³ Failure to integrate could be viewed with suspicion and would be considered a reason for social marginalization. When for any reason someone’s behavior provokes rejection, and it is thought that the person does not fit, people might say: “she is a stranger/foreigner and doesn’t belong here.” Many people think that it is impossible to be loyal to two different countries and “divided loyalties” are a potential threat to the security of the state.⁴

BELONGING TO A NATION

Many authors maintain that a political society is a partnership among those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born.

Individuals who believe they have special obligations to their community — to their family, cultural group, or country — often believe they have duties to past, present, and future generations as well.⁵ Since the nation exists as a historical community, philosophers say, it can be interpreted as “a community of obligation” — the forebearers worked to build and protect the nation, and those who are born into it inherit an obligation to carry on the founders’ work.⁶ They see themselves as responsible for taking steps to ensure that the traditions, institutions, and values that define their community will continue to exist in the next generations.

Therefore, being part of a nation-state (or being admitted as “naturalized” members) requires the people to trust/believe in the nation’s history and traditions; if citizens fail to pass down public institutions to their descendants, they can be blamed for harming the nation’s interests.

WHAT IS REQUIRED FROM A PERSON TO BE ENTITLED TO BELONG?

In the case of citizenship, when people talk about membership rights and responsibilities, and the politics of belonging, the central question is: What is required from a person to be entitled as a citizen, belonging to the collectivity?⁷

This question can elicit multiple answers, as the many dimensions of citizenship are articulated in complex ways. For example, admittance to the citizenry as a naturalized member affirms the right to be treated as equal, not to be excluded on the basis of discrimination or prejudice. The invitation to participate assumes that the new citizens will accept a certain lifestyle, engage in everyday relations with others, and participate in civic life. Then, new members will have a stake in the life of the community and its future.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A “CITIZEN”?

Citizenship in a democracy (a) gives membership status to a nation-state; (b) gives civil identity to members; (c) communicates/shares a set of values, a commitment to the common good of the nation; (d) involves the right to participate in political life; and (e) implies gaining and using knowledge of laws, processes, and systems of governance.

For example, civic identity calls for respect for the symbols, ideas of love for, and loyalty to the common good. Civic agency includes active participation in political activities such as voting, involvement with political parties, and civic volunteering. By participating in social networks and cooperative problem-solving with fellow citizens, immigrants gain social capital — a sense of cohesiveness and unity that is central to the civic values of citizenship.⁸

LEARNING ABOUT DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

According to different authors, civic virtues include independence, open-mindedness, the capacity to discern and respect the rights of others, the ability to evaluate the performance of those in office, and willingness to engage in public discourse. Civic virtues are also described as self-sacrifice, loyalty, and respect for the law.⁹ Civic education communicates democratic ideals and traditions, teaches about the country's history and institutions, and advocates the importance of practicing rituals that affirm unity (such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and singing patriotic songs) — all symbols, icons, and traditions that provide a sense of community.¹⁰ Those civic skills enable citizens to engage in productive dialogue around public problems, build consensus, and work cooperatively. Civic agency, then, is the idea that belonging is put into action when people are engaged in activities for, with, on behalf of, or even against others.

To me, as many others have said before, loving the United States is encouraging dialogue and cooperation, allowing dissent, and relentlessly striving for fairness. Exercising my citizenship means engaging in the messiness and troubles of a pluralistic democracy that may not always work well for all citizens but is constantly trying to improve itself.

WHY DO MIGRANTS WANT TO BECOME CITIZENS?

Among many reasons people naturalize, the most cited in the literature are: (a) family decisions (the United States is where they are going to make their life and where their children were born and have grown up); (b) desire to sponsor a relative; (c) simplifying travel or not having to hassle about immigration documents and visas; (d) showing commitment to or pride in the adopted country; and (e) obtaining the right to vote and influence policies. People have also said that they obtained citizenship to be eligible for government jobs. For example, only citizens can work for the U.S. Postal Service, and citizenship is required for the good jobs at airports.

Caroline B. Brettell led a 2006 project to interview hundreds of immigrants in a southwestern city of the United States, and the verbatim testimonials that she published resonate with what I have heard through the years from Latin American immigrants who became naturalized citizens:

I wanted to become committed to this country. To stay as an LPR [legal permanent resident] is to be neither here nor there. To take citizenship is a statement of commitment and security.

[Another said:] It was going to be better for the kids and that is what motivated us. It gives you advantages and you feel more secure. . . . The U.S. is our adopted homeland and we want to contribute to the community.

[Another said:] It was hard for me to give up my citizenship of India. . . . But then I realized that I would never go back. My wife and children could not live there easily. So I came to the conclusion that I was living in the United States, that I should exercise my right to vote and make a difference. This was not a consequence of my feelings because it was hard emotionally — but of realizing that it was the right thing to do.¹¹

For many migrants in the United States, the reasons to naturalize are symbolically expressed in their desire to obtain the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness “for ourselves and our posterity” that they read in the Declaration of Independence and the introduction to the Constitution.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AMERICAN?

When asked about the meaning of becoming an American, the immigrants interviewed by Brettell gave similar answers to many others. One immigrant who arrived in the United States in 1980, for example, said: “It means I have been upgraded. . . from economy to first class.”¹² Other individuals said:

America is a country of opportunity. It is a place where children will have the most freedom. I have found this to be the case. America allows you to practice in your own way and to achieve community objectives.

[Another said:] Freedom is big, freedom to be who you are, freedom to pursue happiness. . . allowing an individual to pursue whatever makes him happy no matter what his religion and sexual preferences, etc. You are allowed to be what you want to be within correct limits.

[Another said:] It means that one has opportunities, the chance to prosper and get an education. The education must come first. Things can be accomplished in El Salvador, but it is harder.

[Another said:] In the United States a person that was considered poor in El Salvador lives like a rich Salvadoran.¹³

EMOTIONAL AND INSTRUMENTAL BONDS

First-generation immigrants experience strong bonds to two countries at the same time, but the content and meaning of those bonds are different. Their country of origin is usually associated with emotional ties, a sense of roots, and identity that also involves family ties and cultural belonging. Their new home country is instead associated with a less emotional, more instrumental sense of belonging based on everyday life experiences, sometimes expressed in terms of social participation.

For individuals, emotional bonds are important in making the decision of obtaining a new citizenship. Many consider it difficult to give up their previous citizenship, with all that is implied in terms of identity and cultural



Margarita Aguilar, an immigrant from Mexico, was deeply involved in her community here in Portland, Oregon. This photograph was taken on March 4, 2012, and published in the Oregonian with the following caption: “Margarita Aguilar greets her 7-year-old son Maxi Isla Aguilar after school at Cesar Chavez Elementary. Aguilar comes from humble but hard-working roots. Despite never having gone to high school in her native Mexico, she has become a strong force for bettering the lives of her children and their community in North Portland.”

heritage. It is like losing part of one’s identity. It may also separate a person from relatives in their country of origin. Another aspect of those emotional bonds is a (more or less realistic) desire to return to the country of origin.

A Mexican woman employed as a case worker at a nonprofit organization that provides human services to recent immigrants once said to me: “We have our home here, my husband and I work, we take our children to school and to day-care, we have two cars, go shopping, and pay taxes. We feel part of the community and would like to become citizens, but giving up our Mexican nationality feels like betrayal. We grew up in Mexico, have family and friends there. I visit my mother often and still feel at home there, but I am getting tired of being asked every time about my visa. I may have to apply for an American passport.”



The members of the Robles family are all Oregon residents and choose not to go back to Mexico, their native country. This photograph was taken on January 9, 2009, and published in the Oregonian with the following caption: “Irene Robles and her family are the new Latinos, our state’s present and future growth. Three generations of this Latino family are settled in Oregon, and they do not go back to Mexico. They are legal U.S. residents, their children and grandchildren are U.S. citizens — even though the parents originally came to the U.S. illegally. Robles, her children and grandchildren are proud to call Oregon home. They speak English, volunteer in the community, are loyal workers, and say that Oregon gave them a unique opportunity to thrive and grow. From left in the photo are Nancy, daughter; Irene, mother; Cesario, father; Anthony, 1-year-old grandson; Cesar, son; Cesar Jr., 4-year-old grandson; and Ruby Robles, 10, daughter.”

People might argue that migrants have to make up their minds: “If you care so much about the emotional ties, don’t bother about obtaining a new citizenship. If you care about the practical benefits, then become a citizen and don’t think about the emotional.” It is not that easy. Many migrants have genuine feelings of belonging to both their previous and their new home countries.¹⁴

LOVING TWO COUNTRIES AT THE SAME TIME

That brings up a transnational perspective. There are more and more people who love two countries at the same time and maintain their personal bonds through frequent mobility. Increased mobility across national borders may cause some to question national belonging and could bring up many other related questions, such as: What does it mean to migrate? Where do migrants belong? Is it possible to belong to more than one country at the same time? What is the content and implication of dual or multiple national bonds? How individual migrants balance practical and emotional ideas about belonging influences the way they construct their identities as well as their attitudes toward naturalization and citizenship.

DUAL NATIONALITY

Many Latin American countries currently accept that their citizens may hold dual nationality. In addition to Mexico in 1998, other Latin American countries such as Colombia in 1991, the Dominican Republic in 1994 Ecuador and Costa Rica in 1995, and Brazil in 1996 reformed their constitutions to allow their citizens to hold dual nationality. Even if, by law, those Latin American citizens could hold dual nationality, the process of integration to the United States would gradually change their individual perspectives. An interviewee said, for example, to Brettell: “In one’s heart, where you work and live determines what you are. Especially once you adapt to life here. I think I would feel like a foreigner in El Salvador now.”¹⁵

The most complicated situations arise in relation to raising American-born children. Negotiating the children’s identities and contributing to the integration of the second generation becomes an issue even more crucial than defining the immigrant’s own identity.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

Then there is the situation of immigrants who are placed in the category of “undocumented.” Being “unauthorized” marks a difference that requires some measure of public intervention, management, and discipline. Those immigrants may be portrayed either as delinquents or victims that require saving, but always as outsiders. They learn to maneuver in the job market, avoiding and circumventing actions and words that hurt them. The “undocumented” live their lives — uphold their desire of belonging and citizenship — in a complex situation marked by deep contradictions. They negotiate power relationships in their day-to-day movements through work, their community, and the larger community. The mobilization of undocumented Latino youth (the so-called “dreamers”) in their struggle to affirm their rights in U.S. society is a pertinent example of distinguishing citizenship from belonging.