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⇒ Citizenship and Belonging: The Construction of US Latino Identity Today

Introduction

“During times of war, the first casualty is Truth.”

Those are the words written long ago by the famous British war correspondent, Phillip Knightly. Over the past few years, two Mexican American journalists, Patricia Gonzales and Roberto Rodríguez, have continuously exposed the hypocrisy, lies and distortions that have penetrated what we could call the “common sense” knowledge that has thus far organized our everyday life in U.S. society. In their columns, they point out, for example, that in the name of patriotism, our civil liberties have been curtailed; that fear and distrust of fellow citizens have increasingly become the accepted norm. Mass round-ups of different national-origin groups have gone virtually unnoticed by anyone other than the groups directly involved. Racial profiling is now official government policy, and those who practice it are called our nation’s heroes and heroines.

Indeed, the most recent example of these distortions is by Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington, in a new “domestic” version of his “clash of civilizations” argument. His argument in *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (2004), was visibly discussed in various news outlets, including in *The New York Times*, which summarized it in the following terms: “In this new era [...] the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America’s traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico. These new immigrants, [Huntington] argues, are not like earlier immigrants. Many have little interest in assimilating” (Brooks 2004). Indeed, Huntington argues that the presence of Latinos—and of Mexicans in particular—is changing the United States.

At the same time that these kinds of distortions are propagandized, dissent, on the other hand, is increasingly considered unpatriotic—to the point that in a speech to the American Legion veterans on August 30, 2006, the US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, suggested that those who disagree with administration policies in the war against Islamism

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terrorists are comparable to those who appeased Fascism in the 1930s. These are just some examples that show how dramatically the national climate has changed in the United States since 9/11. As Gonzales and Rodríguez (2002) observe, “During the Clinton administration, the president had vociferous critics, yet no one ever questioned their right to speak. No one told them that their dissent or calls for impeachment constituted treason, and no one suggested that they be permanently exiled”. Under these conditions it is important to ask: What does it mean to say that the 42.9 million Latinos in the United States—59.8% of whom are U.S. citizens (Pew Hispanic Center 2005)—are the ones who have made, or are making, significant changes in this society? What, for example, does it really mean in Latinos’ daily lives today, and under the conditions I outline above, to belong to US society? Indeed, given the spreading fear and distrust, the lies and distortions, is it possible for anyone—Latinos or otherwise—to belong to anything resembling a national community in the United States today? If we define citizenship as the political expression of national belonging, then how do Latinos and other groups construct their identities and articulate their experience as citizens in the United States today?

It is important to acknowledge in no uncertain terms the fact that since the eleventh of September of 2001, the actual *practice* of racism in daily life has changed in the United States. Racial profiling, for example, has again acquired a new acceptance—even by some sectors within minority groups. In response to the question of “who is actually changing what?”, then, it could be argued that both the types of action that some chose to follow in the aftermath of 9/11, and the implicit reasoning and justification behind them, (Ahmad 2002; Verhovek 2001; Amnesty International USA 2004; Eagan 2001) make visible the ambiguous and ambivalent position of Latinos in relation to issues of identity in the United States. It also sets the broader context for discussing ethnicity, belonging and citizenship in this new unpredictable post-9/11 world in which we live. For this new acceptance of racial profiling is yet another example that the unrelenting force of racism in contemporary society has turned *all* U.S. citizens—whether White, Black or Latino, whether of Jewish, Arab, Asian or Native American descent, whether consciously “racist” or “anti-racist,” rich or poor, male or female, young or old, wielders of power or not—into willing or unwilling accomplices in its ongoing reproduction and perpetuation. Indeed, racism in the US context cannot be relegated to the distant past when legal segregation, overt bigotry and lynching were common. Instead, today’s racism is fed by fear and the never-ending possibilities created not only by the blatant distortions such as those espoused by Huntington, but also by the “Maybes,” and the “What ifs” inherent in a “national security” doctrine intent on sowing distrust, thereby effectively sabotaging the possibility of creating a community of equals, and its modern synonym, a community of citizens. Seen from this perspective, it is essential that we recognize that, while citizenship may be commonly construed as a legal status, it is, above all, both a political reality and a lived experience.¹

Thus, while my aim in this essay is to discuss the impact of Latinos on the changing meanings of citizenship, this essay also serves as a reflection on the issue of “who is

¹ For useful overviews and discussions of the concepts of citizenship and belonging, cf. Croucher (2004); Castles/Davidson (2000); Heater (1999); Hedetoft/Hjort (2002). For diverse perspectives on Latinos and citizenship, cf. Oboler (2006).

actually changing what?" in US society. I first look at the controversial history and ambiguous "placement" of Latinos as U.S. citizens and residents in the context of racialized labeling and profiling in U.S. society; I then explore the peculiar changes—a kind of facelift—which ethnicity has undergone under the new conditions of a national security ideology with its concomitant undermining of citizenship in the United States. Finally, I discuss some of the ways that, largely as a result of the recognition of their right to have rights, Latinos are contributing, in their own right, to the changing meanings of citizenship and belonging in the US context. Ultimately, I argue, it is through their participation in redefining the very meaning of citizenship in the post 9/11 period that Latinos are themselves (re)constructing and affirming their identity in the United States.

Rethinking Citizenship and Racialization in the 21st century USA

Prior to 9/11, 2001, and indeed even today, many people in mainstream US society insisted that racism was no longer the "real problem". In that falsely optimistic context, racial profiling stood out as the last remaining bastion of the retrograde forces of unbridled racism. Thus, toward the end of the 1990s, in newspaper articles, academic conferences, television talk shows and radio call-ins, discussions about this most unfair and quintessentially "un-American" act were heard throughout the country.

The popularity of the debates on the issue of racial profiling at the time was matched only by the number of equally-heated discussions concerning the need to resolve the status of undocumented immigrants, and the consequent growing momentum of the national amnesty movement. In fact, just prior to 9/11 there was great expectation in the results of the imminent meeting on immigration policy between President Bush and his Mexican counterpart President Fox.

But the days that followed 9/11, 2001, destroyed all expectations of passing the racial profiling bill in the foreseeable future. Any hope that President Fox might have had at the time to regulate immigration between Mexico and the U.S. also died, as the then significant amnesty movement was abruptly stopped in its tracks. For, while racial profiling of American citizens continues to be viewed in a negative light, societal condemnation of the practice has since been somewhat attenuated by the shift in the constantly changing definition of who could and indeed should be profiled, to the "foreigner" in fact and fiction.²

Indeed, 9/11 both halted the societal movement to end racial profiling and also served to affirm the perverse logic of racism. Today, racial profiling has become a quintessentially patriotic and "pro-American" act, laying bare the extent to which everyone in U.S. society has long been socialized to understand and reproduce, at any moment, and almost on command, the mechanisms of discrimination that confirm the intransigent racial bias

² Latinos in this context are not being spared. A study released during the summer of 2002 documents that "nationwide, Latino teens charged with violent offenses are five times more likely to be incarcerated as white teens similarly charged". As Fernando Abeyta, 22, a Community Organizer for the Albuquerque-based Southwest Organizing Project noted, "Throughout Albuquerque, police are harassing, detaining and arresting young Latinos with alarming regularity [...]. 'They are picking people out [...] by the color of their skin and what they wear,' Abeyta insists." Cf. Walker/Villaruel (2002).

that has historically been deeply embedded in every aspect of life in the USA.³ These mechanisms are most clearly manifested in the official practice of ethnic labeling, which has itself undergone changes since its emergence in 1977. I now turn briefly, then, to the development of ethnic labeling in contemporary US society.

Ethnic Labeling in the Post 9/11 period

In 1977, the US government divided the entire US society into five “racial” or “ethnic” categories: White European; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black and African American, American [i.e. U.S.] Indian or Alaskan Native, and Hispanic (Forbes 1992: 59-78).⁴ At the time, there was a very specific purpose for these five categories, a purpose which today seems to have been largely forgotten. For, initially, the main purpose of these ethnic categories was quantitative: the intent was to measure how well U.S. society was doing as a nation in fighting against the racism and the social exclusion of racialized minorities that had led to the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s. Yet, as the Clinton administration’s Race Task Force suggested in 1998, despite the original intention, one of the unintended consequences of creating the ethnic categories has been that these labels reinforce the belief in the superiority of whiteness and “white privilege” itself in the U.S. socio-racial hierarchy (Holmes 1998). In fact, contrary to the past propaganda of the melting pot, what we have in the US today is not a community of equal citizens, but rather a well-organized racial hierarchy, a hierarchy which primarily has as its dominant theme what the French sociologist, Etienne Balibar (1991: 21), has called “the insurmountability of cultural differences,” rather than of biological heredity. Moreover, it is a racism which at first sight does not postulate the superiority of specific groups or peoples in relation to others, but only “the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions” (ibid). In short, through the official creation of ethnic categories—and as has historically been the case in Latin America for example—everyone now “knows their place” in U.S. society.

While ethnicity has also made a positive contribution to US society—ethnic membership and cultural allegiances, or cultural citizenship (Flores/Benmayor 1997) in an age where belonging is disappearing as a community experience can be cited here—it is also important today to ask: beyond the cultural dimension of ethnicity, what are the social and political consequences—for the Latino population and for society as a whole—of continuing ethnic labeling? And more specifically, how does ethnic labeling impact on citizenship and identity construction in the post-9/11 context?

Certainly, the position on racial profiling taken by some sectors of US society—non-minority and minority alike—suggests that actions based on “a little racial bias”, so-to-speak, is being justified by some in terms of the need to protect all citizens and residents of US society from the terror of terrorism. Indeed, although the new racial hierarchy of

³. At the same time, it is important to note that racial profiling in the post 9/11 period undoubtedly resonates in U.S. historical examples. Cf. Volpp (2002: 1575-1600).

⁴ In 2000, the US census added the category of Latino, which until then was used informally in US society. In this article I use the two terms interchangeably, following the varied regional usages and preferences in US society.

inequalities, and racism itself, is not as crude as in the pre-Civil Rights period, this does not mean that the consequences for ensuring citizenship as constitutive of the self-understanding of a community—a process which is inclusive and ongoing, and one which is neither imposed nor dictated by the state alone—are any less virulent. To the extent that citizenship is a lived experience, grounded in the negotiated participation of all groups, of all sectors and individuals within the community, it is important to consider the mechanisms of discrimination currently in force in U.S. society. Channeled through ethnicity, these mechanisms are affirmed again and again in at least two ways: first, through the officially-sanctioned ethnic labels; and secondly, and equally important, through the appropriation and re-definitions of these labels by the various minority groups and individuals in their struggle for social justice. Indeed, ethnic labeling is today being used to reinforce the reliance on the fear and distrust which redefine all third-world immigrants in the U.S. context as potential “foreign terrorists.” The increasing visibility of Latinos has compelled US society to transcend the black-white binary, superimposing a new native/foreigner binary on the traditional understanding of race. This is most apparent in discussions of Latinos’ legal status, and its implications for belonging. Indeed, as the ongoing debates on racial profiling suggest, in a sweeping throwback to an ugly past, the current hegemony in US society is portraying racial divisions if not as “normal,” at least as inevitable. In the process it is unambiguously imposing racial bias as inherent to the organization of the society.

Key to understanding this new racial(ized) divide as it relates specifically to Latinos in the United States is the vagueness of the definition of the label “Hispanic” itself. The term Hispanic has been called a “masterpiece of ambiguity” (Matute-Bianchi 1979: 18), for it includes everyone who was either born in Latin America or Spain, or who is a descendant of anyone born in Latin America or Spain. In the past thirty years, its usage has raised a number of questions about who is a Hispanic or, in the grassroots alternative term, a Latino, and who is not. One of the debates in this respect, for example, revolves around whether Latin American immigrants should be considered to be as “Latino” as U.S. born Latinos, who are US citizens. Regardless of these debates, given the vagueness of the definition of “Hispanic,” it is essential that we acknowledge that it is, first and foremost, a *bureaucratic invention* by state agencies, for purposes of census data collection and policy management—including Affirmative Action.⁵

From this perspective, it is important to note that in the US, the significance of ethnicity, and more particularly of ethnic labeling, is directly related to the distribution and withdrawal of resources and opportunities. Labels such as “Hispanic” allow us to track the poverty and illiteracy rates of each group, even while they simultaneously contribute to the perpetuation of discriminatory practices in the socio-economic sphere. Indeed, by homogenizing this population, the term also serves to brand all Latinos, as a group, as culturally and socially inferior, due to their foreign—un-American—origins and language.

⁵ Indeed, in its origins, the term Hispanic—like the grassroots alternative designation, Latino—is in no way tied to any historical, territorial, cultural background or identity of any one given national-origin population group in the United States. Instead, it encompasses people of all Latin American countries and Spain. A similar homogenization with similar implications occurs in relation to the other official ethnic categories. Cf. Oboler (1995).

From this perspective, the very existence of racial labeling militates against the constitution of an inclusive democratic political life. This is in keeping with the current political climate—such as the retreat of the state in the matter of civil rights enforcement; and the shock, at least for some, that the term of the Voting Rights Act which finally gave African Americans the right to vote in 1965, expired in 2006, and after some struggle by African Americans, was finally extended by the US Congress for another 25 years in 2006.

Indeed, rectification of injustice, whether social or political, is still incumbent upon victimized ethnic groups alone. The state, in this context, merely continues to “manage” the conflict arising from the ever-more skewed distribution of social goods, status, income and position in contemporary U.S. society (Krugman 2002).

In fact, it is now up to “Latinos”, for example, to denounce injustices or the violation of the rights of people of Latin American descent in the United States, regardless of their citizenship status. A few examples can help illustrate this point, such as the deaths of countless Mexican workers as a result of employer negligence, and non-enforcement of worker protection legislation in the rural regions of California. More recently, in April 2006, Anthony Soltero, a 14 year old 8th grader, committed suicide after he was threatened by his principal with three years in jail for participating in the Spring 2006 immigration marches against HR 4437. Originally passed by the House of Representatives on December 16, 2005, this anti-immigration legislation specifically called for the criminalization of all undocumented immigrants and of any institution or person who came to their aid.

Anthony committed suicide because the Assistant Principal of his school threatened to have him jailed for three years for his role in organizing the March 28 Walk-Out of his school.⁶ His untimely death was widely protested in California, primarily by the Latino community.

These examples of what could be called “segmented citizenship” are not, of course, limited to Latinos (Hwang/Lee 2002; Johnson 2005). Moreover, while the response to each racist attack is assumed to be the responsibility of the specifically-targeted “ethnic group”, it is also important that there are fault-lines among racial minorities too, for rarely do we see cross-cultural mobilizations among these targeted groups. We can therefore affirm with some confidence both that racism in the United States is quite secure for some time to come; and that racial discrimination, by way of ethnicity, continues to ensure—and at this point to exacerbate—the fragmentation of the national community; eroding the effective meaning of citizenship, with its attendant rights and responsibilities in this country.

Not surprisingly, racial minorities in U.S. society are also redefining the political reality of the labels, using ethnicity to build and/or reinforce “imagined communities” within their particular groups. At least partially in response to the fact noted by the Mexican American anthropologist, Leo Chavez that “immigrants, even those who are legal residents and citizens, are being re-imagined, minimally, as less deserving members of the community” (1997: 77), sectors of Latinos are recasting the label “Hispanic” in hemispheric and transnational terms. Moreover, in view of the current backlash against

⁶ Moreover, according to the Soltero family’s press release announcing Anthony’s death, “The vice principal also forbade Anthony from attending graduation activities and threatened to fine his mother for Anthony’s truancy and participation in the student protests”.

the gains of the Civil Rights period, the labels are contributing toward the forging of a sense of “cultural citizenship” (Flores/Benmayor 1997). They are both redefining the meaning of belonging and enabling a growing numbers of disenfranchised minorities to engender a collective response to the particular incidents and issues affecting each group. These include, but are not limited to, attacks against racially-marked individuals.

Still, there is no doubt that the presence of the still growing Latino population in the US is in some ways significantly changing the country—albeit not in the ways suggested by Huntington above. Globalization, together with Latin America’s neoliberal policies, and particularly, at least since 1994, the impact of NAFTA, have profoundly affected the Americas, and this is most visible in the sky-high unemployment, growing poverty, and consequent displacement of millions of people throughout the Americas. The result is an upsurge in the transnational migration of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, and the concomitant reorganization of national economies now sustained to a large extent by the remittances of immigrants living in the United States. Hence, without a doubt, the arrival of these immigrants in US society, and the existence today of hundreds of thousands of their US born children, *is* indeed changing the meaning of belonging as well as of US citizenship as the political expression of national belonging. Indeed, it is in this context that the issue of the impact of Latino immigrants’ integration on the meaning of citizenship in the United States has to be assessed.

Latino Immigrants, Citizenship and Belonging

Citizenship has long been understood as a legal status, a relationship between an individual and the nation-state that defines his or her political membership in society (Barbalet 1988). In the course of the 20th century in the US, the focus has been on the legal guarantee of the political and civil rights of individuals. In the United States, particularly in the post-World War II period, as a result of the various minorities’ struggles for inclusion, such as the Civil Rights movements, for example, there has been an enormous extension of political and particularly social rights to various sectors previously excluded from full citizenship: people of color, women, gays and lesbians and the handicapped, etc. And while the struggles were waged by particular groups, many of the changes, particularly those affecting white women, undoubtedly ended up benefiting the entire society. Together they represent a shift and expansion of the practical experience and meaning of citizenship in the USA and what William Flores calls “an active process of claiming rights rather than the passive acquisition of an arbitrary and limited set of rights” (2003: 295-296).

In the specific case of the Latinos, the 1960s and 70s Civil Rights movements by Chicanos or Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans responded both to a long legacy of political and cultural exclusion, and to their being perceived as “eternal” foreigners in the American civic imaginary (Rocco 2006; Johnson 1998). Although they are less well known, it is important to underscore the fact that these Latino movements, like those of other minority groups during the 1960s and 70s, exposed the racialized limits of the legal definition of citizenship. They also exposed the way that the focus on individuals’ legal status hides the significance of the realities of race, class, social status, gender, and sexual orientation, which are key determinants of how membership in a community is lived

in everyday citizenship (Abramson/The Young Lords Party 1971; Garcia/García 1997; Gutiérrez 1998; Lopez 2003; Mariscal 2005; Muñoz 1989; Torres/Velazquez 1998).

The Civil Rights struggles for inclusion in the post-war period served to extend political, legal and social citizenship to actual US citizens as well as to legal residents, to such an extent that by the 1990s, as Dorothee Schneider has pointed out, “there was little besides the right to vote to distinguish holders of US passports from those who held a green card” (2001: 66-67). On the other hand, this “leveling” does not signify a marked gain in the practical content of citizenship per se.

Nativist backlash orchestrated the State’s response on several levels. While the state has continued to construct the very concept of illegality (De Genova 2006; Ngai 2005), it also has sought, as Schneider points out, to slow the decline in the value of citizenship by using legislation to reconstitute the distinction between citizens and non-citizens. In this respect, Linda Bosniak points to several measures “designed to make national citizenship status either harder to obtain, more socially significant, or both” (2000b: 963). Indeed, since the mid-1990s, efforts to raise the value of the right to be in US society have also meant changes in the immigration laws.

By the mid-1990s, much legislation both at the federal and state levels against immigrants had been passed. Proposition 187 (1994), for example, which eventually was ruled to be unconstitutional by the courts, made it illegal for immigrants to get social and welfare services.⁷ Two years later, in 1996, the Clinton administration pushed through a number of pieces of anti-immigrant legislation: The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act; the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty act (which criminalized immigrants); and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (which is known as the Welfare Act).

Between them these three acts restricted immigrants from most welfare benefits, elevated enforcement efforts and removal procedures, and increased the responsibility of immigrant sponsors. Thus, for example, the Welfare Act required US citizenship, restricted public benefits for undocumented immigrants, and forced what was then known as the INS to verify the immigrant’s status before he or she could get benefits, which affected both legal and undocumented residents. Indeed, the Act was broad enough to include benefits for many legal residents as well. While some of this curtailment has been overturned by the courts since the passage of the Act, much has remained (Bosniak 2000a).

Thus the real result was that non-citizens were greatly encouraged to naturalize, or risk losing their benefits. In 1997 alone, just one year after the act, there were 1.4 million applications from immigrants wanting to become US citizens (Gilbertson 2006). The other two Acts make more crimes a deportable offence, allowing immigration officials, as *The New York Times* reported, to “quickly deport illegal immigrants who show up at airports and at the border. Immigration officials, not judges, determine which of them can be deported and, therefore, barred from the United States for at least five years. The decision can be made in a matter of hours and without a lawyer representing the immigrant” (Ojito 1998).

⁷ While this initiative was eventually declared unconstitutional by the Courts, a more recent version of it, Proposition 200—the Arizona Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act—was successfully passed in Arizona in 2004 and is now facing legal challenges in the courts.

Still, the political realities of the current transnational context within which both documented and undocumented immigrants live their lives in the US continue to nuance these stark legislative attacks on immigrant rights.

Ultimately, as Greta Gilbertson (2006) points out, the Welfare Act highlighted “the strong relationship that exists between citizenship and the claiming of social rights” in the United States today. In effect, the Welfare Act linked citizenship to social benefits and the claiming of rights, making the notion of dual nationality more acceptable, both among immigrant Latinos and to various Latin American governments.

The Immigrants’ Response

Spurred on, not only by the state, but also by official channels in their respective countries of origin, Latino immigrants have been redefining belonging very much in terms of social and cultural rights. And this includes embracing the notion of dual nationality. Without a doubt, Latinos do not feel fully “American” largely because of racialization, the label that separates them from other groups, and, perhaps above all, the permanent perception in US society of their foreignness (Rocco 2006). Dual nationality has become a major issue among immigrants precisely because “you don’t lose your rights” or your identity in either country (Gilbertson 2006). In some cases, such as Colombia and Mexico, immigrants today can actually live in the United States and run for office in their respective homeland’s congress, for example, and even win! (Escobar 2006). In short, as Gilbertson suggests, they can safeguard their rights to their pension and benefits in the United States, but they also get to re-claim their original national identity and social rights in their respective countries of origin. Nevertheless, non-white physical appearance marks Latinos as minority, as foreigners, even if they speak English.

In this context, questions of patriotism, loyalties, and allegiance to a state must be studied seriously. For example, in her research among Salvadorans, Susan Bibler Coutin (2003) found that citizenship entails “territorial presence and social participation”—including “working, paying taxes, obeying the law”. These are the bases for immigrants’ claim of a citizenship which Coutin’s activist informants define as “substantive citizenship”. Moreover, in defining citizenship and belonging, what carries most weight among Latinos is the way they are present—as active, working, tax-paying, law-abiding persons. In other words, it is social participation, rather than the length of time in the host society, that defines the perspective on belonging for many Salvadoran immigrants (154-155, 159). And, as one Salvadoran activist stated when explaining why “he stopped denying that he was in the United States: ‘I realized, your patria [homeland] is that which gives you food, that which gives you work. I realized that we had to stop paying taxes here and living elsewhere emotionally. We had to accept that the United States was our government” (153).

Many Latino immigrants negotiate their legal status by creating various alternative networks, relationships and practices to survive the denial of formal citizenship—formal acknowledgement of their active participation in the community. These include finding ways of working without papers, transferring funds and goods through unauthorized channels, using false documents and identities, living in various national spaces, smuggling people across the border (Coutin 2003: 161). Still, this is not to say that these alter-

native networks are truly an alternative, as we can see from the fate of undocumented immigrants during the Katrina disaster. Many were stuck in New Orleans, afraid to leave, because they did not want to be stopped by the police, the national guard and other state officials. The same applies to 9/11 widows who are afraid to “claim” their benefits from their husbands’ deaths.

Nevertheless, it is also important to take into account that through these kinds of alternative practices and actions, immigrants are contributing to redefinition and expansion of the very meaning of citizenship, beyond mere legalities and the discussion of rights. Their actions are also contributing to reframing the debate on the meaning and social value of U.S. citizenship today. In the process, Latino identity and belonging is being affirmed.

Citizenship and Latino identity: The construction of belonging

There is no doubt that citizenship today is an issue which has serious implications for everyone, irrespective of history or national origin status. Nowhere is this clearer than in the current debate in the United States over the fate of Elvira Arellano, a young Mexican activist who, in August 2006, chose to take sanctuary in a church instead of going to her deportation hearing (Sustar 2006). Elvira is an undocumented worker who was arrested three years ago in an immigration raid for working illegally at Chicago airport. Her seven year old son, Saul, however, was born in the United States and is a US citizen. If Elvira is deported, Saul will in effect also be forced to leave his homeland. There are currently over eleven million undocumented workers and over four hundred thousand families in the United States who are in this situation. At least 3.1 million children are US citizens who, like Saul, have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant in the United States (Koch 2006). The key question raised by Elvira’s case is: will the laws protecting citizens prevail over the laws against the undocumented? And even more so, how does/can the Elvira case return us to a deeper discussion which does not exclusively concern itself with the letter of the law but reintroduces an element of empathy and compassion which has historically existed in the US?

At the heart of these current debates on the future of US citizenship, which are being forged through the ongoing political mobilization of Latino/as such as Elvira Arellano, Anthony Soltero, and the millions who participated in the massive immigration marches in early 2006, is the ongoing redefinition and simultaneous affirmation of Latino identity and belonging in the United States.

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