Original Article

Contesting citizenship from below: Central Americans and the struggle for inclusion

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Abstract This article examines Central Americans' demands for legalization to understand how Latino migrants articulate notions of membership normally excluded from dominant definitions of citizenship. Drawing from 28 in-depth and semi-structured interviews, I find that Central Americans broaden the definition of citizenship beyond state-centered legalistic conceptions. Through an examination of the responses of Central American migrants situated in different legal statuses, my analysis brings to the surface the meanings attributed to citizenship from the perspectives of those included, excluded and ambiguously situated legally. In contrast to thin models of citizenship in which individuals are passive bearers of rights granted by states, my respondents defined citizenship as an enactment of membership in a cultural and political community. Within these varied experiences with legality, respondents used participation to enact forms of political membership and to substantiate their claims to inclusion. Importantly, Central Americans' responses also signaled how the imagined community extends beyond national borders. In grounding citizenship theory in ethnographic research with Central Americans, the case study also demonstrates how Latino migrants' claims to legalization form the basis of redefinitions of citizenship itself.
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After migrating en masse during the civil wars that destabilized the entire Central American region, Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans have struggled for legalization in the United States. This is in part due to Central Americans' complex position vis-à-vis US immigration law, which has been directly shaped by Cold War politics and the US role in the civil wars in Guatemala and

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El Salvador.[1] Consequently, much of the scholarship on US Central Americans has focused on the effects of uncertain legal status on various measures of immigrant integration including the labor market, kinship and social networks, and social identities (Mahler, 1999; Coutin, 2000b; Menjívar, 2000, 2002, 2011; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). Less work has focused on how uncertain legal status has shaped Central Americans' views of citizenship and political participation.[2] While citizenship is often understood as formal nationality, citizenship is also constituted by different practices grounded in daily life. Immigrants can take part in various practices and forms of participation that foster community membership without formal nationality (Bosniak, 2000, 2006; Sassen, 2002b). Thus, this article examines how Central Americans interpret the meaning of citizenship, given the contradictions that arise from their uncertain immigration status in the United States. Central Americans' collective struggles for legalization offer a rich opportunity to interrogate how immigrants respond to and transform the conditions of their exclusion. By focusing specifically on the experiences of civil war migrants who are actively engaged in community-level organizing around issues of legalization and immigrants' rights, I demonstrate how Central Americans' demands for legalization contest narrowly defined conceptions of nation-state citizenship. As has been thoroughly documented, a segment of the Central American community in Los Angeles is intensely engaged in local and transnational political activism, despite the challenges of their legal status (Dorrington, 1992; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001; Pérez and Ramos, 2007; Perla, 2008, 2010). I draw from 28 semi-structured and in-depth interviews with former and current members of US Central American organizations, including non-governmental, partisan, social movement and student organizations. Interview respondents were identified through snowball sampling. My aim was not to produce a generalizable set of conclusions about a singular Central American experience but rather to document the perspectives of a select group of activists who directly face the contradictions of citizenship, belonging, participation and exclusion. I support the interview data with participant observation and ethnographic observation, in order to understand how personal experiences and collective processes of political struggle constitute the competing meanings of citizenship for this community.

Given their decades of engaging in community organizing and legal and legislative battles over Central American legalization, I expected my interview subjects to stress a state-centered, rights-based approach to citizenship. However, my interview respondents most commonly emphasized the participatory dimensions of citizenship and community membership. Respondents who were naturalized citizens continued to stress the importance of participation as a way of substantiating the abstract and disembodied nature of citizenship as juridical status.[3] Thus, while Central Americans' claims to inclusion are couched in rights language centered on the state, respondents articulated broader conceptions of membership that contested dominant and narrowly constructed forms of state citizenship. In contrast to a passive notion of citizenship as entitlement, Central American

1 There are important socio-demographic and cultural differences between Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans. For analytical purposes, I will consider them as a single group due to their similarities on those key aspects that I develop in this article, noting contrasts between the three when appropriate.

2 For studies on Central Americans' activism and views of citizenship, see Coutin (2000a, c), García Bedolla (2009), Menjívar (2006) and Perla (2008, 2010).

3 A segment of Central Americans who entered the United States before 1 January

1982 were eligible to adjust their status under the new regulations established under IRCA – the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) granted benefits and relief from deportation to certain Nicaraguans, Cubans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans.

activists emphasized citizenship as a political strategy used in different contexts to demand inclusion. Yet one that had to be exercised in order to acquire meaning, consistent with "thick" definitions of citizenship (Turner, 1990; Bubeck, 1995). My analysis illuminates how, counter intuitively, claims to legalization contest and subvert dominant conceptions of citizenship. Owing to their decades long-battle for legalization and their positioning as temporary migrants, Central Americans offer alternative perspectives often excluded from theories of citizenship.

I begin with a review of political theories of citizenship, drawing primarily from political and feminist theory, and works that ground citizenship theory in ethnographic research. Then I detail Central Americans' demands for legalization and how the context of legal exclusion has framed their understandings of belonging and membership. Next, I discuss my methodological approach, which grounds normative theories of citizenship in the interpretation of interview data. In the sections that follow, I compare the interviews of naturalized and undocumented Central Americans, and show how legal uncertainty has shaped Central Americans' interpretations and perspectives of citizenship. Finally, I summarize my findings and argue that Central Americans' reinterpretation of citizenship demonstrates how excluded subjects transform the meaning of citizenship even while they make claims to be legal.

Theories of Citizenship

Since the emergence of the nation-state, citizenship has primarily been defined as a juridical-legal status that defines an individual's nationality and as a set of rights and obligations squarely tied to the state (Isin and Turner, 2002). While globalization and transnationalism inspired scholars to reimagine citizenship beyond the nation-state, state-granted legal status is now more important than ever as states use citizenship as a form of social closure and as a way to exclude various groups (Brubaker, 1992). Yet, modern citizenship has been conceptualized in broader terms. Commonly known as the first theorist of citizenship, T.H. Marshall (1950, 14) defined citizenship as "a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community." Marshall's focus on membership opened up the possibility of understanding citizenship as not only a legal status granted by states, but also as a set of norms, civic and political identities, rights, and activities that define one's membership and belonging to a political community (Moran and Vogel, 1991; Lister, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Bosniak, 2000; Benhabib, 2002). More recently, civic republicans and participatory democrats resurrected a practice-based approach to citizenship, de-emphasizing the passive nature of citizenship as legal status or a bundle of rights, while emphasizing its participatory dimensions (Bader, 1995). In contrast to state-centered theories of citizenship that privilege the singular membership of the abstract, autonomous individual to

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the nation-state, this alternative posits citizenship as membership and participation in a community. The notion of the active citizen in theories of "thick" citizenship is juxtaposed to the classical liberal paradigm where individuals are the passive bearers of rights. In theories of participatory and associational democracy, citizenship is tied to associational life and patterns of political culture (Somers, 1993). Grounded in civil society, these theories emphasize citizenship as embedded in social and political processes and the contested politics of belonging (Rocco, 2000; Benhabib, 2002; Secor, 2002).

Conceptions of citizenship that extend beyond legalistic or rights-based definitions are particularly useful in accounting for the role of human agency in expanding citizenship's public domain. It allows us to account for how undocumented immigrants use informal practices to function as part of the political landscape despite lack of legal status (Sassen, 2002a, 22). Bibler Coutin (2000, 586) argues that migrants move between the different forms of citizenship and use one dimension of citizenship to gain another, and these movements are as important as redefinitions of the concept of citizenship itself. More formal strategies, like pursuing legislation or legal strategies, can also help undocumented immigrants achieve a level of political recognition. Thus, migrants contest and reproduce dominant understandings of membership through various practices of survival and resistance. The concept of a "citizenship from below" is useful for understanding how migrants' perspectives and practices remake citizenship from the ground up. In the following, I focus on Central Americans' diverse expressions of resistance to inequality and exclusion, in order to uncover how citizenship is reconstituted by immigrants' claims to inclusion.

Contextualizing the Central American Experience in the United States

While Central American migration to the United States stretches back over a century, the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1980s ignited the first large-scale migration from this area (Menjívar, 2000). Over half of Salvadorans and Guatemalans who migrated to the United States settled in Los Angeles. While many refugees planned to return once the wars ended (Hendrix, 1993), Central Americans established deep roots in the city, and today total about half a million in the Los Angeles county alone (Henderson, 2014). As the civil wars dragged on, Central Americans established deeper roots in the United States. Yet despite long-term residency, Central Americans have had few avenues for legalization and have also faced high rates of deportation.[4] Yet, these immigrants have not passively accepted the US immigration policy. They have actively contested the terms of their exclusion through legal, legislative and informal strategies (Hagan, 1994; Coutin, 2000c). Unable to participate directly in electoral politics due to their

4 In 1986, the IRCA allowed migrants arriving before 1982 a chance to

adjust their status, but fewer than half of Salvadorans and Guatemalans arrived before that deadline, and even fewer actually benefitted, see Menjívar (2006).

immigration status, Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees played a central role in mobilizing grassroots movements, engaging in direct action and forming alliances with other civic and political groups that could lobby for policy change on their behalf. These politically active refugees leveraged their experiences as activists in their countries of origin to navigate new political and institutional contexts in the United States. In Los Angeles, former students, labor union organizers, teachers and faith-based activists formed migrant organizations with linkages to revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Guatemala, respectively, which also organized for the rights of Central Americans in the United States (Coutin, 2000c; Perla, 2008). Once the civil wars officially ended, these organizations focused more heavily on immigrants' rights issues, sponsoring lobbying trips to Washington, DC, participating in pro-immigrant rallies and advocating for legalization of former Central American refugees (Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla, 1999). In part due to the political pressure applied by US Central Americans, the Congress granted Salvadorans temporary protected status (TPS), which gave beneficiaries temporary work permits. Hondurans lobbied heavily for TPS, and were also included in this temporary provision after Hurricane Mitch. Estimates suggest that 60 percent of Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the United States are undocumented or protected only temporarily (Menjívar, 2006). Central American organizations along with a network of religious organizations also brought suit against the state department in the case known as *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh* (Gzesh, 2006). In 1991, the US District Court of San Francisco approved a settlement affecting 250,000 Central American refugees who had been denied asylum. The outcome was a major victory for the political advocacy efforts of hundreds of refugees who testified, filed affidavits and raised funds for legal fees.

In sum, while Central Americans faced various obstacles to citizenship and full incorporation, activists used direct forms of community organizing to exert political agency, change the direction of public policy and demand the recognition of their immigrant and human rights. Activists – many of whom faced uncertain legal status themselves – used these forms of participation to build community and contest the terms of their exclusion. In spite of their formal exclusion, migrant organizations played a key role in the process of facilitating the civic and political participation of Central Americans as members of their local and transnational communities. However, Central Americans' uncertain immigration status is far from an abstract set of legal rules; the reality of "legal liminality" (Menjívar, 2006) shapes their daily interactions with local institutions and their civic and political identities. Speaking of this situation, Guatemalan author and critic Arturo Arias argues that Central Americans occupy a "second tier" Latino/a status, not yet having earned the hyphen as a mark of recognition, assimilation and integration within the multi-cultural landscape of the United States (Arias, 2003, 141). Therefore, Central Americans' articulations of citizenship are often tied to the contradictions inherent in their ambiguous legal, social and political standing in relation to both their countries of origin and in the United States.

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Foregrounding the Experiences and Perspectives of Central American Activists in Los Angeles

To foreground how migrants negotiate and contest the meanings of citizenship in their lives, I draw on 28 semi-structured interviews with Central American migrants who are community-based activists. I used a purposive snowball sample to identify potential study participants, including staff and affiliates, volunteers, community leaders and organizers affiliated to Central American community-based organizations.[5] While legal status was not a factor in choosing potential respondents, all of the participants had at one point struggled with uncertain legal status. Despite facing legal uncertainty, subjects were politically active. As such, they were especially attuned to the contradictions of citizenship in their daily lives. The majority of respondents were Salvadorans ($N=18$), followed by Guatemalans ($N=6$) and Hondurans ($N=4$).[6] About half of the respondents had overcome a web of legal obstacles to become naturalized citizens. Most of the respondents who were US citizens had migrated before 1982, the official cut-off for the legalization program passed under the Immigrant Reform and Control Act of 1986 (Gonzalez Baker, 1997). The other respondents included TPS beneficiaries, undocumented immigrants or those in process of claiming asylum.

My interview protocol centered on respondents' history of migration, their experiences with belonging and exclusion, their political participation and community organizing and ideas about citizenship. I coded the transcribed interviews for common themes. Common themes pointed to how struggles for legalization have impacted Central Americans' sense of identity and place, group membership and American identity. Thus, my analysis of the narrative texts is divided into two sections. First, I discuss how respondents in tenuous legal status have used participation as a mode of citizenship. In the second section, I discuss how naturalized citizens continue to struggle with a sense of exclusion. Juxtaposing the narratives of naturalized and undocumented Central Americans illuminates how these subjects, regardless of their legal status, articulate citizenship in more expansive terms beyond legality.

5 For a discussion of snowball sampling and the use of immigrant organizations to select participants, see Hardy-Fanta (1993).

6 The representation of Salvadorans in the sample reflects the demographic composition of the Central American community in Los Angeles, as well as my choice of community-based organizations, which were historically linked to Salvadoran progressive politics. The Honduran and Guatemalan respondents were selected from community-based organizations that worked closely with Salvadoran community-based organizations.

Acts of Citizenship among Undocumented Central Americans or Those with Temporary Status

On a prominent sign located in the community hall of a community-based organization, there is a sign that that reads: "Citizenship is Active Participation." Marvin, The Central American Resource Center's (CARECEN) former executive director explains that, "One does not necessarily need to be a US citizen to be politically active … and to participate and be an engaged citizen. I think if you're a permanent resident or on TPS, and even undocumented, you can be active"

(Marvin, interview by author, August 2009).[7] Cindy, 53, is a TPS beneficiary, who began her activism when she volunteered for a donation drive benefitting the victims of Hurricane Mitch. From this initial encounter with community organizing, Cindy began attending legal aid workshops – or *charlas* – hosted by CARECEN to seek information about legalization programs. When narrating her early organizing experiences, her legal status was a prominent factor. She states:

7 I use pseudonyms for all respondents.

> I started my activism by simply making tamales to help the organization raise funds. At that time, I didn't even have TPS; I was undocumented. But, I started with little things and in a few years, I was part of a delegation that lobbied Congress for TPS on behalf of Hondurans. We started to knock on all the doors of the congressman to lobby on behalf of immigration reform. Around two or three months later, Hurricane Mitch hit. We were one of the few organizations that helped Hondurans, and it grew from there.
> (Cindy, interview by author, June 2009)

In the ensuing decade, Cindy became the executive director of an immigrant rights organization focused on the Honduran community in Los Angeles. She led the campaign for suffrage for Honduran migrants living in the United States who wanted to vote in Honduran elections. Ironically, Cindy could not travel to Honduras to participate directly because of her immigration status. Thus, her perspective on citizenship is directly informed by tensions between her legal status and her political activism. In describing how she negotiates these tensions, she differentiates between citizenship as formal status and citizenship as actual membership. She states:

> Well, I don't have the vote, but I get all my family, my kids, my son-in-law, to vote on my behalf. That's how I have an influence. I have also participated in several city council campaigns. I send councilman letters … I have worked for [the Mayor] and our organization has sponsored things for him. They don't see that while we don't vote, we exercise the vote! Citizens just go and punch a ballot. (Cindy, interview by author, June 2009)

Distinguishing between the status and the practice of citizenship is a way that Central Americans make claims to inclusion. This theme runs through the narratives of other activists similarly legally situated. Manny, 27, for instance, migrated to the United States as a teenager after escaping brutal conditions in El Salvador, including his kidnapping by a paramilitary group. His childhood experiences in El Salvador's civil war directly informed his commitment to social justice in the United States. He states:

> I got started with Proposition 187. I went to Sacramento to lobby legislators after joining a group of students at my high school. I participated in hunger strikes, I went to Washington, DC to talk to senators. I became really active with the undocumented youth thing. I have written so many letters. I can't

> just sit back and witness injustice, after all we've been through, I feel like I have to act. (Manny, interview by author, September 2008)

Manny frames his undocumented status within a framework of social injustice in which he links his experiences with political violence in El Salvador to his political activism in the United States. Rather than an obstacle to participation, Manny's undocumented status spurred his acts of civic and political engagement. Yet Manny also points out the disjuncture between formal status and what he defines as actual citizenship. He states:

> But even with all my activism I still can't vote. It's going to be a while until I get citizenship. All I have been given is political asylum. I was about to be deported and can still can be if they want to. I don't even have a green card yet. I'll probably be in my 40s when I become a US citizen. I look at it like an experience; I'll look back and say, ok, I've learned how *not* to vote. A citizen is someone who contributes to a civic process; according to that definition I guess I am a citizen. But I have no voice in who runs this country. I have never had direct participation in electing or choosing an individual who is going to determine the destiny of so many people. I'm not recognized as a citizen. It only makes me realize my disadvantages …
>
> (Manny, interview by author, September 2008)

In Manny's reflection, citizenship is both a legal form of exclusion and a civic process. His statement points to the tensions between these two dimensions that have shaped his life. Despite the overwhelming feeling of vulnerability due to his immigration status, Manny refuses to define citizenship as merely a matter of legal status. Rather, he expresses ambivalence toward traditional conceptions of citizenship as legal status, by pointing to the disjuncture between being recognized as a citizen and acting like one. By doing so, Manny highlights the stark differences between legalistic notions of citizenship and broader notions of membership as a "civic process." In doing so, he makes a claim to citizenship, while undermining its state-centered definitions.

Central Americans' experiences with legal liminality directly inform their views of citizenship. Legal liminality describes a space in which individuals are neither fully members or fully excluded from legal status, but rather, remain in legal limbo (Menjívar, 2006). Tenuous legal status has not only impacted undocumented or temporary residents, because the threat of deportation is now being used with unprecedented vigor to make even permanent legal residents vulnerable to deportation (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). The US government indefinitely prolongs the experience of displacement of Central Americans with TPS or in asylum proceedings and denies these individuals many rights afforded to other refugees and asylum applicants, immigrants, and the native born, and in addition, actively shapes their identities (Mountz *et al*, 2002). This state of permanent

temporariness has affected their sense of place and belonging, but has also formed the context within which new claims to citizenship have emerged (Bailey *et al*, 2002). For example, Cindy's discussion of her TPS reveals the role of the legalistic dimensions of citizenship. She states:

> I tell people that I have temporary papers; I don't pretend that just because I've been here 23 years, raised a family, and am politically involved with the community, that I am not vulnerable to deportation. I don't say I'm American. Residency won't change much either [in that regard]. I know people getting deported even with papers. I hope one day I get residency, but who knows when that day will come. Every day it gets more vulnerable for our people. (Cindy, interview by author, June 2009)

Cindy's narrative emphasizes the legalistic dimensions of citizenship in the context of deportability. Here, citizenship is primarily protection from the increasing and wide reach of deportation. In many ways, citizenship is a tool that immigrants use to protect themselves from state persecution. While Cindy expresses hope for an adjustment of her legal status, she expresses doubt that legalization will provide her a full sense of American identity and belonging. Given the policies that have produced these forms of migrant illegality, migrants' narratives often disarticulate legal citizenship from full societal membership.[8] As I discuss below, even for those respondents who became naturalized US citizens, membership must be substantiated by participation in a community in order to be fully realized.

8 For a discussion of the differences between societal and state-defined notions of membership, see Rocco (2004).

Citizenship as a Limited Freedom

While the majority of Central Americans residing in the United States are undocumented or temporary residents, between 20 and 30 percent become naturalized citizens.[9] Among my respondents, about one-third had become citizens after a long period of legal limbo. Many of these respondents were set on a path to citizenship through reform laws such as IRCA (1986) and NACARA (1997). Interestingly, while most recognized the advantages of formal citizenship, they also continued to emphasize the participatory dimensions of citizenship, revealing the ways that Central Americans articulate a broader notion of membership beyond the constraints of the nation-state.

9 See Pew Hispanic Research Trends Project for specific analysis of Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans in the United States.

Eduardo, now 52, was 22 when he was forced to flee El Salvador after receiving death threats from the paramilitary death squads. Upon arriving in Los Angeles, he joined a refugee committee to raise awareness of US support of right-wing paramilitary groups. Because he arrived before January 1982, he qualified for legalization under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which benefitted only a small percentage of the total Central American refugee

population. Half a decade later he became a naturalized US citizen and became the executive director of one of the largest Central American community organizations in the country. Yet, his early experiences with state persecution continue to frame his definition of citizenship. He states:

> I became a US citizen for practical reasons. When I was just a permanent resident, I still felt uncertain about my ability to remain in this country especially during times of uncertainty and political turmoil. I don't know maybe it's irrational or maybe it's the fear I've felt since being driven out of my country and coming here and living with that double fear – you know – for my family and friends in El Salvador – but also fearing *la migra*. I think that in this age you must become a US citizen if you can. I don't think it's a matter of choice. With citizenship, you feel more secure, anchored, you feel more certain about your ability to do certain things; you feel somewhat free, but honestly, it's a limited freedom because you still have to work; to do things to improve your community both here and there …
>
> (Eduardo, interview by author, March 2008)

Eduardo's articulation of citizenship as limited freedom reflects the limits of legal formal citizenship as a vehicle for full and equal membership, especially within the context of legal liminality. Having experienced direct state persecution on both sides of the border, Eduardo's idea of citizenship as legal status is firmly rooted in notions of protection and security. Confronting a feeling of permanent foreignness, Eduardo must continuously "prove" his worthiness of citizenship.

The politics of worthiness often play out in Central Americans' daily lives, as they battle with a sense of having to "prove" their belonging. As a naturalized US citizen, Sandra, 28, is active in both local community organizing around issues of racial justice and with Salvadoran transnational hometown organizations. Despite her transnational civic participation, Sandra reveals how her American-*ness* is continuously in question in her daily life. She states:

> When I applied to citizenship, I had to give up my green card, and I was like, Wait, how are they going to know that I'm now legal? Finally, I got my passport. I carry my passport everywhere I go, so much so that the last one was so damaged … You know it's psychological in a lot of ways, because you feel if you don't have that paper, and you pass through immigration, they're going to say, "there's an error" and they're going to take your passport. I'm always feeling like, something bad is going to happen.
>
> (Sandra, interview by author, May 2008)

Sandra's need for proof of her legal status has been shaped by years of legal uncertainty, and even as her status has changed, her sense of permanent impermanence has endured. Like other respondents, Sandra reconciles the tensions produced by her status by recommitting to social justice work, stating that she will continue to work to "make changes" in both her native El Salvador

and her adopted country. For both Eduardo and Sandra, transnational participation becomes a tool of social empowerment that also foregrounds a much broader sense of membership beyond legal status granted by the nation-state.

Central American respondents used this broader sense of the meaning of social membership to contest and transform the narrowly defined models of liberal citizenship based on individualism, state-granted rights and state-centered forms of political community. Maya-Vision, a Maya-Quiche organization, is an example of an alternative form of political community. Centered on assisting the Maya-Quiche community of Los Angeles, its members are focused on preserving Mayan cultural practices and raising funds to assist community members with asylum claims. Guatemalans, in general, have been disadvantaged relative to Hondurans and Salvadorans, in that they have not been included in TPS and other temporary worker programs. Additionally, Maya-Guatemalans are culturally distinct from Guatemalan Ladinos and are often underrepresented and underserved by mainstream Latino organizations.[10] Despite their political and legal disempowerment, organizations like Maya Vision work to form coalitions with other Central American groups, transforming these associational spaces into sites of political and social membership. Juan, a founder of Maya Vision, emphasizes the communitarian aspects of citizenship:

> Most of our members are not citizens in the legal sense, but here, they are made to feel a part of the community. We see ourselves as members of our local community, but also as part of a broader transnational community as Maya Quiche. Our members raise funds for legal assistance, but also cultural assistance, helping other Maya to integrate into the community, preserve their cultural ways. These are important in terms of how we see citizenship because our members face many forms of discrimination and disadvantage out there. It's important that we provide a space for affirmation and healing. (Juan, interview by author, June 2009)

Nonetheless, for both indigenous and Ladino Central Americans, the material and physical circumstances, conditioned largely by the immigration laws and forms of racialization that govern their lives, have shaped their sense of community and their views of citizenship and political membership. Fernando, for instance, is Salvadoran and works closely with members of different ethnic groups of Central American origin in a national advocacy group named the National Central American Roundtable (NACART). While Fernando is a naturalized citizen, bilingual and a long-time community activist, he confronts similar structural forms of discrimination that shaped his collective identity as Central American and his relationship to citizenship.

> A lot of people on the outside think we have little in common with each other – with the Mayans, the Garifuna, and other groups. But, we battle the same things and we want the same things for our community. We deal with

10 Guatemalans are divided by a process of "internal ethnicity" in which Ladino Guatemalans are placed in a superior position to the indigenous Maya. These tensions directly shape inter-ethnic relations among the Guatemalan community, in which Mayan and Ladino organizations rarely work together, see Bozorgmehr (1997).

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> racism, we deal with discrimination, in different ways than other Latinos. Last night I attended a neighborhood council meeting in order to talk about the issues facing Central Americans in particular. I was often ignored. So in a rather exaggerated gesture, I pulled out my passport, which I always carry with me. I said, "You see? I am a US citizen just like you! I have the right to be here, and to speak just like you!" They were all shocked and assured me that they were not excluding me. But, I know better. I know how they treat us, what they think of us. So, in that sense, citizenship makes a big difference. Once you have it, it gives you confidence, you feel secure. But, it doesn't mean they'll respect you. You have to work for that. And, so that is why I organize with other Central Americans – because so many of them don't even have that security so they are extra vulnerable to these kinds of things. (Fernando, interview by author, September 2008)

The contradictory meanings of citizenship – as status, belonging, participation, respect – surface most starkly in the narratives of respondents' everyday lives and in mundane spaces like neighborhood meetings where membership and belonging are contested. Within the racialized and legal productions of difference that position Central Americans on the margins of two nations, respondents like Fernando often leverage their political savvy and experience to demand full inclusion and participation. Thus, despite Fernando's experiences of exclusion, his claim that, "I know better" was his way of exerting personal agency. Fernando performs citizenship as an act of personal and collective empowerment, which demonstrates how citizenship is not simply a status that is transferred to and passively accepted by individuals. Thus, despite the regional, national, linguistic and cultural differences amongst different Central American groups, their shared experiences of legal and socio-political exclusion form the foundation of new forms of identity and claims to citizenship.

Transforming Citizenship from Below

The narratives of Central American migrants reveal how the context of migrant illegality has shaped their alternative understandings of citizenship. Since the largest wave of civil war migration began in the 1980s, uncertain legal status has directly shaped migrants' sense of place, belonging and membership. These views are vividly represented in activists' stories about navigating the tensions produced by political participation, on the one hand, and their prolonged legal uncertainty, on the other. Through an examination of these narratives, I have also pointed to the paradox of legalization. In the process of making claims to be legal, Central Americans also redefine, contest and unsettle dominant ideologies of citizenship. Through an examination of the responses of Central American migrants situated in different legal statuses, my analysis brings to the surface the meanings

attributed to citizenship from the perspectives of those included, excluded and ambiguously situated legally. In contrast to thin models of citizenship in which individuals are passive bearers of rights granted by states, my respondents defined citizenship as an enactment of membership in a cultural and political community. Within these varied experiences with legality, respondents used participation to enact forms of political membership and to substantiate their claims to inclusion. Importantly, Central Americans' responses also signaled how the imagined community extends beyond national borders. While citizenship and transnationalism are often juxtaposed, my respondents discussed how they used their formal nationality to deepen their political participation in their countries of origin. Those without the privileges of citizenship leveraged their experiences as activists in their countries of origin to participate politically in their local communities.

In sum, Central American migrant activists make claims to citizenship, but reject the notion of citizenship as simply a status that is transferred to and passively accepted by individuals. Rather, participation and political struggle are the defining elements of a more expansive notion of citizenship from below that finds expression in the everyday lived experiences of Central Americans' participation and political agency. In acting collectively to claim inclusion, Central Americans also contest the norms of American nationalism and belonging that underpin state-defined forms of membership. To reflect the "thicker" forms of citizenship that have emerged within this community, I point to theories of citizenship that emphasize social participation and social struggle as central aspects of membership (Turner, 1997, 194). Within this framework, citizenship is not only a strategy of containment implemented by the state to regulate access to power and privilege, it is also a set of political strategies used to make popular demands for participation and inclusion.

While many different national origin groups face similar forms of legal and socio-political exclusion, the experience of Central Americans is particularly useful for examining the tensions between legal uncertainty and transnational forms of political participation. This group of activists has struggled for decades for a pathway to citizenship. Yet, we still lack the conceptual apparatus to account for Central Americans' historically specific modes of incorporation and exclusion and their rights-claiming practices. Thus, this article addresses the gap by offering a theoretically driven account of the ways that Central Americans have claimed, contested and transformed citizenship through their civic and political engagement and their daily strategies of resistance and survival. Specifically, I examine the normative dimensions of citizenship by focusing on how migrants interpret the meaning of citizenship in their lives. This is increasingly relevant as immigration reform is nationally relevant once again. The proposed policies are aimed at admitting more immigrants under the rubric of "legalization." Yet we need the conceptual tools to understand the ways in which legalization is not merely about passively accepting a new status, but also about

transforming what it means to be a part of the American national community. Thus, while this article focuses on a specific subset of the Central American experience, it contributes to a more generalized account of the ways that Latino/as are challenging and changing the meanings and practices of national citizenship more broadly.

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