

CITIZENSHIP

NOTES ON AN AMERICAN MYTH

Daisy Hernández



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For Yoel Enrique Sanchez Hernandez,

Natalia Tapia Moreno,

and all those writing the next story

In all lands alien, nowhere citizen.

—GLORIA ANZALDÚA

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INVITATIONS

THE YEAR I turned forty, my mother, sister, and I flew north to Toronto, and together, almost giddy, we marched to the United States consulate. We squinted in the morning sun, and I took selfies with the consulate's glass door in the background until a security guard jogged over and said, You can't take photos here. You have to erase them.

My mother's eyes narrowed at me. She did not understand the man's English, but she knew from his tone that I was the guilty party.

It's a selfie, I stammered.

Doesn't matter, the guard said. It's a security issue. You can't take pictures.

I tried, but failed, to find the words to tell the guard that once upon a time my mother had needed to exist beyond the borders of the United States to receive a fiancée visa, and she had come here to Toronto, to this building. She had been pregnant with me. I wanted to tell the man that my Colombian mother was an extremely shy woman, but once when I asked her how she had convinced immigration officials that she was not marrying my Cuban father for a green card, that she actually did love the man, Mami had puffed her chest and exclaimed, I was pregnant! What more proof is there?

The sun dazzled overhead, and I wanted to tell the security guard: There's a story here about citizenship and lan-

guage, about the policies of the state and the bodies of women. There's a story here about defiance. A story about the narratives we, as a nation, tell about who we are. For my mother and me, it started at this gray building with the hard glass and an American flag sagging in the morning light. But I glimpsed my mother's face: her dark, worried eyes, her lips a firm line insisting that I follow the rules, as if the uniformed man were my father. I bit my lip and deleted the photographs, erasing Mami's smile, my sister's curls, the gloss of my red lipstick, and the doors to the consulate.

Satisfied, the guard turned away, and I tucked the phone into my pocketbook. I had managed to keep twenty-one photographs.

In northern New Jersey, in the early 1970s, my mother looked like a young Cher. She had thick black hair and a face that could be interpreted as Italian or Greek, Armenian or Jewish. When she wasn't cleaning offices or working at a clothing factory, she sauntered through Jersey City in bell-bottoms and fitted tops. Those who didn't understand Spanish probably mistook her for one of the most recent arrivals in that part of the state: the women fleeing Fidel Castro's new Cuba.

A decade later, in 1981, at the age of six, I began silently recording my mother's stories about citizenship. She did not use the terminology of those years: resident aliens, nonresident aliens, illegal aliens. She did not even tell me about visas or green cards. She spoke only of invitations.

Her stories were told at night, in the bedroom she shared with Papi, when he was working at the factory until dawn

and it was only her, me, and my sister. All the lights off, we huddled under the comforter, my toddler sister on one side of Mami and my six-year-old body on the other, in that bedroom at the end of our railroad apartment in Union City. I must have said, Tell me a story, and she started with the first invitation.

My mother was in her twenties in this story. At the factory in Bogotá, during the late 1960s, she and a friend bent their heads over men's blazers, day after day, the tailor's chalk in their hands. They marked the fabric so the seamstresses would know where to stitch the pockets, so the men would have a place for their secrets. My mother and her friend lunched together with their co-workers, sometimes feasting on sopas brimming with potatoes and carne, and other times delighting in freshly baked buñuelos and pandebono. One day, her friend announced that she was joining her son in Jersey City. In the dark, my mother whispered, She said to me, When I get to the United States, I'll send for you.

The woman kept her promise. She mailed a letter, and here the story took a difficult turn. My mother did not want to go north, but everyone told her not to be stupid. There was money to be made in the United States, more than she could imagine. She could work and come back. No one spoke about the recession in the United States, because the worst moments inside the empire were better than those at the edges, and besides, over there, the factories paid in dollars. Mami hesitated. An older sister urged her to go, and before Mami could decide, her sister bought the airline ticket with her own savings. What could I do? my mother asked in the dark. I left, she said with a sigh.

Cocooned under blankets, her sad voice in my black hair,

I made a note to not trust the invitations of women, not even the ones I liked.

My mother did not tell me that she had to apply for a visa to the United States. She did not mention that procuring such a visa was not easy. People were routinely turned away. She did not tell me about the papers she submitted and the man at the United States consulate in Bogotá who approved her request. She did not speculate, at least not to me, on what that man thought when he looked at her: twenty-eight, childless, unmarried, living at home with her parents, a woman who would return or a woman the country did not need. She arrived in New York City, at John F. Kennedy International Airport, in the winter of 1970.

My mother never spoke of colonialism. She said nothing of fear or *la migra*. I was a child, and she was my mother, and so even though she had never read a novel set in Victorian London about wealthy women, she crafted a story where women extended invitations.

In northern New Jersey, she found work and two, maybe three years later, a local woman invited her to coffee. Someone had nicknamed the woman *La Coca-Cola*. I interrupted Mami to ask, Why did they call her that?

She was as popular as *Coca-Cola*, my mother replied, matter-of-fact.

La Coca-Cola brewed coffee on her kitchen stove. Maybe the woman served the café both ways: a tiny cup overloaded with sugar for the white Cuban man she had invited and ceramic mugs brimming with milk, sugar, and coffee for my mother and her sister Rosa.

By then my auntie had also become the recipient of invitations. In Colombia, Tía Rosa had taught elementary

school in the campo, but once my mother settled in Jersey, she sent her a letter asking her to visit, and a man at the consulate approved Tía Rosa for a visa. My auntie boarded an airplane bound for New York City, then rented an apartment with Mami. By then, Tía Rosa was forty years old, more than a decade older than my mother, and with short curls, she had the confidence of a zealous talent manager, a woman who saw opportunity in every conversation. She had no patience for the factories with their demanding hours and their sewing machines squealing like small animals. Tía Rosa started cleaning the homes of the well-to-do.

La Coca-Cola invited my mother and Tía Rosa to meet a handsome man, a Cubano. In his mid-thirties and thin, Ygnacio turned up with his shirt tucked into his jeans, his black hair cropped short. He smiled easily and wore a stylish flimsy jacket that ended high on his waist and made him look even taller and more *flaco* than he was. He said very little but smiled.

Another invitation arrived for Mami. Ygnacio wanted to take her out. He showed up with pastries and sent more invitations. She said yes. He bought a red Chevy so he could drive her down the shore. He proposed marriage on a park bench, the trees flush with summer leaves and house sparrows. Let's get married, he said, and there it was: another invitation.

My mother did not tell me stories of the Cold War. Neither did my father. He grew up in the mountains in Cuba, on the outskirts of Fomento, in a one-room home without running water or a toilet. He had a third-grade education. He was

the kind of man the Communists intended to save from the clutches of capitalism, but Papi had his own ideas. He planned to be rich, and when the war began, he had already joined the army of the dictator Fulgencio Batista. In the late 1950s, that's where the money was. A poor man could work his way up the ranks of the military, or at least have a uniform and a paycheck.

The revolution swept the island. The revolution won. Along with other soldiers, Papi, hours from Havana, surrendered his pistol to the new government. A year later, friends told him to flee. They whispered that the new government had begun its revenge by disappearing enemies of the state. In the first days of 1961, John F. Kennedy's administration broke off diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro's government, and the same week Papi boarded an airplane for South Florida with five pesos from a cousin in his pocket.

My mother could have said it this way: Citizenship is a game of tic-tac-toe. Your father was X and I was O. Here, on the sidewalk, the United States and the Soviet Union chalked three squares across, then up and down, until nine openings appeared. Your father was X and I was O. The Soviets supported Castro's Communist government, and the Americans began offering green cards in 1966 to the Cuban exiles who reached the United States. Your father was born in Cuba. Your father had a Cuban passport. Your father landed on American soil. Your father won.

My mother did not reveal that La Coca-Cola knew this intricate game of citizenship, but the woman named after the empire's most popular drink surely saw the situation. Here stood a woman who needed papers, and over there, a man who had papers, who had permanent legal residency. Nei-

ther was married. Neither had a child. They needed only an invitation.

My mother could have made her courtship sound romantic: Your father relinquished his country to be with me. Yes, he had a green card when we met, but he had no intention of becoming a citizen of the United States until he fell in love with me. She could have said: To keep my love, your papi had to renounce his allegiance to the land where he first saw the sun rise and where he first learned to say the word *mamá*. My mother could have said: He loved me so much that he threw himself into the fire and vowed to defend this country with his life.

My mother said none of this. Instead, in the dark of her bedroom, she shared with me the blunt, almost crude, memory. When she spoke to my father about her citizenship, her status, he replied, Let's talk to the man who does my taxes.

The tax man had an office in the basement of his house in Union City. My parents gingerly walked down the few steps into the waiting room, which was dimly lit, with a low ceiling. Padded folding chairs had been arranged along the perimeter of the room so clients could sit in a circle. At intervals, the door to the tax man's office swung open, and an enormous shower of light poured over everyone. The tax man's wife called out for a client, noted my father's name on her pad, and then closed the door.

Everyone had come here to sit in a circle of dim light because of papers. They had a W-2 for the first time. They had received a letter from the government. They had a new dependent to claim. They had a new *negocio* and a stack of receipts and canceled checks. They loved someone with an expired tourist visa.

When their turn arrived, my parents stepped into an office engulfed by fluorescent light and with just enough room for two big wooden desks covered with stacks of folders and reams of paper. The tax man was a Cuban with a large waistline, and my father was right about him. He did know what to do to make marriage possible for my parents. To my father, he said, The best way is for you to get citizenship, and then you can petition for her.

The tax man knew another Cuban who worked in a law office, and between the tax man and the law man, my father began the paperwork to become a citizen of the United States, and that was the start of their marriage: piles of government-issued forms, the clacking of a typewriter, and the flourish of my father's signature learned in the hills of Fomento. But in the 1970s, my father could only petition to marry a foreign woman who existed beyond the borders of the United States. The tax man shrugged. Go to Canada, he suggested. You can drive there.

I learned as a child that citizenship was a private story, one women told in the dark, where faces could not be seen. Sometimes the story was never told. Decades later I can still only suspect that Tía Rosa secured her green card because she attended a music concert in New York City. In between salsa numbers, she met her husband, a Puerto Rican whose own citizenship was the result of his having been born in a colony of the United States.

It strikes me now that although my mother and her sister were born in South America, at the foot of the Andes

Mountains, in a place once thought of as a remote region, they became citizens of the United States because of the Caribbean. Or to be more exact, they became citizens of the United States because this country's empire extended into the Caribbean.

My father drove. They arrived in Toronto, my mother pregnant with me. They spoke almost no English but managed to find a modest hotel and the U.S. consulate. They brought their paperwork in a manila envelope. They looked like every other immigrant couple from the so-called Third World, with their dark eyebrows and their thin faces, both dressed politely, he in a turtleneck and she in a white maternity blouse. They took pictures of each other. She smiled from ear to ear. She had wanted so badly to become a mother, and now here she was, expecting. For my mother, the story had always careened toward this moment. After leaving home and her own mother, after marrying a man her mother had never met, after working so many hours, after all of that, here she finally was: her first baby on the way. Motherhood, for her, was the true citizenship.

Mami married into a very specific political community. By 1975, Union City already boasted the second-largest population of Cubans in the country after Miami. My mother hauled me in a stroller to the local bakeries, where she bought fresh Cuban bread and guava pastries. A Cuban neighbor taught her to slice onions for the bistec. A Cuban neighbor instructed her on the necessity of routine for newborns: the feeding time, the burping time, the napping time. A Cuban at

the bank was surely the one who approved the mortgage for my parents to buy a three-story apartment building where we lived on the first floor.

My mother became a citizen of the United States, and she also became a citizen of a white Cuban community in the United States.

In the 1980s, during those years when my mother was telling me stories in the dark, the Library of Congress, the world's largest library, acquired a total of 170 books in English with the word citizenship in the title or subtitle. The following decade, in the 1990s, the number of such books jumped to more than 500. The increase was curious because the Library of Congress had held fewer than 2,000 books on the subject of citizenship for the entire twentieth century. The change proved to be neither temporary nor an anomaly. Since 2000, the library has purchased more than 8,000 books about citizenship.

Citizenship itself has migrated beyond its historical confines in international law and electoral politics. There are now books and articles on sexual citizenship, ecological citizenship, literary citizenship, biomedical citizenship, digital citizenship, fetal citizenship, post-pandemic citizenship, homemade citizenship, and, yes, garbage citizenship. This obsession with citizenship has been described by scholars as both a "renaissance" and a "vengeance." At times, citizenship is a proxy for belonging, identity, or community. Other times, it refers to engaging government officials around a specific issue, such as the collection of trash. Sometimes, as with the citizen scientist, it indicates a person who can

contribute regardless of their technical training. Citizenship serves too as shorthand for a situation in which a person has a duty to a particular community, as in the time I heard an author inform an audience that a literary citizen has an obligation to subscribe to journals with small circulations and high fees.

Writing about my mother's journey, I began to wonder why the obsession with citizenship began at the close of the twentieth century. Even terminology that sounds as if it belongs to a post-Covid world originated then. The phrase *biological citizenship* might evoke the image of a world where people brave a deadly virus by sewing face masks from old T-shirts, but the term was coined in the 1990s by a scholar describing the political mobilization of people in Ukraine over the impacts of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

What had driven academics to start writing about citizenship?

Maybe it was the factories. Companies in the 1990s shuttered more of their factories in Jersey and across the United States. They closed completely or opened operations across the border in Mexico. They began buying from companies in China. Borders collapsed for corporate America, and scholars studying the advent of globalization noted that a company based in one country could be responsible for an ecological disaster in another, and how exactly would that afflicted community seek justice? What citizenship could those communities call upon?

Something else changed at the close of the twentieth century: More citizens sprang up.

When the United Nations was established in 1945, it counted a total of fifty-one members. By the 1990s, that

number had more than tripled as people around the globe revolted against imperial powers and proclaimed their independence. With this ongoing decolonization and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.N. added thirty more nations to its roster during the 1990s.

I reached out to Professor Dimitry Kochenov, a legal scholar at Central European University in Vienna and Budapest, and the author of an introductory book on the subject of citizenship for MIT Press. He told me the issue was *who* had become a citizen. "Before citizenship gains prominence, it was not actually important for the distribution of rights in the world, because race was the most important thing," he told me on a video call. The imperial powers, he explained, used race as a way to stop people at their borders. "Once decolonization is a success, you don't need to be racist anymore, because the majority of those whom you didn't want to see because of their race acquire a different citizenship," Kochenov said. "So what you do is simply compile a list of all those passports and say the guys with these passports will not be able to enter. So then citizenship plays fundamentally the racist function which used to be reserved for special race-based exceptions in U.S. law."

For more than a century, the United States used race to decide who could become a citizen. Starting in 1790, only free white people could apply for U.S. citizenship. This led to more than fifty court cases in which presumably white judges had to decide if Mexicans, Indians, Japanese, and Syrians could be considered white for the purposes of naturalization. Black people were barred altogether from citizenship until the 1868 ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which said that anyone born in this country was automatically a

citizen, except for Native people, who, until 1924, were required to leave their tribes and live among white people or find other ways of accessing U.S. citizenship. In 1882, the government outright banned migration from China with the Chinese Exclusion Act, a law that stood until the middle of the twentieth century and came to encompass almost everyone from Asia. In 1924, Congress placed racial quotas on migration to favor white people from Britain and western Europe. That law, the Johnson-Reed Act, made it so no one could technically be permitted into the country if they were not eligible for citizenship. As the historian Mae M. Ngai notes, "By one account, the provision barred half of the world's population from entering the United States."

But not people from Latin America.

The 1924 law kept the door open to people migrating to the United States from Mexico and Central America and Venezuela and anywhere else in Latin America. The men who ran the agriculture industry here still needed other men to work farmlands in Texas, California, and the Southwest, men whose movements could be monitored, men who could be sent home when their labor was no longer required. Instead of outright exclusion, the federal government instituted new regulations. Starting in 1919, Mexicans had to pass a literacy test and pay a head tax to enter the United States at designated ports on the southern border, though exemptions were made for the agriculture industry. The federal government created the Border Patrol in 1924, and the number of Mexicans deported rose from 1,751 in 1925 to more than 15,000 four years later. When the Great Depression hit, cities, counties, and the U.S. attorney general created a shadow deportation program that removed more than a

million Mexicans and Mexican Americans from the country during the 1930s. Around 60 percent of those deported were U.S. citizens, usually the children of Mexican immigrants. In 1931, the Los Angeles city manager commented on the motivation for the deportations: "It is a question of pigment, not a question of citizenship or right."

The United States stopped using race to control its borders in 1965, at least on paper. It had, by then, done away with the Chinese Exclusion Act in order to form a closer alliance with China during World War II, but it still limited the number of people who could migrate from Asia. When Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, it formally ended the racial quotas favoring white Europeans. While the legislation is celebrated for that reason, and for its emphasis on family reunifications, it limited for the first time the number of people migrating from Latin America. It capped arrivals from the entire Western Hemisphere at 120,000 people each year, which might have worked except that in 1964 alone, around 240,000 Mexicans had come to the United States.

The documents Mexicans and other Latinx carried began to matter in a new way. Within two years of the passage of the 1965 immigration law, the Border Patrol apprehended twice as many immigrants. On paper, it looked like a spike in the number of the undocumented. But that was not true. The people had not changed. The policies had.

In 1965, Congress also amended immigration law to clarify that the United States did not permit the entry of any immigrant who was gay or lesbian or nonhetero. For years, the exclusion of queers had been based on whether the immigrant was diagnosed as a "psychopathic personality." That

wording proved to be vague in the courts and for immigration officials. Congress members clarified that no immigrant could enter this country if they were found to be "afflicted with . . . sexual deviation."

There was another possible reason scholars and politicians and pundits became obsessed with citizenship in the 1990s. The United States spent the 1970s and '80s fighting a series of wars Americans did not watch on television. These were the wars the United States lost, the wars in Central America, the wars that could be called the Other Vietnam.

In Nicaragua, during the 1970s, the United States supported the dictator Anastasio Somoza, whose regime murdered thousands of people. After the left-leaning group the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, the Reagan administration, intent on keeping communism out of Latin America, infamously bypassed Congress to fund the Contras, a guerrilla group, in their attacks on the Sandinista government. More than thirty thousand people lost their lives during that conflict.

In Honduras, the CIA trained the country's military on torture tactics during the 1980s, while the Reagan administration used the country as a base for the Contras, at one point funneling \$70 million in military aid to the group with approval from Congress. More than 150 people were murdered or disappeared by the death squads in Honduras.

In Guatemala, the CIA overthrew the country's president in 1954 in favor of one willing to yield to the demands of the United Fruit Company, a U.S. corporation that had been an economic force in the country since the 1800s. A

thirty-six-year civil war began in the 1960s, with the United States training and equipping Guatemalan military forces, including the officers responsible for murdering or disappearing more than two hundred thousand people, most of them Mayans.

In El Salvador, the United States supported the country's leaders during the 1970s and '80s with \$6 billion in economic and military aid, even as soldiers and death squads there tortured and murdered more than seventy-five thousand people, including killing Archbishop Óscar Romero while he celebrated Mass. An outspoken critic of the violence, Romero had sent a letter to President Jimmy Carter pleading with him to stop funding the death squads, and in his last sermon, he asked the military to stop the massacres.

During the 1970s and '80s, about a third of a million people lost their lives in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala—approximately five times the number of American soldiers who died in Vietnam. The survivors of these wars, the survivors of U.S. imperialism in these countries, sought refuge in Mexico, then farther north in California and Colorado and New Jersey. I watched them arrive in my hometown year after year. The brothers from Guatemala. The husbands from Nicaragua. The primos from El Salvador and Honduras. Sometimes they were not men but boys, lanky and baby-faced, hands shoved in their jeans pockets for warmth in the first days of autumn. They joined my mother and me at the bus stop. Later the wives turned up and the sisters and the younger children and the abuelas. They crossed multiple borders because of the crimes committed by the elites of their countries and also by the U.S. military and private corporations that had crossed many fronteras

into their lives. "Colonialism and immigration are part of the same continuum—we are here because you were there," observed the novelist and activist Ambalavaner Sivanandan.

In 1960, two-thirds of immigrants to the United States hailed from Europe. By 1990, that number had flipped. Latin Americans and Asian Americans accounted for about 71 percent of the new arrivals.

A legal scholar and recipient of a MacArthur "genius grant," E. Tendayi Achiume has argued that immigrants are in a colonial relationship with the United States, which wields so much power over their homelands, so immigrants have a political claim to this country. They are not outsiders, not strangers, not foreigners. They are a part of our political community. Looked at this way, political membership is defined not by geographic borders but rather by the political relationships colonialism has created.

Scholars were not the only ones obsessed with citizenship in the 1990s. *Time* magazine wondered at the start of that decade what the "browning of America" would mean for the "national psyche." In 1993, a few weeks before I started college, *Newsweek* editors paid an artist for a cover illustrating the Statue of Liberty drowning in the harbor, surrounded by boats filled with people who had dark faces. Above the statue ran the words "Immigration Backlash." The absence of a question mark or an exclamation mark indicated that the magazine was simply describing a newsworthy event. If I had picked up the international edition, I would have seen a headline screaming, "Keep Out! Now Americans Are Joining the Backlash Against Immigration."

The *Newsweek* cover, along with the headline, portrayed the United States as the Statue of Liberty, as an innocent woman, a woman who had never left home, a woman who was coveted, and now here were all these Black and Brown people in boats flooding the famous harbor, flooding the country itself. The magazine cover did not whisper about the Other Vietnam, about the U.S. government and military and businesses in Latin America and many other countries. The United States was not an empire, the magazine implied; it was only a woman overwhelmed by the needs of immigrants.

Often when speaking of migration, regardless of the decade, the creative class turns to water. Not fire. Not wind. But water. Authors, editors, and journalists speak of immigrants as a flood, a tidal wave, a surge of water that cannot be controlled. The insistence on water, this fear of being drowned by the Other, says nothing, of course, about immigrants, but a great deal about the political anxieties of the creative class in the United States.

In late 2024, more than three decades after *Newsweek* and *Time* ran their stories, *The New York Times* declared an “immigration surge.” Its analysis showed that the largest migration in United States history had started in 2021 and averaged 2.4 million people over a two-year period. Under causes, the reporter primarily cited President Joe Biden’s decision to accept immigrants seeking asylum.

While it will be for historians to debate the reasons so many immigrants arrived in the United States during these years, it remains surprising what the reporter and his editors did not chronicle: More than half of the 412,000 asylum applications filed between October 2022 and August 2023

came from people fleeing three countries under a one-party political system cracking down on its opponents: Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. The United States has intervened in the internal political life of all three countries for decades. In 2021, one million people in Honduras and Guatemala lived on the brink of famine caused by the climate crisis. The *Times* reporter mentioned Ukraine but not the details. Between 2022 and 2024, almost half a million Ukrainians arrived in the United States with temporary visas or as part of a program that let them skip the visa line if they had a sponsor here. In short, the Ukrainians became the new Cubans—immigrants showered with visas and exemptions the way my father and his generation from Cuba had been.

Jerome Powell, the chair of the Federal Reserve, did not need the analysis of *The New York Times*. In May 2024, after the central bank’s policy meeting, he remarked, “We’ve had what amounts to a significant increase in the potential output of the economy that’s not about productivity. It was about having more labor . . . in 2022, both through participation and immigration.”

The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which established the racist immigration quotas that were in place for decades, has been viewed as a backlash to the twelve million immigrants who arrived at the turn of the twentieth century. Because it is 2024, not 1924, the federal government no longer uses explicitly racist quotas. It relies instead on citizenship. The citizens of unwanted countries are stopped at the border. The citizens of unwanted countries are detained and deported. The citizens of unwanted countries are called criminals. The construct of citizenship does the work of race. In the 2024 election, eight states changed their constitutions to

underscore that without U.S. citizenship people could not vote in local elections. Where the state constitutions of Iowa, Missouri, and North Carolina, among others, once proclaimed that “every citizen” or “all citizens” could vote, now the documents will read that “only citizens” can vote.

I have no reason to think that the white girls at my Catholic high school in the suburbs of New Jersey were reading news-magazines in the 1990s, but they were reading something. Or listening. Maybe to their parents. Maybe to the English-language news. Maybe to a teacher. They knew my friends and I lived more than forty minutes away, in the small towns at the southern end of the county, and when my friends and I, a tiny cluster of Latinas, bounced off the school bus one day, a white girl, her hair sprayed high into the air, barked: Go back where you came from!

My mother never heard about that girl from high school. I never told her. I also never told her that once we left the Cuban world of Union City and moved into southern Bergen County, to a predominantly white neighborhood, the bus driver and the shopkeepers and the receptionists, all of them openly mocked us for not speaking English. I never asked her if she understood the blunt edges of their voices or how she made sense of their sneers. I wanted to protect her, so I said nothing. Or perhaps I wanted to protect myself.

My mother never spoke to me about her citizenship status when I was a child. Neither did my father or my aunts or my auntie-husbands. Papers were never discussed in front of children, and so I paid attention from the corners

of their lives, latching on to snippets of conversations when my mother's murmurs thickened with anxiety. Someone's husband had been detained. Someone bought a fake Social. Someone could only work under the table because they didn't have papeles.

A new citizen emerged in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. The social justice movements of the 1960s and '70s made it possible for women and people of color and LGBTQ folks who had been born within the borders of this country to make new demands of citizenship. They wanted more than the vote. They wanted to live in neighborhoods from which they had been historically barred. They wanted the jobs, the mortgages, the doctors. They wanted to walk down the street past the police station without fearing for their lives. They wanted to live. To write books and teach and speak the language of their mothers. To decide where the new bus stops should be erected and what the healthcare system should look like. In 1994, the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo remarked, “In effect, new citizens have come into being as new categories of persons who make claims on both their fellow citizens and the state.”

This new citizen was a darker, bolder, more feminine citizen, and not everyone was pleased. White male scholars had always imagined citizenship as a political membership untouched by race and religion and class and gender and sexuality. The idea that a queer or a Latina or a queer Latina might have an experience of citizenship different from that of a straight white man was, according to two white male

philosophy professors writing in the 1990s, “a radical development in citizenship theory.” But it was more than theory. It is always more than theory.

When people began asking more of the citizenship they had on paper, a conservative backlash began that peaked in the 1980s with Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and their political parties attacking the welfare systems of the United States and Britain. These politicians invoked the idea of “good citizens,” who took care of themselves and required nothing of their government. To invent such a citizen, it was first necessary to create the anti-citizen. It helped that one of Reagan’s staffers read the *Chicago Tribune*. In the mid-1970s, the newspaper began running stories about Linda Taylor, a biracial woman who used a number of aliases to collect food stamps, welfare checks, and veterans’ benefits. She was doing the work of consuming that all good citizens were expected to do in a free-market economy, but she carried it out with other people’s money. For Reagan, that was the offense. The outrage. The failures of her citizenship. He began telling the story of the “welfare queen,” of the bad citizen, who made \$150,000 a year from cheating government assistance programs. The truth, it turned out, was that Taylor stole about \$40,000 over many years and was convicted of welfare fraud amounting to \$9,000. But the facts did not matter. The story did.

Unemployment hit 11 percent in the early 1980s, and Reagan, along with other Republicans, blamed poor women and insisted that the welfare system had become too costly. They believed the government should stop providing apartments and cereal and money for diapers to teenage mothers and their children. The girls should be good citizens.

The girls should marry. In this scenario, the welfare system needed to be dismantled, and Medicaid cut back, and young women—“both black and white,” Reagan said—encouraged to marry men with jobs. When the president shared these ideas with the country over the radio on February 15, 1986, he did not explain where exactly the teenage girls would find these men, these good men with good jobs, nor what should be done with the teenage mother who fell in love with a woman.

It was all talk, but talk is the origin of public policy. Almost a decade later, in 1994, Republicans won control of Congress for the first time in forty years with an agenda called the Contract with America, which proposed, among other things, that the federal government stop providing cash assistance to teenage mothers. By 1996, Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party thought they could only hold on to the White House by agreeing with the Republicans, and so Clinton signed the end-welfare-as-we-know-it bill into law. The federal government would now send a chunk of welfare money to each state, which could, to a large degree, set its own rules. A state could demand that women with young children take low-wage jobs or that they get job training rather than pursue college degrees. It could deny women with children welfare checks after a few years.

A new citizenship emerged in those years: a state-based citizenship. At first, it was limited to those who needed the government the most: the poor, the disabled, single moms, HIV-positive men. Now, thirty years later, state-based citizenship applies to more Americans, albeit still the most vulnerable ones: poor women, transgender folks, the undocumented. It meant that at the end of 2024, women and

pregnant people could have an abortion in Ohio during the first twenty-two weeks of a pregnancy, but not in Texas, Oklahoma, or Kentucky. It meant a person could change the gender designation on their driver's license in Minnesota and New Hampshire but not in Tennessee or Kansas. It meant people without papeles could arrive in Illinois or California and be welcomed at homeless shelters, but in Iowa and Texas they had to monitor the local news for updates on whether the police would turn them over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

This state-based citizenship reminds me of when I was a twenty-year-old college student living in England for a few months and sharing a house with students mostly from across the United States. The father of one of my housemates came to visit from Nebraska. In the kitchen, he heard me speaking in Spanish to the one other bilingual student, and he turned to me and asked, What exotic country are you from?

I was leaning against the sink, washing a dish, thinking about all the dishes my mother had washed and how she never let me wash my own dishes. I was busy with my contemplations, and I was used to the question: Where are you from?

New Jersey, I replied in a flat voice, and was startled when the man's wife and son burst into laughter.

Many people complain these days about the divisiveness of political life in the United States, as if it were only a matter of disagreeing over policies and values, when it could be said that we are at odds with one another because we do not live in the same country. We do not have the same citizenship.

In 1986, Congress granted amnesty to 2.7 million undocumented immigrants, mostly from Mexico, living in the United States. Ten years later, it passed the Latino Exclusion Act. No, the law was not called that, but the sociologists Néstor P. Rodríguez and Cecilia Menjívar have suggested it as another name for the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, given that Latinx people make up a large share of those who have been deported under this law and the majority of them were not deported for committing a crime.

The Latino Exclusion Act created the policy of expedited removal. If Border Patrol agents stopped you at the border and you could not prove that you had been in the United States for two years with papeles, you were immediately expelled from the country and barred from coming back for at least three years. Later this immediate deportation process was expanded to include people arriving by sea and those stopped within a hundred miles of any border. The state of Florida, which has become home to almost six million Latinx, is entirely within a hundred miles of a border.

The new law created the 287(g) program, allowing local police officers to collaborate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the federal agency responsible for deportations. In September 2022, ICE reported that, through this program, officers had detained more than eight thousand people in the previous fiscal year. A third of them had been charged with traffic violations.

Immigration judges lost the power to consider the details of immigration cases because of the Latino Exclusion Act. Doris Meissner, who led the Immigration and Naturalization Service through most of the 1990s, told *Vox*: "Discre-

tion was taken away from district directors and immigration judges almost entirely.” It used to be that if you faced a deportation order, you would get a chance to tell an immigration judge that you had children, and your sister lived down the block from you, and you had a job here. You would tell the judge that you waited for the bus at the same stop every day, and you knew the cold wind that whipped down Fairview Avenue and the price of coffee at the Greek deli. You had built a life in this country, a life worth considering when the judge looked at the deportation order, and the judge had the option to say: Yes, you can stay. The Latino Exclusion Act did away with this possibility. A judge could no longer permit you to continue living in the United States unless you could prove that you feared persecution in your home country.

The Latino Exclusion Act created more mixed-status families—families whose members have different relationships to citizenship. If you married a U.S. citizen but didn’t have papers, not even an expired tourist visa, you generally had to leave the country to adjust your status, and the law barred you from coming back for years. People, being reasonable, did the reasonable thing: They stayed, without papers, but with their families.

People who had papers were not spared by the Latino Exclusion Act.

The legislation worked hand in hand with an anti-terrorism law, also passed in 1996, that turned certain misdemeanors into felonies for the purposes of immigration. If you had a green card and you did something stupid like steal a ten-dollar video game, you were no longer treated as if you were a U.S. citizen who had broken the law. It did not mat-

ter that you had grown up in this country and that you’d had legal residency since you were a child. Your shoplifting now made you subject to deportation, and the new law applied retroactively, so suddenly people with green cards who had been here for decades could be deported for having stolen that video game years earlier. Or for having had an extra beer and driving home. Yes, there were people without citizenship who committed awful crimes, ones that made the nightly news, but the new legislation made no distinction between those crimes and the stolen video game or the DUI.

Two years after the passage of the Latino Exclusion Act, the number of people detained and deported jumped by 70 percent. It also dramatically changed how Americans talked about citizenship. Immigration advocates strained to remind them that not having papers did not make someone a criminal, but politicians and journalists told stories linking those without citizenship to criminal activity until many people forgot it was only that—a story.

Americans, historically speaking, often turn to the story of criminality. Freed from slavery, Black families found white America preoccupied with crime and legislation. The rise of Black codes and Jim Crow laws meant you could be arrested for being Black and going out after dark with friends, riding in a train car reserved for whites, or marrying a white person. When the Civil Rights Movement led to those policies being abolished, President Richard Nixon’s War on Drugs created sentencing guidelines targeting Black people, shoving millions into prison and creating a system of mass incarceration that the legal scholar Michelle Alexander has called the New Jim Crow. Politicians could maintain, then and now, that they were not racist. This was not about race. They

were talking only of criminals. If you were a good citizen, you had no reason to worry.

In 2024, the second-largest policing agency in the United States, after the New York City Police Department, was the Border Patrol, with more than nineteen thousand agents.

The police came looking for me one day in the mid-1990s. I was working at the public library in town, scanning children's picture books, and the police had a man in their jail cell with whom they could not speak. One of the officers thought of me. I was the nineteen-year-old working next door at the library. I was the nineteen-year-old who spoke Spanish, the one at the counter when the police and their children checked out video games and new picture books. The blue uniform stood at the library's narrow counter and asked, Could you come over and help us talk to this guy? He doesn't speak any English.

He presented it to me like an invitation, but it was not, because I did not feel that I could decline. I panicked. My heart rate spiked. My throat narrowed. My vision blurred. But I forced a smile and said yes, and I followed the white man with the gun in his holster next door to the police station, where I stood at the door of a very tiny concrete cell and waved apologetically at a young Brown man in jeans and a T-shirt sitting on a bench, a man who could have been my brother or cousin. I don't remember anything I said or what he said, because I was not in my body, which stood between a white man with a gun and a Brown man with nothing in his hands. It all happened very quickly, and then it was over, and I was back in the library behind the counter checking

out children's books on caterpillars. I don't know when I came back to my body, when the panic subsided, or whether the man was released.

I did not tell my mother about the man in the jail cell. I told her instead that the police had come for me, as if I had been the guilty party. The police took me to jail today! I called from the doorway to the kitchen.

Mami stood at the stove. The onions sizzled in the pan. Her face froze, then frowned. She knew I was a goody two-shoes. I never drank. I never smoked anything. I had a full college scholarship and two part-time jobs. Quietly she asked, *Cómo que te llevaron?*

I explained that the police had needed an interpreter. I made it sound like I had done something important, something official, like I had been fearless. I told her about the things I hoped she would never see: the L-shaped desk behind the bulletproof glass, the switchboard with all its dials, and the jail cell smaller than the shed we had once used for her sewing machines. Mami listened, then sighed.

This obsession with citizenship, which began in the 1990s, surged after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent War on Terror. Politicians charged that there were now citizens and terrorists, good and evil. The border had to be patrolled for Muslim men who would kill us. The Muslim men were never us and had to register with the federal government if they were older than sixteen and came from one of twenty-five Muslim-majority countries, or else face deportation. In early 2003, the journalist Maria Hinojosa reported for CNN from the border, the one with Can-

ada. Pakistani families were fleeing the United States, asking Canada for asylum because some of the men registering with the federal government were being detained for weeks or months and were even being thrown out of the country. The only way to stay together as a family was to leave together.

At the Library of Congress, meanwhile, the staff bought almost three thousand books in English on the subject of citizenship in the first decade after 9/11. The authors of these texts examined citizenship in the Arab world and in modern China and in the global cities of the Western world. They analyzed citizenship in public health and in American literature and in ecological philosophy. They looked at how citizenship had once been imagined and considered how it was being reimagined. Among the titles were *Becoming a Citizen*, *Americans in Waiting*, and *Composing the Citizen*, all of which suggested that citizenship was a red-tailed hawk, a feathered beast in motion, not a fixed entity but one that moved and changed and flitted out of reach.

A few weeks after 9/11, I traveled to an artists' community in New Hampshire. I was to live there for a month with composers, mixed-media artists, and other writers, all of us working on creative projects while the United States began dropping bombs on Muslim families in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. On the television in a nook of the shared house, we watched the news from New York City, where workers moved slowly among the ruins where the towers had stood. A white artist, a woman in her sixties, turned to me to complain about a story she'd read. In Chinatown, people were posting the American flag upside down on the windows of their apartments. The woman was furious. They don't even know how to hang the flag! she growled.

I had already seen the upside-down flags. At the time, I still lived with my parents and an auntie in New Jersey, and I had come home one day to find that my *tiá* had taped a tiny American flag to our front door upside down. It was a paper flag. It didn't move. *Tía* had affixed it to the door with layers of transparent tape.

It was, as far as I knew, the first flag of any country ever displayed at our home. I don't know if my auntie wanted the neighbors to know that we were not terrorists. We were not criminals. We were Americans. We were citizens. On paper, we were citizens. Or maybe this was not it at all. Everywhere we went, the flag had popped up: on lawns, on trees, on supermarket windows. The stores on Bergenline Avenue were selling U.S. flags perhaps for the first time. Maybe *Tía* understood the surveillance of her citizenship and mine by our neighbors, or maybe she only wanted to signal that we shared in the grief of those days.

I never thought it strange that as a child I was acutely aware of my papers. I figured every child knew this fact about themselves. Every child born in the United States was surely told over and over again by their mothers: *Nacistes aquí—eres Americana*. It is what I imagined millions of mothers in many languages had whispered to their children for years: You were born here—you're American.

In today's legal world, citizenship springs from one of two sources: the soil or your blood—the land on which you were born or the citizenship of your parents. Birthright citizenship is based on the principle of *jus soli*, Latin for "right of the soil." Years before the Civil War, Black Americans

claimed this citizenship at political conventions and in Black newspapers. "Birthright citizenship was a fully formed idea by the early 1850s," writes the historian Martha S. Jones in her book *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*, in which she chronicles how Black people in Baltimore engaged in the practices of citizenship by traveling between states, suing in court, and gathering in public to discuss politics and religion. After the Civil War, in 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment made jus soli the law of the land in the United States.

The other kind of citizenship comes from the principle of jus sanguinis, or "right of blood," meaning that your nationality is based on that of your parents. It has nothing to do with biology but with the papers your parents have. It is a practice unfamiliar to most Americans since the United States, Canada, and every country in Latin America except for the Dominican Republic and Colombia offer birthright citizenship.

At least two professors have warned that the Dominican Republic serves as a harbinger of what could happen in the United States. In 2010, the Caribbean country began denying birthright citizenship to the children of undocumented immigrants, and then the country's Constitutional Court made the law retroactive to 1929, stripping birthright citizenship from several generations of children whose parents didn't have papeles, the vast majority of them Haitian.

Colombia, my mother's homeland, recognizes only a blood-bound citizenship. In other words, being born in the country does not automatically grant you citizenship, and this offers another type of caution. In 2019, Colombia found itself home to twenty-four thousand stateless babies, all of

them the children of Venezuelan immigrants. They had no constitutional right to the soil of Colombia until a law was passed making a temporary exception for them.

In the United States, Republicans tried to eliminate jus soli citizenship in 1995, a year before Congress passed the Latino Exclusion Act. They proposed changing immigration law to deny birthright citizenship to anyone whose parents were not citizens or legal residents. Hearings were held, and the Justice Department's top constitutional scholar testified that aside from the legislation being "unconstitutional on its face," such a move would create "a permanent caste of aliens, generation after generation after generation born in America but never to be among its citizens." The bill failed to pass, but the Republican Party included the idea of eliminating birthright citizenship in its platform for the 1996 election.

More than a decade later, in 2011, Representative Lamar Smith, a Republican from Texas, took charge of the argument. In an op-ed for *Roll Call*, he explained that the great men who drafted the Fourteenth Amendment had not intended to include the children of undocumented parents. He knew this because one of those men, a senator, had said in the 1800s that birthright citizens did not include "persons born in the United States who are foreigners." If this wording sounds incomplete, it's because Smith omitted the rest of the sentence, which clarifies that the senator was talking about children born on this soil to foreigners "who belong to the families of ambassadors." In other words, an ambassador's wife could give birth here but not necessarily to a U.S. citizen.

Representative Steve King of Iowa introduced a bill in 2011 that would have changed the Constitution so a person

born in the United States could only be a citizen if one of their parents was a citizen, had a green card, or was serving in the military. He introduced the bill every year until he left Congress in 2020, having lost his seat to a fellow Republican after he told a reporter that he didn't know why the term *white supremacist* was offensive.

The reasons for dismantling the Fourteenth Amendment have grown more elaborate in recent years. Yes, "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States," but according to former vice president Mike Pence, the Supreme Court never ruled on the phrase "subject to the jurisdiction thereof." The court actually did rule on this in 1898 in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, declaring that a child born in this country to Chinese immigrant parents was a citizen. However, Michael Anton, the director of policy planning in the State Department for Donald Trump's second term, pointed out in a 2018 op-ed for *The Washington Post* that the parents in the 1898 court case had papers. They were legal residents. Surely, the Supreme Court did not mean to extend the right of this soil to the newborns of people without papers.

After the 2024 election, Judge James Ho of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit proposed that children born in the United States might not be citizens if their parents were trying to take over the country. "Birthright citizenship obviously doesn't apply in case of war or invasion," he told the libertarian magazine *Reason*. "No one to my knowledge has ever argued that the children of invading aliens are entitled to birthright citizenship."

Ho was born in Taiwan. His first citizenship came to him by blood; Taiwan does not recognize citizenship bound to

the land. Brought to the United States as a child, he grew up in the wealthy suburbs of Los Angeles and became a naturalized citizen of this country. He is now on a short list of nominees for the Supreme Court if Trump has the chance to appoint another justice. By several accounts, he hopes to be the first Asian American on the court.

The reasons to eliminate *jus soli* citizenship run on a loop in my mind: You cannot have a right to this land because you are not subject to the laws of the United States, because your parents don't have papers, because your parents are invading the country, because your parents were not slaves. Yes, Republicans have contended that Congress only intended to grant birthright citizenship to Black Americans. The Fourteenth Amendment, Amy Swearer, a legal policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, told *Politico* in 2018, "was intended primarily to guarantee citizenship rights for newly freed slaves, not to create a universal right for anyone temporarily or illegally in the country, and therefore not subject to the complete jurisdiction of the United States."

The white men who drafted and debated and approved the Fourteenth Amendment were quite aware that its impact would extend beyond Black Americans. In 1866, one of Pennsylvania's senators pointed this out, complaining that the amendment would grant birthright citizenship to the children of "Gypsies" and the Chinese.

Perhaps the concern over birthright citizenship in the last thirty years springs from the numbers. There are now close to sixty-four million Latinx in the United States. If we constituted our own country, we would rank among the twenty-five most populated, with more residents than Spain, Italy, or Canada.

It is worth pausing to consider that the only reason we have a constitutional amendment on birthright citizenship is that we went to war over citizenship for Black Americans. The amendment was not the result of civil discourse, of compromise, of long negotiations into the night. The Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott* declared that Black people could not be citizens of the United States, not even if they were free, and this accelerated the start of the Civil War, which led to the creation of the Fourteenth Amendment, since that was the only way to undo the *Dred Scott* decision. We did not reason our way toward birthright citizenship. We killed one another over the course of about 1,343 days. We killed one another over the origins of citizenship, and more than 150 years later, we are fighting about it again.

I spent my childhood falling asleep, night after night, not to tales of wizards and dragons but to stories about borders and citizenships. I learned that citizenship was a fiction. I could not grab it with my hands like my mother's sewing needles or the chalk she used to mark fabric. Citizenship was a story, an invention, a social construct. In the United States, white men created this fiction of citizenship and used it to organize our lives, to determine when and how and under what circumstances my mother and I could live on this land. The white men issued papers: birth certificates, alien numbers, deportation orders. The white men insisted the fiction was a fact rather than a political and legal and social system they had devised. My mother told me the truth: Citizenship was a story the white men wrote so they could have what they wanted.

Historians told me the rest: The white men, free of the British Empire, created a citizenship to produce a country and a political institution that belonged exclusively to them. They massacred noncitizens. They enslaved noncitizens. They declared in 1790 that citizenship was only for white immigrants. When the story began to fall apart in the 1800s, when the Civil War barreled into kitchens and town squares, the white men revised the story. Citizenship would be a prize bestowed on Black people in 1868, on Indigenous people in 1924, and on everyone else when the white men deemed fit. Citizenship became a marker of how free this country was, of how far it had come, of how much it had grown—even as Black and Indigenous and Mexican and queer activists battled on the streets and in the courts during the twentieth century for the most basic of human rights.

Citizenship is now a proxy for race. Politicians and political commentators—and aunties and co-workers and the guy at the city council meeting—can profess to not be racists. They don't care about the color of anyone's skin. It's just that too many noncitizens have arrived at the southern border, at the edge of town, and in the local schools. They want these people to go back home to their own countries, to the places where they were born, where they have *papeles*. When protests erupted in 2017 over the U.S. ban on the entry of Muslims from seven countries, Trump's White House circumvented the courts by asserting that the policy had nothing to do with discrimination based on race or religion. It was a matter of national security, which is another way of saying, We don't want people with *that* citizenship. In the arguments for eliminating birthright citizenship, no one has to mention the disproportionate racial impact on Brown

and Black children from Latin America, Haiti, and China. It's not about their race, the argument goes. It's about what papers their parents have.

All of this means that citizenship is a social construct in much the same way that race and gender are, and the value of pulling back the curtain, of saying, This is a social construct, is that we can better see the facts. We can see that the social construct of citizenship, like race and gender, governs the contours of our days. It dictates whether or not we call the police, whether or not we drive alone after dark, whether or not we worry about our mothers when they board the public bus. It is easy to forget that race is a social construct when the story favors you, and you do not expect the security guard to follow you around the store. Likewise, when you have citizenship, when that story favors you, you do not worry about your parents driving from Los Angeles to Iowa to visit you at college. You do not think of border checkpoints. You do not pay attention when a woman says the public library issues cards to residents regardless of where they were born.

Social construct—the term feels awkward in my mouth. It is nothing I could say to my mother without a dictionary. So I prefer to say that citizenship is a story, a fiction, a cuento, and I find it useful to turn to the conventions of narrative: Once upon a time, the white men offered citizenship to Cubans but not Colombians or Peruvians, not Pakistanis or Palestinians. Once upon a time, the white men could make deportation orders vanish. Once upon a time, the white men granted amnesty and everyone scrambled to find their pay stubs, their apartment leases, their old tourist visa, any docu-

ment to show how long they had been on this land. Once upon a time, the white men did not care if you spoke English. They helped you when you took the citizenship test. Once upon a time, the white men did not care if you had a fake Social Security number. They needed women familiar with sewing needles, with fabric and stitches.

When my mother was pregnant with me in the mid-1970s, she could start a family in the United States. Our lives were possible because of the story told about citizenship at the time. Since then, so many lives have become impossible, not for any factual reasons but because Americans began telling a different story about citizenship. The story alleges that Latin American immigrants are the problem. The story forgets the United States has committed crimes south of the southern border. The story declares that we are foreigners even when, in 2022, a majority of Latinx in the United States (68 percent) were born here. This Latinx—the one born here, the one spoken of in the Constitution, the one with birthright citizenship—is not one white Americans can imagine, or perhaps they can, which explains the efforts to terminate our birthright citizenship.

Stories require repetition. We tell the story over and over again. We teach it. We put it in films. We photograph it. We document it. We share it. Then one day, we hear they all lived happily ever after, though we know they all lived at odds with one another, and this time, we question the stories we were told, and we begin asking questions. We wonder what it would mean if we recognized the United States as an empire whose political members are to be found across the globe. We consider how citizenship requires and sustains

white supremacy. We draft a story of citizenship as obsessions, as mythology. We start to imagine a new story and maybe even a new country. We turn to one another, to the stories not yet on paper, the stories at the back of our throats, the stories that will set us free.

AJEDREZ

TÍO JOSÉ HAD a round brown face like the center of a sunflower. He worked at a paper factory in New Jersey, and when I was in middle school, he brought me huge stacks of white paper that, for official purposes, was defective in some way. I turned these rejects into books, filling them with poems about love that I hoped to experience one day. My tío approved. He had married into our family, married Tía Dora, my mother's sister, and José was nothing like the men I knew. My uncle spoke in courteous, measured tones. He never wore workman boots, opting instead for dress shoes and ironed polo shirts buttoned to the top. He came from Perú, which, from what I could glean at the time, was nothing like Papi's Cuba or Mami's Colombia. A ceremonial knife made of copper, its handle decorated with the face of an Inca deity, hung on the wall of my tío's apartment, and I took this as evidence of a glorious Indigenous history to which my uncle belonged, which was exactly what he and the government of Perú wanted me to think.

José was different in another way. While everyone in our family took public buses, my sunflower uncle drove a car. A Mercury Cougar. He was a man in charge of his destiny, the most American among us. The keys sang in his hands.

One Saturday when I was in sixth grade, José drove my auntie, mother, sister, and me to Tops Appliance City, an

and I understood that they carried within them a different story than I did. In their story, we only had an excess of shoes in the United States because we had kept the borders closed, because we had kept citizenship as a coveted status, because we had kept citizenship limited to only whites for more than a century. We were in this position of wealth precisely because we had not let everyone in.

They did not want to hear that maybe we were in this privileged position because we had taken so much, because we had forced so many generations of Mexican families into low-wage farm jobs, because we had insisted that our private companies win the best financial deals in Central America, because we had supported so many dictators in so many Latin American countries when it suited our political agendas, and because more recently we had forced Central American countries to open and close their borders to suit our needs. They did not want to hear that the United States was still an empire and that, as the legal scholar E. Tendayi Achiume has proposed, migration might be a form of reparations.

That day when I dropped off the shoes at the immigrant shelter, the air was cold, and the sky blue and bright. Two women pushed strollers, side by side. I eyed their sneakers and wondered if they could be a size 6, if they were walking far or just to the corner. Later I realized I had not thought about shiny red pumps or pink patent stilettos or leather boots. I had not considered the possibility that the two women, like me, would want to wear shoes that made them think, however briefly, of another life.

THE PEOPLE

THE COLOMBIAN CONSULATE was tucked away among palm trees and restaurants with terra-cotta roofs and Mediterranean-inspired archways. No one had hoisted a flag at the entrance, making it easy to walk by and mistake the consulate for another pretty office building in Coral Gables, a wealthy city next door to Miami. I knew the location, though, so I marched past the men ordering brunch, past the bookstore and the new coffee shop, to the consulate, my mother and auntie trailing behind me.

It was a few months before the 2024 presidential election, and I was at the front steps of the consulate to ask about becoming a citizen of Colombia. A 1993 law in my mother's home country made dual citizenship a legal possibility, and by being her daughter, I was eligible even though I had been born and raised in the United States and had probably spent, over the course of my lifetime, less than nine months in Colombia.

The idea of dual citizenship had never occurred to me before the fall of 2016. I had grown up with immigrants who only wanted one citizenship—that of the United States. Always, I had been told that the papers I acquired by being born on this land were the only papers I would ever want. This was true until Trump won the presidency the first time. Then, in the months that followed, a friend told me she was

applying for Canadian citizenship through her parents in case political life became unbearable here, and other friends revealed they already had second citizenships and the political escape routes these offered.

My friends were not anomalies. Dual citizenship is a phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Only about 25 percent of the countries in the Americas and Europe permitted people to claim dual citizenship in 1990, according to the sociologist Yossi Harpaz. By 2016, that number had shot up to more than 80 percent thanks to globalization, which made it cheaper to fly back to the motherland and also to call home. In New Jersey, shops opened in the late 1990s devoted to nothing other than “selling minutes” so immigrants, new and old, could make inexpensive phone calls to Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico. Those who became naturalized citizens of the United States began urging the political leaders of their home countries to grant them the right to vote back where they still had family and were building their casitas.

I stood at the front door to the Colombian consulate inquiring about citizenship almost five decades after my mother walked into the United States consulate, pregnant with me and seeking U.S. citizenship. Our circumstances could not have been more different. She worked in factories and made minimum wage. She was pregnant and married to a political refugee. In contrast, I strode in childless and unmarried, earning six figures, my pocketbook jammed with all the documentation of a typical middle-class citizen's life: a Real ID driver's license, a health insurance card, two credit cards, a bank debit card, and an identification card for my job.

The security guard at the Colombian consulate did not

care about any of the papers I carried. He was tall, much taller than any of my primos or tíos, and it was clear from his sour face that he had been tasked with making the same statements to god knows how many people for many hours. He handed me a brochure, and, looking over my head to the people lining up behind me, he said, Come back tomorrow at eight-thirty. There will be a line at the door.

The brochure, a single page, covered many aspects of Colombian citizenship, from applying for a national identity card and a passport to renouncing your citizenship (you were to email in this case). If I wanted to become a Colombian citizen, there was nothing emotional or even political about the matter. For an initial appointment, I had to show up with my U.S. passport, my original birth certificate, an official consulate-approved translation of my birth certificate, my mother's Colombian passport or national identity card, and knowledge of my blood type. It was not clear if I would be required to live in the country or know its laws and political culture.

I left the consulate clutching that sheet of paper, acutely aware that I was part of a new generation for whom U.S. citizenship might no longer be the answer.

The act of acquiring a new citizenship is often the last chapter in narratives about migration to the United States. Every American is familiar with this story, even people who have no connection to immigrant communities. It is the tale depicted in films and novels, in documentaries about the famous and the talented and the persecuted. It is the story that opens with departure from a homeland, then moves through

a series of obstacles, and triumphs in the United States. Each victory measures the degree to which the pre-citizen can manage the behavior of the good citizen: She marries, she lands a job or two or three, she opens her own business, she gives birth, she sends her children to college. In the final scene, she does not study for the citizenship test. She does not feel anxious about her mastery of the English language. She heroically raises her right hand and vows to defend the government of the United States of America. There is a finality to the gesture: the hand lifted, the vow made. It is a marriage. A political marriage. A marriage for life. Except it's not. Citizenship is no longer the final act. It is no longer the end of the story.

In 2008, the federal government began digitizing more than three hundred thousand immigration files—paper cards bearing the fingerprints of people who had come into contact with the federal government because of their immigration status. These were people who had applied for legal residency or had been ordered to leave the country or who had been approved for citizenship. The government turned their fingerprints into square pixels, and in this way, the government began matching records and finding people who had become citizens after an order had been issued for their deportation. It also discovered people who had become citizens despite having multiple names in the system. It did not matter if the person had never received the deportation order or if government employees had misspelled their name multiple times. It did not matter if the naturalized citizen had hired a friend of a friend to submit their application for asylum and then that person had used their fingerprints to submit someone else's application too. According to the

government, the person had lied when they applied for citizenship.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents began showing up at people's homes. The Justice Department began sending letters. Sometimes the person faced criminal charges. Sometimes it was only a civil matter. The point was the same: the United States government would be revoking their citizenship. While this had happened before, the new digital files made it easier. On average, about forty-six people faced the prospect of losing their citizenship every year between 2004 and 2016. Then Trump won the 2016 election, and in the first two years of his administration, the numbers doubled. The Justice Department even tried to terminate the citizenship of a grandmother.

Norma Borgoño arrived in the United States from Perú in 1989. In Miami, she raised her children and found a secretarial job and volunteered at her church. In 2007, she took the oath of U.S. citizenship. She became a grandmother. The government showed up in 2018, almost thirty years after she first set foot in this country, alleging she had lied on her citizenship application because she did not report a crime of which she had been convicted—except the conviction had occurred four years after she became a citizen. The Justice Department maintained that this did not matter because the crime had been committed while Norma had a green card and worked as a secretary for an export company, where her boss stole about \$24 million from a federal government agency. Norma had cooperated with authorities, making it possible for them to bring charges against her boss. She had also spent a year under house arrest and paid \$5,000 in restitution. None of the lawyers involved in the fraud case told her that

she could jeopardize her citizenship by pleading guilty for secretarial work tied to a crime. After all, when they were in court, she was already a citizen.

Faced with the threat of losing her citizenship, Norma became the subject of a slew of news reports, and her lawyer told me that while it took time, the Justice Department eventually dropped the denaturalization case against her.

Trump's Justice Department announced in 2020 a new unit in its Office of Immigration Litigation called the Denaturalization Section. In April of that year, as the world burrowed in for the Covid-19 lockdown and more than a million people began dying from the virus in this country, multiple federal agencies busied themselves by sending the Denaturalization Section the names of more than five hundred people who were to be investigated and their citizenship possibly revoked.

Two years later, Biden's Justice Department renamed the Denaturalization Section the Enforcement Unit and announced it would be pursuing citizens "who pose a potential danger to national security" and people who had engaged in war crimes and people who had committed "very serious felonies." The phrases sounded reasonable. Few people want the war criminal to live in their apartment building, and few want to stand in line at the grocery store next to the sex trafficker. But then I remembered how language can ruin us, how nouns and verbs, even adjectives, can be used to sell brutality. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States tortured men and detained teenagers at Guantánamo Bay on the grounds that they endangered national security. The countries marked as dangerous by federal authorities back then, like now, were majority-Muslim coun-

tries. The journalist Seth Freed Wessler found that people from Yemen, Somalia, and Iran made up only about 1 percent of the foreign-born population of the United States, but they were an estimated 10 percent of the citizens the Trump administration moved to denaturalize in 2017 and 2018.

Naturalized citizens can be children. They can be teenagers. And they can lose their citizenship if it came by way of a parent whose legal status is revoked. When members of the Trump administration created the Denaturalization Section, they knew this. They were stripping citizenship not only from grown people but also from their children. They were trying to deport entire families. What the department advertised in its press releases, however, were the war criminals and sex offenders whose citizenship was being taken away. They did not talk about grandparents like Norma.

Supreme Court justice Hugo Black observed in a 1967 ruling: "The very nature of our free government makes it completely incongruous to have a rule of law under which a group of citizens temporarily in office can deprive another group of citizens of their citizenship." But this is exactly what happens now. In the summer of 2024, each time the Justice Department decided to revoke someone's naturalized citizenship, a white man with a friendly face and glasses approved the decision. He was a lawyer and a Biden appointee. He probably woke early to jog, then sliced apples for his three children while his wife boiled water for the instant oatmeal. He brewed a pot of coffee and hopped on his government-issued laptop, sifting through digital papers, through dates and accusations, to ultimately decide whether or not a person would lose political and legal and social and familial membership in this country.

His name does not matter. He was one citizen “temporarily in office.”

I found a copy online of the Constitution of the Republic of Colombia. I tried reading it in Spanish. The words—*el concimiento, la libertad y la paz, un orden politico*—were familiar but stiff in my ears. They were not my mother’s Spanish. I attempted reading it in English, which made the task easier, and I liked what I found. Of course, I already knew that Colombia’s government had been a democracy since the late nineteenth century and that two political parties essentially traded power through national elections. Its constitution, though, had been rewritten in 1991, and it promised a new way forward for the country. The government would protect ethnic and cultural diversity, and people would have the right to healthcare. The constitution outlawed the death penalty. It acknowledged that Indigenous communities have their own justice systems and granted these communities two seats in the Senate. Spanish remained the country’s official language, but “languages and dialects of ethnic groups are also official in their territories.”

The Colombian Constitution is long. It has a total of 380 articles, and it mentions Afro-Colombians only twice. It completely ignores abortion, which had been a crime until 2022, when activists took what was on paper—the constitutional right to healthcare—and argued that this included abortion. The country legalized the procedure in the first twenty-four weeks of pregnancy, making Colombia the second most progressive country on abortion in the Americas, after Canada. Two years after it adopted the

constitution, Colombia’s Congress passed a law ensuring that Afro-Colombians received two seats in the House of Representatives. The law also recognized that Black people in Colombia have their own culture and ethnic identities and that those living in certain regions have a collective ownership of the land, though not of anything found underground, like oil. The results have been complicated, since by granting land to Black communities, the law has contributed to their being the targets of violence by local armed groups. Black and Indigenous Colombians account for more than 60 percent of the people displaced from the Pacific region of the country, where gangs of men still control who can enter and who can leave an area and when and how drugs move out of the country.

The act of reading the constitution of another country felt intimate, as if I were making my way through the memoir of someone I had known all of my life. Here was page after page of what this person expected of the world, of what they valued, of what they wanted. And I was thinking of marrying this person. Perhaps this explained the cold feet. I began to worry. My Spanish was still that of someone who had learned the language at home. There were so many words in English that I did not know in Spanish. If I had dual citizenship and a police officer stopped me in Bogotá or Cali or Tunja, I would no longer be a clueless American tourist on paper who could retreat to English. I would be treated as a Colombian woman, a queer Colombian woman with citizenship who had no recourse to a United States consulate, where I would be, if not safe, at least on familiar linguistic ground.

What did it mean to be safe? I had grown up in a family

where papeles translated into a modicum of safety. But what did that mean now?

I thought about safety often in 2024. For the first time, I watched people in my life—people with U.S. citizenship, people with hefty bank accounts, people with all the coveted privileges—experience political fear. They were afraid to talk publicly about the genocide of Palestinians. They were scared of losing their jobs, of having their families targeted, of having their faces and names scorned on social media. They were scared to be accused of antisemitism. They told me they knew two women who had already lost their jobs when they tried to move their organizations into making a public statement opposing the slaughter of Palestinian families. They confided their political confusion to me over the phone in the simplest of terms: It's wrong to kill people like this. How is that not clear to everyone?

I listened and watched and advised, and most of the time, I was utterly dumbfounded, not by the people around me, but by myself: I had thought this would never happen again in the United States. I had thought of McCarthyism as a historical event. Now a Congress member spent hours interrogating the president of the university where I taught, demanding he disavow one of my colleagues and also our students. Our campus police charged four colleagues with misdemeanors for standing between them and students protesting the genocide. While the county prosecutor refused to pursue the charges, the point was made. Where people had once feared losing their jobs over an accusation that they were Communists, now they feared losing their jobs or college degrees for opposing war crimes against humanity.

The week I began reading Colombia's constitution, the

Israeli military killed an eight-year-old boy in Gaza. Its weapons amputated the feet of another boy and catapulted a two-year-old child into the air. The Associated Press did not name the children. Three days later, Israel bombed a school run by the United Nations, murdering the journalist Mohammad Meshmesh. The death count that week in 2024 stood at more than thirty-eight thousand people, half of them thought to be children and 160 known to be journalists.

Unlike the United States, Colombia broke diplomatic ties with Israel and began banning the export of its coal to that country. I found myself wondering: How would it feel to be a citizen of a country protesting this genocide? How would it feel to be a citizen of a country where friends and co-workers were not terrified of losing their jobs for protesting Israel's relentless massacres of children from an ethnic and religious community?

I was old enough to appreciate that with another election, Colombia's president could be voted out of office, and by the time my citizenship application was processed, his administration could be replaced by one aligned with the authoritarianism sweeping the globe. Still, I wondered how it would feel to be a citizen of a country that, when children and entire families were being murdered every day, took a moral stand against such crimes. My friend the peace activist Vijaya Priyadarshini Thakur observed the irony of the situation: "Solidarity for a stateless people is attracting you to another state."

My mother did not understand my attraction. That afternoon, outside the Colombian consulate, she looked at me with her usual worried face: eyebrows knitted, thin lips downturned. She did not know why I would want to be a

citizen of a country she had left decades earlier. Her homeland still had about 5.1 million people displaced by violence—the fourth-highest number in the world, after Sudan, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It did not change my mother's mind that the Colombian government, after six decades of war with the guerrilla group the FARC, had signed a peace accord, or that, in the same year it broadly legalized abortion, Colombia joined a number of Latin American and European countries in offering visas to digital nomads—people whose jobs allow them to work beyond the borders of their own homelands.

I was not my mother. I wanted to talk to the digital nomads, the people who had chosen a new kind of citizenship.

The day Kamala Harris picked her vice presidential candidate for the Democratic ticket, I talked with a digital nomad for the first time. I'll call her Paloma. A queer Black woman in her fifties, Paloma felt that she could not breathe when she walked on the streets in this country. She found the United States antithetical to Black life. Then came Trump in 2016, and the pandemic, and the murder of George Floyd and many other Black Americans. Paloma packed her bags. She knew from her trips to Latin America that the region offered a refuge for Black Americans, and that is what she found. She worked remotely in several Latin American countries before landing in Colombia, where a digital nomad visa in 2024 permitted remote workers to live in the country for at least a year. A person only had to show that they did, in fact, work for a company long-distance or that they had a freelance contract and an income of at least a thousand dol-

lars a month. Colombia accepted digital nomads with citizenship from a hundred countries, most in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe. The United States did not offer these visas.

Most countries wanted the same kind of digital nomad, the same kind of temporary citizen: a person with high earnings, which, given the correlation between race and income, generally meant a white person. Except for Turkey. That country, which only started its program in 2024, sought people who were well off, European or American, and youngish. They would not issue digital nomad visas to people over the age of fifty-five.

The day I spoke to Paloma, I was, like all of my friends, high on Kamala Harris, or maybe it would be more accurate to say I was high on what a Harris presidency could mean for social citizenship. At the very least, the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid would be protected, and presumably she would not direct the Border Patrol to separate newborns from their parents. Harris did not want to stop sending weapons to Israel, but I believed she would, over time, become open to hearing from people opposed to the genocide.

If I am being honest, I was more high on possibility than reality. In Colombia, Paloma stood in reality. Over a video call, she said, The Democrats have done nothing to stop the slaughter of Black lives. She pointed out that the party was not even stopping fascism, only slowing it down. I nodded. I could not disagree with her. She was the one living in a country where women had a universal right to abortion. I was in a country where women in the South were dying after being denied abortions and governors were shuttling immigrants to Chicago in the middle of winter.

Paloma paused. Her curls stopped moving in and out of the blurred virtual background. She acknowledged, "If Kamala wins, I might be interested in going back and forth."

But, of course, that is not what happened. Paloma hoped to be granted a second year in Colombia, but if not, she would move to another country in Latin America. She was unusual in that Latin America had been an escape for her from the racism of the United States. The digital nomad community at large is predominantly white and primarily, it appears, interested in keeping overhead costs low while traveling the world. They often move from country to country, one visa to another, year after year, making their dollars stretch in countries where a sumptuous dinner might cost a few dollars. If political life soured in a country, if a military coup took over the presidential palace, if the government stopped issuing visas for remote workers, the digital nomads would not need to worry. They could simply leave for the refuge of their first citizenship in the United States or Western Europe.

The public radio program *Marketplace* reported that about 8,300 digital nomads descended on the city of Medellín every month in 2024, driving rent prices up in some cases by 80 percent, and that same year, an investigation by one of the country's leading newspapers, *El Tiempo*, showed that 1,244 people had been flying out of Colombia every single day for the past two years without returning. The country's journalists and migration experts speculated that people were leaving because they couldn't find work (unemployment was close to 10 percent, and in 2020 it had reached 18 percent) or because inflation was high or because, despite the peace accords, violence continued in the country. Others blamed so-

cial media, claiming it made people covet the earnings possible in other countries. My tía held the leftist president responsible. She suspected people were fleeing out of fear that Colombia would follow in the economic and political footsteps of Venezuela's dictatorship. In 2023 alone, 170,000 Colombians were apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Colombians left Colombia, and the digital nomads arrived and so did the immigrants. *El Tiempo* noted that between 2021 and 2023, when 1,244 people emigrated from the country on a daily basis, it was still less than the number of people arriving in the country every day from Venezuela.

My first year after moving to Chicago, I had coffee with Veronica Arreola, a feminist activist. She struck me as pragmatic. At the University of Illinois Chicago, she worked to increase the number of Latinx students getting STEM degrees, and she had recently been elected to serve on one of the city's new police district councils, created to reimagine policing in the city. I was contemplating the political obsession in the news with citizens and noncitizens, so I asked Veronica, What word can we use that's not citizen? She nodded and said, We talk about residents. We talk about neighbors.

Indeed, a few miles away, local volunteers had opened a clothing distribution center for immigrants and named it *Nuevos Vecinos*. New Neighbors.

Neighbor had none of the intensity or historicity of citizen. It evoked instead the wispy and whimsical voice of Mister Rogers. It hinted at a person we could see across the street or at the mailbox in our apartment building. In a world

of online interactions, neighbor suggested a person whose body could be found in close proximity to ours.

In 2024, a Louisiana banker decided he no longer wanted to have anything to do with the word *citizen*. Jason Smith, the chief executive officer of Citizens National Bank, told a local paper: "When we would go to chamber of commerce or other events, our name would always get shortened to 'Citizens Bank' and so to try to tell somebody, 'Well, we're Citizens National Bank and they're Citizens Bank and Trust, or they're Citizens Trust Savings,' it just got confusing." He hired a branding company, and after forty years in business, the bank returned to the state's French colonizer roots, re-naming the bank Bonvenu, or "Welcome."

One media outlet reported that the United States had 177 banks with citizen in their names. I doubted this, but with an online search I found: First Citizens, Citizens State Bank, Citizens Community Bank, Citizens Savings Bank, Citizens Bank & Trust, Citizens Bank of Kansas, and so on. In some cases, using the name signaled the ambitions of the company. Citizens Business Bank, which started in California in 1974, was originally the Chino Valley Bank. In other cases, the designation suggested the weight of history. Florida's Citizens Bank & Trust was formed in the wake of the First World War.

Writing for *The New York Times* in 2023, the reporter Karen Loew observed that more restaurants, hotels, and even tattoo shops were branding themselves with the word *citizen*. I hopped on Tripadvisor and saw that this was true. I could drink a cappuccino at Citizen Collective in Seattle and also at Good Citizen Coffee in Nashville. I could enjoy an evening at Citizen Cider in Vermont and then make my way

south to Charlottesville to dine at Citizen Burger Bar. Across the country, at Citizen Public House in Scottsdale, I could feast on "fair trade short ribs." Citizenship becoming the theme for a food show was, I suspected, only a matter of time.

For these restaurants and coffee shops, the citizen brand tapped into a language familiar to anyone who had attended elementary school in the United States or binged on Hollywood blockbusters. The restaurants boasted on their websites that they produced "cider for the people" or "pizza for the people." One venue declared that enjoying a burger was a right and a responsibility, while two eateries held that grilling meat over a wood fire, a type of cooking that has presumably been done for thousands of years, was essential to American culture. Yes, the restaurant sold food and drinks, and also one particular idea of what it meant to be an American citizen: a man who preferred eating dead animals cooked outdoors.

None of this was limited to the United States. If I were a different person, one with different political inclinations, I could travel the world with the sole intention of drinking and dining my way through citizenship. I could enjoy an espresso at the Citizen Café in Spain and also at the Citizen Café & Bar in Shanghai. In Romania, I could watch people feast on chicken wings at CitiZen Bistro & Lounge, and in Dubai, I could indulge in South Indian cuisine at an eatery simply named Citizen Restaurant.

I would not, however, find in other countries the same meaning of citizen. A Canadian coffee shop wanted to "do good in our city," while the Romanian restaurant had picked CitiZen for the Buddhist reference embedded in it, hoping

customers would “escape” to their eatery. The Citizen in Glasgow looked toward the past: Its kitchen and dining area occupied what had once been the office and printing rooms of the *Evening Citizen*, a city newspaper. The hotel chain CitizenM careened toward the future, focused on a single demographic: “mobile citizens” who “cross countries as easily as others cross streets.” The company had hotels in Taiwan, Zurich, and Boston.

One branding expert summed it up for *The New York Times* this way: “It’s aspirational. ‘Citizen’ invokes: I’m a member and I’m important. I’m a citizen, not a customer. It’s about a contribution, not a transaction.”

This explanation amused me. If I am giving you money and you are giving me a sense of belonging, that is a transaction, not a community. I suspected that the new pervasiveness of the word in the United States and around the world, if it was new, suggested instead a longing to connect with a place when so many of us spend so much time online and unrooted. Maybe citizen signaled not “I am important” but rather “I want to be important to others; I want to belong to a group of people who know me, who see me, who hear me.”

The fact also remains that citizenship today is more than a metaphorical commodity. It is an actual commodity. Its value can be described in dollars.

The chairman of the firm Henley & Partners has dual citizenship. So does his CEO. Together they are citizens of the United Kingdom, Malta, and the United Arab Emirates. Every year, their company publishes a guide to the best pass-

ports, the ones permitting you to travel without the hassles of submitting visa applications. In 2024, the Henley Passport Index ranked the U.S. passport in seventh place since it only opened the door visa-free to 188 countries. Passports from Japan, France, and Singapore topped the list, making it possible to see 194 countries without a visa. At the bottom of the list? Muslim-majority countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Pakistan.

The Henley Passport Index underscores the inequities of citizenship. By virtue of having first opened my eyes on land called the United States, I can travel without worry or a visa to more countries than I can name, while a woman born in Haiti or Egypt or Jordan cannot. Yet the index serves another purpose, which is presumably its actual point: It clarifies for the wealthy which citizenships they should purchase if they want to travel freely and easily. The practice is known as citizenship by investment, and the applicants are called investor citizens, though they could just as well be named millionaire migrants.

Purchasing citizenship usually involves buying real estate in the chosen country. In exchange for the investment, the country grants papers: residency and a passport. The person is not necessarily required to live in the country, or they are but only for a short time. Some governments can take a year or longer to process these investor citizen applications, but Vanuatu, a country of more than eighty islands in the South Pacific with a population similar to that of Orlando, Florida, handled applications in only a month or two, giving well-off migrants visa-free access to ninety-four countries, including most of the European Union. Its program came to a halt in 2022, when the EU suspended its visa waiver agreement

with Vanuatu, citing the low rejection rates and the short processing time for applications.

Life, of course, is not only about travel, not even for the wealthy. Henley & Partners also publishes an index that serves as a more holistic consumer guide to buying citizenship. This one considers the reputation of the country, its residency requirements, and the quality of life as measured by life expectancy and how free you are to do what you want with your money there. Austria and Malta, both members of the European Union, topped the list for quality of life in 2024, but Cambodia came in high if you wanted a citizenship that did not require you to live in the country. Citizenship to Antigua and Barbuda, where English is the official language, only requires a millionaire migrant to live there for five days during the first five years of citizenship. And even millionaire migrants have to take cost into account. At \$100,000, Antigua and Barbuda offered the cheapest option, though in 2024 the country hiked its price to \$230,000.

This is the migration of elites, then, the migration that never makes the nightly news or the presidential debates, and it can generate a great deal of income for cash-starved countries. The journalist Atossa Araxia Abrahamian found that the profit from selling citizenship made up a quarter of St. Kitts and Nevis's gross domestic product in 2014. The BBC reported in 2019 that as much as 30 percent of Vanuatu's revenue might have been from the sale of citizenship—money local advocates said never reached ordinary people, though government officials were sighted driving luxury cars. Kristin Surak, a sociology professor at the London School of Economics, found that selling citizenship has generated €21.4 billion for the European Union.

In the United States, citizenship is discussed as if it were so valuable it could never have a price tag. The images from the southern border—discarded water bottles in the desert and people's heads bobbing in the river—emphasize the message that people are dying in the heat and in the water precisely because there is no other way to obtain citizenship to this country. But that is not true. In early 2025, the price tag on U.S. citizenship started at \$800,000.

A lot of paper is involved in buying citizenship to the United States. And emails. And phone calls. The U.S. government technically calls the sale of citizenship the EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program. On paper, a person is spending \$800,000 on a business project in a rural or a high-unemployment area. If they want to invest in other areas, the price tag tips over a million dollars. The investor citizen may pour their money into their own project or apply through one of the more than nine hundred regional centers approved by the government. There are more details, but this is the gist of it: The EB-5 visa covers the investor, as well as their spouse and their children under the age of twenty-one. They do not have to live in the town or city where they have placed their money, which means that an EB-5 investor can buy American citizenship by spending cash on a project in Nebraska while they purchase a family home in San Francisco.

In Philadelphia, millionaire migrants have funded the construction of public train stations, hotels, and the city's convention center. In Manhattan, they invested in the construction of Hudson Yards, where luxury one-bedrooms can start at \$6,000 a month. Austin devoted a page on its city's

website to welcoming EB-5 investors by underscoring that nine census tracts there qualify as “targeted employment areas,” places a millionaire migrant can spend under a million dollars to buy U.S. citizenship.

The sale of this citizenship happens on a first-come, first-served basis. The federal agency responsible for it, Citizenship and Immigration Services, issues fewer than ten thousand of these EB-5 visas every year, and it hit that max for the first time in 2014, even though the government started the program in the 1990s. Today millionaire migrants account for about 1 percent of all new green card holders, according to the Migration Policy Institute, and like ordinary immigrants, they too face the backlog of the U.S. immigration system. One EB-5 investor told *The Wall Street Journal* she was still waiting on her green card seven years after her initial investment.

Not every investor citizen is a millionaire. Some arrive in the United States on student or work visas. They might be physicians or people working in tech. They tire of the slow process of traditional applications for legal residency, usually by way of a work visa, and try the investment route, some taking loans against the equity in their houses to make the investment. The gamble does not necessarily pay off, since Congress has to renew the program every five years, and applications get stalled, as they do for all immigrants.

Still, it is worth considering that a person can buy American citizenship. Some people pay for this citizenship with cash from their home countries or with the equity they have in their homes here; other people pay for it with their lives and the lives of their children. Of course, this is not how we talk about the arrival of people to the United States. Elected

officials and media pundits and ordinary Americans speak instead of a migrant crisis, a crisis at the border, even an invasion, though it would be just as fair to say that there is no crisis. It is simply that the families showing up at the U.S.-Mexico border do not have a million dollars each, and that is what we have decided we want—a million dollars for citizenship to this country.

A month after his 2025 inauguration, Trump declared that his administration would replace the EB-5 visa program with a “gold card.” He was raising the price fivefold, to \$5 million, for U.S. citizenship.

Some people do not want to buy citizenship in the United States, just a condo or a bungalow. They dream of pendant light fixtures, magnets of kittens on the fridge, and plastic flamingos with rainbow hats in the front yard. They are thinking about the American Dream, or they are thinking about the here and now. They came to the United States on a student visa and now they have a career and some savings, and they want to settle down and make a good investment. But in July 2023, people who had come to the United States from China and lived in Florida without citizenship woke up to the news that a state law was barring them, in essence, from buying a home.

The law, known as SB 264, mandates that a person from China without U.S. citizenship cannot purchase a residential property in the state unless they have a work visa or asylum, and even then the person has to find a home that is not within five miles of a military installation. Since most of Florida’s military sites are located near major cities, the law

severely limits the options. The law also applies to noncitizens from Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, Russia, and North Korea, but the prohibitions and punishments are worse for people from China, who face felony charges and up to five years in prison if they break this law. Anyone who participates in the transaction would also be charged. The person who sold the home to an ineligible buyer could spend a year in prison.

SB 264 also targeted people who already owned their Florida homes, requiring Chinese homeowners without green cards or citizenship to register their property with the state if they bought it before the law went into effect. This was true for noncitizens from the other designated countries, too, which led Spanish-language television news programs to feature lawyers warning Cubans and Venezuelans to register their home with the state or face a daily penalty of a thousand dollars.

The federal district judge who refused to temporarily block Florida's law asserted that it was not racist. According to Judge Allen Winsor, the law did not single out Chinese people. It pertained to anyone who had a "domicile" in China, and so, employing a perverse racist logic, he wrote that since a person of any race could live in China, the law did not discriminate against the Chinese. In 2024, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit temporarily blocked parts of the law while a lawsuit against the state made its way through the courts.

The irony is that if Florida wanted to ban foreigners from purchasing property, it would have gone after Canadians. In 2022, they made up the largest share of foreign owners in the state, accounting for 21 percent of all transactions, fol-

lowed in smaller numbers by Colombians, Argentines, and Brazilians.

Other states have passed less punitive versions of the Florida law. In Georgia, a Chinese person without a green card could still buy a home in 2024 but not farmland near a military base if they were an "agent" of the Chinese government. Texas tried to pass a closer copycat of the Florida law in 2023, and Governor Greg Abbott promised to sign it, but protests broke out in Austin and Dallas, and Asian Americans organized and lobbied state legislators, making it so the bill was dead on arrival. Oklahoma's governor suggested the Chinese were to blame for the 300 percent jump in foreign ownership of land in the state between 2015 and 2021, but the reporter Ben Felder uncovered that the foreigners driving those statistics were actually Canadians and Europeans.

All of this meant that for several months starting in 2023, a woman from China, regardless of citizenship, could buy a condo in Chicago near me but not in Miami near my mother. The same woman could have an abortion in Illinois but not next door in Indiana unless her father or uncle or a stranger had raped her. If she lived in Arkansas, her transgender daughter would be banned from competing on girls' teams in sports competitions, even in college, while in Massachusetts, schools would permit her to play on the girls' team.

A year after the Florida law was signed, a real estate agent told *The New York Times* that when sellers saw a Chinese name on an offer to purchase a home, they now inquired if the person could legally buy a home. Sellers did not think that those barred from buying homes were Chinese people without papeles. They thought it was anyone who was Chi-

nese. They could no longer imagine a Chinese person with U.S. citizenship.

A Chinese American woman in Florida with a green card, Susan Li had planned to buy a home, but she put her search on hold, telling CNN, "No matter if I have a green card or I'm a citizen, I still have a Chinese face."

The same summer that I walked into the Colombian consulate, I showed up at a church gymnasium in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood to assist people with their applications for U.S. citizenship. Local community organizers had placed folding chairs into rows where people could fill out their forms. They had assigned the tables on one side of the room to the lawyers and interpreters who determined if the person was eligible to apply. If they were, volunteers ferried the person across the aisle to lawyers and interpreters who would complete the forms.

I was one of the interpreters across the aisle. The work was straightforward. How long have you lived at this address? How long have you been married? Do you have disabled children who depend on you? The women who came to us, one by one, turned out to be versions of my mother: elderly women in modest, thin tops designed for the heat, women who wore little makeup, who smiled politely, who startled when I asked if they had ever been married to anyone other than their current husband. They had all lived in the United States for decades. One of them had bought her home in the neighborhood with her husband almost forty years earlier. Just like Mami. Another told me she had failed her citizenship test the last time she took it. Another brought her grown

daughter and confided, You're not supposed to have favorites, but she's my favorite.

Each one of them had built an entire life in Chicago, in the United States. They were now in their sixties and seventies. They had children and grandchildren who had been born on this land. They had spent decades as legal residents. I wondered if they were finally applying for citizenship because of the rising vile public rhetoric about immigrants, but no, that was not motivating them. They had aged and so had their family members in Mexico. The people they loved across the border were having health issues. The women wanted to travel more easily between the two countries. Of critical importance, they no longer had to take the naturalization test in English. Their advanced age and their decades as legal permanent residents qualified them for testing in Spanish or with interpreters. This is what had stopped them before: a policy prohibiting them from speaking about political life in their mother tongue.

One of the women had applied for citizenship previously, but when she showed up to take the naturalization test, the immigration official posed unexpected questions. She asked me about a yellow river and a guerra fría, she told me, her eyes still alarmed. I inquired more about the yellow river but had to admit that I did not know what the question might have been. The Guerra Fría I knew. I summarized the Cold War as the United States and Soviet Union battling over political ideologies, but when I looked up the question later, I saw my tip would not have helped the woman, since the actual question is "During the Cold War, what was the main concern of the United States?" The answer: communism.

I did not know if I would have to take a naturalization test

for Colombian citizenship, and what would it reveal about political membership except that I could study a country's history and provide the answers officials wanted to hear?

In 2023, 15.2 percent of Americans had been born in another country—the highest percentage in United States history. This included people like my mother and auntie and best friend and the women in the church gymnasium, all of whom have been in the United States for decades. It also included the women who arrived last week. And the children. And the nonbinary. And the men.

That day, surrounded by legal documents and passports, file folders and women's anxious faces, I did not need a piece of paper to tell me who belonged in this country. They were here now. They were sitting next to me. They were loving and bickering and making home here. None of them, not these women-about-to-be-citizens or the ones who arrived last week, none of them had papeles telling the truth, which was this: No matter how long they had been living in this country, the United States, as an economic and military power, had been in their lives before they ever set foot on this land.

In South Florida, when I left the Colombian consulate with my mother and auntie, minimal instructions on dual citizenship in hand, we made our way down the street to the new coffee shop. Quietly we slipped into the delicious air-conditioning, past a smattering of twentysomethings, each at their own table, each silently facing a laptop, headsets firmly in place. My tía ordered a regular coffee and so did Mami. We admired the coffee shop's sunflower-yellow walls and the

bookcase with its oddly shaped shelves and the small portrait of the novelist Gabriel García Márquez laughing. The waiter, a very young man, lithe and pale, told us that he was from Colombia, from Medellín, and he spoke to my mother in the deferential way of young people raised in that country. It was nothing my mother had ever been able to persuade me to do. I had turned out too crass, too loud, too American.

The coffee shop had been named Macondo after the fictional town in García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It occurred to me that my study of citizenship, its fictions and its facts, had brought me here to this place named for a town that existed only in the imagination. Citizenship did require imagination. The historian Benedict Anderson described nations as "imagined communities," positing that before a person can become a member of a country, they must be able to envision themselves as part of such a community—a process that historically came about through printed stories in a shared language. By the summer of 2024, it was clear to me and probably to everyone else, too, that many of us were no longer imagining the same country when we spoke of the United States. Perhaps we never had.

We still discussed citizenship though, and we did this often. When ICE raids spread across the country at the start of 2025, federal authorities questioned and detained members of the Diné (Navajo) Nation, not officially because of their race (that would have been illegal) but because they suspected the Diné of not having citizenship. When Florida banned many Chinese nationals from homeownership, a federal judge concluded this exclusion was about citizenship, not race. When parents sought medical care for their trans-

gender children, they found themselves on social media designated as “bad citizens.” When the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision overturned the federal right to an abortion, Justice Samuel Alito, writing for the majority, did not talk about the state controlling the bodies of women and pregnant people; he only maintained that the Constitution never mentioned citizens having the right to terminate a pregnancy. And when Trump signed an executive order in 2025 attempting to eliminate birthright citizenship, the document said nothing about robbing Latinx of political membership in the United States. It only argued that undocumented parents and their children were not subject to the jurisdiction of this country as required by the Fourteenth Amendment. The newborns were citizens of elsewhere and nowhere.

Citizenship has become a political dog whistle, a proxy for race, a way to talk about white supremacy while avoiding accusations of racism—or of xenophobia, sexism, or transphobia. It is presented to us as a neutral term, when in fact citizenship has been and continues to be thoroughly immersed in our national ideas about race and gender, sexuality and economics. It is a story, and a story can be reconsidered, revised, and retold. I know this because when I was a child, no one spoke of being undocumented. Now families and poets and entire organizations embrace the term. Churches that once offered sanctuary to those fleeing the wars in Central America provide sanctuary now to those fleeing deportation orders. College classrooms filled almost exclusively by white students when I was an undergraduate are now multiracial, and the white man’s literary canon is not dead but in its rightful place alongside the works of James Baldwin, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Piri Thomas. Reparations for Black

America, an idea once openly mocked, are under way these days in some cities and institutions.

Papers did not make any of this happen. People did. Everything I learned about being a member of a political community has come from people. There were the journalists documenting the deaths at the border; the Chicago neighbors organizing lawyers and interpreters; the girl in elementary school who showed me how to be an artist in defiance of authority. Over and over again, I have seen people change how we understand citizenship, and so whether or not I became a citizen of another country, I still wanted to be here in this country. I wanted to be part of a movement that would rewrite how we talked and thought about citizenship.

I finished writing this book when the president of the United States had fired the country’s top general, the vice chief of the air force, the chief of the navy, and the military’s top lawyers. Congress members were talking about removing federal judges opposed to the president’s agenda, and administrators at my university temporarily took down the websites for the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center and Multicultural Student Affairs in response to a threat of losing federal funding. Around the country, ICE agents grabbed international students outside their homes and shipped them to detention centers hundreds of miles away. I was writing, and the country was unraveling.

A very dear friend asked me if it was still safe to produce a book about citizenship. Maybe I needed to think it over. She still had her job in the federal government, but now she had to email the Department of Government Efficiency

every week with five things she had done at her job. Her work had become a work of fiction.

I continued writing despite her warning and even my own fears. I could not bear the thought of allowing someone else to write the story of our lives. We are citizens of the stories we tell. We belong to the stories we scribe about democracy and authoritarianism, about borders and neighbors, about love and grief and one another. In the end, we only truly belong to one another, and this is worth sharing and celebrating, no matter the cost.

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