The Mixed Privilege of Being a White Immigrant

Vanessa's mother moved from Germany to the U.S. as an adult. Vanessa, who was born in the U.S., immigrated to Canada and finds herself comparing their experiences in their adopted countries as she watches her home country from The North. Then, Juleyka speaks with a sociologist who puts citizenship and belonging into a larger context.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamí and Papí] About Anything, and bon jia, new listeners. I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Today, we're doing something a little different. I'm speaking with Vanessa. Her mom is a German immigrant who moved to the United States as an adult. Vanessa was born in the U.S., but she immigrated to Canada, also as an adult. She now finds herself comparing and contrasting her experience in her adopted country to her mother's experience in the U.S. Let's get into it.

Vanessa: My name is Vanessa and I live in Canada, but I'm originally from the United States, and also am half-German, so that's complicated, and in my family I call my mom mama and I call my dad dad. Growing up in a German-American household was interesting, because my dad is American from Texas and my mom is German. So, my mother was, how do you say it, like on a green card or had a green card for most of the time that she was in the States, and she's still in the States now, and now she has citizenship, but it took her probably like I want to say thirty something years before she actually went and got citizenship, because she just didn't have a reason for it.

I think that turned people off a little bit. There's a sense in the States that if you live in America, and you're embracing America, then why wouldn't you try to get citizenship? So, there was a specific moment, and I don't remember exactly how this went down, but my mother was being critical of the United States, because, you know, even though she's not a citizen yet at that point, why shouldn't she have an opinion? And somebody said to her, 'Well, you know what? If you don't like it, why don't you go back to where you came from?" I say this also as a white person with privilege, where this is not something that you hear often. It's something that I know my friends who are people of color hear constantly. This was something my mom had never experienced before and she was like, "Whoa. Excuse me?"

She was really hurt by that and she's mentioned it a couple times since then, so I think it never really left her. It's a weird thing, because you want to be included in that country and you want to… I live in Canada now, and I'm like, "I want to feel Canadian. I really do." And I think my mom wanted to feel American, but not to the point where she was losing her identity as a German. And this is something I struggle with, as well. I have an identity as a German, as an American, and now I guess as a Canadian.

So, since my mom immigrated to the United States when she was in her early thirties, and I immigrated to Canada actually in my early twenties, but close enough, we've kind of had similar experiences and sometimes we talk about that, because it's not like going from Germany to the United States is that much of a culture shock. There were definitely things, but same thing especially going United States to Canada, it's very similar in many ways, which Canadians don't always want to admit, but it's true. As an immigrant to Canada, using my sort of white immigrant perspective, and also being an American, looking at the immigration situation in the United States is somewhat baffling and also not surprising to me.

Canada's not perfect. We definitely have our issues when it comes to treating immigrants certain ways, or refugees, too. People who have come to Canada because they feel threatened in their countries. But then I look at the United States, and I look at what's happening on the Mexican border, and I am like, "How is this allowed? How are we allowed to take children away from their parents? How are we allowed to break up families? How are we allowed to stuff people in cages? Especially during a pandemic." I am an immigrant who has been treated with the utmost respect, coming from the United States, being white, speaking English, never really had a problem. But these other people are suffering.

I think most of it comes down to institutions that are built on the backs of people who are not white and who are the ones who basically physically built the country, and actually I can kind of tie that sort of to my German heritage, as well. Germany does not have a great history, and that's not just the Holocaust. That's also like the colonization of African countries, for example. There is racism like crazy. There's still anti-Semitism like crazy. There's Islamophobia like crazy. But I can also look at Germany and see the government, and these are my opinions, but the government has done a lot in reparation for what happened back then. They've taken responsibility. They've publicly said this was not right. Obviously, they're not perfect, but they've at least done something.

The United States is not doing anything. You know, you look at the camps, or the detention centers, I guess, down on the Mexican border, and it's like, "How is this different?" I mean, maybe there's no gas chamber, but the starvation, and the control, and the cages, and all that. That's all there. And so yeah, my mom and I have these conversations all the time where we're like if this other developed country can say, "Hey, we made a huge mistake and we need to fix it." Let's be

honest, the Americans actually really did help them with this, but I just don't understand how it can get... I just don't understand how the United States can go down this slippery slope when they were the ones who went to Germany and were like, "We're gonna help you get out of this."

It just... It's baffling.

Lantigua-Williams:

Vanessa's story made me think about the different immigration systems in place in North America. You know, I'm sure you think about that, too. It also made me think about how those systems shape society, how they influence us as first gens and our immigrant parents, how they inform how we see ourselves, our relationships to loved ones, and how they determine our sense of belonging. All the stuff we talk about on this show. So, inspired by Vanessa's story, I wanted to step back and take a bird's eye view of immigration in the U.S. and Canada, so that I can better understand the backdrop for conversations with Mamí and Papí. To help us dig a little deeper, I did what I always do. I called in an expert.

Irene Bloemraad:

My name is Irene Bloemraad. I'm a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, where I also direct the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative, and I am someone who immigrated to North America when I was very young, and I've lived both in Canada and the United States.

Lantigua-Williams:

You heard Vanessa's story. Based on your work, your life, your research, what stood out to you when you listened?

Bloemraad: Well, there were a few different things. One thing was who is identified as a foreigner or an immigrant and told to go back from where they come from. We know that in the United States, this kind of phrase has been used for people born in the United States, but it's also something that immigrants hear frequently. And one thing that I thought was interesting about Vanessa's story is how her mother, as a German immigrant, generally didn't get those kind of comments, probably because she's a white immigrant from Europe, but that in particular circumstances when people don't appreciate someone's expression of political attitudes, or what they're saying about current events, then an easy way to dismiss the person is to undermine their legitimacy by saying, "Go back to where you came from."

Lantigua-Williams:

So, the issue of belonging and its relationship to citizenship really is a powerful tool used against immigrants and also used by immigrants, so can you please talk a little about citizenship formation? Not just naturalization, but really the concept of citizenship formation when you're an immigrant.

Bloemraad: You know, citizenship on the face of it seems like a very obvious thing. It's do you have a passport? Don't you have a passport? Am I a citizen of the United States? But there are many layers to citizenship. For some people, citizenship is analogous to political participation. Citizens are people who vote, or who protest, or who make their voice known in the public sphere. For other people, citizenship is just a question of rights. Do I have the right to an attorney? Do I have the right to vote? Do I have the right to social benefits?

For other people, citizenship is really about identity and belonging. Do I feel American? And so, what's interesting is that people might not have legal citizenship, but they might feel like they belong, or they might have rights, and they might participate politically, and Vanessa's story about how her mother did not acquire citizenship in the United States for many years, but who still felt a member of the community, is a great example of how legal status doesn't necessarily map onto that. And one of the things that people use to make claims when they feel like they're being excluded, or they're not seen as legitimate is this appeal to being born in the country. And that's pretty unique to Canada and the United States, because most countries in the world do not give you citizenship based on where you're born.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, I'm really interested in this comparison between the U.S. and Canada, because jokingly, people always say, "If so and so wins the next election, I'm moving to Canada." Right?

Bloemraad: Right. I think a lot of people have been saying that in the last few months.

Lantigua-Williams:

Yes. But let's really break it down. What are the tangible and material differences between immigrating to the U.S. and immigrating to Canada vis-à-vis the ability to become an American or a Canadian citizen?

Bloemraad: There is not much of a difference between the process of becoming a citizen in Canada or a citizen in the United States for immigrants. So, the naturalization process in the two countries is pretty similar compared to many other countries in the world. So, there's a relatively low number of years that you have to live in the country before you're allowed to apply. It's three in Canada and it's generally five in the United States. In both countries, you have to show that you have some ability in the majority language. You have to show that you have some knowledge of the country's history, political institutions, and you have to satisfy the authorities that you're not a security risk, that you've not done anything that in U.S. parlance makes you sort of morally unacceptable to become a citizen.

So, what's fascinating is that the U.S. has a reputation as a country of immigrants that has been pretty generous in its inclusion and its incorporation of people from all around the world, so we would expect that immigrants would become citizens

very, very quickly. The reality, however, is that immigrants in the United States do not become citizens particularly quickly. It's about the same as in many European countries. And I think Vanessa's story about how her mother waited many years before becoming a citizen is really a good example of this.

Interestingly, immigrants in Canada become citizens much more quickly than in the United States, and the overall level of citizenship among immigrants in Canada is much, much higher.

Lantigua-Williams:

What do you attribute that to?

Bloemraad: One of the reasons in my research that I've found is because Canada has a host of different policies around integration and multiculturalism, and this is at the federal level, the provincial level, and local levels, that provide funding to community-based organizations to help immigrants integrate, and also sends a signal, a symbolic gesture of welcome. And in the United States, immigrants feel in the United States that they're more on their own, that they have to do it by themselves, that they have to pick themselves up by their bootstraps. There's just a little bit less support for those things in the United States.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, I want to ask you about how Canada's own experience with settling the Natives, and also with being a former colony, plays into how welcoming they are perceived as being, or how welcoming they are actively trying to be.

Bloemraad: So, Canada is no paradise when it comes to immigration, or racism, or discrimination. It, like any other country in the world, has its issues. And I would say that up through the 1970s and perhaps even later, there were a lot of parallels when we think about race-based exclusion or the treatment of Indigenous peoples in the two countries. One thing that changed in Canada in the '60s and the 1970s is that francophones in Quebec in particular started militating for independence and greater equality, and in the negotiations around what Canada was and what it meant to be Canadian, there was an opening that allowed people who were neither French, nor of British background, to claim a place in Canada.

There was a shifting in what it meant to be Canadian, and that shifting started to include discourses of multiculturalism. But it's not simply that. The other thing that really makes a difference is that immigrants, there are just more immigrants in Canada as a proportion of the population than in the United States. So, one in five people in Canada was born outside of the country. In the U.S., it's 14%, so it's 14 compared to 20%, which is not huge, but if you then add on the fact that immigrants in Canada become citizens really quickly, and at really high levels, 80 to 90%, that means you have a lot of voters who are of immigrant background, and so it makes anti-immigrant politics much harder in Canada than it does in the United States.

Lantigua-Williams:

Have you, in the course of your research, noticed any difference in first generation children born of immigrants, versus multiple generation people who are born in the United States in their politicization and in the awareness that they bring to how they experience their society?

Bloemraad: I would say often immigrants, people who are born in another country and come to the United States, or even for that matter Canada, as adults, they often have a little bit of a sense that they're guests in the house. This is not everybody, but often they're very thankful for the opportunity to move to North America. Often, they really appreciate what the United States or Canada can give them, be it protection and the security of law if they're coming from a country that's at war, or job opportunities, or educational opportunities, or just the chance to live with people that they love. And so, they might in some cases be less likely to criticize the political system that let them in.

If your parents were immigrants, or one of your parents was an immigrant, but you were born in the country, then you often are going to feel like you're just the same as everybody else. You have as much right to be there as everybody else. And at times, you will then tend to be more critical of the political system. This is your home, and so you will speak up more. Now, in this case, there are again differences between the United States and Canada. In the Canadian context, there's actually a pretty high proportion of people who are foreign born who run for elected office, and if you look at the people who are sitting in the House of Commons, it's much more diverse than in the United States, and there are far... There's a far higher percentage of people born in another country in the Canadian house of commons than there is in the U.S. House of Representatives.

But in the United States, and perhaps because of the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement, and the example of the courageous protests and struggles of African Americans, and Chicanos, and Native Americans, we have seen in the past in the United States immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, who have taken to the streets to protest what they perceive as draconian immigration laws. And you don't see that kind of protest as much in Canada. Now, perhaps because the undocumented population is smaller, maybe the immigration policies are nowhere near as draconian, but the U.S. does have a proud history of protest.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you so much for being on the show.

Bloemraad: Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Irene. Citizenship is more than naturalization. For many, it's about political participation, voting, protesting, and

making their voices known in the public sphere. For some, it's about what rights they have and their ability to exercise them. For others, it's about identity and a sense of belonging. One word, layers. Lots of them. Know the data. Naturalization rates in Canada are higher than in the U.S. despite the U.S.'s reputation as a country of immigrants. Immigrants in the U.S. become citizens at about the same rate as in many European countries, so that might call for some myth busting. Understand the ideas behind policies. In both Canada and the U.S., ideas of diversity and inclusion shape policy and are deeply rooted in each country's history. Understanding this history can help us critique the system or envision a better one. And remember, expect intergenerational differences. Adult immigrants and their native-born kids often have different perspectives and different willingness to criticize the political system in their home country.

Lantigua-Williams:

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