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A Dream Fulfilled

Narayani Lasala-Blanco knows firsthand the struggles Latino and other immigrant families face when they come to the United States. She experienced them herself, as a child living in Santa Barbara in the late 1980s.

Now an assistant professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara, Lasala-Blanco came with her mother (who was a U.S. permanent resident) to Southern California from Mexico. The Mexican economy was in crisis, and a job opportunity brought Lasala-Blanco's mother back to the U.S.

Many of Lasala-Blanco's classmates had done the same with their own families, and while Lasala-Blanco had much in common with them, she also felt very different. She was from Mexico City, not the smaller rural areas native to so many of her peers, and she had been exposed at a very early age to the English language. In fact, thanks to the dedication of her teachers at Roosevelt Elementary School, Lasala-Blanco spoke fluent English within six months of her arrival.

Finding Her Place

That made her transition easier, but acclimating to a new country and culture was fraught with difficulties. "I remember most vividly the contrast between the enthusiasm and love many of the third- and even fourth- generation Hispanic-American families I met were putting into integrating into American society and the way they were treated because of the color of their skin, and general ignorance about the history of how they got here," Lasala-Blanco recalled. "I, too, felt like

every single time I said I was born in Mexico, people started treating me differently. “These families had risked a great deal to come work here legally or join other relatives in the U.S., like I had,” she continued. “We all struggled to be accepted.”

Lasala-Blanco will return to themes of those early years Thursday, Oct.15, when she leads a roundtable discussion about issues that have become inseparable from the current political landscape — immigration policy and reform, the shifting U.S. population and what it means to be an American. The roundtable will begin at 4 p.m. in 3824 Ellison Hall at UCSB. It is free and open to the public.

Immigration Politics

The subtle forms of discrimination Lasala-Blanco faced as a child would shape the course of her life as she returned to Mexico to attend high school and college and became interested in studying more formally the various facets of the Mexico-U.S. bilateral relationship and the causes and consequences of the northward migration. Following an internship with the Mexican consulate in San Francisco, she earned her Ph.D. in political science at Columbia University.

Using Aristide Zolberg’s article “A Nation By Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America” as a framework, the Oct. 15 discussion will examine contentious aspects of immigration policies in the U.S. that have been present during elections since the 1700s.

“I think that the immigration debate — who is to be included and excluded from the political community and even physically from the territory — in the United States is unique,” she noted, “because it is one of the few democracies in the world that has ‘designed,’ as Ari Zolberg has expressed, its population through immigration policies, rather than inheriting it with the territory.”

“Everyone in the United States, except for Native Americans — a very small proportion of the population today — has an immigrant background,” Lasala-Blanco pointed out. “This has required policymakers to ask and debate with the public and among themselves what lies at the core of the national identity.” In other words, the melting pot ethos that defines America has also been causing political disputes for centuries.

Studies of Identity

The roundtable is part of the UCSB Interdisciplinary Humanities Center's research focus group on identity issues, and the group's co-convener, political science professor Cynthia Kaplan, is "thrilled" to have Lasala-Blanco as part of the political science department faculty. "With her arrival, the political science department plans to establish a set course of doctoral study in the field of identity," Kaplan said. "Her presence on our faculty strengthens our research on immigration and Latino/Latina politics and our interdisciplinary and multiple methods approach in the study of identity."

Lasala-Blanco said she hopes the roundtable discussion will encourage participants to learn more about the history of groups that too often continue to be referred to as "immigrant communities" despite having resided in the U.S. for centuries now. "Also, to understand that the debate about who is worthy of becoming a citizen and who is not worthy isn't based on cultural or even observable physical characteristics," she said.

Not that a better understanding of the cyclical nature of so-called immigration crises (usually brought on by a surge in arrival of populations seen as different or somehow threatening to established populations) will necessarily solve the problems inherent in migration patterns.

These issues, which are heating up as the 2016 presidential election gets closer, are becoming a recurring theme in American politics, according to Lasala-Blanco. "There will always be political entrepreneurs looking to capitalize on the fact that the new wave may look different from the older wave," she said.

Integration and Assimilation

During her discussion, Lasala-Blanco will examine the commonalities between past and present immigration crises, as well the conditions that contribute to naturalization of immigrant groups.

"I think for the most part, immigrants are willing to integrate if they are given opportunities that are similar to those granted to the general population in terms of education, health care and access to the job market," she said. "This is usually when they start voting and matter politically."

For Lasala-Blanco, the political framework and debate that surrounds immigration policy in America is important to her personally as well as professionally. Even as

she looks forward to opportunities to collaborate with her colleagues in the political science department and elsewhere on campus, she said, she remembers the lessons she learned as a young girl, new to America and unsure of where she belonged.

“I remember that on the first play date I had with one of my Mexican-origin classmates, I complained to the family during dinner about certain American social conventions that made no sense to me,” she noted.

“The 90-year-old grandmother stopped me and said, ‘A la tierra que fueres, haz lo que vieres,’ an old Mexican saying that essentially means ‘Do as you see others do in the land you join.’”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.