

## **BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST**



### **CRISJ Building Justice Podcast**

#### **Season 2, Episode 21 : Belonging in the Context of Exclusion**

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**Guests: Dr.Heidy Sarabia**

**Please note:** This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Maria Elena Pulido-Sepulveda directly should you have questions.

#### **Music lyrics:**

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice CRISJ We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

I'm Maria Elena, fourth year sociology major, and I'm here with Dr. Heidi Sarabia, professor of sociology.

Today, we will be talking about Dr.Sarabia's journey in academia, as well as her research.

Maria Elena: Dr.Sarabia can you start us off with just letting us know more about you and how you came into academia?

Dr. Sarabia: Yes, I guess I always begin by telling the story of migrating to the US coming to the US, I was 14 years old in 1993 (don't do the math) and my family, my mom, my dad, my two brothers we moved from Mexico City to Sacramento California. All of my father's family had been living here both of my grandparents, seven uncles etc, so when I came to the US I gained a new perspective. In Mexico I was part of, I lived in a working class neighborhood with other kids that looked like me but here in the US I was different and a year later in 1997 Proposition 187 passed in California that would have denied undocumented students like myself an education, that would have turned state workers into immigration officials and it really impacted me because it kind of gave me a perspective on what the society thought about me. I was undocumented and I felt un-welcomed. I remember very clearly an economics teacher who had us debate Proposition 187 and at the end he said "I was planning to vote yes on it but after this discussion I will vote no" and it was such a shock because he was teaching all immigrant kids, I was in classes for English learners and to me it was a shock that he would have even considered voting for proposition 187 and so again it sort of, it made me kind of distrustful of Californian society it felt like they didn't want people like me. And it was very hard to articulate what it was, it wasn't until I actually I went to community college Sacramento City College and then I transferred to UCLA where I double majored in Sociology and Chicana/Chicano studies and I gained the language to sort of think about what my experiences were about beyond just my family that this was structural, that in many ways this society wanted my parents to come and work in this country but they didn't want me, they didn't want the whole family, they didn't want the children, and that the expectations were that I would also be a worker like my parents. And so that really shaped everything that I did afterwards I think living in this country undocumented and having that feeling of distrust and so eventually I applied for a graduate program, and I have studied. I have been involved in many projects and in all of them I think what sort of connects them is that I studied belonging. What does it mean to belong and be a part of, be integrated into different contexts. And for example, in my Master thesis I explored how Mexican Zapatista activist carried out transnational activism across borders without being able to actually cross the border because again most of them were undocumented, and so what does it mean to be an activist support Indigenous communities in Mexico from the US and so that was... I learned a lot from all those activists. And then for my dissertation work I went to the US Mexican border and I explored what does it mean to live so close to that wall that it's in many ways very symbolic and traumatic, and violent, and I interviewed migrants who had been deported who had strong ties to the US but they couldn't cross the border and again what does it mean to belong to a society that is not quite home. They were Mexican Citizens but they didn't feel that they belonged in Mexico all their families all their ties were in the US and then I did a post doc in Philadelphia where again I explored a newly formed Mexican community in south Philadelphia and so what does it mean to belong in the context of newness in the US, I mean in California Chicanx, Mexican communities have been here for a while so you have third, fourth, fifth generation Chicanx and you have people who have arrived three months ago but in

Philadelphia the community was very recent most people had been in Philadelphia ten, tops fifteen years and so what does it mean to create community where there is not much history in the community. And then I came back to teach at Sac State in 2016 and since I came back I have been exploring issues of belonging amongst Latinx students, Undocumented students, First generation students in the context of sort of a Hispanic Serving Institution a state that is very progressive, a sanctuary state and yet you still have sort of these interactions these sort of white institutions where the leadership where power structure is very white but the rest of us the student clientele is very diverse but in terms of faculty we don't have that diversity, and again leadership we don't have that diversity so we have a very kind of fragmented experience as amongst Chicanx, Latinx, Undocumented students because you do have that sense of you know belonging, being welcomed, I think there are also these sort of microaggressions that you are exposed to these structural kind of elements that remind you that in some ways the expectation again I think since I came to this country hasn't changed much in the sense that we are seen as not ready to be in leadership positions and that I think continues to be the case. Again, I always think about day one you know US society wanted my parents to come as workers in some ways the University wants my kids to come as students but where are the professors? where is the leadership? That has been, that remains a problem and again I think part of it is sort of this historical legacy of white institutions, white structures that refuse to let go of power right and so how do we, so yeah that's sort of my background and how I came to study the issues that I study.

Maria Elena: Okay, so there is a lot to unpack there you touched on a few things. So with Proposition 187 I was in middle school, so that was my first time organizing a walk out. I was in seventh grade I was put in ESL because my dad fought for me to be in bilingual education my whole life and when I got to fifth grade, when we moved, I was kicked out the program because I didn't have enough Spanish so they put me in a mainstream English class. But then when I got to middle school they tracked me back on that ESL course. I think, personally what I know now I feel like it was kind of a payback thing to him, like "oh you wanted your kid in this program so here it is". And I remember that I remember those ads, I remember the nativism that was there. In Dr. Barajas, in the book he uses for his course it talks about how Mexico is expected to make the investment of birthing people, birthing workers right and then they come here and they are denied services. I was just speaking to a migrant student recently, you spend all these years dedicating time in this country and labor and then you have to go back to Mexico and if you're lucky you have family back home that you're able to kind of set things up for yourself so that when you do return you have something but there are a lot of ifs in that time span right. The belonging piece the Zapatistas I know they got started when I was like a year old but is interesting to see that they are more internationally known now. In 1999 I moved to Baja California so I came with the perspective of "Just Say No" and there's all these cartels and so I had my ethnocentrism of being a U.S. citizen going into Mexico and then I was like Oh its not all these terrible things that I keep hearing on the news right, and having that experience. And I

know its changed a lot and there is more of the globalization going on in Mexico but I had that sense of belonging when I got to Mexico right, like people were welcoming and like “you don’t have an accent” and you know it was really different. Because here I can tell you as fourth generation even my grandmother and father when I was very young I would ask questions about things that were going on in the southern borders and they told me straight up like “you don’t need to worry about that because you live on this side of the border” and this was just before 187 was happening and I’m like at any time it can be us we can be put in that box. I’ve experienced being put in that box so many times just based off the way I look or the way I speak. So I feel like that belonging is its sad because like you said we do have established generations here in California but they aren’t when people, when migrants come from Mexico they don’t experience that acceptance and belonging from people who are already here. And I think that in my personal opinion that was established early on with Los Californios that were part of the California government starting with the Indian Protection Act and then that act was turned right back around on them and turned into the quote unquote Greaser Act and so it excluded them just as quickly as they were set to exclude Native people. So you use the term migrant versus immigrant and so I was wondering if you could share your, why you choose to use that word. I know why I choose to use it, I know that taking your class really made me more mindful of always using it versus just kind of using the two as interchangeable because after I took your class I feel like very much so they are not interchangeable and there is power in words. I think its really important to distinguish that difference so can you distinguish it for me?

Dr.Sarabia: Yes, so migrant its about movement and humans are always in movement we have been migrating you know forever. I think creatures on earth migrate and move and its normal and its part of life and its part of finding new opportunities, growing, changing, and we see it all the time. So, migrant connotes that right, its movement and we move and I moved, I have moved many times. My family migrated from rural Mexico to Mexico City in the 70s we migrated from Mexico City to Sacramento in the 1990s and I have moved. I have moved many times for undergraduate, graduate school, post doc. Immigration on the other hand its coming in, in immigration so there is a boundary already established and that boundary is the nation state boundary and today we take it as normal as natural as “of course nation states want to protect their borders” but it hasn’t always been that way. If we think about California doesn’t put a border with Arizona and Guerrero doesn’t put a border with Michoacan. People cross back all the time back and forth these in some ways fictitious boundaries so why does the US insist on putting these boundaries between the U.S. and Mexico and chooses to militarize it, and chooses to police it, and chooses to surveil it in very particular ways, in ways the U.S. Canadian boundary is not policed, militarized, surveilled and so again people move all the time within the U.S. people move all the time and migration sort of honors that tradition long tradition of people moving around and that is why I use it, I think it is important to disrupt these ideas about borders and in some ways I feel very fortunate that I am an academic because then I can say these things right. We have the opportunity to really think about and as Sociologists to think about the structural ways that shape how we talk about, think about, how we approach

these issues. It gives us that historical perspective where we are able to sort of see the connections. Why is it, again why is it today that we see the Biden administration struggle, I don't even know that they are really struggling but they have kept the Trump administration policy many of them. Again, if we see the historical trajectory, we see that really across political parties in the U.S. there has been a consensus that it is necessary and important to militarize the border making it very violent, you know more that six thousand people have died trying to cross the border and these are bodies that have been found. We really don't know the exact numbers of people that have disappeared trying to cross the U.S. Mexico border. The increased criminalization of authorized and unauthorized reentry has really, dramatically increased the population in federal prisons. Today the largest ethnic group in Federal prisons are no longer Blacks or African Americans are Hispanic Latinx because the U.S. has decided to really go after unauthorized entry, reentry and prosecute all these people under Federal law and so again this wasn't always the case so its important to think about the historical and structural aspects of what we see currently as crisis and the role of the state in some ways manufacturing this crisis so that is why I use the word migrant.

Maria Elena: Okay so you brought up the Federal prison population and you brought up Biden and one thing that I find really interesting is that, I don't know about you but as a woman of color as a brown woman I find it really interesting that a woman whose parents migrated or immigrated, I would personally say immigrate just because for me migration is more about you are moving across lands you are already belong to that's the way I use it versus coming from a different land. So that for me is the difference between migration and immigration and so however you want to label how her parents came into the nation she did come from people that were not born here and then for her to stand up, you know the whole platform was about serving all of these vulnerable underserved communities and then the first thing out of her mouth was "do not come here, do not come here" it was kind of a slap in the face it was like how do you tell me or my daughters that we should aspire to be this thing but again its that belonging its very exclusionary, its saying you don't belong here find somewhere else to go. And then given her history with criminalization and I know that in research I've done prisons aren't or weren't doing so great prior to COVID the numbers were going down, so if we look at films like "The 13<sup>th</sup>" where we talk about how this was a way to keep slavery going, what better way is there if Blacks and African Americans are saying "you're not going to exploit us this way anymore you've been doing it for centuries." We can say the same was done to Native people of the Americas and the reason in my research and in my opinion the reason why Africans were brought were because one I know it was because of the disease but two they couldn't keep them confined because they knew their lands and they could escape and so you bring people from another land who don't know where they are its easier to keep them confined but now you have this, especially after the uprising in 2020 now so now who do you go to? Oh you go back to that old resource and you just find a new way to exploit it and to keep that labor coming in, and what better way? I don't have to worry about granting them a pathway, I don't have to pay them and I get to make them deviant. It's like it's a win-win for the nation state,

right? I don't know if you want to respond to that or if you want to move on to the next talking point.

Dr.Sarabia: Yeah just very quickly. It is that the prison industrial complex in the US has benefitted from in many ways in removing the rights of citizenship from people of color in order to exploit us. It just a quick story, when I was a graduate student, I used to live in Oakland and I attended a workshop about sort of observing police conduct with immigrants or migrants because at that point police will stop migrants and ask for their license and take away their cars, but a court decision from Oregon said that the cop couldn't stop just anybody for any reason they needed to have a specific reason before they could ask for the drivers license. So then I sort of decided to be a police observer and I started sort of any with citizens anybody I will stop and observe, take notes and see, but of course I was living in Oakland with a large population of African American, Black citizens and of course most of my observations were with African American, Black citizens and that's what I realized they had no rights. Most of the time I would come and I would say why did you pop open the trunk was there a reason and the person being detained-stopped would say "well I'm on probation so I don't have rights." And then I very quickly learned sort of first-hand again this issue of taking away citizenship rights I mean not fully but if you don't have the right to say no, I don't consent to being searched then you don't have rights. And so, the criminalization of people in this country again sort of follows all of these logics of exploitation, of labor exploitation and race has been a very easy way to justify this exploitation. It has historically of course as you were sort of mentioning with slave trade it was done in very specific ways and then with the Indigenous people from this continent it has been done in different ways but again under the same logic. And so now because of demographic changes it is very profitable to again target these Indigenous people from the Americas and say well we will continue with these exploitations, its again its sort of very important to think about the historical and structural nature of the way that the nation state works in the way that whiteness works in the United States to see these connections. To see the unique ways in which it has been applied to different groups but it's under the same logic, so the results are unfortunately the same and again we have seen it with different populations, and we continue to see it now being justified under "they are not citizens and so they are breaking the law" and so we are going to justify them. It has been used in the past using different labels and different logics but it's the same outcome because it's really about criminalizing people and exploiting people and denying them rights so that their belonging it's not just that you are being told you don't belong but that it's also about sort of reminding you that the only way you can belong is as a worker and you are going to profit for us either as a worker or as profit making products and so the prison industrial complex creates a product to benefit certain corporations and you know make them profit from us.

Maria Elena: Yes, I agree, and I know Dr.Barajas would not like me to say this I know it's not his favorite theory but the push and pull as well right. People love to ask, "why come here, why are you coming here" and it's like well when land is being taken away from people and you don't have the means to sustain yourself, I think it's foolish to say that this country didn't become the

nation that it is because people were dreaming of better it was because they were running out of land and so they sent the people here and it continues on to this day and it's really it's unfair and I think it's purposeful to keep the masses unaware of their history. If you can't see patterns, then you can't address the issue in my opinion. So, you discussed the Zapatista, and I was wondering if we could talk about that and you talking about Indigenous communities and before I let you start, I just want to touch on a couple of things because one thing that I think Indigenous communities in the US don't understand is what it means to maintain your indigeneity in the southern borders right. Here its blood quantum and your proximity in most cases a reservation right that's how you prove you're Native. Now when we start going to the southern borders you have to have your language, you have to have your culture, you have to have your dress. And so I know over the summer so I am descended from Caxcan and Otomi people of Central and Southern Mexico and so this really hit hard for me there was a 14 year old boy in Mexico who was set on fire by his classmates because he spoke Spanish with an Otomi accent and the teacher after he was in the hospital stepped up and said Oh I wanna help with the medical bills and dad said no you were part of the problem you were part of the bullying you allowed for those students to mistreat my son and this was a result of that. And so again like you said they're able to advocate across borders but how like to me I think for me it goes back to what you were talking about belonging how do we get that message out there? Sometimes I feel like I'm talking to a wall I tell you people don't want to hear it but it's the truth and I would argue that its almost more work to maintain your Indigenous identity if you are born on the "wrong side of the border".

Dr.Sarabia: Well a couple of things the first thing is that I think Zapatistas have written extensively about this issue of belonging just like we here in the US sort of argue for the right to belong in our own unique ways. They are saying we are also arguing to belong as Mexicans in our Indigenous identities we are Mexican but not just Mexican were also Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Etzeda, Otomi, Purepecha we are. The Mexican state just like the US state has really historically tried to erase those identities and in part again because it makes the population more manageable right just think about yourself as US citizen or a Mexican citizen and everything else should not be, should be part of the past, part of a dead past. And in part at least what Zapatistas always remind us it has been these cultural you know holding on to these cultural identities that have really allowed them to survive colonization and state violence and so again they just like in the US Mexico likes to present Indigenous culture as old, dead and part of the folklore right people dress in these beautiful blouses but we don't want to hear Spanish with different accents because people have differential ties and so they want the symbolic part of the culture but not people with their customs and traditions and histories and at least in Chiapas this is what there is a story in the 1980s I believe five Mestizos came to Chiapas to try to organize people and out of all of those five only one remained and he really had to understand people in their context and in their traditions again because those were the traditions that had allowed them to survive and what makes Zapatismo unique in Chiapas at least is that it really embraced Indigenous culture and Indigenous traditions and it built from there. It wasn't like here were going to enlighten you, we are going to tell you what's wrong in this country. It was about

learning what Mexico had done to people how Mexico had completely ignored Chiapas is one of the poorest states in Mexico you know poor in terms of economic investment because again the land is very rich but the levels of education the level of healthcare just very neglected. And so, Zapatistas were very good about creating solidarity links within Mexico and globally. It's amazing and actually in 2006 they had a campaign called the within Mexico it was *The Other Campaign* and globally I think it was called *The Sixth Declaration* and they really invited everybody globally to come and again sort of come together and think of ways that we could work in solidarity and the Intertribal House in Oakland sent a delegation of Indigenous people to the border to again have a conversation with Zapatistas and Zapatistas have really been able to really collaborate with people in Europe throughout the Americas with Indigenous groups in the United States to again think about the structural ways and the ways in which race, racism, capitalism, have been able to be tightly knit to exploit people in ways that again might look a bit different in the US than in Mexico but again are couched under the same umbrella and so it, they work with the same logic. And if we are able to sort of see these structural patterns then we are able to disrupt them because then we are not caught up in these kind of almost like petty discussions about who is more radical, who is more right or wrong, who is more entitled to something we are able to think about the way that structurally we are meant to benefit a one percent and that one percent in many ways might look like us right might look like us but it's about sort of like that racial and economic exploitation. So, you know for a long time one of the biggest the richest man on earth Carlos Slim is Mexican with a migrant family from Libya and so again how do we think about disrupting these systems of exploitation without getting caught up in the details of who is doing what and focusing instead on the structural things.

Maria Elena: I wanted to discuss undocumented students and just real quick a little background so some students that were eligible for DACA may have done things that have caused them to be deported and so now they've spent a great deal of their life in the United States some of them only know life in the United States they came when they were very young and now they're back in Mexico and I've had contact with some of these deported Dreamers and they have animosity towards the country of Mexico because again they are lacking that sense of belonging because they're Pochos or they speak Spanish funny because they grew up here. And so, I think again that's a consequence we don't think about. We have been promising DACA students some type of pathway for at least a decade now and it's not there and we've been deporting students and for some it's really not too bad they're able to adjust but for others who maybe found acceptance here in the US they aren't finding it here and it's giving them animosity towards both nations and I think that that's really unfortunate when you don't have a sense of identity or belonging because you are an outcast in both areas.

Dr.Sarabia: Yes, I think again this issue of deportation is based its right on the idea of borders right its only when you have borders that you have to defend and police and surveil then you have this system of removal that it's in many ways it can be very not temporary but permanent these removals can be very permanent. And when I interviewed people about it yeah, a decade ago that was the hardest thing that I think belonging, belonging to the nation is very abstract



right like does it mean to be Mexican what does it mean to be US American but belonging really takes place at the personal level. Where is my family? Where do I have friends? Where do I have a community that I can find support? And of course, again we live under these structural umbrellas that really thrive through difference, through hierarchal difference and so as you were mentioning about gender that we are very complex. I might be a brown woman but as a cis woman I have certain privileges, as a highly educated woman I have certain privileges but under certain context I look the same as a janitor right so this language issue, language is a tool of power so if you don't speak standard English if you speak with an accent, if you don't speak standard Spanish if you speak with an accent you become an easy target. And I you know again sort of I, taking classes in Chicana Chicano studies sort of understanding these complexities, you know that people don't speak broken English or broken Spanish out of a choice language is a tool for communication and those who grow up in the US English is very dominant so most people who grow up in the US most children who grow up in the US don't speak perfect Spanish whatever that is. I have a ten-year-old kid who goes to a bilingual school 80% of instruction is in Spanish at home we only speak Spanish we only watch tv in Spanish and yet he forgets words in Spanish. Sometimes he can't you know so I'm like where are you getting all this English we live in a country where English is dominant and so we have learned to shame people who do not speak correct English and we have learned to shame people who do not speak correct Spanish whatever that means right. So that makes it hard for people to feel like they can build a community when they are not being accepted because their form of communication its different. And so yes I think it's a tragedy for people who are not able to cross borders because they are prevented by a criminal system that again prevents them from being where they have family, they have community in many ways I think people who migrated to the US they love visiting Mexico they love going back and visiting but when it's a forced choice where you don't have a choice of whether you can be in Sacramento spending Christmas or Michoacan spending Christmas when you are forced to stay in a place and again some of these choices are not temporary they are permanent. I interviewed many deported migrants who had been banned for life from coming to the US, that means you won't be able to ever you know go back to the place where you went to elementary school, or you may not be able to visit your elderly grandmother. I interviewed a woman who was the victim of domestic violence and the ex-husband called immigration on her and she lived along the border and her children lived in the US and they were able to see each other once a month. But these are not I think that's what makes them painful and violent that these are not choices people make that the state forces these choices on people. And again, if you had family in Arizona then you can visit them but if you have family in Mexico then this fictitious line on the land will prevent you in many times in many ways visit with people you love. And so yeah, it's just it is tragic for those that are caught in this very violent legal system, but then again, we have seen it in the US the legal system has been used as an excuse to exercise violence on people of color in many different ways through the prison system, through the immigration system and my hope is that someday that system will be dismantled and changed and sometimes it seems like it's getting worse rather than improving because militarization along the border has gotten worse but then you see the mobilizations around Black Lives Matter and the call for you know real reform on the criminal justice system and then you think maybe these kind of hopes are not so out of touch. We do have a new generation of people who are more aware of the violence that the criminal justice

system exerts on people and you are just hoping that the political system will change along with the ideals of a new generation who tends to be more open and more willing to change a system that has not worked for a long time.

**Outro Music Lyrics**

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice,"  
"Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.