

The Fruits of the “Dot Com”: The Migration and Integration Processes of Colombian and Puerto Rican Software Engineers in the United States

Lina Rincón

This paper compares the strategies Colombian and Puerto Rican software engineers that migrated to the United States during the “dot com boom” used to negotiate their incorporation to American society. During the “dot com boom” (mid to late 1990s), governmental funding and the investment of venture capitalists contributed to the research and development of Internet and computer technologies in the military and financial industries in the United States (Schiller 2000). This phenomenon created a high demand for software programmers, network engineers and technical managers in key information technology hubs in Silicon Valley, the Research Triangle in North Carolina and Route 128 in Massachusetts (Cornelius et al 2001).

During this economic boom information technology companies pushed the American government to increase the visa cap for skilled workers (Chellaraj et.al 2006).

Additionally, during this period these companies implemented policies to enforce anti-discrimination and affirmative action laws (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). Similarly to software engineers that came to the United States from India and China, Colombian and Puerto Rican professionals migrated to the United States to join the IT economy. In fact, since 2000 the number of Colombian and Puerto Rican professionals in Science, Technology and Math occupations has increased by about a hundred percent (US Census 2000, 2010).

Based on sixty in-depth interviews with Colombian and Puerto Rican engineers employed by information technology companies in the metropolitan and suburban areas

of Boston, New York City and Rochester, NY, this research shows that these migrants negotiate the opportunities and constraints of their incorporation to American society by displaying and enacting forms of identity that support discourses of national and/or global citizenship. In addition to discussing the integration experiences of these engineers, the paper examines the push and pull factors motivating the migration of these groups of professionals, as well as the recruitment mechanisms used by information technologies companies in these territories.

In this paper, discourses of national citizenship denote strong attachments to the American nation expressed in narratives of patriotism and the defense of merit, individualism and colorblindness. Discourses of global citizenship reject nation-based legal frameworks by pushing forward universalistic ideas of human rights, scientific cultures, cross border entrepreneurialism, the reliance on market mechanisms to provide incentives, or the disaggregation from national or ethnic identities. Post-national discourses of citizenship defend the idea of participating and belonging to spheres that exist beyond the nation-state (Soysal 1994, 1997; Leach and Scoones 2003; Ong 2006; Root 2007; Grumer-Domic 2011).

I argue that Colombian and Puerto Rican software engineers in the United States have a combination of experiences that are conducive to the endorsement and participation in global forms of citizenship. Engineering graduates believe they are citizens of the world with unlimited and unrestrained opportunities of social mobility because they have been immersed in the communities of knowledge created by the nexus between their hometown universities and the American information technology industry. Indeed, the

recruitment strategies information technology companies used in engineering schools fed these beliefs by promising attractive work opportunities to these recent graduates.

At the same time, the attachments these engineers had to their national and ethnic identities are often weak. The nature of these attachments was marked by the historically unstable relationship these engineers had with their home territories. This relationship triggered a reflexive and critical view of nation-state institutions. The economic and political security situation of the educated middle classes in Colombia has been impacted by extortions and kidnappings perpetrated by illegal armed forces such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. In the absence of government control, the armed conflict resulted in a massive exodus of the middle and upper middle classes to the United States and Spain (Murcia and Parrado 1999; Cardenas and Mejia 2008). In the Puerto Rican case, the colonial relationship that the island has sustained with the United States causes an array of political sentiment among island natives and migrants in the United States. Some Puerto Ricans support the independence of the island and others support the recognition of Puerto Rico as an official and autonomous state (Grosfroguel 2003; Whalen et al 2005).

Over the years of their incorporation to American society, these engineers encountered a constrained context of reception that hindered their social mobility because of their national and ethnic origins. Unemployment, delayed or downward occupational mobility, racism, gender discrimination and legal constraints are among the challenges these engineers confronted. Many of these engineers landed what they considered to be good engineering jobs, but upward mobility became increasingly challenging after the “dot

com” bubble burst in the early 2000s and during the years of the economic crisis (2007-2008).

These engineers suffered delays in salary raises and lay offs, as well as hostile and competitive work environments. Hostile work environments were characterized by discriminatory episodes associated with the specific ethnoracial, gender and legal characteristics of these highly skilled migrants. Colombian professionals faced long waiting periods to be granted legal permanent residence. These waiting periods impacted their social mobility, as well as their personal and financial decision-making processes regarding family and professional development. Puerto Rican professionals were stereotyped based on their phenotype and their colonial history with the United States (Whalen et. al 2005; Aranda 2007).

This study shows how Puerto Rican and Colombian software engineers devised strategies to emphasize their professional value as well as their cultural and human capital in institutional settings. They highlighted categories of self-worth that supported ideas of independence and competence when promoting the quality of their work. In some cases, these engineers reported increased loyalties to the United States, while others advocated for global loyalties such as their belonging to global scientific cultures, cross border entrepreneurialism, market citizenship and a desire to migrate elsewhere. These changing loyalties reveal revived and coexistent notions of both national and global citizenship as a response to the uncertainty created by their social and legal liminality (Menjivar 2008).