

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**MARILYNN S. JOHNSON** is a professor of history at Boston College. In 2015, she published *The New Bostonians: How Immigrants Have Transformed the Metro Area Since the 1960s* and has since begun work on an immigration website. Johnson spoke with Boisi Center interim director **Erik Owens** before presenting on her research at a lunch colloquium.

**OWENS:** Boston is not typically seen as an immigrant city today, but rather a bastion of New England, Irish, white, and other demographics. How far from reality is this perception? How has this changed in recent decades?

**JOHNSON:** That image of the white, Irish city is a legacy of the past immigration. Boston was and always has been a center of immigration, whether it was in the mid-19th century or right now in the present. Even during the restriction years, between the 1920s and the 1960s, when there were relatively few immigrants coming to the country, Boston continued to get inflows of refugees and others because there were older generations of immigrants here and family connections between them. And, of course, we have lots of universities. That has always attracted a lot of immigrants and refugees from intellectual and scientific communities.

With the new immigration law in 1965, the whole country saw a big change in terms of the numbers, origins, and types of immigrants who came. Boston experienced that in dramatic terms. It has been and continues to be one of the top ten largest receiving destinations among large cities. So we've kind of gone back in some ways to the earlier period in the 19th and early-20th centuries, when we were a very big immigrant gateway.

**OWENS:** Can you sketch out some of the specifics in terms of largest groups of immigrant populations, languages, and religions?



**JOHNSON:** The largest groups have been pretty consistent now for over ten years. Chinese, Dominicans, and Haitians are the three largest groups. Each of them has hovered around the 10% mark of total foreign-born. There are other groups that are not that far behind—Vietnamese, Salvadorans, Brazilians, and Cape Verdeans. More recently, there's been an influx of south Asians, Indians in particular. That has been a more recent migration since the 1990s, although it has earlier precedents. There are many, many other groups.

One of the hallmarks of the new immigration is that it has such diverse origins. If you go back and look—I have a chart in my book that shows this—if you look at 1910 versus 2010 and the makeup of

the foreign-born population in Boston, it's really striking. There were groups from five countries in 1910 that made up more than three-quarters of immigrants. Today, it's several dozen countries that make up that same percentage.

**OWENS:** How does the percentage of foreign-born residents here relate to other major cities and the national average?

**JOHNSON:** As I said, Boston is consistently in the top ten among largest cities. It certainly doesn't compare to places like Los Angeles, Miami, and New York, which have consistently the highest rates in the country. But Boston's are pretty high. At this point, 28% of residents in the city of Boston are foreign-born. That's more than a quarter of the population. If we consider the American-born children of those immigrants, we're getting up to probably the 40-50 percent range. That's pretty significant.

**OWENS:** How does the process of assimilation work in Boston? Can you tell us what that looks like for different immigrant groups and whether or not the mode has changed over the years?

**JOHNSON:** Sociologists and others tend to talk in terms of immigrant integration today, because it means that while you are integrating in society, you're still holding onto many of your own cultural traditions and practices. You don't have to

abandon those in order to integrate into American society.

I think it varies by social class. Of course, we have many more high-income, highly skilled immigrants today because of the skill preferences in the 1965 Immigration Act and other legislation that's been passed since then that's provided different kinds of visas to bring in skilled workers. Many of those workers do speak English already. They have skills, they're able to go into workplaces, and they have the income to be able to settle in a variety of different city neighborhoods or suburbs. Their integration experience is relatively smooth compared to less affluent immigrants and immigrants in the past who were disproportionately semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

It's really split, I'd say, because for these working class immigrants, especially if they don't speak English, which many of them don't, it can be very difficult to learn English for a variety of reasons. Language acquisition can be really important in terms of integration. If you're working two or three jobs, it can be difficult to have the time or energy to take language classes. There's also a tremendous backlog in English language classes. People who try to get into them often have to wait months, if not years, to get in. There have been efforts by the city of Boston and by various nonprofits to try and shorten those lines and deliver those services. Still, I think the odds are pretty stacked against people, given the various demands that they have and the availability of services.

**OWENS:** So does that lead to a strong separation of non-English speakers from the general population?

**JOHNSON:** It does, because the less familiarity you have with the culture, the less ability you have to engage with it. One way to engage is through speaking English. There are many services now that are delivered in a number of different languages. But in general, and particularly in many workplaces, it really

helps to have English. What happens then is that immigrants tend to cluster in certain neighborhoods, especially ones they can afford, to get the support that they need. So integration takes longer, and it's usually not going to happen until the second generation—the children who grow up here and have familiarity with the culture.

**OWENS:** As a religion scholar, I was pleased to see a chapter on immigrant religion. Could you say a bit about what you

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discovered about the religious practices of immigrants and how they've changed over time?

**JOHNSON:** This was something that I wanted to do from the outset because religion is such a big force in Boston. You can't understand local politics without understanding the role of the Catholic Church. Until recently, there wasn't that much writing by sociologists or by religious scholars about the role of immigrant religion. There is increasingly more now, but not a whole lot on the Boston area.

This is something I became interested in initially in looking at the Catholic Church. I was trying to understand how the church was welcoming and inte-

grating new immigrants. Then I started looking at what Protestant churches were doing as well. Both groups were doing similar kinds of things, in terms of creating new foreign-language congregations to accommodate new groups, but they did it in rather different ways. What I've found is that in some ways, the Protestants had a more nimble, flexible model that was much more decentralized. It was often able to accommodate new immigrants better than the Catholic Church, which has this huge infrastructure and all kinds of financial crises and personnel problems that the church has been through in recent years. It was interesting to look at the two strategies and to see how local religious institutions were able to be successful or not in welcoming new immigrants.

I also look at world religions. This is a really big topic. Here I just did a smattering of studies of some of the larger institutions—a Hindu temple in Ashland and a Buddhist temple in Quincy, and then a couple of different mosques in the area. In those cases, you usually don't have local institutions with deep roots that were able to provide the infrastructure, so they have had to create these religious institutions out of whole cloth, as it were, but often getting a lot of support from religious bodies back in their home countries.

**OWENS:** Right, in the time-honored American fashion of civil society and institution-building.

**JOHNSON:** Exactly. The one exception, which I thought was quite interesting, was with Islam. There was an older Syrian and Lebanese population in the Boston area. It was actually the second largest concentration in America after New York. Most of those Syrians and Lebanese were Christians, either Catholic or Orthodox. But there was a small group of Muslims in the Quincy area who started a prayer group back in the 1920s or '30s, and that eventually grew into a mosque in the early 1960s. That mosque became

a forerunner—various groups split off from it and formed mosques in Cambridge, Roxbury, and another down in Sharon. And there are many others that have grown up apart from it. But there was something of a small history here of Muslim religion prior to the 1960s.

**OWENS:** That's really interesting. Two more big questions for you. One is about what Americans would call race relations, and people from other countries will see differently. How have the waves of immigration in Boston impacted the local race relations as residents understand it here?

**JOHNSON:** It's really complicated. We have developed this whole model of race and racial classifications since the middle of the 20th century, and it's been evolving continuously. It's very hard to actually track certain populations, like Latinos, because the definitions of Hispanic change with almost every census. But when you're looking at the foreign-born population, many people—a majority of whom are people of color—don't ascribe to the census-designated categories, yet they have been forced to choose an identity.

I was actually just working as a volunteer at Citizenship Day this weekend helping people fill out their naturalization paperwork. When I got to the question on race, I had to explain to them: these are the categories. You may not like them or understand them, but you need to choose one, because all questions have to be answered on the form. People really roll their eyes and say: I'm not this, I'm not that.

That, of course, introduces some real differences between native-born black and Latino populations and foreign-born. Some recognize these categories and identify with them, and in fact worked hard to get those categories constructed for purposes of civil rights and affirmative action. But some new migrants really find them annoying and inaccurate. They are much more likely to identify in terms



of ethnicity and maybe even tribal affiliations in certain parts of Africa or Asia.

It has sort of complicated the landscape, and it's complicated politics in the city in ways that have made for some difficult relationships between native and foreign-born people of color, particularly African descent people and those of Latin American descent. This may also present some openings in the future, some new ways of getting beyond the racial categories that we've been locked into. That remains to be seen.

But many people of color—particularly the children of foreign-born who have moved into political office in the city of Boston and some of the surrounding communities—I think they understand native-born conceptions of race because they've experienced it themselves. But they also understand their parents' concerns about ethnicity and culture and preserving their home country culture, and have tried to bring these things together. They may be equally concerned about civil rights issues as well as issues of deportation and other problems around immigrant rights.

**OWENS:** Do you see a surge of interest in claiming citizenship or applying for citizenship around election times, like now? Or is this simply not possible, given the bureaucratic nature of these things?

**JOHNSON:** There certainly has been this year for obvious reasons, particularly among Latinos. At least, that's what reports have been across the country. At this point, as I discovered working this weekend, it's already too late in terms of getting through the process in time to be able to vote in the fall. I think this whole year we have seen a tremendous surge in the number of immigrants wanting to naturalize and to vote, and there have been stepped-up efforts to do that. The same thing was true with Proposition 187 back in the '90s in California. We saw a big up-tick. When there are immigration issues front and center in the elections, that does tend to drive up the number of people who want to register to vote and become citizens.

In general, I think there has been a bigger push toward citizenship and naturalization in the past ten years or so. This has to do with the repressive nature of the immigration situation right now and fears of family separation through deportation and other problems—the difficulties of traveling if you come from certain regions or countries.

I personally know colleagues here at Boston College who decided to naturalize because it was so difficult to go abroad for a conference—every time you go in and out of the country to be pulled aside and



detained and delayed. Getting citizenship is one way of reducing some of those problems. It also helps if you want to bring your immediate family members over. You can move up in the line. So that's been a big incentive for a lot of people as well.

**OWENS:** Your book project has spawned an interesting web project ([globalboston.bc.edu](http://globalboston.bc.edu)), as well. Maybe we could finish by hearing a bit about the aims of the project and the scope of the web project.

**JOHNSON:** When I finished this book, I had to cut a lot of material that it kind of broke my heart not to include. I focused on the half-dozen or so largest immigrant groups, but there were others that I had investigated and found some interesting information about and couldn't include.

I also became interested in earlier groups and the connections between old immigrants and new immigrants, both similarities and differences. People tend to assume that the new immigrant experience is similar to the old immigrant experience. In some ways, it is, but in many ways, it isn't. Understanding some of those differences in migrants' lives and in the social, economic, and political context is really important.

I decided I wanted to keep working on this subject, but to do it through a website—a digital history project. I am in the process of creating it and have already put on-line the first bits, but it will continue to grow. It's called Global Boston and looks at both old and new groups. At this point, I have three areas on the website. One is a kind of chronological overview of immigration history in Boston, and then another section touches on different ethnic groups and their experiences. I'm just now starting a section on immigrant places, which will look at immigrant neighborhoods and other communities—towns and suburbs that have high numbers of foreign born. I want to examine the history of these places. In many cases, the places where migrants live and work now are places that immigrants

were in the past, but the communities are quite different now.

It's been fun. I'm trying to get students involved with creating the content for the site. I've had both graduate and undergraduate students who are helping me with the project, and now I have my first seminar class that is working on doing a collaborative project on a community history of East Boston, looking at different immigrant communities there. For several years now, East Boston has had the largest percentage of foreign-born residents of any neighborhood in the city. It was also one of the top immigrant neighborhoods in the early 20th century. As such, it's a microcosm of immigration history in the city.

We're headed out there tomorrow for a walking tour to get my students familiar with the neighborhood. When I asked them if any of them had been to East Boston, no hands went up. Then if I asked them if they had been to Logan Airport, just about everybody's hand went up. I

said, well, you've been there. Now we're going to see another side of it.

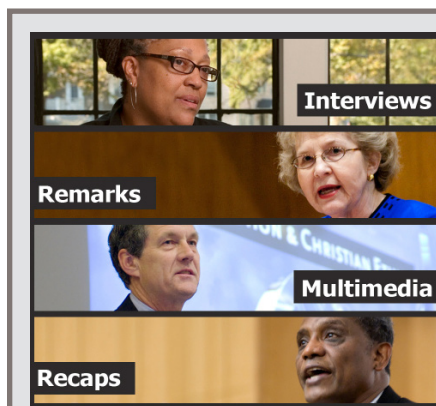
**OWENS:** What a great project. You'll have oral histories included and things like that?

**JOHNSON:** Yes, we're going to include oral histories, as well as historical documents, images, videos, statistical tables, and more.

**OWENS:** I'd love to see that stuff flourishing because it's such a great opportunity to combine scholarship and learning from students and people outside the university.

**JOHNSON:** Yes, and students really appreciate doing public history projects, because they get tired of putting all this effort into writing papers that only the professor reads. If they can create something that will add to public knowledge and have a public face, they will do better work.

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