

Trumpism, Mexican America, and the Struggle for Latinx Citizenship

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*Edited by Phillip B. Gonzales,
Renato Rosaldo, and Mary Louise Pratt*

SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH PRESS • SANTA FE

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS • ALBUQUERQUE

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Names: Gonzales, Felipe, 1946– editor. |
Rosaldo, Renato, editor. | Pratt, Mary Louise,
1948– editor.

Title: Trumpism, Mexican America, and
the struggle for Latinx citizenship / edited by
Phillip B. Gonzales, Renato Rosaldo, and
Mary Louise Pratt.

Other titles: School for Advanced Research
advanced seminar series.

Description: Santa Fe: School for Advanced
Research Press: Albuquerque: University of
New Mexico Press, 2021. | Series: School for
Advanced Research advanced seminar series
| The seminar from which this book resulted
was made possible by the generous support of
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Support
for the book was provided by The UNM Center
for Regional Studies. | Includes bibliographical
references and index

Identifiers: LCCN 2021028020 (print)
LCCN 2021028021 (e-book)
ISBN 9780826362841 (paperback)
ISBN 9780826362858 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Trump, Donald, 1946—
Influence. | Mexican Americans—Political
activity. | Hispanic Americans—Political
activity. | Political culture—United States—
21st century. | United States—Politics and
government—2017– | United States—
Race relations—History—21st century. |
United States—Social policy—1993–

Classification: LCC E184.M5 T785 2021 (print) |
LCC E184.M5 (e-book) | DDC973.046872—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021028020>

LC e-book record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021028021>

Founded in 1889, the University of
New Mexico sits on the traditional homelands
of the Pueblo of Sandia. The original
peoples of New Mexico—Pueblo, Navajo,
and Apache—since time immemorial have
deep connections to the land and have made
significant contributions to the broader
community statewide. We honor the land
itself and those who remain stewards of this
land throughout the generations and also
acknowledge our committed relationship to
Indigenous peoples. We gratefully recognize
our history.

Cover illustration: Photograph of Eliana
Fernández and her family outside the US
Supreme Court on November 12, 2019.
Courtesy of Eliana Fernández

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Chapter Four. “Reckoning with the Gaze,”
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The seminar from which this book resulted
was made possible by the generous support
of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.
Support for the book was provided by
the UNM Center for Regional Studies.

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To anyone with a spark of awareness, it was evident that Donald Trump's 2016 campaign for president promoted social divisiveness and posed threats to America's liberal value of inclusion. In the key effect, it promoted a return to a dominant-white-citizen nation. The general vulnerability of Latinxs appeared with considerable clarity as Trump racialized Mexican immigrants, pledged mass criminalization and deportation, damned amnesty, threatened DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and in his first days as president, signed directives to build a wall along the Mexican border. Mexican American and Chicana and Chicano organizations and immigrant activists protested at the Trump inauguration and geared up for what looked like the sure need for continual resistance during his administration.

A week after confirmation of the results of the 2016 presidential election, the School for Advanced Research (SAR) in Santa Fe announced that it would be accepting proposals for its Advanced Seminar program. We had digested the dynamics of the presidential campaign, particularly as they touched on Mexican Americans, Mexican nationals, Central Americans, undocumented youth, asylum seekers, and Latinxs in general. Trump's threats, in particular those against people of Mexican extraction, prompted us to submit a proposal for an Advanced Seminar on the theme of the shifting terrains of citizenship among Mexican Americans and Latinx peoples in the United States. "Historically," we said, "Mexican Americans have been denied full and equal citizenship. Donald Trump's presidency may well emerge as the latest instance of citizenship restriction for them."

We planned our seminar, involving a set of scholars in Latinx studies with a range of disciplinary orientations to take place in Santa Fe about halfway through Trump's term in office. As we projected, by the time the seminar essays would be ready for publication, the Trump administration would be nearing the end of term of office that he would serve. One of our main intents was to develop analytical tools that would enable us to take stock of this historically unique presidency.

We envisioned the seminar taking on a number of questions. Some addressed the present. For example, to what extent would the Trump administration indeed make good on the anti-immigration, anti-immigrant, and anti-Latinx

threats that candidate Trump made? What kinds of experiences would Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Central Americans in particular have under a Trump presidency? What, if any, responses might they devise to an emerging era of repression? Another set of questions addressed the past. What strands of US history was Trumpism—the general practices and policies associated with Trump’s leadership— mobilizing as sources of power? Who were Trump’s ideological forbears, especially as regards Mexican and other Latinx people in America? What complexities did Trumpism overlook, at its peril?

Prior to our weeklong gathering in Santa Fe, each participant submitted a draft chapter for presentation. What each eventually produced for publication was shaped by responses from members of the group, the excitement of the highly energized interactions of the seminar itself, and specific events that subsequently took place over the course of Trump’s presidential term.

We are grateful to SAR for providing us with the opportunity to meet, interactively explore, and address, within the scholarly specialties of our member scholars, themes of current political and civic importance. We owe our thanks to the following people: the members of SAR’s proposal selection committee; President Michael Brown for his warm welcome to the wonderful SAR facility in Santa Fe; Maria Spray for her logistical and scheduling guidance during our stay; Sarah Soliz for the editorial assistance needed to get the volume out; and our two outside readers, whose input provided invaluable recommendations. With deep appreciation, we thank the indefatigable and attentive hosting team on the SAR grounds, whose provision of accommodations, meals, meeting spaces, and infrastructure made our gathering possible and deeply enjoyable. We are all the more grateful because, unbeknownst to us, that exciting face-to-face intellectual interaction was about to disappear from our lives, snatched away by the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we express our gratitude to the Center for Regional Studies at the University of New Mexico, under the leadership of Dr. Gabriel Meléndez and Dr. Lloyd Lee, for the support it provided toward production of the book.

Introduction

PHILLIP B. GONZALES, RENATO ROSALDO, AND MARY LOUISE PRATT

What does it mean to “belong” to a modern society and nation-state, or what is more properly called a territorial state? One of the major ways in which scholars have dealt with such a question is from the standpoint of citizenship. The concept of citizenship, traced to ancient Athens, is generally understood to embody two dimensions. First, it accords a legal status that grants individuals the rights, responsibilities, and liberties laid down by the formal charter of the territorial state, including participation in public institutions. Second, citizenship accords membership and belonging in a presumed, or perhaps “imagined” (Anderson 1983), national community. Citizenship involves both political and cultural dimensions. The European Enlightenment and the French Revolution are typically identified as sources of the modern ideals of universal citizenship, equality, and inclusivity.

These ideals have long held ideological sway as the foundation of membership in Western democracies. For T. H. Marshall (1987), one of the leading theorists of liberal citizenship, modern citizenship going into the twentieth century consisted of three elements: civil, political, and social. Civil citizenship involves “the rights necessary for individual freedom—liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice.” The political means “the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body.” Social citizenship is “the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security, to the right to share, to the full, in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (5).

Throughout their history in the United States, people of Mexican descent (our main point of focus in this volume, with one chapter on Central Americans) have been made to question their belonging to the American social fabric and polity. Throughout that history, the fact of the matter is that Marshall’s model has

rarely been adequately realized (Rocco 2014). Accordingly, the critique of liberal citizenship appears as the lens through which to consider Mexican America—that is, the very holistic experience of people of Mexican descent in US society.

The reason that the situation of Mexican America cannot be understood solely through European models of citizenship is that the territorial states in the Americas were founded on the basis of settler colonialism. The settlers, whether English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese, were regarded as the dominant ethnic nationals who were seen as superior to those of other ethnicities, whether enslaved people of African descent, or Native Americans, or Mexican Americans. As postcolonial theorists such as Partha Chatterjee and Americanists such as Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, Greg Grandin, and Cristina Beltrán (this volume) demonstrate, any discussion of state and citizenship in the Americas must incorporate this foundational fact.

A major issue involves the relationship between citizenship, on one hand, and race or ethnicity, on the other. Anthony Smith describes the greater sociopolitical context: “Though most latter-day nations are, in fact, polyethnic, many have been formed in the first place around a dominant ethnîe, which attracted or compelled other ethnîes or ethnic fragments into the state to which it gave a name and cultural charter. The presumed boundaries of the nation are largely determined by the myths and memories of the dominant ethnîe, which include the foundation charter, the myth of the golden age and the associated territorial claims, or ethnic title-deeds” (1991, 39). Stuart Hall and David Held framed the issue in relation to changing conditions in Europe: “Older European ideas of citizenship assumed a more culturally homogeneous population within the framework of a strong and unitary state. But social and cultural identities have become more diversified and ‘pluralized’ in modern society. The modern nation-state is increasingly composed of groups with very different ethnic and cultural identities” (1990, 187). The result, as Michal Hanchard observes, is that the “longstanding tendency in Western democracies” has been to envision citizenship “in ethno-racial terms” (quoted in Gooding-Williams 2019, 2).

These questions raised in the 1990s generated a critical rethinking of citizenship’s liberal ideals. Critical theorists suggested that what drove principles of citizenship was not inclusion, but exclusion. Along with the category of citizen, they noted, Athenians themselves created categories of people excluded from citizenship: foreigners, slaves, and of course women (Gooding-Williams 2019). In modern liberal republics, theorists argued, structures of privilege and marginalization were not an unfortunate by-product, but seemingly the whole

point. Creating a “hierarchy of political status,” says Rocco, is “the real function of citizenship regimes” (2014, 22). Citizenship, in other words, does not simply establish a community of those who rightfully belong. It establishes a regime of power based on relations and policies of inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and disempowerment, privilege and subjugation (Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Within this theoretical development, Held and Hall (1990) wondered how concepts of national community would adapt to “pluralization” and heterogeneity? What kind of belonging could citizenship regimes offer to those arriving in large numbers from elsewhere, often uninvited and unauthorized? What kind of adaptation could they demand? How could the construct of legal citizenship cope with racial hierarchies designed to enforce inequality? How could citizenship be decolonized?

In reality, variations on this order of critical questions have been foundational for Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants for a long time; in fact, they define the essential contours of Mexican American history. As historians have shown, the Mexican American struggle for full citizenship, recognition, and belonging in the United States has shaped the evolution of the American political landscape (see Montejano 1987; De León 1997; Foley 2014; Molina 2014). Themselves subject to racial discrimination, Mexican Americans and Native Americans fatally disrupted the United States’ founding racial order: the Black/white binary. With Native Americans, the fact that they were subjugated and disenfranchised without having been enslaved created ambiguity and instability in the original white supremacist citizenship regime. With Mexican Americans, the ambiguity lay in their ability to participate in American democracy at the same time that they are subject to white America’s racialized discriminations.