
Review

Cruelty as citizenship: How migrant suffering sustains white democracy

Cristina Beltrán

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Cristina Beltrán's objective in her evocative and beautifully written *Cruelty as Citizenship* is to offer an explanation for what is at the heart of American nativism and its manifestation as virulently anti-immigrant. The theoretical component conceptualizes 'whiteness' and its dominant features, arguing that whiteness is at the core of nativist movements in the USA. Her empirical component demonstrates the ways in which white nativism has manifested itself in the past. This work ensures that the history of the USA is told correctly from the perspective of those who were harmed by its colonial, expansionist, impulses. It also demonstrates the deep-seatedness of this nativism: Americans have celebrated 'whiteness', wielding 'white supremacy' against non-whites for several centuries. For Beltrán, and given this history, there is nothing surprising about the way Donald Trump's America turned against non-citizens, especially those whose origins are in Latin America.

Beltrán examines three historical time periods – first slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow laws, then the expansionist movement westward that destroyed Native American communities, and finally in more detail the expansionist movement southward to take over Mexican territory and assimilate (or destroy) Mexican-origin citizens. All of these periods, Beltrán says, are characterized by open cruelty towards non-whites. Beltrán observes that the freedom of white movement – to expand west and south – is predicated on the belief that it is justifiable, and even natural, to remove and relocate non-whites who are in their way (p. 63). The logic of pressing forward to do so is justified in a range of ways. For example, during the Mexican-American War (of 1848–1850) 'attacks on Mexicans were legitimated through depicting them as enemy soldiers, bandits, or revolutionaries – violence, duplicitous, criminal, and unfit for citizenship' (p. 81).

Whites in all these periods take an active role in the 'daily creation of segregated space' (p. 48). What is striking about white Americans' behavior is their ability to believe themselves to be fair and law-abiding citizens, all the while treating non-



whites with cruelty and disdain (p. 58). Says Beltrán, white democracy has in fact been defined by ‘the ability to render certain populations rightless, to deny members of the community equality under the law, and to see them only as an undeserving threat – while still seeing themselves as lawful and honorable – *that* is the tyranny that lies at the heart of white democracy’ (p. 124, emphasis in original). For example, lynch mobs – directed against Mexicans as well as Blacks – expected to be celebrated rather than penalized, even though their actions were formally illegal. Just as with Black Americans, the celebration of violence against Mexicans provided whites with ‘the opportunity to be the bearer of rights and legal equality while being free to deny those same rights to racialized communities was an intoxicating civic synthesis’ (p. 89).

A key and quite striking feature of white behavior is the ‘participatory politics of white cruelty’ (p. 125). That is, for whites, the project of settling, expanding, colonializing, enslaving, is an inclusive, participatory one; for most of its history Beltrán describes America as a *Herrenvolk* democracy (p. 14), in which there is a dominant, master, race. Just about all whites contribute to this project by inflicting, celebrating, witnessing and tolerating violence against non-whites: ‘this wide array of actions and practices highlights how profoundly participatory white democracy has been’ (p. 59). As a result, a kind of inclusive solidarity among whites, bolstered by the exclusion and hatred of non-whites, has provided succor to those who are less well-off by ensuring that they do better, and in fact are better, than at least some others.

It is especially through her analysis of ‘Mexican conquest’ that Beltrán draws out the implications for contemporary nativism, so much of which is directed towards migrants at the Mexican-US border: ‘the legacy of this violence and racialized approach to the law can be seen in the treatment of migrants at the border and in contemporary practices of migrant arrest and detention’ (p. 77). The stereotypes developed in the mid-late 1840s, of Mexicans as barbarous and uncivilized, as violent and dangerous, are carried into contemporary nativist rhetoric nearly unchanged. The perception that the border is out of control, and that citizens are justified in joining in efforts to police it, remains. While white democracy has at least been legally constrained by the formal expansion of equality to all citizens in the USA, this equality among citizens now seems to encourage and even legitimize violence against *non-citizens*. Migrants at the US-Mexican border, says Beltrán, are ‘one of the few racialized populations that can still be made legally subject to the violent rhetoric and practices of white democracy’ (p. 91).

Beltrán’s narrative highlights the stories of those who suffered grievously as a result of US expansionism, noting how distinct populations suffered in similar ways, and how the discourse of whiteness permeates all of these expansion efforts. However, she does see some hope in the history that she tells, especially in the growing backlash against nativism in its current instantiations.



For one thing, in the face of American expansionism, non-whites did *not* give up or cede space; and they are still *not* ceding space. They did *not* accept the logic of assimilationism or the obligation to bow down in the face of white privilege and domination. Instead, they have continued to assert themselves and take up space. Here is Beltrán describing the Mexican response, ‘not only did Mexicans endure as a visible and purposeful presence on their land and in their communities but they continued to migrate and claim social, political, and cultural space’ (p. 82).

For another, in the present Beltrán sees a real shift in how whites are engaging with questions of race, and in their willingness to take real, concrete actions in support of non-white co-citizens. She cites white participation in the Black Lives Matter movement as a key example (p. 121). The nativists, though loud, cannot undermine ‘the reality of America as a multiracial democracy’ (p. 119).

Cruelty as Citizenship is a short text, explicitly intended to raise critical questions and ideas for public discussion. There are other questions Beltrán might have given some more thought to, certainly – I was struck by the near complete absence of even a cursory discussion of the persistent discrimination and racism directed towards Americans of middle eastern origin or Muslims more generally (mentioned only at p. 27 n, 57, and repeated verbatim at p.67 n, 9). In her discussion of the discourse at Trump rallies, Beltrán explicitly notes the attacks on multiple non-white groups, including Native Indians, Blacks, and Jews, implying that there are interesting connections to make here about the vitriol directed at Latin American-origin citizens and residents, and migrants at the US-Mexico border, and other non-white groups. In particular, Trump’s discourse may seem to contradict Beltrán’s central claim, that white nativism has been redirected to focus only or largely on non-citizens.

I also wondered whether more attention ought to have been given to a key difference between the historical moments that Beltrán describes, which on the one hand feature the movement of Americans into territory that belongs to others, and, on the other hand, the movement of non-Americans into American territory. The movement is different – in one case by expansionist Americans and in the other by vulnerable migrants seeking a better life. In the former, the wrong is expansionism and the destruction it generates; in the latter, the wrong is in denying entry to vulnerable migrants. So one alternative way to explain current nativist attitudes is to emphasize the way in which the USA has historically excluded outsiders; a case could be made that the response to migrants at the US-Mexico border flows more from a history of American attempts to deny non-whites entry to the USA than from a history of American expansionism. These stories are of course not incompatible, though the locus of emphasis is distinct.

Finally, I would like to know more about what explains the current movement away from white nativism. What explains why it is that some whites are currently prepared to ally with non-whites, by willingly joining with them to demand justice for *all*? Beltrán explains that the formal equality of whites with non-whites has



taken away a source of important privilege for many of those who have responded with virulent nativism against migrants. But, has this legal protection of equality also enabled whites to better see that a formal commitment to legal equality has not translated into substantive equality for many non-whites? These questions are not criticisms of a book that is short by design; rather they are questions to which I am certain Beltrán has interesting answers. *Citizenship as Cruelty* has given readers what they need to question celebratory accounts of American history by offering a plausible and persuasive explanation for the anti-immigrant orientation of current instantiations of American, white, nativism.

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