

Cristina Beltrán. *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 126pp., \$10 USD paperback (ISBN: 978-1-5179-1192-8)

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In her book *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy*, Cristina Beltrán uses past practices of *Herrenvolk* democracy as a means for exploring the nativist treatment of noncitizen migrants in the contemporary United States. *Herrenvolk* democracy is a concept taken from the sociologist Van der Berghe (1967, 18) in which a regime is “democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups”. This kind of regime simultaneously promises white citizens equality (between one another) and privilege (over non-whites), treating non-whites as “*anticitizens*”, the Other who threatens and consolidates white citizenship, and who “[ensure] that no white ever need find himself or herself at the absolute bottom of the social and political barrel” (Beltrán 2020, 45. Emphasis in original; Olson 2004, 43, 29-30).

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Beltrán examines historical *Herrenvolk* democratic practices during the American Frontier, the Mexican-American War, and the eras of slavery and Jim Crow. White men on the frontier were free to both create and enforce the law, allowing them to terrorize the people into whose territory they were expanding. Frontiersmen were permitted to both “practice ‘vigilante justice’” and “pardon those they felt had been treated unjustly” while people of colour were subject to racial terrorism (Beltrán 2020, 54-57. Emphasis removed; Grandin 2020, 22). Throughout the book, Beltrán highlights how the ability to enforce extra-legal terror on racialized minorities while being immune from legal consequences is a practice that continued through public lynching in the 19th and 20th centuries and continues through border militias today. Beltrán adds that during the Mexican-American war, the violence against Mexicans was often witnessed by the broader public, whose sanction gave the violence a public character similar to anti-Black lynchings. Understanding the public nature of the violence of the lynchings is necessary to understanding the role of the violence in *Herrenvolk* democracy, because it explains how this violence reinforced the dominant and subordinated races positions, by demonstrating how the former is above the law and reminding the latter of their position below it.

As Beltrán (2020, 111; Olson 2004, 76) notes, “today’s white advantage involves ‘probabilities, not guarantees’”. Despite persistent wealth gaps and continuing discrimination, Black Americans can no longer function as anticitizens, due to prominent examples of Black Americans (Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, LeBron James) who have achieved higher status than most whites. Noncitizen migrants, on the other hand, are not able to rise to prominence due to their precarity and can therefore serve as anticitizens in a *Herrenvolk* society, always remaining below the lowest whites. Noncitizens migrants are further made into anticitizens by demonizing them as a threatening Other through the ‘great replacement’, a racist theory which posits that “white people are being systematically ‘replaced’ by people of color through mass migration” (Beltrán 2020, 115). All of this creates a situation in which non-citizen migrants can be subjects of the extra-legal terror that defines *Herrenvolk* democracy.

Beltrán's work helps readers see contemporary nativist American immigration politics, not as an aberration, but as a continuation of *Herrenvolk* practices that have existed for centuries. This can help explain why America has border militias, despite Americans holding more positive opinions of immigrants than, for example, Italy, a country which also has high levels of disapproval in immigration and is experiencing an influx of refugees at their border. While the US has armed border militias, Italy uses government efforts and partnerships to attempt to slow migration (Gonzalez and Connor 2019). The book situates past violence, not as aberrations or as failures to live up to ideals, but as integral practices in the formation of American democracy. Therefore, it allows us to examine whether the same is true today: does America's mistreatment of migrants mean it is falling short of its self-image as a nation of immigrants, or is it part of its identity? Goals like building a border wall, practices like separating migrant children from their parents, and the existence border militias are evidence of the latter.

My principal criticism of the text is that it fails to acknowledge certain key differences between the historical periods Beltrán is covering and recent history. Lenard (2022) shares this criticism, highlighting how previous periods involved American expansion into non-American territory, whereas today's violent practices relate to non-Americans' movement into American territory. However, I would argue that the differences are more fundamental than Beltrán or Lenard posit.

Beltrán tries to use Trump's rallies as a stand in for the public violence of the past, which she compares to lynching, however, I argue there is a disjuncture in this comparison due to how the content of Trump rallies reveals a significant difference between past and present (Beltrán 2020, 105-107). Beltrán elucidates how Trump's speeches would "conjure images of 'deadly sanctuary cities' where 'dangerous, violent, criminal aliens' are continually 'hacking and raping and bludgeoning' American citizens", which Beltrán compares to "nineteenth century newspaper accounts that sought to satisfy white readers with the 'excruciating details' of lynchings" (Ibid). The nineteenth-century newspaper accounts reinforced *Herrenvolk* democracy because they reminded white readers of their dominant position. In this scenario, they are the citizens and the non-whites are the anti-citizens, and so the white citizens are reminded that no

matter how low their social standing, at least they are not subject to unpunished violence. The Trump rally inverts this relationship: non-citizen migrants are depicted as acting with impunity, protected by Democrats, and in Trump's telling, it is white citizens who are subject to unpunished violence at the hands of illegal immigrants - putting them closer to the position of anticitizens than dominant citizen.

This contradiction points to a recurring issue in Beltrán's argument: the racism she describes was based on superiority, whereas modern nativism activates a sense of threat. Beltrán (2020, 114) is correct when she describes the modern nativist as feeling a mixture of "envy, impotence, and rage" towards migrants, but she fails to see how that creates a fundamental disjuncture between the practitioners of *Herrenvolk* democracy and modern nativists. An approach which sufficiently contextualises the continuity *and* divergence between past and contemporary practices would be more theoretically impactful.

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