



Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology Statement opposing anti-Latinx rhetoric

The President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, uses the following words in a chain of ad hoc discriminatory associations to paint all individuals of Latin American background with a single brush:

In President Trump's rhetoric, Latinx people are "*Illegals.*" "*Drug dealers.*" "*Rapists.*" People from "*shithole countries.*" Simultaneously, U.S. citizens have been described as "*under attack*" by Latinx and Latin American "*parasites.*" A "*big, beautiful wall*" (at an estimated cost of \$25bn+ dollars) must be immediately erected across the U.S.-Mexico border's entire length, keeping "*infestations*" of migrant "*animals*" and assorted "*gang-members,*" "*bad hombres,*" or "really really bad persons" outside of the country.

If it wasn't clear already, Trump's 2016 campaign promise to "*Make America Great Again*" implies a nationalist governing philosophy of nativism that demonizes and disproportionately impacts Latinx peoples living in the US and Latin Americans in need of political asylum.

Thousands of migrant families and their children have by now been rounded up, indefinitely detained, and subjected to arbitrary forms of confinement and concentration both cruel and unusual. The youngest children being held in detention centers are being put up for adoption in the United States rather than reunited with their biological parents. Just as worrisome, the Administration has set up a denaturalization office with unimaginably undignified powers, targeting select individuals for expulsion and turning long-standing citizens into stateless persons at the stroke of a bureaucrat's pen. Latinx U.S. citizens residing on the borderlands whose birth certificates, officials claim, exhibit "irregularities," or were merely inadequately filled out, have been amongst the first group targeted by the Office...

We have seen this kind of racial demonization and the group-differentiated divestiture of citizens' rights before, primarily across the 20th Century rise of European fascist and totalitarian Powers.

As executive board members of the *Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* (SLACA), and regional experts within the American Anthropological Association, we express our shock, outrage, and dismay over the rhetorical outgrowth and influence of such dehumanizing language and policies.

In recent days, however, a bizarre new volley of Trump's anti-Latinx epithets warrants special consideration. The President now draws attention to "*migrant caravans,*" marching from Central American countries towards the United States, as he puts it, with "*criminals*

and unknown Middle Easterners mixed in.” Subsequently, Trump recanted for the public record his comment’s linkages to the Middle East—and latent nationalist associations with terrorism—, but the dog whistle had already sounded.

As Latin American and Caribbean anthropologists, we are familiar with facts on the ground. “*Caravanas*” are nothing more than groups of stateless individuals, banding together out of necessity for group protection on the move. *Caravanas* as such are commonplace in periods of economic turmoil and political upheaval. At this very moment, for example, multiple Latin American countries bear witness to Venezuelan nationals walking in southward-bound groups across Colombia, Ecuador and Peru in search of political amnesty and basic economic survival.

The particular migrating group which Trump and his media-world supporters have demonized hails mainly from the country of Honduras. Anthropologist Jon Carter has carried out years’ worth of intensive fieldwork in the country, documenting its deteriorating political, social, and economic conditions under state neoliberalism. “I do not use the term ‘migrant caravan’, says Carter, “because it is a misnomer. These are not migrants, as such. They are refugees — law-abiding Hondurans who find themselves with nowhere to turn and are fleeing into exile. They are refugees of an economic ideology that has cannibalized itself, while opportunists criminalize its victims for political gain.”

To be a stateless person in exile, as Carter suggests, is to live in a generalized condition of “rightlessness.” As German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt similarly wrote, the refugee is among the most vulnerable persons in any society, for a stateless persons’ human rights are often placed in question as citizens’ rights take precedence over them in any new or temporary host country. Unfortunately, President Trump’s rhetoric weaponizes refugees’ vulnerability and twists public understandings of peoples’ immediate need to flee from zones of life-threatening low-intensity warfare and/or economic collapse.

The Administration’s rhetoric has already claimed early victims. It is no coincidence, for example, that a white supremacist recently shot dead eleven worshipers at a Pittsburgh-area Synagogue, claiming Jews who donated to refugee relief services were helping “invaders” to enter the country—specifically identifying “migrant caravans” as motive enough for his shooting spree. Meanwhile, in recent days thousands of U.S. troops have been deployed to U.S. states adjacent to Mexico, further militarizing what is essentially a police border function and threatening to repeal habeas corpus protections for all individuals and families approaching the border zone itself. Latest reports tell us that heavily armed, self-appointed militia groups have likewise patriotically “answered the call,” converging across the U.S. side of the border in unregulated and potentially lethal patrols.

Together, in rhetoric and in practice, President Trump has followed the most dangerous of scripts of populist and xenophobic 20th century governance, whipping up a frenzy of inchoate ethno-racial fears and reigniting long-dormant nativist demands. Most recently, his anti-Latinx rhetoric has come to serve as a powerful signal in a social media-driven

relay system actively amplifying a myriad of dangerous revanchist fantasies. As Orwell would have put it, Trump and his nativist enablers are “thinking in phrases,” confusing rhetorical sleight of hand for reality itself, while giving themselves ideological permission to serve as judge, jury, and at times even public executioner, in defense of exclusionary nationalist ideals.

It is far too easy—and perhaps worthless—to decry yet again the casual racism of a President who has symbolically built up his reputation through decades’ worth of xenophobic statements and public race-baiting. Of late, however, the amplification of Trump’s nativist rhetoric has stimulated what can only be described as real and quickly mounting crimes against humanity.

We as members of SLACA unequivocally reject the Administration’s nativist rhetoric, and stand together in justice and solidarity with all Latinx, Latin American, and Spanish-speaking communities effected by these developments.