

## How the Tejanos Became Non-White.

The issue of immigration to the United States – in particular Mexican and Latin American immigration – has posed one of the most fraught and polarizing issues in American politics during the last 10 years. The watershed victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primary – in part due to his success in mobilizing fervent support for restrictive immigration policies and a proposed wall along the U.S.-Mexico border – seems likely to keep immigration issues at the center of U.S. political debate throughout the election season and the next Presidential administration.<sup>1</sup> The debates over immigration policy and enforcement have been so fraught partly because when we talk about immigration in U.S. politics, we are usually talking about Mexican immigration, Latino/a<sup>2</sup> immigration more broadly, and the U.S.-Mexico border. The politics of immigration are inseparably tied to questions about the position of Latino/a communities in American national culture, and the long-term *demographic* effects of immigration across the U.S.-Mexico border. And these demographic discussions are driven by such intense and conflicting passions because Latino/as, especially Mexican-Americans, whether immigrants and native-born, are pervasively classified as an ethnic and cultural *outgroup* within American society. Despite the ambiguous status of “Hispanic” or “Latin American” identities in census categorizations,<sup>3</sup> in popular cultural and political debate, people of Mexican-American or Latin American origin are *typically* characterized as ethnic or racial “minorities,” considered to be “people of color,” and (hence) as one of the major *non-white* demographic groups within the United States. Latino/as are distinguished not only from the Anglo-American population, but also from the European immigrant groups and their descendants – Americans of German, Irish, or Italian descent, for example – who are now counted

1 The prominence of immigration debates has not only driven highly polarized contests *between* political parties during election campaigns, but also ground-shaking conflicts *within* American political parties. Within the Democratic party, the emergence of mass protest movements led by undocumented youth and immigrant rights have led to harsh criticism from Social Justice and Progressive coalitions against the Obama administration’s deportation and detention policies. Within the Republican party, Donald Trump’s watershed victory over established, conventionally conservative Republican politicians in the 2016 Republican primaries seems to have been driven in no small part by his success in mobilizing a white conservative base, by appealing to fervent support for more restrictive immigration policies, more punitive immigration enforcement, and a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. See Thompson on whiteness, immigration, and Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign.

2 “Latino/a,” “Latin@” or “Latinx” are deliberately gender-neutral alternatives to the grammatically masculine “Latino,” increasingly used in activist and scholarly writing.

3 Sometimes the Census has treated these identities as a separate racial category, parallel to and distinct from “white” and “black”; sometimes as a question of “national origin” which is explicitly independent of racial categories; the most recent U.S. censuses have offered open-ended questions about race and ethnicity that tend to result in multiple different treatments by different respondents. See Cohn.

simply as part of the majority “white” population. When the U.S. Census Bureau announced in 2005 that Texas became the first Southern state to be classified as “majority minority” or as having a “non-white” majority, and then in 2015 that for the first time “white” children no longer constituted the majority of American children below the age of five, the state and national trends that they were announcing were trends driven primarily by increasing numbers of Mexican-American and other Latin American populations, both through immigration and through U.S.-born children.<sup>4</sup> Immigration politics on all sides of the debate are tied intimately to the color line, and to problems of ethnicity, race, and whiteness in American national life. But if the strings binding immigration politics to issues of race are bound tightly, they are also tangled. Historically, Mexican Americans have fit awkwardly into the color system of racially-stratified American and Southern communities. Latin American cultures, prior to and parallel to the development of the United States, elaborated racial hierarchies of their own, which sometimes overlap with, and sometimes cut across, U.S.-American color lines rooted in the history of African-American slavery and Jim Crow segregation;<sup>5</sup> Latino/a Americans have found themselves wedged into an unstable position somewhere between the established legal and social categories of “white” and “colored” (or, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “white,” “black” or “Indian”): Anglo-American laws and custom at some times and in some places subjected them to segregation and disenfranchisement as “colored” people parallel to that inflicted on African-Americans throughout the South; sometimes integrated all Mexican-Americans, or sometimes only elite subsets of the Mexican-American population, into the social status of “white” or “Caucasian” Americans. Often the *legal* treatment of Mexican-Americans as nominally “white” has diverged from the *customary* treatment of them as “colored” or “brown” through social discrimination and through extralegal violence.<sup>6</sup> Latino/as have constantly contested racial orders that worked to their marginalization and disenfranchisement – but strategies of resistance have varied and shifted, sometimes leading activists to identify themselves as *part* of the “Caucasian” majority and insist on its privileges, and sometimes leading them to *distinguish* themselves from white populations, and insist on recognition of their rights as a racial or ethnic *minority*. My research project will study the origins of U.S. debates over the racial categorization of Latino/a people and by investigating its early origins and development through conflicts over the social and legal status of Spanish-speaking Tejano/as in the social and legal environment of antebellum Texas. Before large-scale Anglo-American settlement of Texas, it was a part of the Spanish colonial empire and then a northern province of the Republic of Mexico; once large-scale

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4 See Chideya and Murdock on Texas as a “majority minority” state; see Thompson on the 2015 announcement that nationwide “white” children no longer constituted the majority of American children under the age of five.

5 See Cordero-Guzman on both the historic and the persistent effects of Latin American racial hierarchies in complicating questions about Latinx racial identifications (as “white,” as “people of color,” or as a distinct or intermediate third group) within the U.S.

6 See Lupe Salinas, “The Legally White, Socially Brown Latino.”

settlement of white and black populations from the U.S. began, Texas also became one of the furthest cultural and political outposts of the Lower South. It was in Texas where Anglo-Americans first found themselves living alongside a large, settled Mexican population. After the Texas Revolution (1835-6), Texas's decade as an independent Republic, and its eventual annexation by the United States (1845), it was also in Texas where Anglo-Americans – more specifically, Americans predominantly from the slaveholding South, who brought with them the Deep South's plantation system, slave society, and thousands of enslaved African Americans when they came to Texas – found themselves in a position of military and political predominance over a significant population of Spanish-speaking Tejano/as. I will examine how questions of racial classification and the “whiteness” or “coloredness” of Tejano/a people shaped debates over citizenship and enfranchisement in the Texas Republic and the state Constitutional Convention of 1845, legal doctrines and social attitudes towards intermarriage, political debates over the incorporation of Tejano/a labor into Anglo-American systems of production (in particular, the debate in Texas over the possibility of passing a “peonage law” to incorporate Tejano/a laborers into a system of bound labor), and overt conflicts over land ownership and community segregation through extralegal violence, militia and paramilitary conflicts, leading up to the “Cortina War” of 1859 over control of the Rio Grande Valley.

### Contemporary Issue sources:

1. Thompson, Derek. “Donald Trump and the Twilight of White America” (*The Atlantic*, May 13, 2016). Discusses immigration politics and white anxiety over demographic change as an issue fueling the watershed political developments of the 2016 primary campaign. <http://tinyurl.com/zen3wds>
2. Cohn, D'Vera. “Census History: Counting Hispanics” (*PewResearch Center*, March 3, 2010) provides historical context on the U.S. Census's evolving attempts to legally categorize Mexican-American and Latino/a residents of the U.S. <http://tinyurl.com/jp4rp43>
3. Chideya, Farai and Steve Murdock. “Whites Now the Minority in Texas” (Interview, *NPR News & Notes*, August 11, 2005) discusses demographic change in Texas and presents the now dominant view of Mexican-Americans as a “non-white” population. <http://tinyurl.com/hzrkjnf>
4. Cordero-Guzman, Hector. “When Latin American Racial Hierarchies Meet North American Racial Classification Schemas” (*Latino Rebels*, June 4, 2014) discusses the complicated relationship between Latin American racial hierarchies (often based on fine gradations in the degree of Spanish or indigenous heritage) and modern debates in the U.S. over how Latino/a Americans classify themselves, or are classified by others, in racial terms. <http://tinyurl.com/hu76xsj>
5. Salinas, Lupe S. “The Legally White, Socially Brown Latino,” in *U.S. Latinos and Criminal Injustice* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press), 15-27, discusses the background of legal treatment of Mexican-Americans in the post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and contemporary periods, and the evolution of parallel treatments, often including Latino/a Americans as “white” for most legal purposes but treating them as non-white through social attitudes, customary practices, or extra-legal violence.

### Secondary sources relating to the American South to 1877:

1. Pierce, Jason E. *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (Boulder, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 2016) is a book-length study examining the role of

shifting ideas about race and whiteness in the process of Anglo-American settlement of the West, including the settlement of the Louisiana Purchase territories and of Texas.

2. Anderson, Gary Clayton. *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820-1875* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005) deals extensively with military conflict and extralegal violence (both against the Mexican population and also against Texan Indian nations) as a factor in Anglo-American settlement of Texas in the period from the first Anglo settlement of Texas up to the end of Reconstruction and the closing of the open ranges.
3. Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) deals with the construction of the term “white” and of racial categories in American law.
4. Montejano, David. *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1987) documents the evolution of Anglo-Mexican relations in early Texas, especially focusing on the economic and labor system of the Rio Grande Valley. Montejano argues that the Valley in particular was characterized by the development and then the breakdown of a “peace structure” incorporating both some elements of a racial order and also some elements of social assimilation among Tejano/a and Anglo-American elites, quite different (Montejano argues) from the more openly antagonistic patterns that developed in Central and Eastern Texas.
5. De León, Arnaldo. *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1983) reviews the development of a body of Anglo-American racial stereotypes directed against Tejano/a people, especially focused on the development of central and eastern Texas and comparing the cultural treatment of Tejano/a people by Anglo-American settlers with that of African-Americans and with that of Texan Indians. Provides some detailed discussion of attitudes towards intermarriage, characterizations of Mexicans in terms of racial types in the antebellum press and literature, and detailed treatments of the instigating causes of, and Anglo-Texan reactions to, the Cortina War in 1859.

### Primary sources relating to the American South to 1877:

1. “Declaration of the People of Texas” (1835), one of the first public declarations of the Texas Revolution, explicitly drawing on the Mexican Constitution and attempting to appeal to both the Anglo-American and Tejano/a populations of Texas for support in the rebellion. Available through the Tarlton Law Library website at the University of Texas.  
<https://tarltonapps.law.utexas.edu/constitutions/dpt1835>
2. “Declaration of Independence by the Republic of Texas” (1836), representing a shift in rhetoric towards an exclusively Anglo-American focus and presenting a declaration of complaints against not only the “Mexican Government” but also the “Mexican People.” Available through the Tarlton Law Library website at the University of Texas, <https://tarltonapps.law.utexas.edu/constitutions/doi1836>
3. Weeks, William F., Reporter. *Debates of the Texas Convention* (Houston, 1846). Available in digital facsimile form through the Tarlton Law Library website at the University of Texas, <http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/> Includes a discussion over several days of questions concerning suffrage, representation, and the inclusion of “white citizens” in the Constitution as a condition for the franchise. Most Anglos at the convention argued that the term “white” legally included the Tejano/a population, but some East Texas delegates argued that Tejano/as should be excluded as “Indian” and one participant at the convention, the San Antonio politician Jose Antonio Navarro, provides one Tejano/a response to the debate.
4. Smith, Ashbel. “An address delivered in the city of Galveston, on the 22d of February, 1848” (Galveston, 1846), presenting a strident statement of the idea of the “destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race on this continent” in the political aftermath of the U.S. victory in the Mexican-American war.

