

On The Responsibility Of Latin@ Academics, Artists, And Cultural Workers



Author's note: I write on a matter of great urgency: to engage you in a response to the war the Trump Administration and various state governments are waging on Latinos. The most

prominent form of the attack is the demonization, detention, and deportation of immigrants. \$125 billion of the federal budget will underwrite the hiring of ICE agents and the construction of detention centers. These actions, however, are accompanied by an assault on our standing as citizens and permanent residents, whose intention is to deny us our rights and protections. Under attack also are the multiple institutional spaces we have created in response to exclusion.

Over the past six months we have seen Republican elected and appointed officials cowed, their Democrat counterparts stymied, the judicial system hamstrung, institutional leaders intimidated, and the mainstream media sidelined. There is no cavalry who will ride to our rescue. We will have to join the battle ourselves. As individuals who have the preparation and the abilities to respond to these attacks, we have a major responsibility: we must not be silent or allow ourselves to be silenced.

—Arturo Madrid

By Arturo Madrid

The Trump administration and several state governments have in effect declared war against sectors of the U.S. population. Many of the bellicose policies and actions they are advancing and carrying out are specific to Latino populations, and particular to the Mexican-origin population: detention and deportation of immigrants, deeming them as “illegal” and criminal; suspension of the citizenship or the permanent resident status of anyone who is deemed not to be “American;” elimination of the policies and programs that have made

possible our participation in the institutions of U.S. society; and the eradication of the academic, artistic, cultural, institutional, intellectual and political spaces to address exclusion over the course of 175 years.

Our ethnic-racial hybridity, our cultural vitality, and most especially our electoral potential are being constructed as a threat to U.S. society. Thus, the virulent resurgence of a narrative that holds that we do not belong. This narrative seeks to subvert our own, which is that we have always had and continue to have a central role in the development of this country, that we have a legitimate claim to the rights and protections enshrined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights of the United States, and that we constitute an essential part of the fabric of this society.

In 1967, at the height of the debate over the war against Vietnam, the renowned linguist and MIT Professor, Noam Chomsky took the authors of and apologists for U.S. policy in Southeast Asia to task in an essay titled *The Responsibility of Intellectuals*. “It is the responsibility of intellectuals,” he stated, “to speak the truth and to expose lies.” The current administration’s policies, discourse and actions, at their base racist, sexist, xenophobic and homo/trans-phobic, call for action by those of us who have the capability, the preparation, and the will to challenge them **The political moment calls for us to transcend our status as academics, artists and cultural workers and become public activists.**

It is not an easy role to assume. Most of us do not feel we have much to offer, since these matters are not in our fields of engagement or expertise. Many of us do not consider ourselves activists. Some of us are intimidated. Others of us have family members, friends, and colleagues who support said policies and actions. Many in our respective communities believe that citizenship, permanent resident status, or the blankets of assimilation and acculturation, of class status, or of light skin will protect them.

Let us not be naïve. The U.S. has a long history of incarcerating and deporting people deemed to be a threat, e.g. Japanese Americans in WWII and Mexican Americans and Mexicans during the Depression and *Operation*

Wetback in the 1950s. Xenophobes, racists and bigots construct all mexican@s and latin@s as undocumented immigrants and criminals. All of us are vulnerable to assault, whether by state-sanctioned entities ---sheriffs, police, agents, marshals, ICE agents, the military---or individuals and militias. Given the situation let us be hypermindful of the German pastor's belated expression of regret for his failure to act during the early stages of the Nazi regime: "First they came for"

Our responsibility, our obligation and our task are to use our intelligence, knowledge, and abilities to counter the narratives and the discourses that vilify and reject us, to challenge misrepresentations and misinformation, and to continue to advance a counter narrative in whatever modes and platforms are available to us. That task will require us to develop a deeper understanding of the struggles our communities have waged to claim standing in this society and its institutions, and of the threats to that standing.

In summary, the tasks before us are:

- ✚ to educate ourselves about our rights and protections as citizens or residents
- ✚ to assert them and publicize them when they are violated
- ✚ to share information on the threats to our personal or collective status or wellbeing
- ✚ to alert each other to what is happening at our respective institutions, organizations and localities
- ✚ to call public attention to actions by institutional officers that seek to delimit or eliminate policies and programs that serve our interests
- ✚ to defend, in public forums, policies or programs we value and to reject actions that seek to curtail or eliminate them
- ✚ to challenge misinformation and misrepresentation



Tejanas Defend Democracy who marched at the No Kings March in San Antonio on June 14, is a women-led collective rooted in the power of art, politics and fashion as tools of resistance whose purpose is to stand visible, vocal and unafraid in the fight for justice. Photo: Gloria A. Ramirez

advanced by public officials, political operatives, media representatives or erstwhile experts

- ✚ to act in solidarity with individuals and entities who are under attack
- ✚ to support individuals and organizations who advocate or act on our behalf
- ✚ to make our voices heard by elected and appointed officials frequently and in timely fashion
- ✚ to identify private and public entities, locally, regionally, and nationally, that can be of help in addressing the threats we face as a community

- ✚ to provide financial and other support to those organizations that are engaged defending our communities

To be effective, we must seek out and act in concert with other like-minded individuals and provide support to organizations on the frontlines of the struggle. Of fundamental importance is to take issue with public officials who are setting, implementing, supporting or going along with policies inimical to our wellbeing and supporting those who are challenging those policies and actions. They need to hear from us personally, directly and frequently by whatever means are at our disposal. Our people have struggled against oppressive forces that have warred against us. They were not silent then. We must not be silent or allow ourselves to be silenced now.

If you agree that the situation requires a response, **please relay the attached call for engagement to 10 friends and/or colleagues.** Write each a personal note asking them to do likewise. If we all do, we can initiate a wave of organized resistance. —Arturo

Bio: Arturo Madrid, now retired, was the Norine R. & T. Frank Murchison Distinguished Professor of the Humanities and director of the Mexico, the Americas & Spain Program at Trinity University in San Antonio. Recipient of many awards and actively engaged in varied civic, academic and cultural arts entities, he also wrote In the Country of Empty Crosses published in 2012 by Trinity University Press.