

## Introduction

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### “This Land Belongs to Me”

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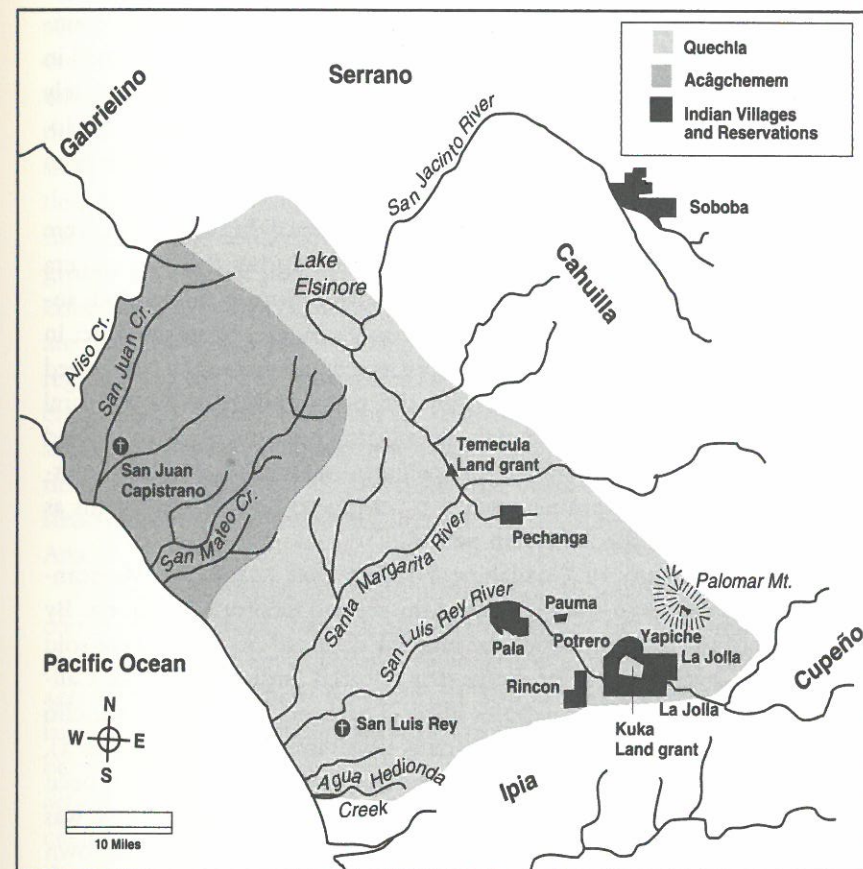
In 1889 a young woman, Modesta Avila, was brought to trial in Orange County Superior Court, accused of placing an obstruction on the tracks of the Santa Fe railroad, which had recently been laid some fifteen feet from the doorstep of her home in San Juan Capistrano, a former mission and Mexican pueblo. The obstruction was simply a heavy fence post laid across one rail and another one hammered into the ground between the tracks, with a paper stuck to it that read: “This land belongs to me. And if the railroad wants to run here, they will have to pay me ten thousand dollars.”<sup>1</sup> Max Mendelson, merchant, postmaster, and express agent in San Juan, was waiting for the daily train when he discovered the obstruction. As he quickly dismantled it, Modesta Avila sat quietly watching from her door. Mendelson reported that he told her not to do that, as someone could get hurt; she responded, “If they pay me for my land, they can go by.” Avila reported forcing the railroad to compensate her to individuals who represented the new economic order and legal authority established in the American era: a banker, bank teller, sheriff, and judge, all from Santa Ana, the American town that had been founded in 1869, some twenty miles to the north of San Juan. At the bank she inquired about the quickest method to receive the anticipated payment of ten thousand dollars. She then asked the sheriff whom she could hire to keep peace at a dance

she was giving in Santa Ana to celebrate receiving the money. While holding this dance, she was arrested for disturbing the peace. At her arraignment, she also told the judge about her purported victory over the railroad. Avila paid dearly for her defiance. She was sentenced to three years in prison and subsequently died in San Quentin. At the time of her death she was in her mid-twenties.

Avila's story is significant to this book because it addresses the dynamics of power that shaped land policy. Modesta Avila was born in 1867, in the midst of the American conquest. During the decade of the 1860s, Californios lost the vast majority of their land to settlers from elsewhere; Avila was thus motivated to take action by her generation's experience of land loss. Her story is one among many stories of individuals I will tell because they vividly depict the processes and implications of the conquests of this region.<sup>2</sup>

In the following paragraphs, let me briefly introduce my subject, my terminology, and my orientation. I will also describe San Juan Capistrano and Santa Ana, where most of the events in this book took place. By *conquest* I mean the process that extends the political, economic, and social dominion of one empire, nation, or society over another one. Because conquest involves the systematic acquisition of land, it is intricately linked with policies of territorial expansion. During the conquests of North America by Spain and the United States, populations were submerged and reconfigured partly by being renamed. The populations from colonial Mexico that settled on the California frontier between 1769 and 1821 called themselves *gente de razón*, people who possessed reason. Indian peoples, in contrast, were assigned such names as *indios*, *neofitos* (neophytes), and *gente sin razón*, people without reason. Mission Indians were identified by the mission of their birth or baptism.

San Juan Capistrano was founded as a mission in Acâgchemem territory in 1776; by 1796, nearly one thousand Acâgchemem resided at the mission (see map 1). Between the late eighteenth century and 1812, the mission gained control of the entire Acâgchemem country, changing its cultural, economic, political, and spatial order. These peoples called themselves Acâgchemem through the early nineteenth century; by mid-century, however, they went by the name *gente* (people) and Juaneños, after the mission. Mission San Luis Rey was established in 1798 in Quechla, the territory of the Quechnajuichom, who became known as Luiseños. Sometime in the latter part of the nineteenth century, most Juaneños were forced to leave their villages; they relocated to Quechla. Some of these villages became reservations. Anthropologists have sub-



Map 1. Reduction of Acâgchemem and Quechla territories from the preconquest period to the early twentieth century.

sequently studied both populations as a single cultural and linguistic group under the name Luiseño. The colonial experiences of mission Indians provided an element of shared historical identity when mission Indians federated and demanded recognition in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Californios first articulated their own territorial identity during the early 1830s, in political debates between the California territorial legislature and the Mexican federal government over the emancipation of neophytes and secularization of the California missions. Californios used Spanish colonial ideas to define their territorial government's right to control the land of mission Indians. When emancipation and secu-



larization were enacted in 1834, Californios gained control of the countryside. Most of the rural area along the California coast was granted in ranchos. Californios were also granted the extensive lands immediately around San Juan in 1841, when the mission was made into a pueblo. (See map 2 for the imprint of this process on the land around San Juan Capistrano.)

Californios defined their status against that of Indians, who were virtually dispossessed of the lands they claimed during the Mexican era (1821–1848). In the official documents written during this period, individual Indians were referenced with only a single, Spanish name; in census records, the many skills they possessed and tasks they performed were not recorded. Indians typically did not receive title to the rural village and town lands that a majority of former neophytes were allotted upon their emancipation from the missions—a fact that simplified matters for the U.S. government when it sought to claim Indian lands as public domain in the American period.

The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) initiated the second territorial conquest. By the end of the 1860s, most of the ranchos depicted on map 2 were sold or lost, a divestment of property that affected large numbers of Californio heirs and Indian peoples alike. The legal partition of Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana in 1868 partially illustrates this process (map 3).

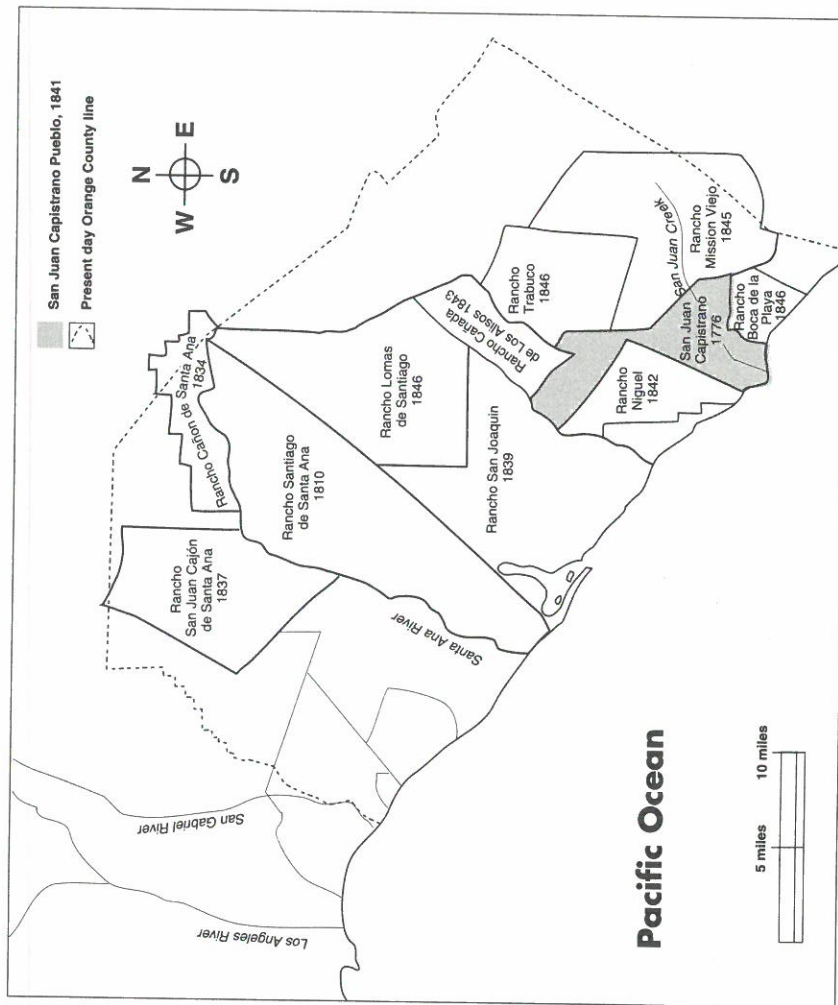
In 1870, Santa Ana was one of three American towns that had been established on this former rancho. By the time Orange County was founded in 1888, the Anglo-American farmers who had settled the town were the largest ethnic population in the area. The land politics that shaped the American conquest were similar to those that sustained capitalist agriculture elsewhere in the nation: land and natural resources became commodities, while people who had capital monopolized credit and transportation and established the conditions for an agricultural industry. In coastal Southern California and elsewhere in the Southwest, capitalist industrialization required that Indian populations be further deterritorialized, meanwhile supporting the interests of (usually self-defined “white”) squatters and land speculators.

The core of this book is the problem of identity. I am concerned, that is, with the encounters that produced a sense of historical consciousness. Hence, although the book covers over 160 years—from 1769, the date of the Spanish conquest, to 1936, when regional strike waves in agriculture generated a new sense of collective interests on the part of the Mexican American population—it is not primarily organized

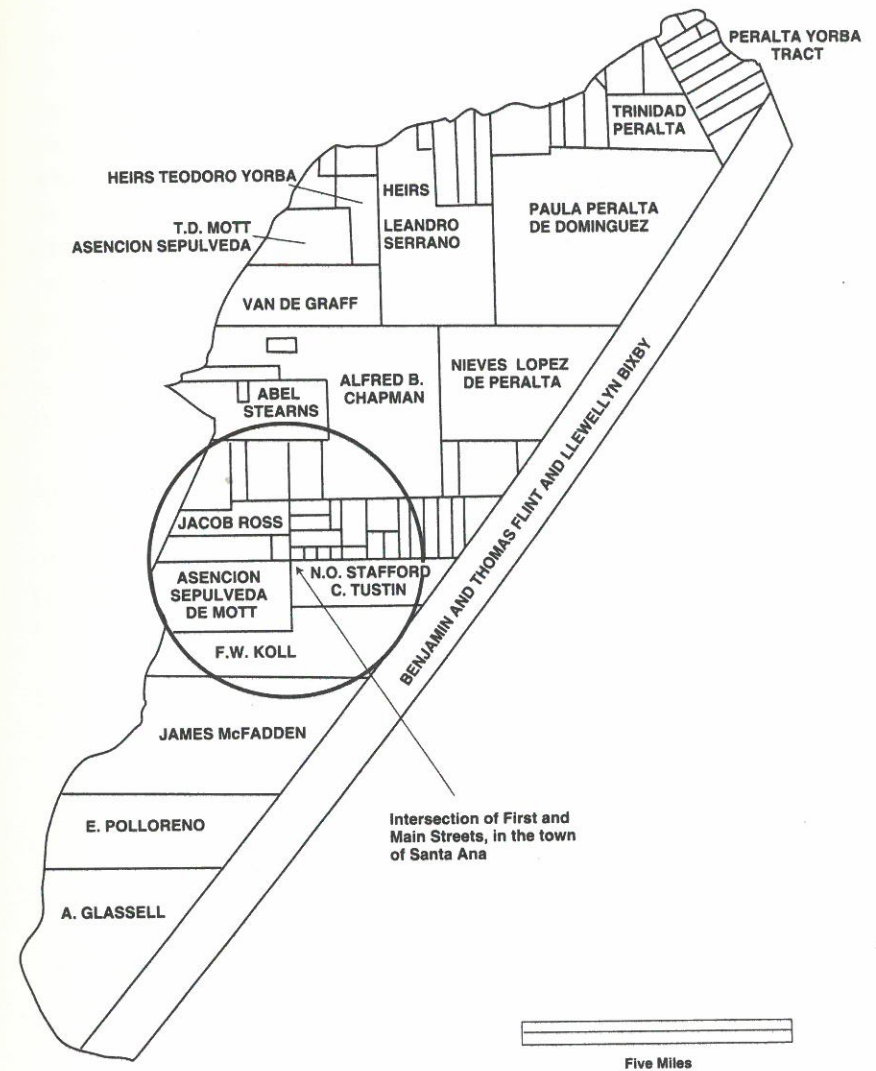
according to a linear chronology. While the first two chapters do proceed along a historical time line from Spanish conquest through U.S. territorial conquest, with the consequent loss of land and spatial isolation of Californios and Indians, in the second half of the book the focus shifts to explore some of the more qualitative dimensions of this multiethnic history around the turn of the century (roughly 1880 to 1930): the persistence of Californio and Indian societies, the meanings these groups gave to the past, and the larger historical imagination that took hold during this process of social self-definition. Included in this analysis are the ideas about history, nation, and religion conveyed by Mexican regional culture. The book takes an extended look at the historical references and shared language of patriotic and religious history that shaped part of the meaning of Mexican-American identity in the twentieth century. As a sort of case study, the book also examines the construction of racial and national identities in the American town of Santa Ana.

In paying particular attention in this book to places (such as Indian communities, towns, barrios, and the imaginary ties that link specific places together) I am influenced by writers who view space as an active agent in social change. For Edward Soja, social meaning is derived largely through the organization of space. Soja laments that geography became a field primarily authorized to describe and set the stage for action. During the course of its development, he says, geography increasingly turned positivist and instrumentalist, attending ever less to “the formative spatiality of social life as a template of critical insight.”<sup>4</sup> The favoring of time and devaluation of space in social theory and history is similarly problematic. The linear story—the story built around time—necessarily submerges and peripheralizes the geographical or spatial imagination.

Space, according to Soja, is an analytic category with a multiplicity of theoretical and methodological underpinnings. Soja, like Michel Foucault, finds relations of power and discipline inscribed into “the apparently innocent spatiality of social life.”<sup>5</sup> Foucault, for example, notes how metaphors such as field, region, and territory can serve to designate particular forms of domination. Spatial metaphors, he argues, are “equally geographical and strategic” because geography grew up in the shadow of the military.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the spatial embeddedness of power relations has strongly informed my work. I thus ended up situating this history within a geographical framework that embraces



Map 2. Ranchos and the pueblo lands of San Juan Capistrano.



Map 3. Legal partition of the Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, 1868. The American town of Santa Ana was established in 1869 and expanded to incorporate the land within the circle.



the Spanish colonial world, the culture of Greater Mexico, the U.S. Southwest as a region, and the Borderland.<sup>7</sup>

The Annales school of social historians incorporated spatial issues into their analyses of rural society and region, and their work represents another influence on my own.<sup>8</sup> In studying the social and economic connections between regions, they rethought historical time, questioning the importance of the "event" in history. Instead they examined the imaginary, the symbolic, and the history of beliefs and mental structures. They conceived of large questions and issues by examining themes not previously covered by historians, including the history of the face, *l'histoire du visage*, and the history of national memory, as in the series of books dedicated to monuments and other *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory).<sup>9</sup>

Spatial dimensions of change, such as territorial conquest and the formation of the barrios, were among the first things studied by Chicano historians. Albert Camarillo originated the term *barrioization* to describe "the formation of residentially and socially segregated Chicano barrios or neighborhoods."<sup>10</sup> The process Camarillo depicted involved social, economic, familial, urban, and demographic change. Many historians have studied the formation of the barrios as urban and social history; the barrios also figure large in the work of novelists, poets, and artists.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1970s the barrios garnered attention thanks to land-based grassroots politics, which drew in well over a generation of scholars and artists, including myself. This movement embraced multiple peasant- and migrant-led land takeovers in Mexico, especially in Tijuana and elsewhere in northern border states, and urban movements in U.S. cities. I became interested in the grassroots movement that arose in the city of Santa Ana in the early 1980s partly because of the stories barrio residents told to the press about their neighborhoods. The women and men who engaged in this neighborhood insurgency made the barrio part of their claim to power; its historical space gave them a sense of their right to demand representation in urban politics and funds for neighborhood improvement. Telling their stories to all who would listen, they encouraged people to see the barrio as descriptive terrain recording the social interrelationships that had developed over time. The stories I heard created a social meaning for the neighborhood, a meaning that was layered in the physical place.<sup>12</sup> I wanted to capture that sense of place and of collective history in my work.

In urban struggles, and in the scholarly literature cited above, the

politics of space is closely connected to the formation of collective identities that are grounded in particular interpretations of the past. In this regard Stuart Hall's discussion of the relationship between identity and history is instructive. He argues that cultural identities are not fixed in a single or hidden history but are "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of a past just waiting to be found, . . . identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."<sup>13</sup> Joan Scott also writes against unilinear accounts of experience, identity, and politics. She says,

If identities change over time and are relative to different contexts, then we cannot use simple models of socialization that see gender as the more or less stable product of early childhood education in the family and the school. We must also eschew the compartmentalizing tendency of so much of social history that relegates sex and gender to the institution of the family, associates class with the workplace and community, and locates war and constitutional issues exclusively in the domain of the "high politics" of governments and states.<sup>14</sup>

Identities are grounded in the particular relationships formed through histories of race, gender, class, and place. One identity does not displace another. Historical identities, especially, are generally structured in relationship to particular readings of geographic areas, such as are found in the "imagined community" of the nation.<sup>15</sup>

Despite critical studies of the formation of nationalisms, many historians still work with a bipolar model of national culture. That approach has meant that Mexican immigrants are understood by scholars as having just two options: to "become American" or "remain Mexican." George Sánchez criticizes such a static notion of ethnic identity. In the United States, he argues, the invention of new "traditions" and the abandonment or radical transformation of older customs are in fact common. He also reminds us that in Mexico a similar invention of traditions has worked to forge national unity. Mexican American ethnicity in Los Angeles, Sánchez says, developed from interactions between Mexicans and Mexican Americans as well as "through dialogue and debate with the larger cultural world encountered in Los Angeles."<sup>16</sup>

The views of other scholars complement that of Sánchez. Paul Gilroy, for example, calls race "socially and politically constructed" and charges that "elaborate ideological work is done to secure and maintain



the different forms of 'racialization' which have characterized capitalist development."<sup>17</sup> David Roediger, documenting the pervasiveness and centrality of racial identification for white Americans, examines "white" identity as it is assumed by a sector of the U.S. working class. Race, says Roediger, is constructed differently over time by people in the same social class, and differently at any given time by people of varying class positions.<sup>18</sup> In this book, I examine the way a white racial identity was given meaning in the American period not within a particular class, but as it was configured through urban and institutional structures.

Although ideas about "race" were present in the identities forged during all three periods that I cover, the meaning of color was never singularly interpreted, nor was color status ever entirely nonnegotiable. In the Spanish colonial and Mexican periods, the ascriptive status of the Spanish/*casta* population as *de razón* (having reason) allowed that group to downplay the significance of racial background and emphasize instead the simple distinction between Catholic settlers and *indios*. But that comparatively ample tolerance for color difference was not shared by the Anglo American population, which had generally accepted a set of ideas about "white" racial superiority just prior to the Mexican-American War of 1846. After 1900, difference in terms of skin color superseded all other distinctions, and it became harder for Californios to negotiate a favorable status. Thus, race identity became central to the construction of national identity, with "American" being equated with whiteness. The notion of white racial superiority reaffirmed the equation of "white" with "American" and "citizen," and that mindset came to define urban politics and to prevail in individual and collective statements of identity.

This book is a multiethnic history that examines the politics of space and the construction of identities. Chapter 1 looks at the Spanish conquest. Here I build on Ramón Gutiérrez's description of conquest and colonization as a process whereby missionaries sought to establish their authority over native peoples, an effort that in turn shaped important dimensions of society.<sup>19</sup> I also discuss the comparable process of emancipation and address the questions central to New World politics in nations where enslaved or coerced peoples were emancipated: What did freedom mean? Who owned the land? Who controlled labor?<sup>20</sup>

Chicano historians have described the capitalist transformation of the countryside in California, though in some accounts the American conquest plays the central role in this transformation, with little or no attention given to the general economic transition that was in fact oc-

curing nationwide. Moreover, while historians have provided a needed analysis of the ethnic dimension of this transition, they have tended to define ethnic and national categories in static terms, as being constant over time.<sup>21</sup> An exception to this rule is David Montejano, whose work on the emergent meaning of "white" and "Mexican" in south Texas simultaneously explores the political economy of the transition to capitalist agriculture.<sup>22</sup> In chapters 2 and 3 of the present study I explore some of these ideas, focusing on the effects of territorial conquest and land politics on Indian peoples as well as on Californios. Like Ramón Gutiérrez, Sarah Deutsch, Deena Gonzalez, and others, moreover, I also address the gender politics of conquest.<sup>23</sup>

By providing a detailed view of the social world of San Juan Capistrano at the turn of the twentieth century, chapter 3 traces the history of change in San Juan's preindustrial, multiethnic (but primarily Californio and Indian) society. This town's history is similar to that of others in the Southwest, places where the regional Mexican and Indian populations remained demographically strong even as they lost economic and political power.<sup>24</sup>

Américo Paredes, in examining the role of history in south Texan culture, situates the Southwest within the larger cultural area of Greater Mexico.<sup>25</sup> I follow his lead in chapter 4, where I examine Spanish-language theater and cinema, modes of representation that form part of the content and expressive means of a regional culture that is Mexican, Mexican American, and highly influenced by Spanish peninsular culture and performance.<sup>26</sup> The historical imagination that shaped interpretations of the past in Californio society was informed by this vibrant regional culture.

The theater was one way of telling patriotic stories and shaping national identity; in chapter 5, we see how the ordering of institutional and social space served a similar function. Here I examine the history of the American town of Santa Ana and its barrios, to present a case study on urban politics and race relations in an early-twentieth-century southern California community populated by people of widely diverse backgrounds and allegiances.

This region has been shaped, in part, by the distinctive histories of Indian peoples, Spanish, Mexican, and American colonists, and transnational migrants, yet, as are other regional histories, its story is wholly American. Central to the story are the processes of conquest and immigration, by which the nation changed fundamentally as new populations merged to create a multiethnic society. During the years of in-



dustrialization particularly, ideas about what constituted America and the American changed so rapidly that native-born citizens and immigrants alike constantly confronted them as new. "The very things which strike the native born (Americans) as foreign seem to her (the new immigrant) as distinctly American," stated a member of the Immigrant Protection League in 1913.<sup>27</sup> Organizing the perception of "the American" was one of the central processes that defined American society during this period. Hence, the pivotal question asked in this book is not, How was a population "Americanized" or, at an earlier date, "Hispanicized"—that is, persuaded to adopt Spanish customs, dress, and speech? Rather, the core question is, How and why did ethnic and national identities acquire their particular meanings? They were forged, I argue, through the struggles between contending social groups over who had access to the land and to the rights of citizenship.

