

BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM: *You Are Not American*, by Amanda Frost

Jachelle Billingsley, Webster University – Saint Louis

Alexander Magrath, Webster University – Saint Louis

Editorial note: Undergraduate seniors in Webster University’s Department of History, Politics, and International Relations read Amanda Frost’s (2021) book *You Are Not American: Citizenship Stripping from Dred Scott to the Dreamers* as part of their Spring 2023 “Senior Overview” shared reading project. In this book review symposium, Jachelle Billingsley and Alexander Magrath share their reflections on *You Are Not American* following their close reading of the text, course discussions, and oral examinations with faculty. Author Amanda Frost is the John A. Ewald Jr. Research Professor of Law at University of Virginia’s School of Law.

Perspective: Jachelle Billingsley

What does it mean to be an American citizen? How secure are you in your citizenship, and is this a right that can be taken away from you? In Amanda Frost’s (2021) book, *You are Not American: Citizenship Stripping from Dred Scott to the Dreamers*, these questions are brought to life through historical case studies of real people who had their citizenship questioned. Frost (2021) argues that citizenship is an essential right and that the practice of citizenship stripping aims to take away that fundamental protection. She demonstrates how citizenship stripping has been used throughout America’s history to oppress and exclude particular individuals and groups from enjoying the full benefits of their American citizenship.

Frost (2021) lays out two main themes to show the precarity of American citizenship. First, she outlines how the U.S. government used citizenship stripping to take away legal rights and privileges from certain people. The rights taken away include the right to vote, the ability to hold political office, and the right to enter and remain in the United States. In this instance, citizenship stripping was used to strip people of rights the government could no longer justifiably take away on the sole basis of race, gender,

ethnicity, marital status, or political affiliation. Frost (2021) then describes how citizenship expands beyond legal rights and privileges to also include a sense of identity and belonging. She explains that the stripping of citizenship not only deprived people of their identity as Americans but was also used as a tool to purge the country of those deemed “Un-American”. This allowed the U.S. government to qualify what it meant to be “American” and what type of people could wear that label. With her reliance on archival work and a plethora of primary sources, Frost (2021) provides us with an array of case studies that support these themes.

Though she is critical of the U.S. government and its use of citizenship stripping, I think Frost (2021) avoids the trap of writing either a primarily celebratory or pessimistic brief of American history. Instead, she opts to let her case studies illustrate the lived experiences of citizenship stripping. For example, she does not omit the historical facts that Confederate leaders Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis regained their U.S. citizenships after death. In this way, she denies us the opportunity to slide their damaging historical impacts under the rug or to cast them aside as former American citizens. Frost (2021) therefore does an excellent job of making readers examine hypocrisies regarding who should retain American citizenship. This forces us to face and acknowledge the history of a country that struggles with identity – including enduring racism, sexism, and xenophobia.

Although I enjoyed the book, there were some ways in which I found it lacking. For instance, it would have been interesting to see how citizenship stripping affected Muslims living in the United States, especially after 9/11 and the rise of global counter-terrorism security measures. Secondly, there are times when the book’s emphasis on storytelling left me wanting more data to support the author’s core arguments. While I understand the effort to write the book in a way that appeals to a larger audience, more data could have connected the case studies and given readers a more complete view of citizenship stripping as a larger, deliberate strategy. Overall, this book is an excellent starting point for understanding citizenship stripping and encouraging further research on this topic. Frost’s (2021) *You are Not American: Citizenship Stripping from Dred Scott to the Dreamers* ultimately shows us how citizenship stripping has been used for more than 150 years to oppress, silence, and intimidate people to reinforce the ideology of who counts as an “American”.

Perspective: Alexander Magrath

In her book *You are Not American: Citizenship Stripping from Dred Scott to the Dreamers*, Amanda Frost (2021) defines citizen stripping in the United States as an action used as a proxy for taking away the rights of citizenship because other markers (such as race and gender) are barred by

protections within the U.S. Constitution. The goal of her book is to share individual stories using voices from historical case studies to show how citizenship stripping impacted peoples' lives and access to fundamental rights. To do this, Frost (2021) centers our attention on ways the U.S. government has persecuted its own citizens through nation-building and its continuation. Frost's (2021) emphasis on storytelling also makes this scholarly book more accessible to non-academics, which is a valuable contribution because everyone should understand the negative impacts that citizenship stripping has had on individuals and groups deemed "un-American".

But what is a citizen? Frost (2021) believes a citizen is a national community member who possesses all the rights and privileges guaranteed by their constitution and government who is subject to the duties that community membership entails. Yet there has been a lot of tension in American history – between different ideologies, laws, and courts' interpretations of those laws – in determining what it means to be an American citizen. Moreover, America's dark history has much to say about what it means to NOT be American; awful things have been done to certain individuals and groups because of their customs, religion, racial/ethnic/sexual/gender identities, and even choices of reading material. These people are perceived as threats to the status quo, majority societal opinion, and the government – giving them a status deemed unworthy of being American. Determining who does and does not belong is part of nation-building; in many ways, determining who we are *not* is just as important as deciding who we are.

Frost's (2021) method of supporting her arguments is to tell personal stories of "unwanted" people who experienced citizen stripping. She chose these individuals because most of their stories are not widely known by most Americans. From the Dred Scott decision (where the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Black Americans could not claim U.S. citizenship) to the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII (illustrated by the case of Joseph Kurihara) to the mass deportation of Mexican Americans in the 1950s, Frost (2021) provides stories of how American citizens were stripped of their nationality or deemed unworthy of citizenship. One example is the story of Emma Goldman, an anarchist who was stripped of her citizenship because of her critical views of the U.S. government during World War I. After her work inspired someone to assassinate U.S. President William McKinley, she was stripped of citizenship via the Espionage Act, imprisoned, and then deported to the Soviet Union. The personal stories Frost (2021) shares seem to have little in common except for the fact that the U.S. government wants to silence and persecute individuals who have been deemed "un-American." In this way, citizenship stripping serves as a strategy used to deny "unwanted" people their enjoyment of these rights; it is a way to say, "You do not belong here."

Frost's (2021) book shows how this strategy was applied to Chinese Americans with the story of Wong Kim Ark (who had to fight for his birthright citizenship because of his race); to Japanese Americans like Kurihara; to military leaders who fought against the United States during the Civil War (including Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis); to suffragists who fought for women's rights (such as Ethel Coope Mackenzie); to enslaved Black Americans; and to "suspect citizens" (such as Goldman, labor leader Harry Bridges, and others); and enemy citizens (including Fritz Kuhn, an American Nazi). Through these case studies, Frost (2021) brings us all the way to present debates about U.S. citizenship and belonging related to U.S. President Barack Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris and to current discussions surrounding the so-called "birther movement." These studies all show that because U.S. citizens are entitled to many rights and privileges,¹ the government has an interest in denying citizenship to people they deem threatening or unfit.

In short, *You are Not American: Citizenship Stripping from Dred Scott to the Dreamers* is a reminder that the question of "Who is an American citizen?" remains a contentious one and that citizenship stripping is used as a tool for excluding certain individuals and groups from the U.S. polity.

References

Frost, A. (2021). *You Are Not American: Citizenship Stripping from Dred Scott to the Dreamers*. Boston: Beacon Press.

© Copyright 2023 *Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights*. All rights reserved.

Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights is an academic journal that provides space for undergraduate students to explore human rights issues, challenge current actions and frameworks, and engage in problem-solving aimed at tackling some of the world's most pressing issues. This open-access journal is available online at www.webster.edu/rightingwrongs.

¹ The rights of U.S. citizens include the right to vote, eligibility for holding elected office (although only "natural born" citizens can be president), the right to serve on a jury, eligibility for employment in federal and state governments, and the right to enter and remain in the U.S.