TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Understanding the History and Political Identity of Latinos with Geraldo Cadava

In this episode, Fred Lawrence speaks with Geraldo Cadava, Professor of History at Northwestern University and author of *The Hispanic Republican*. Cadava takes us from the childhood experiences that shaped his interest in complex identities—moving between the affluent suburbs of Irvine and the borderlands of Tucson—to his scholarly work on the contradictory nature of Latino identity. He shares the compelling story of his Panamanian-born grandfather, a veteran and copper miner whose partisan evolution from a Ronald Reagan voter to a staunch Republican demonstrates how individual political reasons can lead to deep ideological shifts. Cadava also previews his upcoming, ambitious project of writing a book encompassing the past 500-year history of Latinos, *A Thousand Bridges*, which argues that Latinos have historically been both victims and agents of empire.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening. Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018 we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures.

We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today I'm delighted to welcome Professor Geraldo Cadava. Geraldo Cadava is Professor of History and Latina and Latino studies at Northwestern University. He is also a contributing writer for the New Yorker and is the author of *The Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of an American Political Identity, from Nixon to Trump*, as well as *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland*. At present he's writing the history of Latinos over the past 500 years, tentatively titled *A Thousand Bridges* to be published by Crown in 2026. Professor Cadava hosts the podcast Writing Latinos and is co-editor in chief of the online magazine Public Books. Welcome, professor.

Geraldo Cadava: Thanks so much for having me. I appreciate it. It's great to talk to you.

Fred Lawrence: There are so many different ways in which I prepare for Key Conversations: interviews, programs, episodes, some of it is reading the work of my guests, listening to other podcasts or recordings they have done. But for you and for me, I've got the best possible preparation. We had the opportunity to be together in Brooklyn last October when you gave your public lecture as a Visiting Scholar at Brooklyn College. That was the week before the 2024 election, and that's actually relevant to something I want to come back to in a little bit. But first I want to start with a story that you told that day of the role that your grandfather played in your life and in your intellectual development. Would you share that with us? It's such a compelling story that really describes you and your background, but also the trajectory of your work.

Geraldo Cadava: Yes, absolutely. Thanks for asking that. I remember that visit to Brooklyn College very well, it was an extraordinary time, and my visit to Brooklyn College also took place at the same time as Donald Trump's Madison Square Garden rally.

Fred Lawrence: Exactly.

Geraldo Cadava: I had just been there too, and that was quite an experience. But yes, thank you for asking about my grandpa. I'm looking at a picture of him right here to my left, but he has had a looming influence on pretty much everything I've done in ways that I still am figuring out and continuing to learn more about, but also in ways that have been very clear to me for a long time. His name is Geraldo Cadava. I am named after him. For some reason his name is Geraldo Cadava Jr. and mine is not, so I don't know how that works. But he was born in Panama, a city called Colón named after Christopher Columbus. He moved to San Diego when he was 17, joined the military, went to high school, finished high school in San Diego, and then moved all over the country for various deployments, one to Nebraska, to Texas. He finished his career at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, and then he had another stint at the Panama Canal Zone, but not the same place where he was born.

My dad was actually born in the Panama Canal Zone on the base there. The point is, he spent a whole career in the military, and the military gave him a lot of pride in becoming an American citizen, and he thinks that the military gave him every opportunity, every professional opportunity he had in his life. It helped him put a roof over his family's head. Just being in the United States helped secure an education for his kids that he didn't have in Panama, and so he was just a patriotic guy. But the story that he tells of becoming a Republican is that in 1980 he voted for Ronald Reagan, for the first time he'd ever voted for a Republican. And it was for a very specific reason because he, Reagan that is, promised to put more money back into his paycheck in the form of tax cuts.

He was working as a copper miner outside of Tucson, Arizona at the time, and he was excited about the idea of more take-home pay for his family, so he voted for Ronald Reagan, but then over the next 36 years, the last presidential election he voted in was in 2016. Over the next 36 years, he just embraced whole cloths, all of the positions of the Republican Party to the point that when I asked him for his thoughts about Donald Trump in 2016, he said that Donald Trump is a good guy because he's a Republican. There was no questioning of the policies or anything like that. He just had this ingrained partisan identity, and that was just interesting to me. That was a window into the evolution of partisan identity, how someone can become a Republican for a very particular reason, but then over time follow the party down all of the different rabbit holes that go on over time. The Republican Party in 1980 was very different from the Republican Party in 2016, so I was curious about how someone had made that evolution as well.

That's the very particular story about how his work influenced mine, and really, I started the research for my book, *The Hispanic Republican*, maybe in 2013, 7 years before stories started to come out that Donald Trump is just improving the Republican Party's odds among Latinos. At the time that I started the research I was much more interested in understanding Latino conservatism as this interesting quirk or facet of Latino identity than I was in thinking about partisan politics in any way. But my book came out in May of 2020, *The Hispanic Republican*, and Donald Trump narrowly lost the 2020 election at the same time that he increased his share of the Latino vote between 2016 when he won, and 2020 when he narrowly lost, so even though I had gotten into this project in order to understand this interesting quirk in Latino identity and to explore my grandfather's history and understanding the broader world that he was a part of, my career took this turn into thinking and writing about Latino politics and partisan behavior much more than it had before after the 2020 election.

Fred Lawrence: Your grandfather was born in Panama, and your father by historical quirk was also born within the geographical boundaries of Panama, The Canal Zone, but part of Panama today.

Geraldo Cadava: Yes.

Fred Lawrence: But now tell us a little bit about where you grew up and how this is going to lead to a young man who begins to think about questions about history.

Geraldo Cadava: In between my grandfather's two stops in Panama, like I said, he was born there in Colón, and then he had a deployment in Panama at the Canal Zone, and his job there was to teach the English language to Latin Americans, both people who had become members of the US military who were Latin American, but also Latin Americans who were in the militaries in their home countries, his job was to teach them English since he had spent a lot of time in the United States. He had told this funny story about how English is a funny language because you can have one word that means three different things. He said, "Take for example, the word sheep. It can mean an animal that says bah. It can be a boat or it can mean inexpensive." Because sheep is just his mispronunciation of cheap, sheep and ship. That's my grandfather. And my dad was born there at the Gorgas Hospital named after one of the doctors who helped eradicate the yellow fever when the Panama Canal was being constructed, and then he spent a lot of his childhood in Texas and Arizona.

The way that they ended up in Tucson, Arizona is that that was the final stop of my grandfather's military service at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. My other grandfather, my mom's father, was also a tech sergeant in the Air Force, and so my mom and dad lived right across the street from one another in Tucson, Arizona, and they dated when they were in high school. They stayed together long enough to have me, I think they were separated before I was 1-year-old, but they came together for this brief period of time, and my father went to the University of Arizona, thought he was going to be a civil engineer, ended up changing career tracks and majoring in English, then getting his PhD in English in Irvine, California at UC Irvine. I followed him there and he raised me for the whole school year as a single father while he was in graduate school, and then I would go spend summers and spring breaks and winters with my mom and my grandparents in Arizona.

I think this is important for understanding why I'm interested in what I'm interested in a scholarly sense, because I think as a kid I was moving around a lot in different contexts, between different contexts. I was in the predominantly white town of Irvine, California. This was in the eighties. I think Irvine has changed a lot. I think it's like 60% Asian now, it's not a predominantly white place, but-

Fred Lawrence: Irvine in the eighties was a pretty white place.

Geraldo Cadava: It was a white place. It was very affluent. That's where I went to elementary school, and then I would go spend summers in Tucson and winters in Tucson and just move back and forth. And so one of my uncles, my mom's brother, Joe, a truck driver, called me green bean because I'm half gringo and half beaner. That's what he said. And it's

interesting... Obviously, I laughed it off at the time and have only recently come to understand all the ways that it's offensive.

Fred Lawrence: It is really actually not only not funny, and if you'd been perhaps a little older, you might've been smart enough to be scared by it.

Geraldo Cadava: Totally.

Fred Lawrence: Maybe you were lucky to be under the radar when it came at you.

Geraldo Cadava: Totally. And the other thing that's interesting about it is that beaner is a slur for Mexicans in the border region, but my grandfather is also Colombian and Panamanian, so it to me, in later years came to represent how all Latinos are just misread as dirty Mexicans or something like that, regardless of what their national background is.

Fred Lawrence: Not only racist, but irrationally racist.

Geraldo Cadava: Yeah, irrationally racist. That's exactly right. But then also Tucson is just 60 miles north of the US-Mexico border and the border towns of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. In recent years, when I've come to explain to myself and to others why I have become interested in the issues that I'm interested in, my first book was about the border, my second book was about conservatism, I think it was just a lot of thinking about mixed race identities since I'm half white, half Latino. It was thinking about living near the border and moving back and forth across the border constantly to go have lunch with my grandparents in Nogales, Sonora or go to an artesania, like a crafts store to come back with ceramics or plates or glasses.

My grandma would also go to doctor's appointments and get prescription drugs in Mexico that she couldn't get in the United States, and then thinking about my grandpa as a Republican, Colombian, Filipino, Panamanian man, who was then living in the US-Mexico border region, which is a Latino place dominated by Mexican and Mexican-American people. I think so much of my work has just been dedicated to exploring all of these weird little quirks of Latino identity and history and culture that I'm still really just trying to make sense of for myself.

Fred Lawrence: As a kid in an academic community and with an academic father, do you remember a moment when you thought to yourself, I want to be an academic too, or did it not happen like that?

Geraldo Cadava: Yes, yes. It was the day after I bombed the LSAT.

Fred Lawrence: Many academic careers begin with bombing the LSAT or the MCATs.

Geraldo Cadava: That's right.

Fred Lawrence: A well trod path.

Geraldo Cadava: That's right. I went to Dartmouth College, and after I bombed the LSAT, I did start remembering my time at Dartmouth where I was a history major and had written an undergraduate thesis about a Chicano-Mexican-American art group in Los Angeles called ASCO. And I spent the summer between my junior and senior years in college where I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, not early as a junior, but as a senior, because I wasn't that smart.

Fred Lawrence: We're proud to count you as one of ours. Dartmouth is one of our very, very oldest chapters.

Geraldo Cadava: Oh, cool. Cool, cool, cool. This was in 2000. And so I wrote my undergraduate thesis about a Latino art group and set it aside. I thought I was going to go to law school. I worked at Sullivan and Cromwell, a white shoe corporate law firm in New York after college as a legal assistant. I worked in the project finance group, and my job was... Oh, I had a lot of jobs. A lot of it had to do with copying things and putting little tabs to organize documents on things. But the deals, the kind of deals that the group that I worked in did, it was like building oil pipelines through the Amazon. And one of the things I had to do is collect news stories for the partners so they could understand how those deals were being covered in the popular press. And there were stories about women chaining themselves to bulldozers to prevent the destruction of the Amazon so that these oil companies could go through.

And so over time, I started to question whether I wanted to be doing that kind of work or whether I wanted to be doing another kind of work. And then I halfheartedly studied for the LSAT, bombed it, and then literally a month later I took the GRE. I took it in November, I think, or October, so it was relatively late in the application cycle, and all of the graduate school applications were due in early December. And so within a two-month period of time, I had abandoned the idea of law school, thought about what I really wanted to do, and I had this hanging memory in my head of having really enjoyed my undergraduate thesis research project and applied to graduate schools. But it ended up being a great decision, and I ended up making the right decision about a school to go to, but I wouldn't say that there was a lot of forethought and premeditation. I think the one advantage I really did have is just an academic father who could coach me through the process, but also I grew up around a lot of academics. I was familiar with the conversation.

I remember the times when he was studying for his qualifying exams, and he would take me over to a friend's house where he was studying with that friend together, and I would just fall asleep while he and his friend were preparing for their exams. I also remember he went to UC Irvine at a time when the literary theorist, Jacques Derrida was-

Fred Lawrence: Yes.

Geraldo Cadava: ... splitting time between Irvine, California and France. And so my dad got to study with him, and he brought him over to our house when I was maybe in fourth or fifth grade, and my dad said, I want you to meet someone, so I ran downstairs in my underwear and no T-shirt.

Fred Lawrence: You met Derrida in fourth grade in your underwear?

Geraldo Cadava: In my underwear.

Fred Lawrence: You do understand most people do not have a story like that.

Geraldo Cadava: Yeah, probably. I don't know that I want a story like that, but it happened. Yes, I did. But wouldn't-

Fred Lawrence: He didn't imprint on you as... At the time you didn't say, this is a transformative experience, this is another one of my father's friends or another of the people my father brings to the house?

Geraldo Cadava: He was some old dude. Just some old dude.

Fred Lawrence: Not a transformative figure in literature, and for that matter sociology-

Geraldo Cadava: No.

Fred Lawrence: ... and the way we see the world.

Geraldo Cadava: No.

Fred Lawrence: A 20th century version of Karl Marx in some ways.

Geraldo Cadava: That's right. That's right. I also remember taking break dancing classes in Irvine, and Judith Butler was asking me about my break dancing classes, but I didn't know who any of these people were. I don't know if those people were then who they became.

Fred Lawrence: Judith Butler was on her way to becoming one of the major figures in literary theory, but I think Derrida, by the time he was in Irvine-

Geraldo Cadava: He was there.

Fred Lawrence: ... he already was, and Irvine was in some ways the Yale of the west in that regard. Yale was the heart of deconstruction and literary theory, Geoffrey Hartman and J. Hillis Miller. J. Hillis Miller who wound up out at Irvine.

Geraldo Cadava: That's right.

Fred Lawrence: In many ways that was the western outpost of deconstruction.

Geraldo Cadava: It's funny, these are names I all remember. I remember all of them but I didn't follow their careers at all. All of it suggests that I've had an interesting insider and outsider,

mostly insider academic trajectory. I would say outsider in the sense that I spent my entire, well through my first two years after college thinking that I was not going to get a PhD and become a professor. And in fact, my dad reminds me that when I was a kid I was telling him stories about how there's no way I would ever become a professor because I saw how hard he worked and he worked all the time. What I mean by that is literally he eats, sleeps, and breathes his work.

And so dad, if you ever listen to this, I don't know how you'll feel about me saying this, but he would sleep three or four hours a night every night for years and years and years, because when he was raising me as a single father, his routine was that he would work during the day. He would spend time with me from 3:00 until 8:00 until I went to bed, and then he would keep working until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. And so I say this because when I went to graduate school he was my only model for how to be an academic. And so I was only sleeping in my first semester three or four hours because I thought that that's the kind of-

Fred Lawrence: Did you have to do-

Geraldo Cadava: ... choice you had to make to become an academic. And I don't think that was healthy because by the second semester of graduate school, I was having stomach problems and I thought I was drinking too much coffee. I was just stressed out. In some ways I had to learn in graduate school a different way of being an academic. That I think is where my mentors at graduate school, especially a man named Stephen Pitti and his wife Alicia Camacho, who were married, both professors at Yale, became fundamental models to me of decency, having a family life that was separate from your work and I don't mean to suggest here that my dad is not a decent person and didn't have an understanding about this, but this is just how he related to his work.

Fred Lawrence: I want to ask you a question about your upcoming work or the work that you're in the midst of. The Chicago city planner, Daniel Burnham, famously said, "Make no small plans." For you we could say, write no small books. This is a book, if I understand it right, you correct me if I got this wrong, you are purporting to write a book on the history of Latinos over the past 500 years, half of a millennium, so how do you conceptualize a project like that?

Geraldo Cadava: It's really hard. It's challenging, because the other layer to what you said is that I want this to be not only readable, but maybe dramatic and also short, I mean in a sense that people will read it. If I can come in at like 200, 250 pages, that would be ideal, so it is challenging. And what that means is, on the one hand, it's easy. I've been teaching Latino history for 20 years. I have a take. I know what I want to say. I know what I want the argument to be. The challenge for this project is not the mountains and mountains of research that I need to do all over the world, it's really about choosing the right moments and the right stories to be representative of large swaths of time and finding the right characters, so I'm trying to build each of these chapters around particular

moments. Right now, my mind is just in the early 19th century, thinking about people like Simon Bolivar and Spanish-American Independence and the drafting of the first constitutions for Peru and Chile.

The reason that's important to me in the context of Latino history is that still today, 50% of Latinos identify not as Latino, but as Mexican or Colombian or Venezuelan or Puerto Rican. Those countries that so many Latinos today closely identify with didn't exist before Spanish-American Independence and the drafting of the first constitutions in the 1820s. I think it's an important moment. Obviously Bolivar, he's a key character. There the challenge is so much has been written about Simon Bolivar. Why is he useful to me in explaining something about Latino history? Really, what I would say is that this book, unlike other books I've written that have been really heavy on primary research, visiting archives all over the place, what's really important about this book and has been really hard is to figure out the architecture of the book in order to be able to write it concisely, clearly choosing the right moments, choosing the right characters, so it's a different kind of exercise.

But I think the other thing that's going to, I hope, will make it possible for me, is that I have a very, in my mind, clear argument that I'm trying to start with other people who have been foolish enough to embark on such an endeavor. The basic idea has been that Latinos are victims of colonization, victims of empire, victims of discrimination, so they've been colonized, they've been a colonized people. And I'm not challenging that idea so much as saying that it's really incomplete because at the same time that Latinos have been victims of empire discrimination and colonization, I'm saying that Latinos have also been colonizers. They've believed in all of the values of the empire, like the Spanish empire, the American empire, and I think that that's a really important side of Latino history that hasn't really been explored as much, that would help us understand something about how complex Latino communities are today.

Fred Lawrence: I normally ask my guests on Key Conversations to help our listeners build their reading list, because they're also readers here at Phi Beta Kappa. But you may have just done that.

Geraldo Cadava: I might have.

Fred Lawrence: Are there additional books that you would recommend, or is that where you would have people start who are trying both to get into the areas that we've been talking about, but also some people who have some background in Latino history who might want to take their level of knowledge up to a higher plane?

Geraldo Cadava: For me, I would say maybe those two books, Ada Ferrer's *Cuba: An American History* and Jorrell Melendez-Badillo's *Puerto Rico: A National History* have been two really good models for me right now. But I've also enjoyed the novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez called *The General in His Labyrinth*, which it's about Simon Bolivar's final

months going up the Rio Magdalena in Colombia, where he goes to his final resting place in Santa Marta. I read that for obvious reasons right now, but it's just so good.

Fred Lawrence: You told us that you thought maybe you'd be a lawyer, but apparently you were supposed to be a historian. You found your way to it. I think you were supposed to be a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar…

Geraldo Cadava: I was.

Fred Lawrence: ... during the 2024-2025 year. I think these-

Geraldo Cadava: It was my destiny.

Fred Lawrence: I think these things have a way of working out, and I'm so glad you were. I'm so glad for the experiences you had and that you gave our students and our faculty and our communities on those visits, and I'm really grateful to you coming in today and sitting down with me on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Geraldo Cadava: Thank you so much for having me, and thank you for the opportunity to be a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, and it was nice talking to you.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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