PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Donna R. Gabaccia

IMMIGRATION AND AMERICAN DIVERSITY

A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

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IMMIGRATION AND AMERICAN DIVERSITY

Problems in American History

Series editor: Jack P. Greene

Each volume focuses on a central theme in American history and provides greater analytical depth and historiographic coverage than standard textbook discussions normally allow. The intent of the series is to present in highly interpretive texts the unresolved questions of American history that are central to current debates and concerns. The texts will be concise enough to be supplemented with primary readings or core textbooks and are intended to provide brief syntheses of large subjects.

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7	Donna R. Gabaccia	*Immigration and American Diversity*

Preface and Acknowledgments

Short books produce large debts. *Immigration and American Diversity* was written as a book that undergraduate students could profitably read in conjunction with many fine collections, which gather "immigrant voices" past and present. As a teacher, I know how much students enjoy hearing those voices, and as a writer, I appreciate the authors who make them accessible. Without collections of documents and personal narratives edited by Colin Calloway, Thomas Dublin, Jon Gjerde, Gordon Hutner, Thomas Kessner, Betty Boyd Caroli, Dale Steiner, and Al Santoli, mine would have been a very different book.

For years, I have labored happily in the multilingual world of interdisciplinary and transnational studies of migration while teaching world history. The experience has alerted me to the distinctive characteristics of immigration and ethnic histories of the USA. The rest of the world does not think about race, mobility, ethnicity, religion, or history and chronology in quite the ways Americans do. This awareness pushed me to respond positively when Blackwell editor Susan Rabinowitz first encouraged me to consider a small interpretive book on a grand, important theme.

I took seriously the goal of Blackwell's Problems in American History series to "present in highly interpretive texts the unresolved questions of American history." *Immigration and*

American Diversity does not aim to document in all their rich detail the histories all of the immigrant and ethnic groups of the USA. Others have done that well. But doing it well has diverted attention from social and cultural interactions among immigrants and Americans of diverse backgrounds.

My goals were straightforward. I wanted students to consider how immigration shaped social interactions *across* cultural boundaries. I wanted to trace the resulting changes in group and individual identities, among newcomers and diverse Americans alike. Finally, I wanted them to face the unresolved issue of American national culture. To write briefly about four centuries of ethnic interaction, I drew on my experience teaching world history, and organized the material thematically rather than offering the tight chronology appropriate for histories of politics, policy, and demography.

A year-long sabbatical from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte allowed me to revise a very rough draft of this manuscript during the early months of my tenure as a Fellow at the Charles Warren Center at Harvard University. There I benefited from good advice delivered by my fellow Warren Fellows in its 2000–2001 seminar "Global America." Jim Campbell, Jona Hansen, and Jessica Gienow-Hecht were particularly helpful, perhaps without fully realizing how.

Jim Barrett, Peter D'Agostino, Dirk Hoerder, Cindy Kierner, and Lea Zuyderhoudt were kind enough to read drafts of some of the chapters of this book. I thank them for it, as I do the three anonymous readers who saved me from some errors and sharpened my interpretation in countless ways.

More personally, I again thank both Thomas Kozaks, Jeffrey Pilcher, Jeanne Chiang, Dorothy Kachouh, and my mother, Marjorie Gabaccia, for their unfailing love. It sustains me in all I do.

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Introduction

If you are like me, and are an American living in the USA, then your ancestors – like mine – lived on other continents before coming to North America. But while I think of myself as a descendant of immigrants, you very well may not. Why should that be so? Since World War II, the United States has often proudly proclaimed itself, in the words of John F. Kennedy, "a nation of immigrants."[1] In his book, Kennedy acknowledged the importance of American diversity. But even when he wrote in 1959, the word "immigrants" – understood to mean those who had left Europe voluntarily between 1820 and 1920 in search of liberty – excluded many Americans. If your ancestors arrived in America before 1492, came from Spain, England, or France before 1776, or traveled unwillingly as slaves from Africa, it's unlikely you considered them part of Kennedy's nation of immigrants. If you arrived more recently, leave the USA to go home on vacations, or don't possess a green card, you may not think of yourself as an immigrant even today.

Immigration and American Diversity aims to broaden your understanding of the USA as a culturally diverse nation by portraying immigration as just one of many important migrations transforming American life. It offers a short survey of a long sweep of American history, beginning with the arrival in North America of migrants from Asia, Africa, and Europe and ending with a discussion of the USA at the turn of the twenty-first century. It identifies the places where mobile

peoples have met and describes the American communities – including those we today call "ethnic groups" – that emerged from their encounters. It shows how these encounters produced individual identities and regional cultures that are uniquely American in combining elements from diverse traditions.

Immigration and American Diversity shows you how discussions of newcomers have also been central to Americans' efforts to define their nation. Could anyone who chose American citizenship and espoused its civic ideals become an American? Or were Americans themselves a racial or a cultural group willing to exclude other peoples they deemed too different? While urging you to ponder these unresolved questions, *Immigration and American Diversity* ultimately argues that migration helped make Americans of newcomers and natives alike.

Who is an Immigrant?

If you have traveled abroad as a tourist or moved from one US city or state to another, you already know that all people on the move are not considered immigrants, nor do they consider themselves to be immigrants. National governments define immigrants by identifying foreigners who are eligible to join their nations. To do this, they must first draw boundaries around their national territories, embrace the residents of that territory as national citizens or subjects, and legislate which foreigners may enter. They must distinguish immigrants from both their own mobile citizens and from other foreigners who – as students, temporary workers, businesspeople, or tourists – will again quickly leave. Many distinguish immigrants from foreign "denizens" who live permanently on their territory without joining their nation.

Because governments define immigration, it is problematic to speak of American immigrants before the USA became an independent country. Many newcomers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came as conquerors and viewed the na-

tives as enemies to be vanquished if not totally eliminated. Many were slaves captured in Africa. Although different from later immigrants, these early migrants established and institutionalized forms of human interaction with which Americans would long grapple.

Nor did migrations of conquerors end in 1776. When the USA defeated Mexico in 1848, and when it obtained Spain's remaining colonies in the Caribbean and the Philippines in a war in 1898, neither the natives nor the newcomers in these encounters are best understood as immigrants. Many Americans migrated westward as rulers; Mexican residents of Arizona and the colonials of Puerto Rico became subjects and, eventually, citizens, of the USA without leaving home. Puerto Ricans who then moved to New York as citizens crossed no national boundary and no inspector counted them as immigrants.

And they had plenty of company. Contrary to popular belief, there was no golden time in the past when Americans were immobilized by strong attachments to their home places in the USA. Even during the nineteenth century's peak eras of immigration, larger numbers of people moved about within the USA than across its national borders. Yet, surely, to leave rural Alabama for Chicago's "promised land" in 1910 was a cultural journey almost as long as the one from Poland to Cleveland.[2]

Immigration itself has ebbed and flowed considerably since the USA began counting foreign newcomers in 1820, as Figure I.1 shows. Yet immigration, somewhat like the westward "frontier" migrations, has nevertheless generated a controversial interpretation of US history. While the latter emphasized the nation's destiny to expand and conquer, portraits of the USA as a "nation of immigrants" have celebrated the American nation's ability to incorporate outsiders peaceably and to unify peoples of diverse backgrounds.

This celebration of immigration as a foundation for national unity is quite recent, however. Americans did not even label foreigners as immigrants until a full century after the USA became a nation. Until 1820, they called the newest arrivals

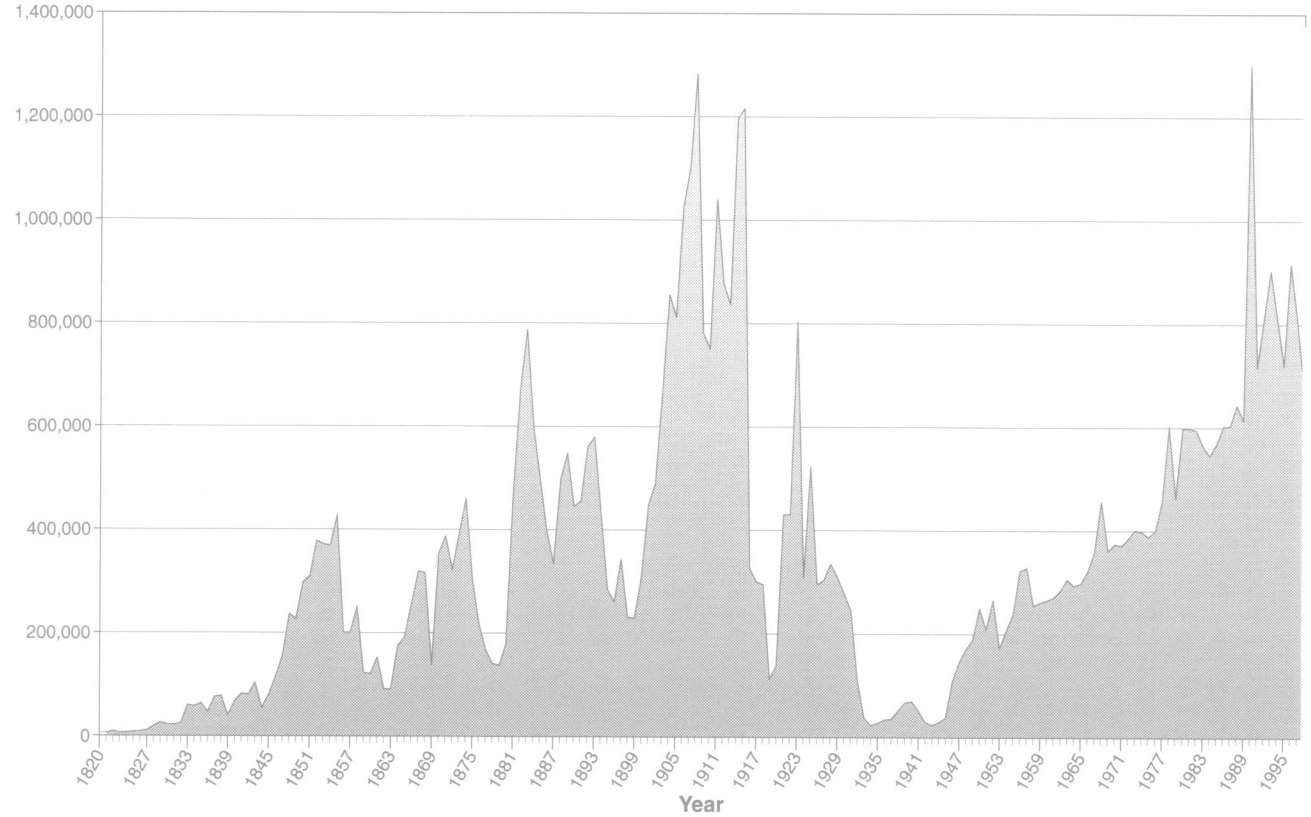

Figure I.1 Immigration as an influence on American life

"aliens": citizenship defined Americans, aliens lacked it. When aliens obtained citizenship they "became American." For a half century after 1830, natives increasingly questioned this easy transformation of aliens into citizens; they began calling newcomers "emigrants," to emphasize their flight from a backward and intolerant "Old World." In the 1880s and 1890s, natives hostile to newcomers (we now call such people nativists) became the first Americans to popularize the term "immigrant." Efforts to diminish immigration from abroad date from this era.

Celebrations of the USA as a nation of immigrants, and of the transformation of immigrants into Americans, developed only after immigration was, in fact, sharply restricted between 1882 and 1924. Only then did immigration seem to provide a satisfying illustration of the national motto of making "out of many, one," and even that illustration failed to satisfy the many mobile Americans who felt little connection to immigration. Since 1965, historians of immigration have increasingly questioned the unifying power of immigration, emphasizing instead its contributions to American diversity.[3] Both popular and scholarly accounts have also catalogued the experiences of "the many" – Native-Americans, women, Asian immigrants, and African-Americans – excluded from the "one" during the years when European immigrants could easily acquire citizenship.

One of the purposes of this book is to bridge the chasm between an upbeat image of the USA as a nation of immigrants and more critical accounts of American multiculturalism written in the past three decades. While both recognize diversity as a central theme in American life, each interprets national unity differently. Viewing the USA as a nation of immigrants has the advantage of focusing our attention on the transformations of cultures and identities that inevitably occur as people move about, recognize their differences and try to live together despite them. But to view all these transformations as a direct path to national homogeneity might be inaccurate. Most Native- and African-Americans have deep roots in North America but maintain distinct identities; some

of the most important influences on newly arrived foreigners have been mobile natives, many of them racial minorities, and they, too, changed during their encounters with each other and with the newcomers.

Immigration, Ethnicity, and American Diversity

Diversity is too obvious to ignore in the USA; we see it in personal identities, physical appearances, cultural and religious values, and group affiliations. Newcomers to the USA generate some of this diversity although immigration is by no means its only source. People in the USA vary in religious faith, language, and geographic origins; around 1930, scholars began labeling such differences "ethnic."[4] Americans with darker skin colors have developed distinctive cultures through their long histories of exclusion and discrimination; Americans typically call these differences "racial" or "racial ethnic."[5] Immigration and ethnic history are thus best analyzed together – the former for its focus on mobility as a source of transformation and the latter for its attention to cultural groups.

Even among immigrants and their immediate descendants, cultural diversity is never exclusively the product of mobility. Historical memories of conquest and abuse define important elements of group solidarity and identity for Jewish-Americans, Native-Americans, Black-Americans, Asian-Americans (especially in the west), Mexican-Americans in the southwest, and many white southerners, too. For immigrants and natives with distant or recent origins in Asia and Africa, racial discrimination encourages ethnic group formation. Religious practices are important in defining ethnicity among immigrant Catholics, Jews, and Moslems and among long-time American Mormons and Black members of the Nation of Islam while spoken accents are salient to southerners, Latinos, Blacks, and most foreigners.

Ethnic groups, with their distinctive cultures, have considerable significance in American history. Religious faith has generated local churches, mosques, and synagogues and large

nation-wide and even international associations of the faithful. The southern states did secede in 1860 to form an independent country based on regional loyalties. Many immigrants and racial minorities in 1900 married, socialized, and worked mainly with people of their "own kind," and their newspapers, associations, and leaders spoke for them as separate groups. The American government has traditionally treated ethnicity and race as real and sometimes even as scientific ways of categorizing diversity. American law labeled and limited the legal rights of enslaved Africans, Native-American nations, and foreign aliens, and treated individuals first and foremost as members of these groups, determining who could marry or vote, what schools children attended, what kind of jobs adults took, and which political opinions they expressed.

Nevertheless, ethnic groups, like nations, are also to some degree "imagined communities," and they are imagined by both insiders and outsiders to possess an ethnic culture.[6] People on the move have especially strong incentives to choose to identify with and thus to imagine themselves as members of distinct ethnic groups. But they also have better-than-average opportunities to escape group constraints. This means that group life usually reflects some element of choice among insiders. Leaders of the Catholic Church may speak for all the faithful but many Catholics do not attend services or support the church financially. Many migrants change their religion, not just their residence. And Jewish- and Chinese-Americans may prefer their children to marry within their groups, but they do not always do so.

Powerful outsiders can also play a powerful role in imagining cultural communities, and for this reason, many theorists argue that physical appearance, especially color, provided such a firm indicator of cultural difference that racial groups differed from ethnic groups in being imposed rather than chosen. It is certainly true that white outsiders imposed racial identities on Americans with roots in Africa and Asia and that, over the centuries, black Americans encountered the especially thick boundaries whites drew between themselves and those of darker skin. Nevertheless even their identities changed over