From the Other Side

Gabaccia, Donna

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PART I.

Coming to the United States
ONE

Where Is the Other Side?

Immigrant women came to the United States from the same corners of the earth as immigrant men, and they traveled via the same routes. The location of the corners from which they came, however, changed remarkably during the three great waves of migration (1830–1860; 1880–1920; 1965–present). The nation receiving them also changed during these years. One challenge in studying men and women immigrants is to document their diversity while recognizing what they shared as migrants.

Angela Spoo Heck, a German speaker, represents the first great nineteenth-century wave of immigrants from northern and western Europe.1 Born near Trier, Heck was twenty-eight and newly married when she left her native land in 1854; she accompanied her migrating husband Nikolaus, an unemployed journeyman tailor. The couple traveled to Antwerp, then boarded a sailing ship for New York. Heck had neither applied for permission to leave home nor received a cash grant from her town’s mayor, eager though he was to be rid of poor “creatures” crowding local welfare lists. A devout Catholic, Heck found she could not pray during the terrifying transatlantic voyage. In her first letter home, she joked with her brother-in-law about the million lice that had joined the immigrants on their voyage over.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Asians and southern and eastern Europeans heading for the United States outnumbered Irish, Scandinavian, British, and German immigrants like Heck. Typical was Jennie Grossman. Born into a Jewish family in Lulieniec in Russian Poland around 1904, she left with her parents and brother just before World War I.2 Grossman’s father was an itinerant carpenter who returned to his three-generation household for Sabbath each week. At times Russian soldiers were billeted at his house, but they offered no protection during pogroms. Grossman’s father suffered recurring nightmares of anti-Semitic violence; Grossman and her brother several times hid beneath their barn to avoid attack from Gentiles. Still, the departure from Lulieniec proved traumatic for Grossman’s mother. Her elderly father had traveled along as far as Warsaw, but en route to the port city of Danzig, train personnel pushed him away from the emigrants. Shocked, and unable to say good-bye, Grossman’s mother dropped a mirror she was holding; she carried the pieces for years afterward.

Since 1965, immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America have become the majority. Martha Vásquez de Gómez, for example, traveled
to the United States from her rural Mexican home in 1973. She was just sixteen, the eldest of ten children, and accustomed to heavy household work. Her widowed father had been ill, so when a friend of an aunt offered to take her to San Antonio, where she knew a family that would employ her, she readily agreed to let her go: he would have one fewer to feed. Vásquez de Gómez traveled by bus, with her aunt’s friend and a counterfeit passport. Curious to see the United States, she worked there for a number of years and then returned home to see her father one last time. Soon thereafter, she married a young man in Guadalajara. She never returned to the United States.

Culturally diverse, these three women shared origins on “the other side,” in regions of the world connected to the United States through economic and political ties, yet also economically and politically far less powerful than it. As the United States changed from an ex-colony within the British Empire to an independent and expanding nation-state, an international capitalist giant, and—ultimately—a world leader, its international connections continuously redrew the location of “the other side.”

IMMIGRATION IN A CAPITALIST WORLD ECONOMY

If there were no inequality in the world, there would be far less migration. For the past 400 years capitalism and political centralization, most visibly through colonialism and through the expansion of nation-states such as Italy and Russia, have been key generators of inequality and of opportunity, and thus of migration. According to John Bodnar, “most of the immigrants transplanted to America . . . were in reality the children of capitalism.” While important, Bodnar’s view misses how political subordination, too, sparked human mobility. Political change cannot be neatly divorced from the history of the capitalist world economy. State policies have influenced human migration from the mercantilist empires of the seventeenth century, with their organization of the slave trade and of colonial investment, through the restrictive immigration laws of nations in the twentieth century. The experiences of minorities like the Grossman family cannot be understood apart from their subordination during periods of national or imperial consolidation or collapse. In fact, politics may be the most important determinant of the way understandings of race and ethnicity change over time.

Capitalism and political centralization cannot tell us all we need to know about emigrants. Economic inequalities occur within nations and within empires, too; most migrations cross no international boundaries. And while economic inequality may be an important precondition for much migration, the very poorest are usually too poor to take advantage of economic opportunities elsewhere. World view, age, and gender matter. A prospective migrant has to recognize her problems, to know something of worlds beyond her own and to perceive them as better—and attainable. And a prospective emigrant has to have the power to move. Adults and men have often known more of
the wider world than children or women; they have also enjoyed cultural support in making decisions for others in their families.

Not all the problems immigrants hope to solve by migrating are economic or political in origin. A contemporary of Jennie Grossman left home because she did not want her father to arrange her marriage; the fictional Swedish heroine of Moberg’s *The Emigrants* repeatedly argued against her husband’s desire to emigrate until one of her children died. Personal and familial events can spark migrations, but cannot easily be measured.

It is true that from their points of view, Heck, Grossman, and Vásquez de Gómez did not become migrants in response to a “capitalist world system” or to “political centralization,” but to individual and immediate opportunities. Pragmatically, however, each moved through a world shaped by capitalist development and by nation- and empire-building. Each experienced personally the ways in which immigration and international politics had integrated two widely separated regions of the world into a state of hierarchical interdependence. As immigrants met Americans and as subordinated minorities confronted their rulers, distorted social, cultural, and moral distinctions emerged; we call these views of difference ethnocentrism and racism. They made differences between developing and “backward” regions appear natural. For Grossman, ethnocentrism meant the daily fear of pogroms; for Vásquez de Gómez and Heck, it meant instead hearing complaints about them from elite Americans, earlier German arrivals, and Chicano employers in San Antonio.

In contrast to immigrants, the “racial” minorities of the United States were created as first European empires, and then the independent and expanding United States, gained varying degrees of control over Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and parts of the Pacific. But when viewed from a global perspective, colonized or racial and immigrant minorities appear as overlapping and intertwined groups. Ambitious and competing dynasties in Europe had made colonies of their neighbors (England of Ireland, Spain of Sicily, Russia of Poland, and Turkey of Serbia) before or at the same time as they sought colonies elsewhere in the world. Ethnic or racial minorities, the colonized, the enslaved, the partially free, and the formerly colonized have figured prominently in international migrations from 1492 down to the present. Empires seem always to “strike back” through mobile minorities.

Few nations, furthermore, have sought economic development or political influence only as receivers of immigrants or only as “world powers.” Great Britain built the world’s largest colonial empire, but it was an empire characterized by high internal mobility. And while the United States became known as a nation of immigrants, it also acquired new territories and minorities in the nineteenth century and exercised political influence over a far-flung groups of allies after World War II. To this day, Great Britain’s tradition of Empire and Commonwealth shapes its immigration policies. In the United States, too, the history of immigration should be viewed in tandem with the histories of racial minorities and the expanding American “empire.”
FROM COLONY TO AMERICAN EMPIRE: IMMIGRANTS AND OTHER MINORITIES

From a collection of colonies marginal to the Spanish, French, and English empires of the seventeenth century, the United States emerged as an independent nation, committed to growth through migration, yet destined also to struggle with colonialism's legacy of creating racial minorities of conquered peoples. The population of the United States in 1790 still reflected the imperial policies of the British and French.\textsuperscript{16} As in the rest of the colonized world, populations of Native Americans had declined precipitously. But unlike Africans in the Caribbean or in parts of Spanish and Portuguese America, Africans on the North American mainland, both slave and free, were outnumbered almost everywhere by Europeans and their descendants. England had started late in the competition for colonies, and it coaxed and coerced migrants to secure its colonies from Spanish and French encroachments. It opened its colonies to religious dissenters (Puritans in Massachusetts, Catholics in Maryland, Presbyterians in frontier areas from New York to North Carolina) and permitted foreigners, like the Germans of the middle colonies, to live under English laws and become citizens through naturalization.\textsuperscript{17}

Most of the Europeans who had traveled to settle in British North America were humble people, hardly free themselves. England sent prisoners, convicts, and poorhouse residents to its colonies. Impoverished English men and women also sold themselves into temporary slavery as indentured servants in order to cross the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{18} By 1790, however, the descendants of these European settlers had clearly distinguished themselves through law and custom from slaves and other Africans. Like its "mother" country, the United States quickly established its intentions to limit full citizenship to European men: its constitution enshrined the property rights of slave owners; it treated Native Americans as belonging to separate nations.\textsuperscript{19}

Women had formed but a small part of colonial migrations to the Americas. Slave traders and plantation owners preferred male laborers, as did urban and rural employers of indentured labor.\textsuperscript{20} Women's numbers equaled men's only among the most prosperous free migrants who traveled to North American colonies to farm the frontier or to establish religious settlements. By 1790, however, demographic increase had balanced sex ratios everywhere but on the western frontier of settlement. Most free white women, of course, remained men's dependents under law.

From the time of its first complaints (in the Declaration of Independence) about the British king limiting migration to the colonies, the United States had announced its intention to encourage immigration. In its constitution, however, it also proclaimed its right to limit access to residence and citizenship.\textsuperscript{21} The Constitution provided for the abolition of the slave trade (which occurred in 1808), and plans to resettle emancipated slaves to Africa coexisted with Congress's decision to restrict citizenship through naturalization to whites.
Even after its independence, the United States remained firmly embedded in an Atlantic economy dominated initially by Great Britain. Though it was no longer a colony, its trade ties and its continued need for foreign capital maintained conduits through which mass European migrations traveled after the end of the disruptive Napoleonic Wars. Encouraging immigration, however, was of little importance to the Founding Fathers at first. They looked not toward Europe but westward, committing the new nation to expansion as far as the Pacific and to the dispossession of American Indians and European colonizers on its borders. After the Louisiana Purchase and the conquest and purchase of a large part of Mexico’s territory, Easterners expected that Americans—that is, free, white English-speaking Protestants—would populate the west and southwest, outnumbering if not completely replacing the indigenous American Indians and mestizo Catholic Spanish-speakers of the region.

The settlement and development of these western territories provoked a national crisis that clarified the relationship of immigrant and racial minorities in the United States and the position of the U.S. in the world. Wealthy southern planters looked forward to bringing slaves and slavery westward with them, while opponents of slavery argued instead for free labor in populating and developing the United States. Increasingly, free labor came to mean labor from abroad, and opponents of slavery ultimately supported an open-door immigration policy. By the 1850s, immigrants and racial minorities seemed positioned as conflicting sources of labor for national economic development. The Civil War established the nation’s commitment to industrial growth by means of free rather than slave labor. Free men would labor on free soil or work as free wage-earners. Immigrants—not former slaves—would become wage laborers in the country’s expanding industries.

Industrial expansion in the United States opened new questions about the country’s relationship to the rest of the world. President Monroe had announced U.S. opposition to European expansion in the Western Hemisphere. Industrial growth inevitably transformed the United States into a competitor with European empires for worldwide markets, and U.S. employers eagerly sought more and more laborers for expanding industries until World War I. Interested in trade with Asia and the Pacific, the United States sometimes saw carefully regulated immigration as an alternative to empire-building along European lines. In 1877, for example, Congress moved to guarantee that immigration brought only free laborers to the country. It excluded first “coolies” and “slave girls”—Chinese men and women who traveled to the United States on American trading ships as indentured servants and contract laborers—and then in 1885 all immigrant contract laborers, including those from Europe. Determined to exclude all coolies and unwilling to view the Chinese as free migrants, Congress ended the migration of all Chinese laborers in 1882. During the same years, however, the United States acquired its own subordinated racial minorities in colonies—only one of which (Hawaii) eventually entered the Union as a state.
Overall, 95 percent of nineteenth-century immigrants came from Europe. But despite their European origins, their large numbers drew shocked attention. After the turn of the century, almost a million immigrants a year strode off boats to find homes or work in the United States. Between 1880 and 1924, their numbers accumulated to impressive totals: four million Germans and almost as many Italians; three million Irish; two and a half million English, Scots and Welsh, and almost as many eastern European Jews; over one million Poles, and almost as many Scandinavians. Although small in numbers, the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans continued to attract special, and negative, attention.

In their poverty, nineteenth-century European immigrants resembled the indentured servants and redemptioners of the colonial era more than the Puritans and Cavaliers that Anglo-Americans proudly claimed as their country’s founders. Most were of modest means or poor, and many had required assistance from home-villagers, illicit labor agents, or emigrated relatives to finance their trips to the United States. Immigrants seeking jobs in industry heavily outnumbered settlers on the land. Many were “sojourners” with little intention of remaining in the United States.

Few native-born Americans saw these new arrivals as followers in the footsteps of the original European settlers. Although Scandinavian, English, and some German immigrants shared the Protestantism of earlier English colonizers, most immigrants by the end of the nineteenth century worshiped in synagogues, in mosques, or in Catholic, Greek Orthodox, or Russian Orthodox churches. Because U.S. economic development drew on the hinterlands of nations and empires that could not match its rate of growth, many new arrivals (notably Irish, Poles, and South Slavs) had been colonized minorities—already disparaged for their backwardness and racial difference—at home. Fears of immigrant minorities mounted as southern and eastern Europeans—viewed as “dark” peoples from alien cultures—replaced the English, Scottish, and German newcomers of the pre–Civil War migrations. But unlike immigrants from Asia or Africa, most could at least claim citizenship through naturalization if they so chose.

Not surprisingly, demands for racial discrimination in United States immigration policy increased. Immigrants from China and Japan first bore the brunt of racist policies against foreigners, but discrimination did not stop with them. Mass migrations from Europe sparked intense debates about the racial status of European immigrants. Were the Irish white? Were the Italians? Could either ever successfully become Americans? Surprisingly often, the initial answer to all these questions was no. Social-Darwinist racial theories roughly resembling those we today associate with Hitler found an official place in U.S. immigration policy in 1899. Overnight, immigration officers declared northern and southern Italians two different races; they labeled most British West Indians as Africans; and they reclassified Polish or Russian Jews as “Hebrews,” in order to emphasize their Semitic (and thus Oriental) origins.
Migration had increased irregularly across the century, peaking just before World War I. Though the war put a clamp on immigration, the drop proved temporary; after the Armistice, demands for more restrictive laws grew. Over a presidential veto, Congress first excluded immigrants who could not read or write. When that law did not succeed in lowering immigration totals, new laws passed in 1921 and 1924 banned all Asian immigration and assigned tiny numerical quotas (albeit on a national, not a racial basis) to southern and eastern Europeans, while allowing large numbers of western and northern Europeans to enter. Clearly emerging from racial fears, these laws nevertheless did not attempt to restrict immigration from Africa (it was small in any case), from Mexico, or from any other nation in the Western Hemisphere, no matter what its peoples' "race."³⁹

By banning small Asian immigrations and restricting sizable southern and eastern European migrations, Congress accomplished its overarching goal, reducing the total number of immigrants entering the United States in the 1920s to about 150,000 annually. By restricting immigration while demand for labor in the United States remained strong, however, Congress also practically guaranteed that new migrants would replace excluded ones in U.S. agriculture and industry.

With the restriction of European migration after World War I, the racial minorities of the United States and the peoples of its own colonies moved to replace immigrants from Europe. African-Americans abandoned rural homes in the South for northern cities, as did the Mexican-Americans of the Southwest. Unrestricted, migrations from south to north in the Western Hemisphere grew, especially across the land border separating the United States from Mexico. Puerto Ricans and Filipinos also left their U.S.-colonized homes to experiment with work in the United States. Supporters of racist immigration laws had argued that they would "take the pressure off an overheated melting pot" in industrial cities; instead, restrictive laws merely encouraged new peoples to try their luck in the pot.⁴⁰

The Great Depression of the 1930s temporarily interrupted these new migrations. As jobs became scarce, the United States tightened its control of immigrants and resisted efforts to revise the quota laws of 1921 and 1924.⁴¹ Racial prejudice continued an important influence on U.S. immigration policy: authorities deported Mexican workers from the Southwest, failing even to differentiate between legal and undocumented immigrants or between citizens and foreigners.⁴² And the United States held firm against humanitarian demands that it suspend discriminatory quotas in order to allow Jews to escape persecution in Europe.⁴³ Still, Hitler's racial policies, leading to incarceration and murder of Jews and other minorities, attracted such negative attention that discrimination against racial minorities and southern and eastern Europeans in the United States became harder to defend. By World War II, Italians had become as indisputably white as the Irish before them. Filipinos gained their independence soon after the war, and campaigns against racial discrimination in all its legalized forms—from the segregated U.S.
Army and the drinking fountains of the South to prohibitions against Asian naturalization—gained momentum and support.

Modest changes initially exacerbated the contradictions inherent in U.S. immigration policy.\(^4\) Congress lifted racist bans against its Chinese allies during World War II, and it gave its blessing to farms that actively recruited Mexicans as temporary “bracero” workers.\(^5\) But it left in place discriminatory nationality quotas aimed at Asians and southern and eastern Europeans until 1965. Cold-war fears of foreign radicalism may have helped sustain discriminatory quotas through the economic boom of the 1950s.\(^6\) But the cold war also worked to undermine immigration policy in practice, since anticommunism moved the United States to admit small groups fleeing Communism, first in the late 1940s from eastern Europe, then in 1956 from Hungary and in 1961 from Cuba.\(^7\)

Only with a new Immigration Act in 1965 did the U.S. Congress finally attempt to provide a more permissive and racially neutral immigration policy. The law raised the number of immigrants admitted yearly to 290,000. It created numerical quotas and uniform visa requirements (“preferences”) for all nations of the world.\(^8\) The Immigration Act of 1965 can thus be seen as complementing its legislative contemporaries, the civil rights laws that ended legal racial discrimination against the country’s racial minorities.

The new immigration laws of the late 1960s did make migration from the Western Hemisphere and from northern Europe relatively more difficult, since people from both had effectively enjoyed unregulated migration since the 1920s.\(^9\) However, preferences for immediate relatives of naturalized immigrants and for skilled and professional workers guaranteed that older immigrant groups enjoyed particularly good access to visas, at least initially.\(^10\) And the visa status of refugees remained problematic under the new legislation;\(^11\) throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Congress and President responded periodically with special legislation and executive acts to allow carefully selected refugees, usually fleeing Communist countries or the Middle East, to enter the United States, notably from Cuba, southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union.

Patterns of immigration into the United States changed significantly under the new laws. Legal immigration totals rose well above the ceilings established under the 1965 law, to about half a million yearly in the late 1970s and 1980s, largely as a result of special provisions for relatives and refugees. As immigration increased, earlier migrations of African Americans to northern cities waned, and then reversed direction somewhat with the rapid economic development of the New South and the Sunbelt.\(^12\)

European interest in migration to the United States declined as northern European economies rebounded from World War II and attracted southern and eastern European migrant guest workers of their own.\(^13\) Italians, Portuguese, and Yugoslavs often preferred migration to northern Europe to migration to the United States, and the number of immigrants from these groups dropped to about 60,000 yearly in the 1970s.
The majority of immigrants entering the United States under the new law came instead from Asia (roughly 250,000 yearly in the 1970s and 1980s) and from Latin America and the Caribbean (upwards of 300,000 yearly during the same period). In the 1970s and 1980s, Mexico, China, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, and the Philippines regularly ranked among the top five countries sending immigrants to the United States. Spanish-, English-, and French-speaking immigrants from the Caribbean also rapidly increased in numbers. The United States no longer draws new workers from the minorities of other nations, from its own racial minorities, or from its colonized territories. Instead, its immigrants now originate in the far-flung military and trade empire the United States has built as world leader since World War II. Many new immigrants, furthermore, are well educated and professional workers in their homelands.

As in the nineteenth century, however, today’s new migrations challenge Americans to reconsider their definitions of race and racial minorities. Native-born Americans often see immigrants from the third world as Hispanics, African Americans or Asians, yet new immigrants rarely identify with such categories. Shared origins in Africa do not automatically make the French- or Creole-speaking, Catholic Haitian the soul sister of a native African American Protestant from Atlanta. Newly arrived Colombians contrast their supposedly pure Castilian Spanish to the “Spanglish” of Puerto Ricans; new arrivals from Japan and Korea are unlikely to feel much mutual solidarity as Asians. The United States in the 1990s seems to face again a period of fundamental transformation in its racial assumptions as new immigrant minorities undermine the racial categories created centuries ago by colonialism and national expansion in this hemisphere.

CONCLUSION

The history of immigration, past and present, begins in the changing margins—or other side—of the capitalist world economy. As conquest, capitalist investment, and ties of commerce disrupted subsistence production around the world, they generated first regional and then global markets for settlers and workers from developing nations. Unfortunately, analyses of global capitalism have rarely attended in any detail to women. This chapter, too, has downplayed the importance of gender and ethnicity in a world organized hierarchically through capitalism and political centralization into developing and backward regions. Still, a growing literature on women and economic development, supplemented by studies of women under colonial rule, does shed some light on immigrant women’s early lives on the other side.

The next chapter will show that trade, investment, nation-building, and colonialism proceeded in patterned ways, forcing men and women of the other side to devise strategies for coping with change. But while capitalism and centralizing governments introduced fairly uniform changes in the hinterlands of the world, people’s responses varied considerably with culture and gender. Initially, many rural peoples chose defensive strategies to pro-
tect their kin-based households from the atomizing influence of capitalism and its system of individual wage-earning and consumption. To limit capitalism's inroads, families assigned wage labor to particular family members—most typically young men, older men, and younger women. Over time, however, more people of the other side sought to make their peace with capitalism or empire through fulltime wage-earning. And whether one embraced or rejected these changes, migration became an important mechanism for securing a future in a changing world. In this respect, too, the history of immigrant women in the United States begins on the other side.