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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

"They're Coming to America": Immigration, Settlement, and Citizenship

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Immigrant America: A Portrait. By Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006, 3rd edition. ISBN: 0520250419. 460 pp., $24.95 (paper).

Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada. By Irene Bloemraad. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. ISBN: 0520248996. 369 pp., $23.95 (paper).

Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States. By Monisha Das Gupta. Durham: Duke University Press. ISBN: 082233898X. 318 pp., $23.95 (paper).

Everywhere around the world
They're coming to America
Ev'ry time that flag's unfurled
They're coming to America

Got a dream to take them there
They're coming to America
Got a dream they've come to share
They're coming to America

…."[1]

[1]Released in 1980, Neil Diamond's hit single "Coming To America" ends with an interpolation of the traditional patriotic song, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." Because of its patriotic theme, the song has been used in a variety of contexts, including as the theme song for Michael Dukakis's 1988 presidential campaign. Shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, Diamond modified the song's lyrics during live performances: instead of "They're comin' to America," towards the end, it became "Stand up for America." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/America_(Neil_Diamond_song)

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Immigration has become a key symbol in contemporary American culture—a central and powerful concept that is imbued with a multiplicity of myths and meanings, capable of rousing highly charged emotions that at times culminate in violently unfair practices. I open this essay with Neil Diamond's hit single "Coming to America" because it encapsulates the myth of "immigrant America": the idea that the U.S.—as a nation of freedom, rights, and liberty and justice for all—constitutes the beacon for the world's "tired…poor… [and] wretched refuse…." This myth shores up the national narrative of U.S.-bound immigration as a unidirectional and voluntary phenomenon, one in which the poor and desperate of the world descend en masse on a wealthy and benevolent nation. It is this "push-pull" story—of desperate individuals searching for the promised land—that has emboldened politicians, anti-immigrant groups and media agencies to create "knowledge" of an everyday "reality" that the U.S. borders are out of control and that immigration is overwhelming U.S. public institutions and threatening U.S. core values and identity. In other words, the myth of "immigrant America" constitutes the underlying logic of anti-immigration rhetoric and practices.

By portraying immigrants to the U.S. as a matter of desperate individuals seeking opportunities, the myth of "immigrant America" disregards the forcible inclusion of Native Americans, Mexican Americans and African Americans into the U.S. nation via conquest, annexation and slavery, and the fact that since at least World War II, migration to the U.S. "has been the product of specific economic, colonial, political, military, and/or ideological ties between the United States and other countries…as well as of war" (Ngai 2004, p. 10). Given this history, to challenge anti-immigration rhetoric and practices, one would need to first expose the myth of immigrant America by emphasizing the role that "U.S. world power has played in the global structures of migration" (Ngai 2004, p. 11). And yet, much of the published work in the field of immigration studies has not situated U.S. immigration history within this globalist framework, opting instead to focus on the immigrants' social, economic, and cultural integration into the nation. This "modes of incorporation" framework, which fits squarely within the status-attainment tradition, assesses the assimilability of the immigrants but leaves uninterrogated the racialized and gendered economic, cultural, and political foundations of the U.S.

Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut's *Immigrant America: A Portrait* is one of the more sophisticated examples of the modes-of-incorporation approach to immigration. Widely praised for its comprehensive scope, the expanded and updated third edition provides a much-needed synthesis of the latest research and national and regional data on post-1965 immigration to the U.S. This hefty volume is chock-full of useful information on hotly-contested immigration issues—on the immigrants' patterns of settlement and acculturation, economic adaptation and political participation, English-language acquisition and rates of naturalization, and on the educational attainment and mobility of the second generation. The book's key theme is *diversity*: "never before has the United States received immigrants from so many different countries, from such different social and economic backgrounds, and for so many different reasons" (p. 13). Since "today's immigrants come in luxurious jetliners and in the trunks of cars, by boat, and on foot," (p. xxiii), the authors conscientiously detail the bewildering variety of the immigrants' contexts of exit and modes of adaptation to American society.

The book's attention to differentiation and heterogeneity—and persistent questioning of the demand for a uniform assimilation process—is a welcome respite from the din of the acrimonious public debate on the costs and benefits of contemporary immigration. Indeed, Portes and Rumbaut are firmly pro-immigrant, firing off a dizzying array of data to counter misinformed stereotyping and nativism in favor of a national embrace of diversity. On the

other hand, they are also firmly pro-"immigrant America" in that they consistently represent the U.S. as a "nation of immigrants"—a "place where your dreams can come true" (p. 10). The logic behind the "immigrant America" approach is that immigration is a *problem* to be solved: "is it good or bad for the country to continue receiving hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world?" (p. 35).[2] Their answer to this question is resoundingly affirmative: immigration, they tell us, is good for America because immigrants "fill the labor needs of the giant American economy, rejuvenate the population, and add new energies and diversity to American culture" (p. 35).

This problem-oriented approach, however pro-immigrant in this case, uncritically accepts and thus naturalizes U.S. white middle-class culture, viewpoints, and practices as the norm—not only for the U.S. but for the world's populations. Instead of challenging the ideological and material power of these normative standards, and the global-historical conditions that have produced and solidified the "American dream," Portes and Rumbaut accept the premise that "most immigrants come to America to attain the dream of a new lifestyle that has reached their countries but that is impossible to fulfill in them" (p. 19). To be sure, the authors are cognizant of the political and economic role of U.S. industry and military in this global migration. In the conclusion, they recount the historical roots of today's migration, noting the historical ties between each of the major sending countries and the U.S., forged during the latter's successive interventions and expansionism. However, by limiting this analysis to less than four pages of the book (pp. 353–356), the authors skip an opportunity to critically inform public discussion about the origins of immigration—to show that "border crossers" are not just calculating individuals migrating in search of the "land of opportunity" but also U.S. colonizers, the military, and corporations that routinely cross borders in search of souls, raw materials, labor and markets. Dispelling the myth of immigrant America—and calling attention to the U.S. role in precipitating global migration in the first place—would be the first step toward having an honest immigration discussion not only locally and nationally, but also globally.

Another impressive example of the modes-of-incorporation approach to immigration is Irene Bloemraad's *Becoming a Citizen*: *Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada.* Like Portes and Rumbaut, Bloemraad is decidedly pro-immigrant, advocating an interventionist stance toward immigrant political incorporation. Hers is one of the few books to focus on immigrant political integration, and the first to do so through a comparative analysis of American and Canadian policies of resettlement and diversity. The basis for the U.S.–Canada comparison is their diverging patterns of political incorporation: since the 1960s, the levels of immigrant citizenship have been consistently much higher in Canada than in the U.S. Much of the research on immigrant political incorporation posits that the characteristics of the immigrants—their political skills, experience and interests—hold the key to understanding their levels of naturalization and participation. In contrast, Bloemraad insists that we also pay attention to political systems and government structures—that immigrant political participation is not just about the type of immigrants countries receive, but also about the reception given to these immigrants. Her argument, in brief, is that institutional contexts matter—that government ideologies, policies, and programs make a difference in transforming immigrants into active citizens. With convincing statistical as well as in-depth interview data with Portuguese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees in Boston and Toronto, Bloemraad shows how greater state support for settlement and an official policy of multiculturalism in Canada increase immigrant citizenship acquisition and political participation. In contrast, the government's

[2] For a discussion of the "problem-oriented" approach to migration, please see Espiritu 2003, pp. 207-209.

laissez-faire attitude toward integration in the U.S. appears to produce political apathy and alienation.

Although Bloemraad's book features an international comparison, it does not scrutinize the international context—colonialism, wars, capital investment, labor recruitment—that propelled migration to the U.S. and Canada in the first place. This oversight is most glaring in Bloemraad's treatment of the Vietnamese because it omits the specificities of their forced migration and the legacy of the American/Vietnam War. This omission—and the concomitant attention to U.S. "substantial assistance" to Vietnamese refugees—turns the U.S. into the magnanimous rescuers of the Vietnamese, never mind its role in producing this exodus in the first place. Moreover, although Bloemraad notes that the Vietnamese are seen as a racial minority in North America, she does not examine how this racial formation was first determined by U.S. wars in Southeast Asia. Besides devastating most economic opportunities for Vietnamese, the Vietnam War—and its attendant propaganda—has had racist and gendered consequences not only for citizens of Vietnam but also for Vietnamese in the diaspora. The popular and official discourse on Vietnam and its people during the Vietnam War established images—of inferiority, immorality, and unassimilability—that "traveled" with Vietnamese to their new homes and prescribed their racialization there. The Vietnamese case thus makes evident the global dimension of racism: Vietnamese refugee lives have been shaped not only by the racialization of Vietnamese in North America but also by the status of Vietnam in the global racial order.

Furthermore, the depiction of the U.S. and Canada as "countries that welcome immigrants from around the world" obscures the "darker side" of U.S. and Canadian immigration and citizenship history, which includes policies that barred Asian immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that interned immigrants and citizens of Japanese origin during World War II and that institutionalized immigration and citizenship systems that favored white Europeans until the 1960s. Bloemraad recounts these "earlier restrictions based on race and gender" as relics of the past and represents present-day U.S. and Canada as having "the most open" citizenship policies in the world. This unilinear and progressive vision of history overlooks the ways in which immigration and citizenship policies are not only an instrument of border control, but also of social control. It is partly through these restrictive policies—buttressed by popular culture—that whites are made into ideal citizens and immigrants into a race of "aliens," the impact of which lingers long after the repeal of these discriminatory laws. As we know, the U.S. Naturalization Act of 1790 limited naturalized citizenship to "free white persons," thus conjoining whiteness and citizenship at the very outset of the new nation. On the other hand, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which excluded from immigration Asians on grounds that they were racially ineligible for citizenship, cast Asians as *permanently* foreign and unassimilable to the nation. The racialization of Asians as the "foreigner within" continues to hamper their political effectiveness in the electoral arena. In sum, immigrant political participation has its origins not only in the "liberalization" of North American citizenship laws, as Bloemraad claims, but also in the larger history of global and domestic racial order.

Without an in-depth examination of the global and domestic racial order, Bloemraad's conceptualization of citizenship, her key independent variable, is unavoidably celebratory: citizenship is a "glue that binds strangers"—a "legal status that accords rights and benefits…an invitation to participate in a system of mutual governance, and…an identity that provides a sense of belonging" (p. 1). The immigrants' rate of citizenship is thus an indicator of their loyalty and spirit—their desire to put roots down in their new country. Bloemraad's more conventional understanding of immigrant political incorporation is

premised on the idea that citizenship for racialized communities, once achieved, guarantees their place in the national community of rights. This approach is unduly positive: it disregards the persistence of second-class citizenship, which is sustained through *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, and conditional citizenship, which is granted to designated groups only contingently for "good behavior." Even as citizens, racialized citizens, but also gays and lesbians, women, and the working class, stand outside of the membership of solidarity that structures the nation, which reduces their ability to exercise citizenship as a political/ legal matter. The contingency of citizenship becomes most visible during moments of national crises such as the repatriation of Mexicans during the Great Depression, the persecution of Chinese "communists" during the Cold War, and the racial profiling of Asian and Muslim "potential terrorists" during the post-9/11 era. To be sure, Bloemraad does recognize these exclusionist moments, but regards them as disconnected episodes from what citizenship can be, rather than as linked mechanisms through which the state creates legitimate and illegitimate members of the nation.

Of the three books reviewed here, Monisha Das Gupta's *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* is the only one that moves beyond a modes-of-corporation toward a more critical transnational approach to migration. While Bloemraad focuses on political possibilities that are contingent on nation-based citizenship, Das Gupta asserts the need to create a new language of rights that does not depend on full citizenship. For Das Gupta, citizenship is not the basis of inclusion and granting of rights (as Bloemraad claims) but rather the basis of exclusion and the withholding of rights. In other words, citizenship, as a social and cultural institution created by the nation-state, is designed to keep intact the power relations between ideal citizens who have economic, political, and social rights and "alien citizens" (Ngai 2004) who are routinely deprived of these rights. In Das Gupta's framework, gender, class, and racial inequalities *constitute* citizenship, rather than being mere impediment to its full implementation. Adopting what she calls a "radical Third World feminist perspective," Das Gupta questions the wisdom of relying on citizenship to address the multiple systems of oppression when it is in part this very institution that establishes these hierarchies in the first place.

Das Gupta's point is straightforward: if citizenship is by definition exclusionist, then to predicate rights on having citizenship is to leave out those who do not or cannot have citizenship. While it is true that the U.S. no longer bars people from citizenship on the basis of race, many immigrants continue to be excluded from the circle of citizenship rights on the basis of English fluency, years of residence, political history, criminal record, sexuality, and family member's ability to sponsor new immigrants. Das Gupta's book thus focuses on the radical efforts of South Asian feminist, queer, and labor organizations in Northeast U.S. to assert claims to migrant rights that are not contingent on the acquisition of nation-based juridical citizenship. Because their constituencies for various reasons have not been permitted full citizenship rights, these organizations creatively seek rights that are mobile rather than rooted in national membership and advance claims as migrants rather than as citizens-to-be. The crux of their argument is this: these new political subjects, who have emerged from the exploitative conditions set by this current phase of globalization, necessarily demand a "transnational complex of rights"—rights drawn from local, national, and international laws—that would guarantee them a basic right to safety, good work conditions, and freedom of movement across borders. The strength of the book is that it documents radical struggles that are at the forefront of challenging contemporary global inequities and does so by going beyond the necessarily narrow and exclusionist framework of juridical citizenship. Like the other two books reviewed in this essay, *Unruly Immigrants*

is ambitious in scope: it is a multi-sited ethnography that provides comparative analysis and exemplary grounded ethnographic research of *seven* organizations that could only have been achieved by Das Gupta's many years of active and sustained participation and fieldwork.

The implication of Das Gupta's argument—that we imagine the subject of rights other than the citizens—goes beyond the discussion of migrant rights. While Portes, Rumbaut, and Bloemraad's "nation-of-immigrants" approach misses the way that citizenship has been violently and unilaterally imposed on conquered and colonized groups, Das Gupta's framework enables us to understand how the discourse of full citizenship in fact harms these groups' demands for self-determination. As an example, the ongoing sovereignty movement in Hawaii, which demands freedom from U.S. political, military, and cultural domination, insists that the 1900 conferring of U.S. citizenship on Hawaiians was done unilaterally, without Hawaiian consent, and that the rights sought by indigenous Hawaiians–to land, to language, to culture, to family, and to self-government—are all outside the rights guaranteed to citizens by the U.S. Constitution. Das Gupta's book thus helps us to move beyond the myth of "voluntary" immigration and to make visible the deliberate and violent peopling of North America—through conquest, slavery, annexation, and the importation of foreign labor. That is, it enables us to challenge the narrative of the teeming masses invading the "land of opportunity" and to draw attention instead to the ways in which groups of color have been coercively and differentially made to be part of the nation.

Immigration is regularly represented in public debates and popular images as "a problem to be solved, a flaw to be corrected, a war to be fought, and a flow to be stopped" (Mahmud 1997, p. 633). Conceptualizing immigration primarily as a problem, contemporary research on immigration has focused on immigrant cultural and economic and political incorporation and adaptation and on responses by native-born Americans to the influx. However important, this modes-of-incorporation approach is not enough. At this moment of reinvigorated U.S. imperialism and soaring immigration to the U.S., it is imperative that immigration studies scholars recognize and analyze the intimate connection between U.S. foreign interventions and migration to the U.S.—to be mindful of what Amy Kaplan (2003) calls the "entanglement of the domestic and the foreign." As scholars interested in social change, it is imperative that we take a different sort of responsibility for the global conditions of justice: to not only attempt to integrate the world's dispossessed but also to critically delineate and evaluate the policies and practices that produce these conditions in the first place. That is, we need to approach immigration studies from a critical globalist framework because the elsewhere is always about the here.

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