

Not a Nation of Immigrants

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

On George Washington's birthday, 2018, the Donald Trump administration's director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, L. Francis Cissna, changed the agency's official mission statement, dropping the language of "a nation of immigrants" to describe the United States. The previous mission statement had said the agency "secures America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system."¹ The revised mission statement reads: "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administers the nation's lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity and promise by efficiently and fairly adjudicating requests for immigration benefits while protecting Americans, securing the homeland, and honouring our values."²

The Trump administration's official negation of the United States as a nation of immigrants was unlikely to change the liberal rhetoric. During Joe Biden's 2020 bid for the presidency, the campaign issued a statement on his immigration plan, titled "The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants," asserting that "unless your ancestors were native to these shores, or forcibly enslaved and brought here as part of our original sin as a nation, most Americans can trace their family history back to a choice—a choice to leave behind everything that was familiar in search of new opportunities and a new life."³ Unlike the previous "nation of



Fallen Christopher Columbus statue outside the Minnesota State Capitol after a group led by American Indian Movement members tore it down in St. Paul, Minnesota on June 10, 2020. By Tony Webster - Flickr, CC BY 2.0, [Link](#).

¹ ↪ Safia Samee Ali, "[S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Drops 'Nation of Immigrants' from Mission Statement](#)," NBC News, February 22, 2018.

² ↪ "[Mission and Core Values](#)," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, accessed July 26, 2021.

³ ↪ "[The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants](#)," Biden-Harris, accessed July 26, 2021.

immigrants” statement, the Biden campaign did acknowledge prior and continuing Native presence, as well as specifying that enslaved Africans were not immigrants. However, the new rhetoric continues to mask the settler-colonial violence that established and maintained the United States and turns immigrants into settlers.

It appears ironic that Trump positioned himself as anti-immigrant, being the son of an immigrant mother (from Scotland) and the grandson of an immigrant paternal grandfather (from Germany), as well as being married to an immigrant (from Slovenia). But Trump was not against European immigrants. In a January 2018 staff meeting on temporary immigration

With the Democratic Party back in power in 2021, the nation-of-immigrants rhetoric appears to be firmly back in place, although the exclusionary policies of the United States will continue as they did during the Barack Obama administration.

status, Trump asked, “Why do we need more Haitians? Take them out.... Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here? Why do we want all these people from Africa here? They’re shithole countries.... We should have more people from Norway.”⁴ The month before, referring again to Haitians,

Trump said that they “all have AIDS,” and about Nigerians, he said that once they had seen the United States, they would never “go back to their huts” in Africa.⁵

In his quest for the presidency, Trump made immigration the center of his campaign, focusing on the exclusion of Mexicans, promising to build a border wall and militarise the southern border. He claimed that “the U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems,” and railed that, “when Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards.”⁶

Democratic Party politicians and liberals in general insisted that Trump and his supporters were un-American in denying

The ideology behind it also works to erase the scourge of settler colonialism and the lives of Indigenous peoples.

the nation-of-immigrants ideology that has been a consensus for more than a half century and remains a basic principle of the Democratic Party. Most people

around the world viewed the United States as a nation of immigrants, while questioning if the country was backsliding on its promise in electing Trump.

With the Democratic Party back in power in 2021, the nation-of-immigrants rhetoric appears to be firmly back in place, although the exclusionary policies of the United States will continue as they did during the Barack Obama administration.

As Osha Gray Davidson, who has collected dozens of examples of how “nation of immigrants” is used, points out, the phrase is generally used to counter xenophobic fears.⁷ But the ideology behind it also works to erase the scourge of settler colonialism and the lives of Indigenous peoples. “We in America are immigrants, or the children of immigrants,” is the refrain.⁸ The theme of Mitt Romney’s acceptance speech as the Republican nominee for president in 2012 included “a nation of immigrants”: “Optimism is uniquely American. It is what brought us to America. We are a nation

⁴ ↪ [“President Donald Trump Calls Haiti and African Countries ‘Shithole’ Nations | NBC Nightly News,”](#) YouTube video by NBC News, January 11, 2018.

⁵ ↪ Michael D. Shear and Julie Hirschfeld, “Stoking Fears, Trump Defied Bureaucracy to Advance Immigration Agenda,” *New York Times*, December 23, 2017.

⁶ ↪ [“Donald Trump Presidential Announcement Speech: US Became Dumping Ground | China | Mexico,”](#) YouTube video by Mango News, June 18, 2015; [“Fact Checking Donald Trump’s Immigration Comments,”](#) YouTube video by CNN, July 2, 2015.

⁷ ↪ Osha Davidson, *The American Project* (podcast), season 1, January 15, 2020–January 21, 2021.

⁸ ↪ “A Nation of Immigrants,” YouTube video by BuzzFeedVideo, March 2, 2017.

U.S. postwar administrations scrambled to conceal any trace of the U.S. colonialist roots, system of slavery, and continued segregation as they developed military and counterinsurgent strategies to quell national liberation movements in former European colonies.

of immigrants.”⁹ Speaking at a Nevada high school to a large audience, President Obama said: “We are a nation of immigrants, and that means we are constantly being replenished with fighters who believed in the American dream, and it gives us a tremendous advantage over other nations.”¹⁰ Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, in 2016, evoked a nation of immigrants, with “the Statue of Liberty reminding us of who we

are and where we came from. We are a nation of immigrants, and I am proud of it.”¹¹

“A nation of immigrants” was a mid-twentieth-century revisionist origin story. The United States emerged from the Second World War undamaged by bombs and heavy population loss, which was the experience of most combatant nations. In fact, the United States became a beefed-up industrial powerhouse exhibiting military might, including the atomic bomb. It was poised to become the economic, military, and moral leader of the “free world.” The Soviet Union, the country that actually defeated the army of the Third Reich, was the new adversary. U.S. postwar administrations scrambled to conceal any trace of the U.S. colonialist roots, system of slavery, and continued segregation as they developed military and counterinsurgent strategies to quell national liberation movements in former European colonies. The Soviet Union and Communist China, which took power in 1949, denounced Western imperialism and colonialism in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and the Caribbean.

In 1958, then U.S. senator John F. Kennedy, surely informed by liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., published the influential and best-selling book *A Nation of Immigrants*, which advanced the notion that the United States should be

A total of two million Mexican citizens, with the participation of the Mexican government, migrated to the United States, particularly California, as de facto indentured agricultural workers under time-limited contracts. Meanwhile, the burgeoning agribusiness industry in California recruited even more Mexican workers outside the program, without documentation or civil rights, and subject to deportation.

understood or defined through the diversity of the immigrants it had welcomed since independence.¹² This thesis was embraced by U.S. historians and found its way into textbooks and school curricula. It is neither coincidental nor surprising that Kennedy would introduce this idea, as, at the time, he was strategising how to become the first president born of immigrants—albeit very wealthy ones—and the first Catholic president in a Protestant-dominated culture.

Aspiring to the presidency, Kennedy introduced a clear context and narrative in which he could transform this negative into a positive. This founding text of “a nation of immigrants” was published during Kennedy’s 1953–59 first term as U.S. senator from Massachusetts, two years before he was elected president.

Given that, in the twenty-first century, immigration is practically synonymous with the México-U.S. border established in 1848, it is striking that Kennedy never mentioned México or Mexicans or the U.S.-México border in the text, nor did he use the terms Latino or Hispanic. Yet, this was 1958, late in the period of the contract labour Bracero Program, which began during the Second World War. A total of two million Mexican citizens, with the participation of the Mexican

⁹ ↪ “[Transcript: Mitt Romney’s Acceptance Speech](#),” NPR, August 30, 2012.

¹⁰ ↪ “[NV: OBAMA-WE ARE A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS](#),” YouTube video by CNN, March 31, 2016.

¹¹ ↪ “[Clinton: ‘We Are a Nation of Immigrants’](#),” YouTube video by AP Archive, November 16, 2016; “[Tim Kaine: ‘We’re a Nation of Immigrants’](#) | NBC News,” YouTube video by NBC News, October 4, 2016.

¹² ↪ John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (1958; repr., New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2018). This is the most recent of dozens of editions of the book, following its first printing in 1958.

government, migrated to the United States, particularly California, as de facto indentured agricultural workers under time-limited contracts. Meanwhile, the burgeoning agribusiness industry in California recruited even more Mexican

“Operation Wetback” began in 1954 to round up and deport more than a million Mexican migrant workers, mainly in California and Texas, in the process subjecting millions—many who were actually U.S. citizens—to illegal search, detention, and deportation, forcing them to forfeit their property. “Operation Wetback” was a repeat of the Herbert Hoover administration’s deportation of a million Mexicans in the 1930s, dubbed “Mexican Repatriation.” administración de Herbert Hoover en la década de 1930, denominada “Repatriación Mexicana”.

workers outside the program, without documentation or civil rights, and subject to deportation. More egregious than Kennedy’s omission of any mention of México or the border is that the federal program known by its offensive official name “Operation Wetback” began during Kennedy’s first year as senator and continued beyond his senatorial career through his presidency. “Operation Wetback” began in 1954 to round up and deport more than a million Mexican migrant workers, mainly in California and Texas, in the process subjecting millions—many who

were actually U.S. citizens—to illegal search, detention, and deportation, forcing them to forfeit their property. Workers were deported by air, trains, and ships far from the border, leaving those who were U.S. citizens stranded and without the documents enabling them to return to their homes in the United States. “Operation Wetback” was a repeat of the Herbert Hoover administration’s deportation of a million Mexicans in the 1930s, dubbed “Mexican Repatriation.”

Regarding the status of Indigenous peoples in Kennedy’s nation-of-immigrants scheme, the then senator wrote: “Another way of indicating the importance of immigration to America is to point out that every American who ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrants.” The exception, Kennedy went on, was “Will Rogers, part Cherokee Indian, [who] said that his ancestors were at the docks to meet the Mayflower.” But

In the only other mention of Native Americans, Kennedy refers to them as “the first immigrants,” while dismissing their presence as “members of scattered tribes.”

Kennedy disagreed, claiming that “some anthropologists believe that the Indians themselves were immigrants from another continent who displaced the original Settlers—the aborigines.” This is the bogus speculation of U.S. white nationalists who claim that those imagined original

aborigines were in fact European, possibly Irish. A few pages on in the text, in the only other mention of Native Americans, Kennedy refers to them as “the first immigrants,” while dismissing their presence as “members of scattered tribes.”¹³

Equally unsettling, Kennedy includes enslaved Africans as immigrants, although the book contains the infamous drawing of a slave ship, with humans chained down on their backs, scarcely an inch between each, packed like sardines. It is striking to read how profoundly Kennedy whitewashed history by noting that “the immigration experience was not always pleasant” or that “the Japanese and Chinese brought their gentle dreams to the West Coast.” He failed to mention the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or its extension a few years later to all Asians.

This idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants was hatched in the late 1950s, and while Kennedy was its ambassador, it came to reflect the U.S. ruling-class response to the challenges of the post-Second World War anticolonial national liberation movements, as well as civil and human rights social movements domestically. In the United States, the National Congress of American Indians was founded in 1944 by D’Arcy McNickle, Helen Peterson, and other longtime Indigenous activists. At the same time, African-American attorneys and other professionals were

¹³ ↪ Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, 2–3.

These cracks in the racial order of settler colonialism and capitalism constituted a radical departure in a society locked down in patriarchal white domination and obsessed with “real” Americanism. At the end of the Second World War, the U.S. social, economic, and political order was solidly and confidently a white patriarchal Protestant republic, dominated by corporations with worldwide investments and financial reserves, along with a massive military machine far greater than that of any other country in the world.

developing a legal strategy for desegregating public schools, while in 1951, more radical African Americans, including Paul Robeson and members of the Civil Rights Congress, petitioned the recently established United Nations with the detailed document We Charge Genocide, based on the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. A mass movement against segregation was emerging. Around the same time, Native American activists were contextualising the situation of Native nations within the decolonisation/

national liberation context, and Mexican farmworkers were organising in the fields, defeating the Bracero Program and forming unions.

These cracks in the racial order of settler colonialism and capitalism constituted a radical departure in a society locked down in patriarchal white domination and obsessed with “real” Americanism. At the end of the Second World War, the U.S. social, economic, and political order was solidly and confidently a white patriarchal Protestant republic, dominated by corporations with worldwide investments and financial reserves, along with a massive military machine far greater than that of any other country in the world. Unionisation movements, primarily made up of white workers, were seduced by home ownership and middle-class status, their unions becoming business oriented with their own profit-making privatised health care, while the United Kingdom and Western European states responded to militant union demands to institute universal, public health care. Black descendants of enslaved Africans lived under a totalitarian Jim Crow system in the former Confederate states and were ghettoised and discriminated against when they escaped the South in migrations for northern and coastal industrial urban areas that were stalked by police forces resembling slave patrols. Native Americans were abandoned on shrunken land bases that could not support life, forcing many to find work in nearby or faraway cities, while Congress began reversing New Deal reforms that had acknowledged the Native land base and governments. This culminated in the congressional termination of Native status and land bases in 1953, an erasure that took the Red Power movement two decades to reverse. Meanwhile, Irish and Central, Southern, and Eastern European immigrants, mainly Catholics and Jews, had made gains in being accepted as equal—that is, as white. But on the West Coast, U.S. citizens of Chinese and Mexican descent were discriminated against and subject to deportation, while U.S. citizens of Japanese descent had been incarcerated in wartime concentration camps, stripped of their property and citizenship rights. Ads for jobs segregated men and women as well as white and Black, with lower wages for women and Black workers. Ivy League universities were overwhelmingly white and for men only, with quotas to limit the number of Jewish men.

The explosion that cracked the white republic was the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court school desegregation decision under Chief Justice Earl Warren, who ironically, as the wartime attorney general of California, had facilitated rounding up Japanese Americans for federal incarceration. Based on decades of organising for African-American desegregation, the order for school desegregation under Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was a great achievement, but the backlash commenced immediately. White Citizens’ Councils organised all over the United States, linking racial integration with communism and labelling it un-American. Within three years of the Supreme Court desegregation decision, the white nationalist John Birch Society was launched by Robert Welch, the heir to the Welch candy fortune in Massachusetts, along with others such as Fred Koch, father of the Koch brothers, who, in the twenty-first century, have funded legislation and movements to end all government benefits and promote the privatisation of public goods. The Supreme Court

composition was the target of this white nationalist movement, using the Republican Party as the vehicle, and had largely achieved its goals with the Trump administration's appointment of three justices, shifting the court's ideological spectrum to five ultraconservative justices, one moderate conservative, and three liberal ones.¹⁴

The promise of permanent progress was the context within which the Black civil rights movement grew and contributed

The first highly visible sign of a well-organised counterrevolution inside the United States vying for political power was the evangelical anti-abortion mass movement that soared following the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision to decriminalise abortion in 1973. And, significantly, the relatively benign, century-old National Rifle Association was taken over by the Second Amendment Foundation, a white nationalist organisation that had been founded in 1974 by Harlon Carter, who had been the border chief of the 1950s mass deportation of Mexicans in "Operation Wetback."

momentum to other ongoing movements for liberation, including Puerto Rican independence and Native American self-determination, as well as the Mexican farmworker unionisation movement of the 1960s, the women's and LGBTQ rights movements, and the rising student anti-imperialist and antiwar movements that grew in opposition to the accelerating U.S. war to overthrow the government of Vietnam. The counterrevolution against these advances brought Richard Nixon, then Ronald Reagan, to the presidency. By the 1990s, capitalism and militarism were triumphant in dissolving the Eastern European socialist

bloc and organised liberation movements that had taken state power in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, which became shadows of their former aspirations.

The first highly visible sign of a well-organised counterrevolution inside the United States vying for political power was the evangelical anti-abortion mass movement that soared following the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision to decriminalise abortion in 1973. And, significantly, the relatively benign, century-old National Rifle Association was taken over by the Second Amendment Foundation, a white nationalist organisation that had been founded in 1974 by Harlon Carter, who had been the border chief of the 1950s mass deportation of Mexicans in "Operation Wetback." This is the moment when the Second Amendment became a white nationalist cause, relying on the right-wing ideology of originalism—that is, interpreting the original meaning of the U.S. Constitution. Parallel to postwar liberation movements, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency ran counterinsurgent operations against national liberation movements before and

In the mid- and late 1960s and early '70s, while the U.S. war in Vietnam raged, the then liberal U.S. ruling class and its brain trust sought ways of responding to social demands while maintaining economic, political, and military domination. They settled on multiculturalism, diversity, affirmative action, and, yes, the nation-of-immigrants ideology.

after they took power in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa, while J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation ran similar operations against domestic movements, including COINTELPRO, a domestic counterintelligence program. Anticommunism was the connective tissue among these organisations until the socialist bloc collapsed in 1990, although anticommunism remained a social and political weapon

of control domestically and internationally.

In the mid- and late 1960s and early '70s, while the U.S. war in Vietnam raged, the then liberal U.S. ruling class and its brain trust sought ways of responding to social demands while maintaining economic, political, and military domination. They settled on multiculturalism, diversity, affirmative action, and, yes, the nation-of-immigrants ideology in response to demands for decolonisation, justice, reparations, social equality, public spending on social welfare, and an

¹⁴ ↪ Erwin Chemerinsky, "[Chemerinsky: Predicting the Supreme Court in 2021 May Be Dangerous and Futile](#)," *ABA Journal*, December 18, 2020.

end to U.S. imperialism, counterinsurgency, and overthrow of governments. Given attempts to offset an exclusive

It is crucial to recognise that when and how “immigration” as such began, it was based on overt, blatant racism and a policy of exclusion, and it has never lost that taint. Although immigrant bashing is not new, and has long targeted Asian and Mexican workers, it has become a more fraught issue as it crystallised in the late twentieth century and accelerated in the early twenty-first century, targeting Mexicans, Asians, and Arab Muslims.

emphasis on white settler history and the winning of the West as the nationalist triumphal narrative, “a nation of immigrants” fit the multicultural agenda. No longer was the United States a “melting pot” of assimilation to whiteness but rather a many-coloured quilt. Kennedy’s A Nation of Immigrants had called the United States “a nation of nations.” Despite the surging of white nationalism during the twelve-year period of the Reagan-Bush administrations, by the early 1990s, the “waves of immigrants,” “nation of immigrants,” and Native peoples

as “the first immigrants” narrative Kennedy had conceived was a consensus concept as it entered public school textbooks. This neoliberalism also triggered textbook wars over history standards, with the right wing pushing for and demanding a return to the original narrative, especially founding fathers iconography to support their constitutional philosophy of “originalism.”

During the nearly two centuries of British colonisation of the North Atlantic coast and up to U.S. independence, the great majority of European U.S. settlers were Protestant Anglo-Saxon, Scots-Irish, and German-speaking (before Germany was a nation-state). From 1619 onward, there was a steadily increasing number of enslaved Africans. When the United States won independence, the founders inscribed in the Constitution the requirement that citizenship could be held by white males only. Despite expressed fears, especially by Alexander Hamilton and the Federalist Party regarding immigration and the Alien and Sedition Acts, no immigration laws or procedures existed, not even during the arrival in the 1840s of 1.5 million Irish famine refugees. In 1875, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that only the federal government, not the states, could create immigration laws and that regulation of immigration was a federal matter,

The elephant in the room of immigration is the U.S. military invasion and annexation of half of Mexican territory that spanned more than two decades, from 1821 to 1848.... White supremacy and settler-colonial violence are permanently embedded in U.S. topography.

though the federal immigration service was not established until 1891. Tellingly, the first federal immigration law, which created the foundation for U.S. immigration, was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. It is crucial to recognise that when and how “immigration” as such began, it was based on overt, blatant racism and a policy of exclusion, and it has never lost that taint. Although immigrant bashing is not new, and has long targeted

Asian and Mexican workers, it has become a more fraught issue as it crystallised in the late twentieth century and accelerated in the early twenty-first century, targeting Mexicans, Asians, and Arab Muslims.

Yet, those who defend immigrants and immigration, mostly metropolitan liberals, often immigrants or children of

White nationalism was inscribed in the founding of the United States as a European settler-colonial expansionist entity, the economy of which was grounded in the violent theft of land and in racial slavery, and with settlers armed to the teeth throughout its history.

immigrants themselves, employ the idea of a nation of immigrants naively without acknowledging the settler-colonial history of the United States and the white nationalist ideology it reproduces. Such advocates were caught by surprise and in shock when Mexican hating led to a successful presidential campaign in

2016, and even more surprised by the January 6, 2021, white nationalist violent takeover of the U.S. capitol.

The elephant in the room of immigration is the U.S. military invasion and annexation of half of Mexican territory that

[These descendants] are the latter-day carriers of the U.S. national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempt to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settler into an “indigenous people,” believing that they are the true natives of the continent, much as the South African Boers regarded themselves as the “true” children of Israel, powered by Calvinism; the Calvinist Scots settlers did in Ulster, Ireland; or Zionist settlers in Palestine—all established by an imaginary God-given covenant making them the chosen peoples.

spanned more than two decades, from 1821 to 1848. During that same period, the eastern half of the United States was being ethnically cleansed with the forced removal of Native nations. White supremacy and settler-colonial violence are permanently embedded in U.S. topography. The United States has a

foundational problem of white nationalism that was not new to Nixon or Reagan or Trump.

White nationalism was inscribed in the founding of the United States as a European settler-colonial expansionist entity, the economy of which was grounded in the violent theft of land and in racial slavery, and with settlers armed to the teeth throughout its history, presently numbering over three hundred million people with the same number of firearms in civilian hands. Yet only a third of the population own those guns, an average of eight each, and 3 percent of the population own 50 percent of the guns in civilian hands. A great majority of this minority of gun owners are white men who are descendants of the original settlers, or pretend to be.¹⁵ These descendants are most obvious in the former

Given the powerful influence of this cultural, religious, and demographic minority, it is essential to acknowledge its existence in order to understand persistent white supremacy and mistrust of non-European immigrants as well as Indigenous North Americans, descendants of enslaved Africans, and Mexicans.

Confederate and border states, but are also in reality scattered in clusters and communities in all parts of the United States. They are the latter-day carriers of the U.S. national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempt to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settler into an “indigenous people,” believing that they are the true natives of the continent, much as the South African Boers regarded themselves as the “true” children of Israel, powered by Calvinism; the Calvinist

Scots settlers did in Ulster, Ireland; or Zionist settlers in Palestine—all established by an imaginary God-given covenant making them the chosen peoples.

Given the powerful influence of this cultural, religious, and demographic minority, it is essential to acknowledge its existence in order to understand persistent white supremacy and mistrust of non-European immigrants as well as Indigenous North Americans, descendants of enslaved Africans, and Mexicans. Since the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, the United States has launched counterinsurgent wars in Afghanistan and Arab countries, accelerating anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States. And although U.S. evangelicals enthusiastically support the settler state of Israel, which matches their religious belief that Jesus will return when Jews return to Jerusalem, there is an underlying anti-Semitism in U.S. white nationalism, mostly centred on a narrative of imagined Jewish domination, which works to transfer responsibility for capitalist exploitation from European and European U.S. ruling classes to a behind-the-scenes Jewish conspiracy and control. The sacred text of U.S. white nationalists, *The Turner Diaries*, first published in 1978, is a fictional illustration of that anti-Semitism. It is mixed with hatred of Black Americans and all people of color, the argument being that Jews use people of color to conceal their devious plan of dominance, and that the Black civil rights

¹⁵ ↪ See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2019).

movement was controlled by Jews, because white nationalists deem people of color as not fully human and incapable of theory or action on their own.¹⁶

Those current realities and their history underlie the narrative of the nation of immigrants. We can see this, for example, in the contemporary neoliberal celebration of founding father Alexander Hamilton. During the Obama administration, the nation-of-immigrants chorus became a best-selling musical, celebrating Hamilton as an immigrant. More than a year after Hamilton premiered on Broadway in 2015, writer and director Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is of Puerto Rican heritage, staged a private performance at the White House for President Obama and his family and invitees. Before the show began, Obama spoke in praise of the work, saying that, “in the character of Hamilton—a striving immigrant who escaped poverty, made his way to the New World, climbed to the top by sheer force of will and pluck and determination—Lin-Manuel saw something of his own family, and every immigrant family.”¹⁷ Portraying Hamilton as an immigrant, although he was a British colonial settler in New York and virulently suspicious of “aliens,” obfuscates while celebrating his role, as a federalist, in structuring the fiscal-military state, a capitalist state created for war. Further, portraying continental-based Puerto Ricans as immigrants obscures the continued U.S. colonisation of Puerto Rico.

Yet, the genesis of the first full-fledged settler state in the world went beyond its predecessors in 1492 Iberia and British-

Both the liberal and right-wing versions of the national narrative misrepresent the process of European colonisation of North America. Both narratives serve the critical function of preserving the “official story” of a mostly benign and benevolent United States as an anticolonial movement that overthrew British colonialism.... The nation-of-immigrants myth erases the fact that the United States was founded as a settler state from its inception and spent the next hundred years at war against the Native nations in conquering the continent.

colonised Ireland, with an economy based on land sales and enslaved African labour, and the implementation of the fiscal-military state. Both the liberal and right-wing versions of the national narrative misrepresent the process of European colonisation of North America. Both narratives serve the critical function of preserving the “official story” of a mostly benign and benevolent United States as an anticolonial movement that overthrew British colonialism. The pre-U.S. independence settlers were colonial settlers just as they were in Africa and India or like the Spanish in Central and South America. The nation-of-immigrants myth

erases the fact that the United States was founded as a settler state from its inception and spent the next hundred years at

Buried beneath the tons of propaganda is the fact that the founding of the United States created a division of the Anglo empire, with the U.S. becoming a parallel empire to Great Britain, ultimately overcoming it.

war against the Native nations in conquering the continent. Buried beneath the tons of propaganda—from the landing of the English “pilgrims” (Protestant Christian evangelicals) to James Fenimore Cooper’s phenomenally popular *The Last of the Mohicans* claiming settlers’ “natural rights” not only to the Indigenous peoples’ territories but also to the territories claimed

by other European powers—is the fact that the founding of the United States created a division of the Anglo empire, with the U.S. becoming a parallel empire to Great Britain, ultimately overcoming it. From day one, as was specified in the Northwest Ordinance, which preceded the U.S. Constitution, the new “republic for empire,” as Thomas Jefferson called the new United States, envisioned the future shape of what is now the forty-eight states of the continental United States. The founders drew up rough maps, specifying the first territory to conquer as the “Northwest Territory.” That territory was

¹⁶ ↪ Andrew Macdonald (pseudonym for William Pierce), *The Turner Diaries* (Mountain City, TN: Cosmotheist Books, 2018). See also Brad Whitsel, “The Turner Diaries and Cosmotheism: William Pierce’s Theology,” in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 1, no. 2 (1998): 183–97.

¹⁷ ↪ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at ‘Hamilton at the White House,’” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 14, 2016.

The narrative of the nation of immigrants also excludes the history of enslaved Africans, who were hauled in chains thousands of miles from their villages and fields, naked and with no belongings, and forcibly denied not only their freedom but also their languages, customs, histories, and nationalities.

claiming indigeneity.

The narrative of the nation of immigrants also excludes the history of enslaved Africans, who were hauled in chains thousands of miles from their villages and fields, naked and with no belongings, and forcibly denied not only their

By 1840 [slavery] was of greater monetary value than all other property combined, including all the gold in circulation, all bank reserves, and all real estate. The Cotton Kingdom was the fiscal-military center of U.S. capitalist development with the industrial production of cotton, giving rise to a permanent racial capitalism, even after legalised slavery ended.

freedom but also their languages, customs, histories, and nationalities. Not only were they used as forced and unpaid labour, but their very bodies were legally private property to be bought and sold, soon creating a thriving, legal domestic slave market, which by 1840 was of greater monetary value than all other property combined, including all the gold in circulation, all bank reserves, and all real estate.¹⁸ The Cotton Kingdom was the fiscal-military center of U.S. capitalist development with the industrial production of cotton, giving rise to a permanent racial capitalism, even after legalised slavery ended. Plantation owners and managers maintained a military-like counterinsurgency to control the enslaved workers, often calling in the U.S. army to quell insurrections. During Reconstruction, following the Civil War, Ku Klux Klan terrorism against Black political and economic power was the result of the inadequacy of the U.S. army occupation of the former Confederate states. Army divisions were being shifted west of the Mississippi to destroy Native nations and seize the rest of continent. With the end of the occupation, Jim Crow segregation laws gave rise to a form of policing that spread in the twentieth century to major urban areas as

The small class of Hispano elite in New México had welcomed and collaborated with U.S. occupation, which led to late-twentieth-century Hispano claims of indigeneity while living on lands their ancestors had forcibly taken from the Indigenous pueblos.

kind of contingency of full citizenship.

Anglo settlers seized the agricultural lands of Indigenous peoples of the Southeast for plantation agribusiness in cotton and importing enslaved people from the original slave states for the gruelling labour. One group of U.S. slavers moved into the Mexican province of Texas soon after the Mexican people won their decade-long war for independence from Spain. The two-year U.S. military invasion of México that began in 1846 finally seized México City in 1848. Under U.S.

How subsequent generations of Irish Americans became settlers, even one of their own ascending to the presidency in 1960, is a tragic story.

occupation, the Mexican government, through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was forced to relinquish the northern half of its territory. What became the states of California, Arizona, New México, Colorado, Utah, and Texas were

¹⁸ ↪ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 252–53.

then opened to Anglo settlement, and in the process legalising those Anglo slavers in Texas who had already settled there illegally. The Indigenous nations in the seized territory—the Apache, Navajo, Kiowa, and Comanche—resisted U.S. conquest for decades, as they had resisted the Spanish empire. The small class of Hispano elite in New México had welcomed and collaborated with U.S. occupation, which led to late-twentieth-century Hispano claims of indigeneity while living on lands their ancestors had forcibly taken from the Indigenous pueblos. This then was another site of the fiscal-military state and racial capitalism taking hold to contribute to U.S. imperial dominance.

Meanwhile, the English colonisation of Ireland led to the 1840s famine and the first mass migration to the United States.

Then there were European immigrants, mostly Catholic and Jewish, who were considered not quite white.... During that period, Italian immigrants arrived, mostly from southern Italy. Suffering the stigma of being Catholic and also dark complected, they were subjected to extreme discrimination... they became Americanised and accepted as white through the Roman Catholic Church and a process rooted in the myth of Columbus... This, too, was another self-indigenising process.

The Irish refugees were mostly Catholic and despised by the majority U.S. Anglo-Protestants, but they quickly became the nation's second-largest European national group, a political force with which to be reckoned. Many settled in urban slums and had few skills, having been agricultural workers. They took whatever unskilled jobs they could find, the men and boys working on the docks, pushing carts, digging canals, and constructing the railroad, and obtaining work as slave patrollers in the Cotton Kingdom and early urban police forces. Women worked as housekeepers and nannies, in factories, and

often in sex work. How subsequent generations of Irish Americans became settlers, even one of their own ascending to the presidency in 1960, is a tragic story.¹⁹ As well, the nearly cult-like formation of twentieth century urban police forces and the Federal Bureau of Investigation drew on Irish recruits until they became dominant and definitive as police. Radicalised urban policing increasingly became a major component of the fiscal-military state.

Then there were European immigrants, mostly Catholic and Jewish, who were considered not quite white. During the 1880s alone, more than five million Central and Eastern Europeans arrived in search of jobs in burgeoning industrial and mining sites in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Many Jewish immigrants were fleeing pogroms, while other

The origins and staying power of the Western panic against Asian immigrants moved from medieval Europe to the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act of May 6, 1882, and into the twenty-first century... Fear of Asians in general and of the Chinese in particular persists today with the U.S. reaction to China's economic development.

immigrants, particularly German, were driven out by political repression and brought with them strong organisational experience that was socialistically inclined. The immigrant-driven workers' movements forced the reformulation of industrial capitalism, but their status as immigrants made them vulnerable to political deportation in the early twentieth century. During that period, Italian immigrants arrived, mostly from southern

Italy. Suffering the stigma of being Catholic and also dark complected, they were subjected to extreme discrimination. Italians and other Catholic immigrants became Americanised and accepted as white through the Roman Catholic Church and a process rooted in the myth of Columbus, especially with the 1882 founding of the Knights of Columbus and the subsequent four-hundred-year anniversary of Columbus's first landing in the Caribbean. This, too, was another self-indigenising process, with the Catholic Columbus being positioned as the original founding father of the United States.

¹⁹ ↪ See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Since the early twentieth century, immigrant hating in the U.S. is primarily about Mexicans (not Latinos in general) and is directly related to the unsettled border established in 1848 when the U.S. annexed half of México. The fact that a third of the continental territory of the United States today was brutally annexed through a war of conquest is inscribed on that international border. The cold war against México has never ended, and the border is an open wound.

The origins and staying power of the Western panic against Asian immigrants moved from medieval Europe to the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act of May 6, 1882, and into the twenty-first century. All European U.S. trade unions were corrupted and weakened by their anti-Chinese bigotry and support for barring Chinese workers, which accelerated the spread of yellow peril racism. In Oakland, California, socialist, union activist, and celebrity writer Jack London was among the loudest voices spewing hatred. Yellow

peril suspicions also led to the internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese descent under the liberal Franklin Roosevelt administration. Fear of Asians in general and of the Chinese in particular persists today with the U.S. reaction to China's economic development.

Since the early twentieth century, immigrant hating in the United States is primarily about Mexicans (not Latinos in general) and is directly related to the unsettled border established in 1848 when the U.S. annexed half of México. The fact that a third of the continental territory of the United States today was brutally annexed through a war of conquest is inscribed on that international border. The cold war against México has never ended, and the border is an open wound. There is a history of U.S. aggression against México and Mexicans, militarily and economically as well as ideologically, from Walt Whitman to Patrick Buchanan and Trump. In fact, the United States is responsible for the waves of refugees from Latin American countries, due to imperialism, who are then criminalised and their children deported, dispersed, and even lost in the ongoing situation at the US-México border.

What, then, is the position of immigrants in a settler state? One of the unspoken requirements for immigrants and their

What, then, is the position of immigrants in a settler state? One of the unspoken requirements for immigrants and their descendants to become fully "American" has been to participate in anti-Black racism and to aspire to "whiteness."... Although immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean are not pressured to become "white," as immigrants were in the past, they do automatically become settlers unless they resist that default... "the thrust of American struggles has been to deracialise but not to decolonize. A deracialised America still remains a settler society and a settler state."

descendants to become fully "American" has been to participate in anti-Black racism and to aspire to "whiteness." With the post-Second World War work of civil rights, Black Power, and other antiracist movements, whiteness lost much of its desirability for several generations. This process coincided with and influenced the 1965 immigration reform law that removed restrictions on immigration that had been in effect since the 1924 immigration law, which limited immigration to Western Europeans. Thereby, since the late 1960s, greater numbers of immigrants have come from the Global South, mostly from formerly

colonised countries, and many of them refugees from civil wars or U.S.-instigated wars in their countries. The "new" immigrants are more likely than past immigrants to be college graduates or professionals. They often experience racism and "othering" in their daily lives, and for Muslims in particular, virulent hostility, which for some leads to solidarity with antiracist movements. How they as immigrants experience and react to settler colonialism varies, with some becoming dedicated to solidarity with Native peoples' resistance while most remain indifferent or even negate the demands of Indigenous communities and the reality of settler colonialism. Although immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean are not pressured to become "white," as immigrants were in the past, they do automatically become

settlers unless they resist that default. Antiracism and diversity are widely accepted, but the problem is the general denial or refusal to acknowledge settler colonialism. As Mahmood Mamdani observes, “the thrust of American struggles has been to deracialise but not to decolonize. A deracialised America still remains a settler society and a settler state.”²⁰

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
 - Monthly Review
 - Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Underlying Causes of Immigration from Mexico to the United States — Structures of Deprivation](#)
 - Álvaro J. de Regil: [Debunking the myths behind US malice towards Mexico](#)
 - Ricardo Antunes: [The New Service Proletariat](#)
 - Bruce Neuburger: [California's Migrant Workers](#)
-

²⁰ ↩ Mahmood Mamdani, “Settler Colonialism: Then and Now,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 3 (2015): 607.

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

❖ **About the author: Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz** is a historian, activist, and author of *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2015). This article is adapted from the introduction of her latest book, *Not A Nation of Immigrants* (Beacon Press, 2021).



❖ **About this paper:** Not a Nation of Immigrants was originally published in English by Monthly Review in September 2021.

❖ **Quote this paper as:** Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz: Not a Nation of Immigrants – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, February 2022. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and providing a link to the original publisher.

❖ **Tags:** Racial capitalism, Democracy, Human Rights, Immigration, Colonisation, Slavery, Racism, Imperialism.

❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

© 2022. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org