A SHADOW ON THE PAST: TEACHING AND STUDYING MIGRATION AND BORDERS IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

INTRODUCTION

It is hardly a profound insight to observe that the study of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involves questions about race, immigration, labor, capitalism, and gender that endure to our day. Indeed, many of us are drawn to this period by the sense that despite the differences between now and then, the study of this past might have something to offer the present.

Fundamental aspects of immigration policy and border policing were put into place in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. One might think of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 Immigration Act as bookending the period: the former marked the advent of a “gatekeeping” nation and thus of the first “illegal immigrants,” while the latter signaled the triumph of nativist sentiment and the explicit codification into law of a comprehensive ethnoracial hierarchy with a system that endured for generations. Arguably, the expansive capitalist development that gave us the moniker “Gilded Age” drew millions of migrants to enter U.S. territory, even as the Progressive embrace of statism enabled the vigorous regime of exclusion and border patrol that emerged in response.

The study of the conjoined subjects of migration and borders in this period and beyond is a dynamic one, attracting increasing scholarly interest and provoking new questions and reexaminations of old answers. And the ascension of Donald J. Trump to the presidency on an avowedly nativist platform raises the prospect that the 2010s might be as consequential a decade for ethnoracial pluralism and immigration policy as any in U.S. history.

JGAPE assembled this roundtable to explore how this conjuncture of the academic and political worlds is altering the ways in which we study and teach the history of migration and borders. What might specialists in these fields offer in order to understand the longer histories that account for the present political moment? How are current developments changing our teaching and scholarship? What, in short, are the promises and perils of studying and teaching migration and borders in the age of Trump? We selected our panelists based on their scholarly expertise, but also with an eye to assembling a group that included scholars from a range of fields and institutions. Our hope was for the conversation to be wide ranging, but as appropriate for our journal, to also consider the ways in which the study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continues to inform our understanding of migration and borders.

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What follows is an edited and annotated version of a conversation that took place over email in May and June of 2017.

PARTICIPANTS


Sonia Hernández (SH). Associate Professor of History and Director of Latina/o & Mexican American Studies at Texas A & M University. Member of Refusing to Forget (resfusingtoforget.org). Author of the award-winning Working Women into the Borderlands (2014); Mujeres, trabajo y región fronteriza (2015); and the award-winning article, “Revisiting Mexican(a) Labor History through Feminismo Transfronterista: From Tampico to Texas and Beyond, 1910–1940” in Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies (2015).


Benjamin Johnson (BHJ): How has your working life been changed by recent political developments?

Julian Lim (JL): As someone trained in both law and history, law has always played a large role in my immigration history class. Thus my syllabus was already focused on state power and, in particular, the power to exclude, which obviously resonated greatly with
students interested in and concerned about Donald Trump’s stance on immigration. What I taught in my immigration class did not change much during the election. But how I taught in the classroom did.

My classroom experience during the fall 2016 semester changed dramatically even before November. Teaching at a large public university in Arizona, I interact with a student body that spans the entire political spectrum. So I always have had a handful of students in my immigration classes who raise the usual anti-immigration arguments about criminality, labor competition, and national security. Generally, however, these students skirted around and tried to avoid racially charged comments or arguments. What surprised me last fall was a student who admitted during office hours in the second week of the semester that he held a variety of intolerant ideas about interracial marriage, African Americans, and Latinos—ideas that even he recognized as racist.

I was sincerely caught off guard, especially given than I am Asian American (I have yet to fully comprehend his confiding in me). But this exchange (and fortunately it was the only one) clearly demonstrated to me that the election and the rhetoric coming out of the Trump campaign was emboldening many Americans to vocalize their prejudices. I had to emphasize more than usual that we were all there to learn about immigration history through informed discussion, critical thinking, and deep analysis of the evidence. This meant providing more space in the classroom for the students to critically debate arguments and counterarguments based on the readings, and to grapple with both sides of an issue as a class. I believe this helped to avoid any impression that I was imposing a particular political agenda in the classroom, and it kept students focused on the readings and primary sources, reducing opportunities for students to easily fall back on personal prejudices and biases.

**Hasia Diner (HD):** I have to admit the election campaign, its tragic result, and the first hundred days of the administration, with the flurry of hideous rhetoric against immigrants, has shaken me to the core. I held up the god of dispassion in my decades of teaching and scholarship. It may have been possible for extremely bright and perceptive students to have discerned the bias in my teaching. That is, they could have parsed out my unstated belief that immigrants had made America “great,” as it were; that exclusion, particularly on the basis of imagined racial categories constituted a shameful act; and that inflexibility toward the admission of refugees had made the United States an agent in the perpetration of the Holocaust. I had, I am sure, implied all those, but took the stand of the distant scholar who tried to get the students to see the context of American and American immigration history. Since this fall my tone has changed. I feel that as a moral human being I cannot just stand by idly and not use my small bully pulpit to try to make my case. I consider that bully pulpit to be my classroom and my writing. Just as the election has stimulated me to use more of my free time to work specifically on matters and issues in the present, so too has it pushed me to reorient my classes and writings. Nevertheless, in the classroom I continue to ensure that students who disagree—and fortunately I have had very few—get a chance to make their case.

I feel morally compelled to contextualize the material in light of the outrage I feel as an American citizen. I feel this in strong measure as the child of immigrants. I understand what would have happened to my parents had they not come to America in the late 1920s from Ukraine. The vast majority of the Jews there, their siblings, other relatives,
and the people they grew up with, were marched into the forests and ravines, forced to dig pits, and were shot by the Germans and their allies in what historian Timothy Snyder has labeled the “bloodlands.”¹ My parents were not. They managed to just come in at the very onset of the era of the National Origins Act, living out those years in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee and not being marched off to their deaths in Eastern Europe.

I am more pointed now as I write and teach that the current anti-immigrant discourse is not new, that the anti-immigration forces are merely recycling old, ugly statements, as much lies in the early twenty-first century as they were in the past. I make it clear. Immigrants did not take jobs from Americans, but rather their mere presence created the America that developed. Without immigrants there would have been no America. While that also applies to slavery and the forced migration of Africans, it is as much true of the women and men from all over the world who understood that work existed that Americans would not do, and they, the newcomers could do it and in the process support themselves and their families. I teach my students and readers essentially, there is nothing new under the sun. The dynamic persists and so does the ugliness.

**Sonia Hernández (SH):** I appreciate your question since this has been on my mind lately. Well, actually this has been on my mind since the end of spring 2016 during the debates surrounding campus carry in my state of Texas. For many of us, particularly faculty of color who teach courses on borders, immigration, Chicano/a, and Latino/a history, the thought of having armed students in class was quite daunting. While I grew up in a family with a long tradition of hunting along the Texas-Tamaulipas border, the thought of students and weapons in a classroom in a predominantly white institution, with a long military tradition through its Corp of Cadets, and with a strong Republican tradition, I have to admit, made me nervous. But I survived the start of concealed campus carry on and made it through the semester. With each class session, each week, the issue was not affecting me so much. I did not make substantial changes—I was determined to teach the way I always taught. But eventually the political atmosphere in the late fall and the next semester deeply affected me. Many of us were involved in campus demonstrations for two main reasons: first, to push for a sanctuary campus; and second, to react to a scheduled campus talk by white supremacist Richard Spencer.

During the fall semester, while our class discussions were fine and no student made inappropriate remarks, there was a moment during class discussion around the topic of sources that remains a moment of reflection for me. It made me feel like I had failed teaching how to evaluate source material. We had a class discussion about an article on Texas Ranger violence against the ethnic Mexican community and the power of oral history as a source to address dark chapters in our state’s history that have been silenced, marginalized, or refuted.² There was a student who questioned the use of oral histories in this award-winning article by Monica Muñoz-Martínez, “Recuperating Histories of Violence in the Americas: Vernacular History-Making on the US-Mexico Border,” a scholarly essay that complements the work that I and scholars from the social sciences and humanities have been involved in “Refusing to Forget” (www.refusingtoforget.org).³ The student, even after I and other students mentioned further key sources used in the piece and how these complemented and reinforced oral testimonials, continued to insist that it was not solid evidence. I spoke about the power of the memoir in helping to shape the historiography of military history, particularly with
diaries and memoirs written by veterans, and I received a not-so-reassuring nod. Why was it that the use of oral histories, when these capture underrepresented voices, was questioned? As a result of this exchange, I felt that I had to spend just a little more time talking about “the facts,” and how “the facts” could be acquired using a variety of sources. This was a class where students were supposed to “get the basics.” If someone was going to finish that class not appreciating, not understanding, not realizing that oral histories were in fact a valid source among many (which I thought was an issue that had been long settled), then I felt I had failed in training future historians.

Was this kind of questioning possible given the new political environment that rendered anti-woman, anti-LGBTQ, anti-Muslim, and anti-Mexican rhetoric as normal and absolutely fine to use? After Inauguration Day, I walked around campus differently. I found myself having to do breathing and meditation exercises, writing down my fears and anxieties. I was hypersensitive if certain people did not smile, did not say “howdy!” to me (“howdy” is the Aggie student greeting), and I kept worrying about my kindergartner and wondering if her teachers and administrators would ensure that children, regardless of age, would be taught to respect one another. What made my anxiety more palpable was my activism, along with some colleagues and students, in pushing for a sanctuary campus and more protections for all students who felt vulnerable and were threatened by this new administration. We had come out on the local news and afterwards I had received some hate mail doubting my PhD training, questioning my teaching philosophy, and reminding me that “anyone who is illegal is just that, illegal.”

While it was exhausting for me to just think about these things on a daily basis, there was also hope. During the Richard Spencer talk, despite all the hatred he spewed on campus, there were counter-talks where audience numbers surpassed Spencer attendees. There were also teach-ins and protests, and it was beautiful to see community members from different religious and racial backgrounds come together—even if momentarily. It was a scary moment for lots of people and I had students approach me after class about their fears concerning deportations. They mostly feared for their siblings and other relatives. I found myself telling students to not worry, that I would make sure nothing would happen to them. One student, after our class discussion about the 1930s deportations during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, came to my office to ask for reassurance that there would not be another deportation like that one. I felt so guilty afterward because I told her that we should hope for the best and that, likely, this would not happen (at least on that scale). Then a couple of months after our conversation, Immigration and Customs Enforcement units were spotted near our campus, mostly targeting construction worksites. I felt I had failed once again as in that moment when the oral history lesson I had fought hard to explain did not seem to have an impact on one student.

Maddalena Marinari (MM): The recent political developments have profoundly affected my working life, as they have for many of us in academia. On the surface, very little should have changed for me considering that I teach in “liberal” Minnesota at a small liberal arts college that prides itself on its commitment to social justice and its immigrant origins. Nonetheless, the school has a predominantly white student body and many of these students, even those who see themselves as open minded and inclusive, are reluctant to talk about race relations and immigration in open and frank discussions in the current charged political climate. Engaging with these issues in class became
increasingly difficult during the past year. Like many liberal arts colleges, the school also emphasizes its sense of community and the close relationships students can develop with their professors. This meant that for many of my colleagues and me, life changed pretty quickly after election night. For me, there was the additional challenge of being a foreigner who teaches U.S. history. While students have always valued and appreciated the different perspective I bring to the classroom, I no longer feel that I can count on that. The fact that I am also an immigration scholar has further complicated things for many of them. While my approach to teaching and my emphasis on exploring U.S. history through the eyes of different historical actors has not changed much, I now often find myself wondering how students will respond to readings or class discussions that focus on immigration, race and ethnicity, or citizenship and integration.

Last fall, I decided to teach a new course, called “The History of the Present,” to explore the historical origins of contemporary culture wars, the evolution of presidential elections, and the origins of mass incarceration in the United States. During the course, content did not become real for many of the students in the class until election night. The first class meeting after the election, while many of the students in the class could barely hold back tears, the Trump supporters could not hide their excitement and insisted that people just needed to give the president-elect a chance. From the end of class that day to now, I have received endless emails and I have met with countless students, many of whom I did not know but who simply wanted to talk about what was going on and what was going to happen next. Several students had to seek mental health help simply to find the energy to finish the semester. The next semester, I taught an upper-level course on U.S. immigration, so many of the same dynamics continued. I have lost track of how many times students in that class asked me “What will happen next? Can something like the 1924 Immigration Act, the forced repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the 1930s, or the Japanese internment really happen again?” While I try to reassure them that much has changed since those events took place, I also tell them that historians cannot predict the future and that nothing is out the realm of possibility. All of this takes a personal toll and slows down everything I do.

My thoughts also keep returning to what many of the students have told me since last November. One of them came to see me in tears because she noticed that her mom, an immigrant, had started to talk ever so quietly in public when they talked on the phone when she used to talk and laugh loudly before. Several minority and international students expressed dismay that they can no longer tell which students are their allies because of all the Trump supporters coming out of the closet after the election. This dynamic is particularly complicated in a high-context culture like Minnesota. Out-of-state and international students often genuinely cannot tell what their Minnesotan friends think about what’s going on in the country right now because their response is always muted even if they feel strongly about what is taking place. And yet, a white student from Minnesota came to see me in my office crying and saying “what have we done? Where do we go from here? This is our fault.” Many of my female students felt discouraged and wondered what it would take to break the famous glass ceiling. To bridge these concerns and create a sense of community, I brought students of different backgrounds together to talk and strategize on how to move forward, organized a teach-in to historicize and discuss the executive orders on immigration and refugees, and participated in a few student-organized roundtables and events to offer a historical perspective.
on what was happening. All the while, I regularly follow up with students to make sure
they are okay, especially since the new president took office.

**JL:** As my colleagues have pointed out, current events are ripe for generating class dis-
cussions. During the spring and fall semesters of 2016, my classes regularly connected
controversies in the news with what we were covering in class. I suppose one of the pos-
itive outcomes of the election is that many more students than before are realizing that
history matters—they see current debates about immigration and the border as part of
a longer history about how Americans and the government have decided who to
include and who to exclude, and why. For those who came in believing that immigration
is a very recent “problem,” connecting current debates to this earlier history of immigra-
tion policy shaped by ideas about race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion can be very
eye-opening, and can help them see how current immigration policies are not as “neutral”
as they seem.

**Elliot Young (EY):** If by “contemporary political developments” you mean the election
of a nativist, sexist fascist to the most powerful post on the globe, I would say that it has
completely changed my work life. Ever since the election, I feel like I have an entire
additional full-time job in tracking Trump’s policies and trying to figure out ways to
resist them by writing opinion pieces, providing expert witness testimony for asylum
cases, continuing my research on the history of immigrant detention, testifying at City
Hall, and by occasionally picking up a sign and marching in the streets.

The students at the small liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon, where I teach, are
almost all on the liberal side of the political spectrum. Nonetheless, there are differences
among our students (and faculty) in figuring out how to respond to the recent election.
Some students have been prompted to action, pushing to have Lewis & Clark College
adopt a sanctuary declaration to protect to the extent possible all undocumented students
and staff. Other students have joined anti-Trump protests in the city, which have been
some of the largest and most militant in the country. However, the vast majority of stu-
dents are not activists. They may be shocked, frightened, and upset, but they have not
turned those sentiments into organized action.

Recently, these issues sparked a campuswide discussion when students involved in a
symposium invited a speaker from the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), an anti-
immigrant group that pretends to be a scholarly think-tank, but it is actually a group
that manipulates data and cherry-picks evidence in an effort to criminalize all immi-
grants, particularly Latin Americans and Muslims. The CIS speaker was to debate an
immigration lawyer in an academic forum.

In a *Huffington Post* piece I questioned the judgment of the student organizers, who
were not fully aware of the group’s dodgy past and links to eugenicists like John
Tanton when they extended the invitation. I argued that since they were unaware at
the time of the invitation that CIS was labeled a “hate group” by the Southern Poverty
Law Center, that they could withdraw the invitation.6

The students decided to honor their invitation in the interest of hearing various per-
spectives about refugees, and they decided not to allow the public into the forum as a
safety measure. (The public was eventually allowed to watch the event by simulcast in
another hall.)
A local activist group came and protested outside the venue, making noise, chanting, and occasionally banging on doors. Some of the activists took to calling some of the students who attended (I also attended) the debate “Nazis,” and one protestor even spit on the shoes of one of the student organizers after the event had ended. In spite of these instances of hostility, the debate occurred without disturbance and the protestors were allowed to express their opposition to CIS.

In the wake of the debate, some students, faculty, and the president of the college condemned me for shaming the students in a national publication for inviting the CIS speaker. I publicly apologized for criticizing the students rather than solely the hate group, a strategic error that allowed the debate to shift from a discussion of CIS to the question of the appropriateness of publicly calling into question the judgment of students. One department colleague even insisted that I retract my article. I declined.

One of the most disturbing emails came from a Latino student who asked me what gave me the right to even talk about this issue of immigration as it did not affect me directly. Of course, as the son of a mother from India who would have been ineligible for citizenship before the 1950s and a father whose Jewish family perished in the Holocaust, these issues do touch me personally. However, I believe that the questions of immigration and refugee policy are the moral responsibility of any sentient being living in the United States.

What this incident taught me is that the stakes of the current political moment are extremely high, as are the emotions. Do students and faculty on a privileged private liberal arts campus have the right not to be disturbed by loud protests? Does the public have the right to protest at a private college? How does one balance the safety and comfort of students and the safety of immigrants who are being arrested, detained, and deported at increasing rates? How does inviting an anti-immigrant “hate group” to campus shape the educational experience for students whose basic humanity is being called into question by this group?

Discussing such questions is difficult because we are not just engaging in polite academic debate, but talking about life and death issues for immigrants. I agree with Julian’s exhortation to keep students focused on the primary sources and readings during class. I also force them to adopt positions that they find abhorrent in class debates (the slave owner or Pinochet supporter, for example). Some of my colleagues have told me that they try to mask their political views in the interest of being non-partisan teachers. In contrast, I believe that on issues of great moral gravity (slavery, racism, sexism, homophobia), one should not pretend to be neutral. As the late Howard Zinn reminded us, you cannot be neutral on a moving train.

As educators we have a duty to make students think critically about their own biases and to engage the arguments of people with whom they disagree. But, we also no longer have the privilege of pretending to stand above or beside the fray. Of course, it is easier to enter the fray as a tenured faculty member at a liberal, liberal arts campus.

BHJ: I am eager to hear more about the classroom dynamics. Teaching about immigration and borders has always been laden with pressing questions of race, identity, and social justice. But now they are also explicitly tied to partisan politics, and as several of you have noted, to such policies as the Trump administration’s refugee ban and proposals to deport millions.
In the spring term of 2017, I taught an undergraduate course on the history of North American borders. I have never had a more engaged group of students; the morning headlines invariably made the case for the relevance of history, so I did not have to. Ironically, Donald Trump helped to make this class a success. Yet half of my students were the children of immigrants from Mexico, South Asia, and the Middle East, and the one avowedly conservative student has Mexican grandparents and proved himself a good listener to his classmates’ pressing concerns. So the profound divisions over these issues were mostly not present in the room itself.

How do you see these tensions in your classrooms? And in what ways are these tensions assets to learning, and in what ways are they barriers?

**MM:** After having quite a few moments of tension last fall when I taught the History of the Present, I was both excited and concerned about teaching an upper-level seminar on U.S. immigration history this spring. Like Benjamin, however, I had an extremely interested and thoughtful group of students. Moreover, as one student put it, “it’s eerie how much current events connect to what we are doing in this course.”

Each week, we began class with a discussion of recent developments in immigration and refugee policy and intentionally connected what was happening to what we were discussing and reading about in class. Given the frenzy of these events, these discussions often took up most of the class, but they also became critical moments for students to process what we were studying and grapple with what was happening around them.

While only a few of the students in the class had an immigrant background, one such student, an avowed libertarian, began the course with a strong conviction that race had no impact on U.S. immigration policy and was not a factor in the current president’s immigration policy decisions. Throughout the semester, as we engaged primary and scholarly sources about Chinese exclusion, Mexican repatriation, and Japanese internment, he grappled with the role of race until one day he came to my office to tell me that he now acknowledges that race does influence U.S. immigration policy.

The low point of these discussions happened when we had an incident on campus that involved a group of well-intentioned but misguided domestic minority students who posted provocative posters about deportation and white supremacy, apparently to generate a campus-wide discussion about these issues and mobilize students into supporting our immigrant students. The result was a lot of hurt immigrant or first-generation students and outraged domestic students who objected to the implication that they do not already support immigrants. That week, my class devoted the first hour to processing what had happened but also strategizing what to do in response and how to show support to those hurt without minimizing what had happened. It was encouraging to see them use what they had learned in my course to mobilize outside of class. One of them contacted the president, the dean of students, and the director of the Diversity Center to urge them to act and help the students who had been directly affected by the incident.

**JL:** My classes at ASU tend to be quite diverse. Though a significant percentage of the students in my classes lean to the left, I have also had proud Trump supporters, non-Trump conservatives, and libertarians; Catholics, Protestants, Mormons, Muslims, and atheists; military students and civilians; citizens and immigrants. The majority of my students are white or Latina/o, and some of my Latina/o students have undocumented family members. I remind my students on the first day of the semester about the rich diversity of
our classroom. I tell them that our discussions will raise hard, messy issues like race or religion, and that I expect a diversity of perspectives. And then I make clear that my number one rule in class is that we discuss these issues carefully, critically, and respectfully, and without any partisan baggage (here, it helps when I acknowledge that Democrats—even President Obama, or the “Deporter in Chief”—have no clean track record on matters of immigration).

But like Elliott, I also ask students to adopt and argue for positions that they may personally find objectionable—for example, why the United States should automatically intern all Japanese Americans on the West Coast during WWII, regardless of citizenship. I think this is a positive way to build in critical dissent without too much tension. And again, I think this allows the students to grapple with issues from a variety of perspectives, without me explicitly announcing my individual politics. (As Elliott suggested, as an assistant professor at a large public university in a very conservative state, I have to be cautious about any appearance of partisan politics.) The exercise itself—and the conclusions that the students can draw from the pro/con lists and debates—produces the politics.

Lastly, I have found that this diversity does not necessarily produce negative tensions, but rather, unexpected perspectives. I have had students wearing Trump hats who were not automatically anti-immigration, and white religious conservatives who provided some of the most humanizing comments about undocumented immigrants. And it was an immigrant student from the Middle East who reminded me that there is still much to celebrate in U.S. immigration history.

EY: Teaching about populism in Latin America has never been easier than after Trump was elected. I have a ready-made example that students can understand when talking about Juan Perón in Argentina or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. I am careful to discuss the differences between Left (Chávez in Venezuela) and Right (Fujimori in Peru) varieties of populism in Latin America, but I also want to show similarities between Latin America and the resurgence of populism in the United States. Thinking about Trump in a Latin American context actually helps students to understand and maybe even sympathize with Trump supporters.

Unlike Julian’s students, my classes on the whole are not very diverse, either in terms of ethnic makeup or political orientation. No student has publicly come out as a Trump supporter or even a Republican, although one of my best students privately revealed to me that he was a Republican. The debate in my classes is mostly between the liberals and the leftists. I have a good number of Latina/o students given the themes of my classes, and quite a few international students from all over the world, including Ethiopia, Kosovo, Malaysia, Chile, and China. Without their perspectives, class discussions would be much less interesting.

One of the most powerful moments came at the end of the semester in my borderlands class when a quiet Latina student spoke about her undocumented mother who worked as a janitor. All of a sudden everything we had discussed during the semester came into focus, and the room was filled with a pregnant silence.

SH: Like some of my colleagues at my institution, I teach an introductory-level historiography and methods course that is required of all history majors. Faculty have the choice of focusing on a particular topic to familiarize students with schools of thought, source
material evaluation, methods, and historiography. Since I began my career at Texas A&M I have chosen to teach this introductory course from the perspective of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands mainly, post-1848. Immigration, of course, is among the key themes that students discuss as well as the creation of nation-states and borders. The course is capped at fifteen and I usually have three or four Latino students (who identify mainly as “Hispanic”), one or two African Americans, with a majority white student enrollment.

Teaching about borders, immigration, race and ethnicity, gender, and citizenship to predominantly students from Texas public schools is challenging itself—regardless of the students’ ethnicity. At least for me, I have had to spend a considerable amount of time, early in the semester, presenting an overview of Texas and Texas-Mexico borderlands history that often is at odds with the kind of history of to which students from Texas have been exposed. We also attract out-of-state students who often are surprised to learn that Texas requires a “Texas history” course. Even before Trump became the clear nominee for the Republican Party, the conversation about immigration and immigrants, “border walls,” and such became hot topics for seventeen Republican candidates to cater to the more radical wing of the party. Thus, every time I taught the course, there was something in the media about one of several themes to be discussed in class. This, I saw as a real privilege. Nothing ever got out of hand. I would like to think that students respected one another because I made it quite clear on the first week of class that discussion had to follow two rules: respect for fellow Aggies and students had to rely on facts (of course, after the election, I found myself spending more time discussing “the facts”).

While I have witnessed interesting discussions about immigrants, human rights, citizenship, and border issues in the past semesters (not necessarily in the context of Trump), I would like to focus on one moment where one student went through a process of growth. Students select a topic from a preapproved list I circulate early in the semester (I do this to ensure that there are enough sources available). This particular student chose to write on the origins of the Border Patrol. The students all had various assignments in the early part of the semester and one of those was to develop an abstract and accompanying preliminary annotated bibliography with historical sources (combination of primary and secondary with bulk of the material coming from secondary literature). The assignment was turned in using sources on the early history of patrolling the area encompassing the 1848 geopolitical boundary. Yet, the tone of it was clearly anti-immigrant and the tentative conclusions/hypothesis presented were anti-immigrant as well. My teaching philosophy has been to respect student voices and, while I strive to maintain civility and respect in the classroom, I also tell them early on that my goal in the classroom is not to produce carbon copies of me. I take pride in guiding the students on their journey to become effective historians. On the other hand, I do remind students of the responsibility that comes with being a historian: that what we argue and how we argue it can have implications on everything—how we make people feel, how we influence policy, and what kind of future we can shape for others. As with other students in the past—including Latino students with very conservative positions regarding “those non-citizen Latinos,” I often found myself frustrated when I could not seem to reach all students. I realize that as an educator, I will probably not be able to have a positive impact on all my students (it took me several years to get over this). But, when there is one student who comes full circle in their transformation—it makes it all worth it.
As the writing process continued and as this student put pieces of the research together, the rough draft was submitted and as expected, the anti-immigrant tone remained. Discussion continued in class as students worked on their drafts as a group and individually outside of the classroom. The students discussed an older, but still relevant and crucial article by historian Oscar J. Martínez, “Border Conflict, Border Fences, and the “Tortilla Curtain” Incident of 1978–1979,” on the history of fences along the U.S.-Mexico border and people’s perception of such barriers, as we had just discussed the recent rhetoric and debates over a wall and the ridiculous assumption by our new president that Mexico could in fact pay for it. But when the day arrived for students to present their research I was completely surprised. The students presented on the respective historiography of their topics (some more thoroughly than others), the sources they consulted, and the schools of thought that shaped each historian.

Then, my student approached the podium and began her presentation and then she paused, looked around, and said something like the following. “I have learned so much doing this research and I have to admit that I now think so differently about immigrants.” She told the class how immigrants, simply by crossing, were not criminals. She confessed that before, she became quite upset every time she heard that “illegals” were “coming over.” She even said that finally, now, she realized that even using certain labels could send certain signals. She proceeded to give an overview of the political, economic, and social context that led to the passage of particular legislation that sought to curb immigration from certain countries, discussed the transformation of the Border Patrol agency over the course of several decades, and spoke about the need for immigration reform.

While this is not the case for every single student, the way in which this student shared her thought process with the entire class and the transformation she experienced through a close engagement with historical sources was such a rewarding experience for me. This took on special meaning for me because our challenge as educators is to provide all tools necessary for students to find their own voice, to make their own arguments without us having to tell them to think in a certain way or to believe something that we believe. I saw a historian in the making. While it may not seem like a big deal, it mattered to me because as educators we face one of the most challenging moments in a divided country where “facts” are not challenged in a sort-of postmodern way, but they are challenged because certain facts make some people feel uncomfortable.

BHJ: Perhaps not surprisingly, all of us in this roundtable seem to have great hostility toward the Trump administration’s rhetoric and policy on migration. How up-front are you in class about this, and what are the advantages and costs of your approach? The week before the election, in a U.S. survey session on the 1930s, I made an extended statement about xenophobia, racism, and the campaign, drawing parallels to the ways that European fascists responded to the real problems of politics and economy in their day. The day after the election, one of my students wore her Trump for President T-shirt, grinning at me for the entire session. I was not sure that I had engaged these issues without simply activating and then inflaming my students’ pre-formed sentiments.

SH: Despite my position as tenured faculty I have never felt it has given me the privilege to say whatever I want to say in the classroom nor speak with the intent to “convince” students to think like me. While I believe students can figure out my political positions, I try to cover all sides of the issue at hand and let them draw their own conclusions even if
I disagree. I held tight to my approach even before I arrived at my home institution, which is a predominantly white public research university. Between 2006 and the spring of 2014, I was an assistant and then an associate professor at a border HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution) teaching university. At the HSI, there were moments in my classes where not all the Latinx students agreed with me nor with their peers. I taught a Mexican American history course the semester in which the Secure Fence Act was passed and while congressional funding was one of its obstacles, the rhetoric in support of the fence was nasty. Each time construction began on a tiny part of the fence the emotions ran high and if students did not bring up the latest news in class, I did. I remember an experience with one student quite clearly. He was an older Hispanic; he insisted on this identity label just like some fifteen or twenty students in the class. Throughout the semester he was very vocal about “illegal aliens” crossing the border and most students did not like his position nor his use of that label. There was one moment in class where the discussion grew intense and almost everyone in class was on him debating him about his anti-immigrant views, particularly because he was of Mexican origin. There was one student who rolled her eyes at him and began to attack him on a more personal basis. I intervened on his behalf and reminded the young woman and everyone of the ground rules of discussion. While he did not change his views, at the end of the semester he stopped by to see me and thanked me for allowing him to express his views. While I understand Ben’s concerns about preaching to the choir, I think it is okay if that happens once in a while.

For me, living in a conservative region of Texas where it is common to see bumper stickers featuring slogans like “Obama Sucks,” “I support Oil & Guns,” “She Lied,” and “Secede,” one or two courses where there is somewhat of a consensus is just fine. Listening to students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members outside of the university call your own people “illegal aliens” hurts. Particularly, since I grew up with the same fears that my undocumented parents felt, despite my status as a citizen. Those moments of consensus after much thoughtful dialogue in many ways help me heal and reflect on my childhood and how much it hurt every time I heard people call my parents (and me) “illegal aliens.”

**HD: **Sonia, I am very moved by your situation. As someone living in an utterly blue environment, I never feel this. Indeed I sometimes consider in the context of my NYU colleagues in history, I am a bit less left, less condemnatory of capitalism and something we might call “American values.” The Trump era has ironically moved me more to the left and caused me to see those values as problematic in a way and to a degree that I did not before. Mine, like so many of my peers, has in fact been the upbeat, American and Jewish success story: poor immigrant parents, did not know much English, somewhat confused about how to navigate American society. And we—products of the postwar expansion—benefited from being white, living in a state—Wisconsin—with terrific and affordable public higher education, and so many more factors. I don’t want to make this biographical, but while we were raised with a deep revulsion toward racism and supported civil rights in all sorts of ways, I do not think we saw how privileged we were. That all said, I have perhaps been more shocked, more devastated by the Trump-turn than others who maybe began cynical already and I am enduring now a deep crisis of faith, perhaps one that was always misplaced.
My privilege now continues by teaching and living in New York—in Greenwich Village—and by teaching students—who are anti-gun, anti-Trump, and so on. I have not been challenged as you and your colleagues are.

Since the election, I have been much more up-front and direct than I have ever been about my politics and frankly, my sense of foreboding about the future of this country. As one measure, for the first time I have political pins on my various coats, reading, “Resist,” “Not My President,” and “My People Were Once Refugees.” I decided that I have the right to express myself. I too have First Amendment rights, although I consider that as a teacher, I have a sacred obligation to respect my students’ views and make them understand that they would not be harmed or humiliated if they disagreed with me. Indeed I always encourage debate, on whatever the subject.

But the irony is that teaching at NYU I have no one in my classes who disagrees. Perhaps my boldness in making comments, here or there, as they flow from the narrative of the course, is that I am confident that I have no one in my classes who supports Trump, votes Republican, or does not share in my vision of America. Teaching Jewish history as I do, I do tread on much more dangerous and murky waters when it comes to Israel/Palestine, and on that matter I am scrupulously circumspect and analytic.

Thus the old normal—my belief in classroom neutrality—has been replaced in my mind by a sense of urgency. I just cannot be silent on the dangers I see before us.

BHJ: I respect that sense of urgency and feel it myself. But I also feel, just as strongly, the “irony” that you invoke. Most of us in this conversation seem to live in echo chambers where we can take these kinds of overt political stances about the Trump administration’s immigration and border policies. Indeed, we feel compelled to do so, but if almost all of our students agree, and those who dissent remain silent (like Elliott’s closet Republican), what good are we doing? In my dark moments I fear that despite the commitment to the practice of history that Sonia and Julian have invoked, we are just replicating the worse dynamics of contemporary American politics, where we sit around with the like-minded and complain about the other side.

MM: I actually do not feel like I live in an echo chamber, not even in my upper-level classes on immigration, race and ethnicity, and citizenship. While students in these courses tend to self-select or are at least open to learning about immigration, integration, and other related issues, they do not always share my views about immigration. At my institution, like at many others, Trump supporters have felt emboldened, especially considering that Minnesota was initially too close to call, our county leans conservative, and the town the college is in is struggling to adjust to the small community of Somali refugees. I also do not want to give the impression that all of my students who identify as liberal or progressive necessarily support immigration, immigration reform, or integration. They do not and many of these students, like many liberal Americans, are ambivalent about these issues, but they keep an open mind and want to learn about the genealogy of today’s immigration debate.

For me, the issue of whether and how open I should be about my views toward the current administration’s rhetoric and policy on immigration is more acute in the introductory courses I teach. Because they are part of the general education curriculum, these courses have a broader range of students with a broader range of political views. And while they are polite about it, they certainly don’t hide their positions. I have always
used humor to hint at my positions in these classes, but this semester I decided not to because several students complained to the president last semester that many faculty members were trying to impose their liberal views on them. I took their complaints seriously and decided to revise the syllabus of my U.S. history survey to include more discussions and readings about immigration, mass incarceration, the criminalization of minorities, and the struggles of the United States to become a more inclusive society. When students, who take turns leading discussions in small groups every week, realized that there were many similarities between history and the present, they talked freely and openly about their surprise, their discomfort, and their difficulty changing their positions. While they remain reluctant to discuss these issues openly as a class, these small groups allowed them at least to think about these issues more critically. I also crafted a new assignment that asked students to connect an aspect of their family history to what we were studying in class. For some, it meant confronting the possibility that some of their immigrant ancestors, for example, were discriminated against like many of today’s immigrants but nonetheless faced fewer problems integrating into U.S. society because they were white Protestants from Northern Europe.

I have to confess that I often wonder if I would have made these adjustments had I tenure and were I American. While I am not sure what the answer to those questions would be, I feel that these changes were productive for the students and me.

**EY:** I wish my students were more willing to challenge me and each other about their ideas. Part of the problem is that we live in Portland, which has a culture of niceness that discourages people from disagreeing with one another. I’m from New York City, and so I don’t have this problem. In fact, I get nervous when people do not disagree.

I have organized several teach-ins and workshops since Trump’s election, and I always try to invite people who disagree with me to participate, but there is nobody willing to defend Trump on campus. That does not mean we all agree. There is plenty of division and disagreement between the neoliberal Democrats and the Bernie wing of the party. And then there are the anarchist folks who think voting for either major party is a waste of time.

One of the ways I have tried to break out of the echo chamber is by doing a Conversation Project sponsored by Oregon Humanities, which involved facilitating a conversation with small groups of people across the state. My topic was immigration and diaspora. Although most people who show up to a library for such a discussion are liberal-leaning, I did have some other folks with fairly conservative perspectives participate. I am not sure any minds were changed, but getting people to hear one another in a respectful and civil dialogue seemed like a good first step.10

**HD:** I too would like students to disagree and I often set up lessons around controversies in the past—and sometimes verging on the present—in terms of the range of ideas out there on various issues and try as best as I can to represent multiple positions. In the main, students will get frustrated with me and ask, “but what do you think,” and I tend to say the following. “It is not important what I think. What matters is how did, for example, pro- and anti-suffrage advocates craft their arguments? What facts did they present? Whom did they represent?” and so on. As I teach American Jewish history among other subjects, the Israel/Palestine issue is a real time bomb in class and I work hard at keeping my politics out of it, although a perceptive student will go and
find me online, in various publications and know exactly where I stand. But, what has made this moment in time transformative for me is that I now am less likely to try to represent the range of views and subject them all to the same kind of scrutiny, particularly as we discuss immigration. I am more upfront, harsher, and unmistakably anti-Trump.

JL: For reasons already stated, I am not transparent in class about my political affiliations, although like Hasia, if students did a little digging online, they could probably figure it out. And like Hasia, I frequently get students who ask me in class about my stance on a hot topic. I try to avoid telling them my conclusions, but instead focus their attention on the different factors—both historical and current—that I think we should all consider as informed citizens and Americans.

Another irony—at least for me—about teaching immigration or U.S. history during these early days of the Trump presidency is that I have brought more focus to moments of “progress” in the past, and how everyday people struggled to produce those important moments of change. As is the case with many of us, I am sure, I was wary about teaching U.S. history in any way that could reinforce notions of American exceptionalism. After November, however, I realized the dangers or weaknesses of focusing so constantly on just the struggles and the shortcomings of different movements (e.g., the ethnocentrism and racism of Progressive Era reformers, contributing to the infamous 1924 National Origins Act). For me, those moments of struggle reveal so much about how different historical actors understood freedom, democracy, and what it means to be American. But a history of constant discrimination and state (and non-state) violence was perhaps too real following the election, and I realized that the students also needed some positive historical reassurance that people can make change, and that there has been progress through all of these struggles. So I’ve made a concerted effort to pause, recognize, and give more emphasis to those moments of change instead of glossing over them. Otherwise, I worry that students will become despondent or—worse—apathetic and ask why bother.

HD: I wonder as a dramatic and pedagogic device if it might not be interesting to engage with undergraduate students in counterfactual historical thinking, obviously letting know that posing a problem as “what if” is imaginary. But doing it that way might—perhaps—provide a way to think of both the contingent nature of history and to envision the motives and concerns of the players. So, for example, when we teach the 1920s restriction we might ask, what if all the various ethnic organizations, representing this group and that, had actually banded together, and spoken with a single voice opposing restriction. As we know that never happened and while some efforts were made by some individuals representing a kind of liberal progressive elite, the masses of immigrants, their children, and the leaders of their communal institutions spoke out, here and there, on their own and in the name of their group alone. What if they had managed to work together? A day thinking about this might make history more alive to students, demonstrate the importance of grassroots action, and allow them to think that different decisions in the past, might have led to different outcomes. I ask this as someone who thinks the writing of counterfactual history is fine for novelists, alone. We ought not do it in print, but why not in a class?

BHJ: I very much like that idea. (And counterfactual history strikes me as a profitable approach for scholarship as well.)
Maddalena’s mention of student complaints to the college president about faculty statements in the classroom raises the important issue of the pressures put upon us. This last term a colleague of mine, John Donoghue, was placed on the “Professor Watchlist,” a project of the conservative group “Turning Point USA” that describes its goal as “to expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.” Donoghue was singled out for linking the legacies of slavery to Trump specifically, and capitalism more generally. It did not intimidate him, but he is a tenured faculty member with an outstanding publication record and a supportive department and dean. Our non-tenured and especially lecturer and adjunct colleagues expressed their concerns about the possible consequences of being named on such a list. Our provost did not respond to repeated requests to publicly defend the right, and indeed the importance, of faculty members addressing thorny questions of politics and social justice, but did issue a patronizing memo warning faculty not to make classrooms the site of partisan pronouncements.

My sense is that faculty are under increasing scrutiny over just the kind of statements that we are discussing. Indeed, in April the National Rifle Association’s Wayne LaPierre named “academic elites, political elites, and media elites” as “America’s greatest domestic threats.” To what extent do you feel constrained by such pressures? How about your colleagues?

**EY:** I am not really worried about being put on a watch list or blacklist since I have tenure, and in truth, I am kind of annoyed that I’m not on such a list. On the other hand, I teach at a fairly liberal institution and I came out long ago as a Leftist (some have even called me a Marxist!). Life’s a lot easier to live outside of the closet.

I cannot imagine how it must be for those of you with Leftist views at more conservative institutions, or who are women, people of color, and non-citizens whose authority is already suspect, where you have to always look over your shoulder and wonder whether you will be reported to the authorities for ideological diversion. At my own institution, colleagues have occasionally publicly admonished me for “politicizing” and “polarizing” the campus. My feeling is that if you are not pissing someone off, you are not doing your job. Better that they hate me for who I am, than love me for who I am not.

**JL:** Faculty at ASU were reminded, of course, that we should not use any school infrastructure at all (no ASU email, phone, etc.) for any kind of partisan political activity. But otherwise, I have not felt any particular pressure from the university to stifle my intellectual activity.

In fact, following the election, I helped organize a collaborative project with several other immigration scholars across the country. It was primarily led by Erika Lee at the University of Minnesota, but Maddalena and I were co-organizers, and Elliott served as one of the consultants. We came together as scholars concerned about the heightened anti-immigrant and nativist rhetoric associated with the Trump campaign and presidency, and we produced the #ImmigrationSyllabus, a public syllabus that we hoped would help the public to more deeply understand the historical context to current debates about immigration, integration, and citizenship. The organizers of this syllabus were then invited by Public Radio International to annotate the executive order that was issued on January 27, 2017, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” (also known as the “Muslim ban” order). We drew on
the work that we did for the #ImmigrationSyllabus to identify and explain the historical precedents for various sections of the executive order.\textsuperscript{15}

Since the election, I have also written an opinion piece and have been interviewed on our local NPR radio station about immigration history and its connections to our current times. In all of this work, I have felt supported by the university, my academic unit, and my colleagues. I have great senior colleagues and mentors who have encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone and speak to the broader public.

And fortunately, we have a university president and administration that so far has maintained a positive commitment to academic freedom. More specifically, it has been tremendously helpful that Michael Crow, our university president, has been outspoken about his commitment to DACA students and to all DREAMers. He argues that it is not only required by the state constitution (which requires that Arizona’s public school system “be open to all the children of the state”), but he also sees it as part of the core principle set forth in ASU’s charter—that ASU measures excellence “not by whom we exclude, but rather by whom we include and how they succeed.”\textsuperscript{16}

MM: Unlike many of my colleagues in this forum, my college tends to be cautious when it comes to speaking out on immigration issues, but while I am constrained in the classroom, I feel less limited when it comes to what I do when I am not teaching. I have a lot of supportive colleagues who have encouraged me as I have become more active, especially after it became clear that immigrants and refugees were one of the Trump administration’s primary targets. Since the election, I have exchanged numerous emails and talked with several of my fellow migration scholars to brainstorm about what to do. Many of us, like all of you in this forum, are ready to participate and engage with the public. We just wish it were under different circumstances, but, as a fellow migration scholar recently told me, “if I write an op-ed on immigration and people against immigration spend the next few days leaving negative comments, I don’t mind because at least they are not targeting immigrants or refugees while they tear my article to pieces.” Participating in the #immigrationsyllabus project that Julian has already mentioned was one of the most rewarding experiences so far. Not just because it gave me the chance to work with and learn from an amazing group of scholars, but also because it led to many other opportunities to engage with the public, from annotating one of Trump’s executive orders for Public Radio International with some of the same people behind the syllabus project to participating in discussions and teach-ins on campus and in the community. I realize, however, that some of my colleagues, especially those who are not on the tenure track, are more vulnerable than I am. As someone who remembers clearly the Berlusconi era in Italy and sees how difficult it’s been for Italy and Italians to recover from and undo the political, social, and cultural damage he wrought, I also think about the toll that all of this frantic activity is taking on all of us and the long-term damage these events are creating for U.S. society and the rest of the world.

BHJ: I would like to shift the conversation to the scholarly side of our working lives. One of the things that strikes me about this moment is that we have not only a fast-moving current political situation, but its intersection with a real dynamism in the study of the linked subjects of migration and borders. What strikes you as the major changes in these fields in the last ten to fifteen years?
HD: I think that the most significant change, although I think it needs to be more deeply historicized and complicated, is the idea or constant refrain about borderlands. What do we mean by borderlands when we invoke it? Do pieces of officially generated paper (or their absence) have to have been present to have made the space a borderland or for our subjects to be considered individuals who had to negotiate borderlands?

In some ways, if I am reading much of this material as intended, the new thrust of the scholarship has become more deeply political than probably any other time in the field of immigration history, which is where I am coming from. If the subject is about papers created by state agencies then—and it is possibly a good development—we immigration historians have revived the significance of the state as a factor in what had for decades been thought of as a matter of primarily social history. Yet this shift raises an important question: how do those of us who consider ourselves social historians, still concerned with the agency of our subjects, respond to now thinking about “agency” in a very different way? Some of the books that have placed so much emphasis on state action have stripped ordinary people of their abilities to negotiate for themselves and they have de-emphasized the importance of communal organizations, within the immigrant/ethnic population, for example. Perhaps that is the intent of the scholars but I think it should be more up-front.

JL: I am someone starting out in borderlands studies, and moving more and more into immigration topics. But as someone whose scholarship examines migration in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, one of the themes or approaches from the past ten to fifteen years that deeply shaped my work was the “transnational turn.” By shaking loose the centripetal pull of the nation and following people, ideas, and things across various borders and into the archives of multiple countries, borderlands and immigration historians have provided new perspectives on how people move and why borders harden. More specifically, the works of historians like Rachel St. John (Line in the Sand), Samuel Truett (Fugitive Landscapes), and Karl Jacoby (Shadows at Dawn and The Strange Career of William Ellis) were critical to how I approached the study of migration and state power at the U.S.-Mexico border. But the transnational approach also came from a different angle—from those who have brought renewed focus to Asian migration through the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Following the migrations of Chinese immigrants, Erika Lee (At America’s Gates), Grace Peña Delgado (Making the Chinese Mexican), Julia Schiavone Camacho (Chinese Mexicans), Kathleen Lopez (Chinese Cubans), and Elliot (Alien Nation) have all produced important studies about the Chinese in the Americas, including but also outside of the United States. Kornel Chang and Beth Lew-Williams have also brought attention to Chinese migration to the Pacific Northwest, and the experiences and challenges they encountered as exclusion came to define the broader Anglo borderlands of Canada and the United States.

Thinking about migration in more complicated and diverse ways in the American borderlands, many new works take cross-racial approaches or perspectives (e.g., John McKiernan-Gonzalez’s Fevered Measures). For me, it has been exciting to connect the longer historiography of the Anglo-Mexican borderlands to these newer histories about black, Asian, and indigenous migrations and cross-border strategies. They are not yet numerous, but the emerging studies of how Native Americans and enslaved African Americans exploited
the U.S.-Mexico border for their own purposes (e.g., to flee slavery or evade Mexican
and U.S. soldiers) complicate my own understanding about the border and its normative
meanings.

Ironically, as Hasia also observes, I think all of this attention to the fluidity of migra-
tion has led to more studies in immigration history about the state, immigration law and
policy, and attempts to constrain migration. So just in the past fifteen years, there’s been
an explosion of historical attention to border policing, restrictions, the creation of “illegal
aliens,” and deportation. These works include Mae Ngai (*Impossible Subjects*), Erika Lee
(*At America’s Gates*), Daniel Kanstroom (*Deportation Nation*), Patrick Ettinger (*Imagi-
mary Lines*), Kelly Lytle Hernandez (*Migra!*), Dierdre Moloney (*National Insecurities*),
Libby Garland (*After They Closed the Gates*), and most recently, Hidetaka Hirota (*Expel-
ling the Poor*), Torrie Hester (*Deportation*), and Deborah Kang (*The INS on the Line*).23

**MM:** The intersection between migration and borderlands studies has produced some of
the most exciting scholarship in the last fifteen years, and I completely agree with all of
Julian’s suggestions. The transnational turn has been critical to my work as well. As
someone who studies the impact of U.S. immigration policy at home and abroad, I have found the work of Paul Kramer, Jana Lipman, and Laura Madokoro particularly
helpful in understanding the global connections and broader implications of U.S. immi-
gration policy.24 Equally important have been Kathleen López, Erika Lee, and David
Fitzgerald and David Cook-Martín’s explorations of the intersections of U.S. immigra-
tion policy and the Western Hemisphere.25

Another critical development has been the proliferation of a rich literature on the guest
worker programs enacted throughout the twentieth century to bring unskilled immigrants
through the back door, even as the United States built an immigration policy that offi-
cially favored skilled immigrants and family reunion. The work of Ana Elizabeth
Rosas, Erasmo Gamboa, and Deborah Cohen on the Bracero Program and Cindy Haha-
movitch’s book on Jamaican guest workers have shed light on the complexity of these
programs and their complicated legacy. The proliferation of different immigrant statuses
and the continuing use of immigration policy to shape American society throughout the
twentieth century also affected how immigrant communities mobilized for their rights or
a fairer immigration policy. While Charlotte Brooks, Cindy Cheng, Madeline Hsu, Lori
Flores, Jane Hong, Erika Lee, and Lorrin Thomas have explored the negotiations and
strategies that restricted immigrants and citizens from territories adopted to voice their
concerns and fight for their rights, Kelly Lytle Hernandez has urged us to pay attention
to the connection among immigration, mass incarceration, and the long history of crim-
inalization of immigrants of color.26 Lastly, as the United States moved toward a gate-
keeping policy, legal scholars Kunal Parker and Hiroshi Motomura have explored the
changing relationship between immigration and citizenship in U.S. history.27

**EY:** I started out as a borderlands historian, concerned principally with the construction
of race and nation on the U.S.-Mexico border. In the last twenty years, I have been most
influenced by the so-called transnational turn, which has forced me to rethink what I
mean by borderlands and transnational. For me, a topic straddling two or more countries
is not enough to constitute transnational as a methodology, although much of the new
borderlands scholarship was transnational without using the fancy terminology. Like
all concepts, borderlands and transnational threaten to become empty buzzwords
unless defined. My newer work is also about migration across borders, but I do not feel
the need to constrain myself to a particular region. I follow my subjects where they went,
which has brought me to Macao, Callao, Havana, Guaymas, Vancouver, Eagle Pass and
Veracruz. This globetrotting, though exhilarating, leaves me weary and envious of the
city or region specific study.

I hate to be asked for a list of books that have been important to me since there are so
many, but luckily others have mentioned many of them already. If I had to choose one
book that signaled for me the possibilities of this new borderlands approach it would
be Ramón Gutiérrez’s *When Jesus Came* because he managed to deal with the messiness
of Spanish, Anglo, Indian relations in a borderlands region through the lens of gender and
sexuality.28

**HD:** From a methodological perspective, one of the problems with much of the transna-
tional and even broadly borderland studies perspective is the matter of language. If we
want to know, or care, how the individuals in motion or their home societies responded,
felt, thought, engaged with the processes at work, we must be able to access their words
as they wrote or said them. Transnational means multilingual and few of us are actually in
a position to do this as it should. The words of the movers, the transmigrants, come to us
third and fourth hand and as historians, we know that is never good. This from an ulti-
mately old-fashioned immigration historian.

**EY:** I am not sure I would see a focus on the state and agency as mutually exclusive, but I
take Hasia’s point that if we focus only on the oppressive state, we certainly miss out on
the ways that people on the ground evaded borders and avoided state authorities. One cul-
de-sac of the “agency” debates of the 1990s was simply proving that people had
“agency,” which is always true but ultimately unsatisfying when you realize that there
is agency everywhere, even under slavery and in the Holocaust concentration camps.
So perhaps bringing the state back in was an effort to say, yes, people have agency,
but under what constraints are they operating. Marx had something to say about that
in the Eighteenth Brumaire.29

**MM:** This issue has been on my mind for the last few years, actually. I might be too opti-
mistic, but I sincerely hope that transnational and borderland studies will push us to do
more collaborative work along the lines of what Donna Gabaccia and Katharine Donato
did for their book *Gender and International Migration*.30 I know this is not easy to do for
historians, especially junior scholars, but I see a lot of untapped potential and an amazing
opportunity for projects that can bring together scholars with different language skills,
specialties, and areas of interest. In part because my projects tend to have a comparative
component, I have always been interested in bringing together bodies of scholarship on
different immigrant groups. It seems that digital history is charting new territory when it
comes to this type of collaboration, but the tough part is to convince the larger discipline
that this type of project and collaboration constitutes legitimate scholarship even when it
does not result in the traditional (solitary?) monograph.

**HD:** I applaud Maddalena’s comments and optimism. I do not see this as a zero-sum
game in any way but I am concerned vis-a-vis the scholarship we produce that unless
we move to a more collaborative, team approach the emphasis on state action and trans-
nationalism will shift attention away from the immigrants themselves, their strategies and
adaptations. The idea of teams working on large scale, cross-national, and multi-group (and perhaps as another subject, I generally have shed use of the word “group” because of its imprecision and erasure of complexity) projects is compelling. If the IEHS and the Immigration Research Center and other entities, including some not yet in existence, can foster this, then I think we would be moving the field to a richer ground.

BHJ: This all seems to add up to a richer, more detailed body of work attentive to the experiences of different migrant groups, more attentive to the power of the state, and more aware of the international and transnational contexts of migrant experiences and state power in the United States. It also strikes me as a much more pessimistic take on migration in U.S. history. Older accounts more centered on European migrants, it seems to me, could ultimately fit—or be made to fit—into larger narratives about the rise of cultural pluralism in the United States and what Mae Ngai calls the achievement of “universal liberal citizenship.”

This is painting in broad strokes, of course, but, the last generation of work seems much more attentive to exclusion and to the United States as, in Erika Lee’s terms, a “gatekeeping nation.”

In that sense, for those of us disturbed by what we see as a profoundly racist and nativist immigration politics—and now policies—coming from the Trump administration, these scholarly developments seem very well-suited for explaining the present moment.

MM: While we were working on the #ImmigrationSyllabus, a few of the people who provided suggestions on our draft worried that the project might emphasize exclusion, restriction, and discrimination at the expense of immigrants’ contributions to U.S. society, culture, and life. For us, a focus on immigrants’ contributions would have been a different project that might not have helped our audience understand the long history behind the current debate on immigration, immigration policy, and immigration reform. We felt that it was important for readers to know that the Muslim ban, the illegality spiral, and the racialization of immigrants of color have been decades in the making. The challenges of forging interethnic collaboration, teasing out a sense of belonging in a hostile environment, and having a voice in a politically charged environment have a similarly long history. The scholarship on the rise of the “gatekeeping nation” has also helped us challenge the ‘up from bootstraps myth’ without taking away from the positive role that immigration (legal or not) and immigrants have played throughout U.S. history. Migration scholars have been doing what Ibram X. Kendi urges all fellow historians to do in his Stamped from the Beginning, namely, to recognize that the history of racial progress in the United States is accompanied by an equally steady history of racism.

BHJ: It would be perverse, all the more so in this moment, to neglect the history of nativism, racism, and the use of state power to exclude. (And I write this the weekend after a white supremacist stabbed to death two men for defending Muslim women from his tirade on public transportation in Portland.) Yet I do fear that one consequence of the focus on state power and the generally more grim story told by recent scholarship on migration and borders is that we risk losing sight of the state and, yes, nationalism as an emancipatory force in U.S. history. In my own scholarship, I write about how much the fear of statelessness structured Mexican American civil rights politics in 1930s Texas. In my recent teaching and in this conversation, I am struck by the enormous importance of the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantee of birthright citizenship to
contemporary immigration politics. Can you imagine what our politics would be like today if the children of Mexican and Chinese immigrants (and the great-grandchildren of Italian and Jewish immigrants from the early twentieth century) could not vote because they and their offspring remained non-citizens in perpetuity? And of course this commitment to birthright citizenship was produced as a key part of the promise of legal equality and citizenship that the victorious Union made to freed people in the wake of their emancipation, surely still the greatest democratic achievement of U.S. nationalism. So we’re back to Maddalena and Ibram Kendi’s point about the entwined histories of nativism and pluralism, racism, and equality.

HD: Yes it would be perverse, agreeing with Benjamin, but it would also be very bad history. What I think we need to do though as we teach and write is to explore the multiple, often contradictory strategies undertaken by immigrants and their children to deal with these never-ending exclusions and hatreds. We have a long set of questions to explore with students, readers, and indeed ourselves. How did immigrants from the same place (the “group” as it were) squabble among themselves on how to respond? Why did some strategies enlist more or fewer supporters? Whom outside the “group” did they turn to as allies? How and when did alliances flower? What arguments did they make? How did immigrants defend themselves in terms of cultural practices, relationships to homeland, and the like as they faced these threats from the outside? So many questions but they require looking at the perpetrators, the objects of the hatred, and other Americans in equal depth.

JL: I agree with Hasia that capturing the voices and perspectives of immigrants themselves is vital, and—returning to her previous point about language—that language is critical to studying them as historical subjects and actors, and not simply objects. For those working on borderlands and using transnational methodologies, being able to work in multiple languages has become essential. But there are also some real or practical limitations too with multilingualism.

Taking my own research as an example, I could not imagine working on the U.S.-Mexico border without working with Spanish-language sources. My book looks at diverse immigration streams moving through the U.S.-Mexico borderlands from the 1880s to the 1930s, so it was critical that I look at what people from both sides of the border thought and wrote about the issue. But I also could not imagine spending an extra two to four years to learn Cantonese, even though a significant focus of my book is the Chinese.

In addition to the time it would have added to my graduate studies, I had to consider the pay-off and whether it warranted that additional time. And here, again, I am in full agreement with Hasia that if we really want to know how immigrants themselves “responded, felt, thought, engaged with the processes at work, we have to be able to access their words as they wrote or said them.” But what about those poorer, illiterate immigrants who were not able to leave behind their thoughts in their own words or writing? These are the kinds of immigrants—poorer, working class—that I study and very few of them left documents in their own handwriting. One of the risks of transnational studies of immigration is the privileging of elites—those immigrants who had the resources to travel back and forth (especially across oceans) and leave a documentary trail of their own making. As all of us here recognize, the challenge for scholars of transnational migration is capturing the experiences of the non-elite.
Here is where “the state” comes back in, at least for me. As Elliott points out, if we only focus on state oppressions, we lose sight of the myriad ways in which “people on the ground evaded borders and avoided state authorities.” But it is also frequently the documents generated by the state (both from the United States and Mexico, in my case) that provide some of the richest glimpses into what these immigrants might have thought, and what kinds of actions they took during their migrations. American officials in particular were obsessed with the unlawful entries of Chinese laborers, for example, and left behind thousands of reports and transcripts including actual transcribed statements given by detained immigrants.36

Of course, these records provide only a partial view and the sources come with a lot of baggage and a host of interpretation issues. Ultimately, we only see what the state was most concerned about, and what various state actors felt were worthy of reporting. So in the end, Hasia is perhaps right that such studies are really about state action. But my hope is that by bringing new focus to the records and voices of immigrants reproduced therein, that we can still get some fuller understanding of the networks that “ordinary” immigrants created in response to the state and the ways in which they also helped to shape immigration law and policy from below. I am not sure how or where else we can find their voices (though of course I am eager to hear others’ suggestions!).

Lastly, here I would like to insist that the state matters a lot. I am not sure if it is a more “pessimistic take on migration,” as Ben puts it, but yes, recent histories of Asian and Latin American migration are quite different from the earlier histories of European migration that more comfortably celebrated American cultural pluralism. Historians are focusing on the state precisely because of this difference. For scholars trying to understand the perpetual foreigner and “illegal alien” labels that continue to racially define and stigmatize so many Americans of Asian and Latin American descent, for example, immigration law and policy (i.e., the state) is incredibly important. As Maddalena points out, immigration history in the United States is both (and usually simultaneously) a history of inclusive progress as well as exclusionary gatekeeping. The state does not totally determine the experiences of immigrants, of course, but as we see from current events, the state plays a powerful role in constructing and validating ideas about who belongs, who does not, and why.

On this note, it is important to remember that “the state” is not monolithic. One of the ironies following the election and the executive orders on immigration issued in January is the way in which “states’ rights” were suddenly invoked by pro-immigrant supporters seeking to promote and protect sanctuary cities. It is thus important to remain attentive to the differences between federal, state, and local responses to immigration, and the “emancipatory” potential in certain arenas even if (as in our current times) the federal government does not seem so friendly to immigrants. There are also regional and interagency variations even at the federal level. In my own research, it became clear to me how agents on the border understood and administered immigration laws differently from lawmakers in D.C. or Mexico City. Military officers, consular agents, and judges—just think about the federal courts today!—also frequently understood and interpreted the government’s duties to certain immigrants differently than immigration agents. I am glad Hasia reminded us about the absolute importance of exploring the multiple and sometimes contradictory strategies of immigrants and their children. I think that it is important to think about the diffuse arms of “the state” for related reasons—both to help us understand more clearly how state power
works in diffuse ways but also to see how immigrants might take advantage of the various and multiple avenues available thereby to keep the borders more porous.

BHJ: And to make this even more complicated, migrants are also often dealing with more than one state. As the recent refugee crisis and nativist backlash in the European Union suggests, the United States is hardly alone in confronting questions of citizenship and diversity.

EY: Yes, I want to underscore the importance of putting the transnational into U.S. history. When looking at U.S. immigration history, for example, the regional and broader global contexts are essential. This would be important not only for comparative purposes to show how the United States is similar and different to other nations, but to fully understand how the United States operates extraterritorially to enforce its immigration restrictions and how migration policy and technologies have been shared across borders. It is not a coincidence that Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Peru, and many other nations in the Americas joined the U.S.-led ban on Chinese laborers by the 1920s. Similarly, to understand Central American migration to the United States today, one needs to look at how Mexico has stepped up its detention and deportation policies at the behest of and also financed by the United States. Migration is a global phenomenon and so we need to study it from that perspective.

SH: Transnationalism as a rigorous methodology has sought to further excavate what “lies in the interstices,” to cite Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*. Anzaldúa’s work, published in the 1980s but conceived during her coming of age in the south Texas borderlands (although often on the margins of the latest transnational scholarship), opened research possibilities particularly for voices that had been silenced. While Anzaldúa did not employ the term transnationalism, she did underscore methods of recovery for vulnerable peoples. But she did so by also pointing out their agency. Grounded in her own experiences as a *mestiza* living in the *encrucijada* or crossroads of two nation-states, Anzaldúa and later other scholars including Emma Perez (*Decolonial Imaginary*) and Sonia Saldívar-Hull (*Feminism on the Border*) heeded the call to excavate those voices that had been silenced, overshadowed, or simply considered marginal and not central to the making of regional spaces, borderlands, and in short, entire nations. Others, including Kelly Lytle Hernandez in “Borderlands and the Future History of the American West,” took notice and argued that certain peoples’ history could be found in multiple archives or in archives considered not their own. Thus, in the last decades, key works from Chicana/o, Western History, Borderlands and Immigration, and Mexican history (see my earlier mentions) have attempted to capture the voices of the so-called voiceless. Such efforts have also been partly successful due to the close reading of documents in multiple languages. Language of course is key in our understanding of people’s histories and I think every effort should be made to engage documents in their original language and placed in their specific cultural contexts to better understand them and their meaning for the larger world.37

Transnational approaches are imperfect like every other approach. While transnationalism can also reproduce ideas about nationalism, as Leela Fernández has pointed out in *Transnational Feminism in the United States*, and at times privileges the nation-state or transnational states at the center of historical processes, it can also help to recover peoples
who perhaps, if studied from a single-nation perspective or a single-archive method, may never quite make it onto the historiographical record, even as a footnote.\textsuperscript{38}

The migration of peoples can also be of an ideological sort and not necessarily a physical one, and a transnational approach can help to excavate their histories. In research conducted in Mexico’s municipal, state, and national archives; in United States’ ports of entry including South Texas and New York; and Spain, I began to recover the lived experiences of one Mexicana who, while never having stepped outside of her community, engaged in an ideological migration of sorts to promote workers’ rights. Her identity was a regional one colored by ideas from other women and men across Mexico’s international borders as well as across the Atlantic. The state or multiple states towered over communities, yet communities also found ways to navigate and engage the state/s and at times used state-sanctioned language, state entities, and representatives of the state to promote and realize their own agendas.\textsuperscript{39}

Besides transnational approaches, interdisciplinary approaches can help to create more nuanced interpretations of migrant experiences and the lives of some of the more vulnerable people in the world like children (particularly undocumented children), and victims of state and non-state sanctioned violence.

\textbf{EY:} Hasia’s point about knowing the languages of the people being studied is important, and I agree with Julian that there are some projects that would be impossible if we required scholars to learn all of the languages of the migrants involved. Like Julian, Spanish was indispensable to my research for \textit{Alien Nation} about Chinese migration in the Americas, but given the lack of written sources left by the Chinese migrants, Cantonese was less essential. The work that Freddy Gonzalez, Julia Maria Schiavone Camacho, and Kathleen López are doing using Chinese language sources from China in their research on Chinese migration in Mexico and Cuba are also opening up new perspectives on this migration.\textsuperscript{40} There are also Chinese language sources in the Americas, but there needs to first be a greater concerted effort to preserve and archive these sources than we have at the present. Not every project will be able to do everything, but the goal should be to listen to as many voices as one can, especially those that have been most silenced.

\textbf{HD:} Then this kind of study might call for collaborative group projects where teams come together that enlist the language and other skills of multiple historians. I always work on the assumption that sources exist and it is a matter of being creative and dogged to find them. Indeed knowing the language helps locate those sources.

\textbf{EY:} I love the idea of collaborative projects and, yes, we cannot know that the sources do not exist if we do not know the languages. But this means we would have to cooperate. I’m not sure they trained us well to do this in graduate school.

\textbf{SH:} Collaborations are indeed crucial for the reasons suggested by my colleagues above. Further, collaborations that build upon interdisciplinary approaches that employ material culture in the form of artifacts coupled with more common historical sources such as newspapers, government records, personal correspondence among others, can help to bring marginal voices to the forefront that have been overshadowed by state-focused studies. Recent efforts by several historians have brought together a wide variety of sources including music, clothing, oral testimonials, court records, and newspapers,
that culminated in the first museum exhibit on the violence that Mexican-origin peoples experienced at the hands of state authorities during the 1910–1920 period along the southern Texas border. This team effort, “Refusing to Forget,” cast a light on the voices of many—possibly over 3,000—who were shot in the back, lynched, tortured, and left for dead by state agents (principally Texas Rangers). The exhibit placed this dark chapter at the forefront of Texas history, but did so in a transnational way as the story told by the exhibit positioned state-sanctioned violence at the heart of state formation, the making of international borders, global revolutions, and in the specific socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations that shaped ethnic identity and people’s response to such violence. For the first time in the history of Texas, an exhibit on the state’s role in the violence during this period was on full display in the official state museum (overseen by some of the most conservative people in the state and the nation). This has begun to shift the public history (and historiographical) record and for many, it has signaled the beginning of a much-needed reckoning with states’ role in sanctioning violence against ethnic minorities.41

The exhibit was able to happen because it was a collaborative effort of a team. There were sources that had been examined by only some of us while there were other scholars who had access to private collections. As another example of collaboration, we have seen a growing number of books that have been translated and published in Mexico (in some cases also translated to other languages). For example, Elliott’s book on Catarino Garza, Michael Snodgrass’s book on Monterrey workers, and my book on women’s labor and activism in the Mexican northeastern borderlands have all been translated to Spanish and published in Mexico. Key works coming out of Mexico have also been translated to English and/or are forthcoming in the United States.42 In full agreement with the group, I think we can certainly come up with creative collaborations to more fully develop our respective fields.

As a final thought, I do not think historians should ignore or lessen the role of the state over voices and histories of marginalized and vulnerable people. I think as historians we can attempt to re-create and narrate a story that includes both the limits and excesses of the state/s as well as people’s own agency in navigating, contesting, accommodating, adapting, or reshaping and diminishing state power.

JL: I think we all agree, and (picking up on Ben’s prompt about where the field is going or ought to go), it looks like collaborative projects across fields and disciplines would really produce many more exciting new works and perspectives. But I am wondering what we mean by collaborative/team projects. Projects like Sonia and Ben’s “Refusing to Forget” exhibit or the #ImmigrationSyllabus make sense to me as collective efforts. I can also imagine creating a shared database or archive of translated sources by and for scholars working in different languages and with different kinds of materials. But are we also talking about co-authored books? I am not opposed to the idea, but in addition to the matter of graduate training (or lack thereof) that Elliott pointed out, I wonder how receptive the profession or universities and colleges would be to collaborative book projects—especially if it is the scholar’s first book. At the risk of sounding crassly pragmatic, what kinds of collaborative projects are realistic for junior scholars trying to land tenure track positions and eventually tenure?
HD: It seems to me that all of these have potential and might be an important “shot-in-the-arm” for the field. None of these are impossible to imagine and what I think all of this demands is a combination of cooperation, creativity, and funding. If we want this, we should think about how to begin.

BHJ: The ongoing digital revolution and the increasing prominence of public history within the field have made more room for these kind of collaborative projects, either oriented at teaching (#ImmigrationSyllabus) or public memory (Refusing to Forget). And it is exciting to think what this kind of collaboration would look like in the context of a more traditional scholarly publication like a monograph. But I think Julian is right to ask about what career stage this kind of thing is viable. For the foreseeable future, I think this is the kind of work that established scholars with job security are far better positioned to embark on.

What else does the current situation let us see more clearly? Are there dangers in the kind of present-mindedness that informs this conversation?

EY: I had a student this year working on a project about identity on the Guatemalan-Mexico border in the 1920s and 1930s, which included many dramatic cases of Guatemalans (many of whom were indigenous) being deported from revolutionary Mexico. She was struggling to find the relevance of the project until Trump got elected, and suddenly her project seemed to be at the center of what was happening. My point in relating this story is that understanding the period of growing immigration restrictions from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s is essential for our contemporary political moment.

I hate to be the curmudgeonly historian who reminds everyone that this all happened before. But it did. And the general public would be in a better place to not only understand but to oppose the current wave of xenophobia if we looked back at state efforts to criminalize immigrants in the past and also to appreciate how immigrants resisted and survived those moments.

To paraphrase the journalist Shaun King who remarked that if you want to know what you would have done during the civil rights era, ask yourself what you did today to further civil rights. That goes for us as well. I do not have the answer as to what tactic is most effective, but a diversity of tactics is what we need right now: writing academic books and articles, publishing publicly oriented opinion pieces, organizing museum exhibits, creating online syllabi, helping immigration lawyers, donating to the ACLU, or joining your local Antifa group. What is not helpful or ethically acceptable is burying your head in the sand and hoping this moment of xenophobia and racism will pass.

MM: I agree with Elliott that this current moment makes it impossible for us to ignore how important it is to remind our students, legislators, and the public in general that history does not repeat itself but rather builds on what has happened before. What we are experiencing today is the product of previous legislative decisions, established racial scripts (as Natalia Molina calls them), and a long history of nativism and xenophobia in this country. One of the things that surprised me the most when I arrived in the United States for my PhD training, fresh out of college, was how marginal immigration history was in the narratives of U.S. history found in textbooks. In my naïveté, I assumed that the study of U.S.
immigration history and its integration into mainstream narratives of national histories would be central in a country that calls itself “a nation of immigrants.” At a time when Italy was becoming a receiving country, one of the questions that motivated me to come to the United States was this: how do national histories look different if seen through the history of immigration? The current historical moment only reinforces my belief that this shift in the master narrative is now an imperative.

The current situation also helps us see what is left to explore when it comes to our scholarship. Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has famously said that there is no “united league of the oppressed,” but I wonder if, when it comes to immigration, we simply should look more closely at when, how, and why intra-ethnic collaborations have or have not happened. How would this history help us understand the rewards and challenges of today’s resistance? Perhaps the most neglected aspect of these collaborations—one that has only recently attracted attention among scholars—is the one between immigration activists and African American civil rights activists. Lastly, following Kunal Parker’s suggestion in his Making Foreigners, we should pay more attention to how and why the distinction between citizens and immigrants has continued to harden, especially during the last century with the consolidation of a powerful centralized state and the transformation of the immigrant into a disabled legal subject.44

HD: I do not think that we are being present minded although we can certainly not blot out the current moment. We went into this field because it resonated with us intellectually, whether as scholars of American history who realized the centrality of immigration to shaping American history or as scholars of specific communities whose experiences cannot be disassociated from the larger immigration past. That we have something specific to say about the contemporary situation does not make us presentists, but rather this should be taken as a powerful example of how history matters.

JL: I agree. Immigration historians have an important opportunity to contribute to public debate and to help shape the direction of conversations about immigration and refugee policy. The challenge is translating our knowledge for a wider public, the one outside of our classrooms. Here, I do see some tensions between our roles as historians and as political actors. As a historian, I understand and accept complexities and contradictions. But in our current political climate, there is no space for complexities and contradictions. The messages—either pro or anti—have to be simple and direct. Take for example the arguments in support of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA): they are blameless, hard-working ideal citizens. They are kids brought to the United States when they were too young to have any choice, who have lived their whole lives in the United States, are as Americanized as any U.S.-born citizen, and by the way, are exceptional, 4.0+ GPA-earning, and Harvard-bound. Politically, this has been very persuasive and effective—it’s no longer the case. But I worry about what is lost in the name of political expediency. What about their parents? Mothers and fathers who work two, three jobs so that their kids can have these opportunities and achieve the American Dream? The political packaging of DACA for the public effectively made DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans) impossible, which is why DAPA has never gotten its foot off the ground, even under Obama. The same could be said about economic arguments in support of immigration. Trump has been calling for more focus on “merit based” immigration, emphasizing skills and employability over family connections or human rights.
To what extent do politically attractive arguments about the economic benefits of immigration dehumanize immigrants and potentially contribute to a much more restrictive and narrow list of immigration priorities?

Another political message or slogan that I’ve been grappling with as a historian is the “nation of immigrants” label that Maddalena just raised. Personally, I am drawn to the promise of unity and equal access to the American Dream that it seems to offer. My parents faced a lot of challenges as non-English speaking, working-class immigrants. It took them decades to feel at home in the United States, and they reminded me frequently during my childhood and youth that I was always Korean and would never be accepted as American. But I also know that they were and are very grateful that my sister and I grew up in the United States. As impoverished as they were back in Korea, there is no way that I would have ever had the opportunity to become a college professor there—let alone go to college in the first place, perhaps. As a historian, though, I also know that the label is loaded with misdirections and exclusions, erasing colonialism, the indigenous, slavery, and anti-immigrant state action. There was a fair amount of criticism when pro-immigrant advocates rallied behind the “nation of immigrants” slogan because of these reasons—and that criticism is spot-on. But again, we return to this tension between historical accuracy and political expediency. How to fairly balance the notions of American exceptionalism with the historical realities of colonial violence and state power behind the “nation of immigrants” identity? And then how to convey this in a neat, easily digestible package for the American public? At a time when the academic left is under scrutiny for being out of touch with political realities, I think this is one of the biggest challenges we face.

On a closing note, the current situation has helped me to appreciate even more deeply the historical relevance and significance of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. There are so many similarities between that period and ours—the extraordinary levels and diversity of immigration, globalization on a whole new scale, the surge in xenophobic nationalism. Almost 100 years after the 1924 Immigration Act, we seem to be on the verge of another extremely restrictionist period. And it is still fundamentally tied to ideas about ethnicity, race, religion, and class. Our current situation suggests (at least for me) the need to research and ask new questions about the 1910s and 1920s, in particular, and especially (as Maddalena has suggested) about the limitations and possibilities of collaboration and cooperation across ethnic and racial lines, and across the immigrant-citizen divide. There’s a lot more to be explored and said about the role of economics, radical politics, and national security concerns vis-à-vis immigration and the border during this earlier period that may help inform us better about the deep roots of the anti-immigrant sentiment today.

NOTES

1Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
3Ibid.


Howard Zinn, You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).


See https://oregonhumanities.org/programs/conversation-project/ for more information.

10See the Immigration Syllabus at http://editions.lib.umn.edu/immigrationsyllabus/.

11See the methodological discussion of counterfactual history in Manfred Berg, You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).


14See the Immigration Syllabus at http://editions.lib.umn.edu/immigrationsyllabus/.

15https://president.asu.edu/about/asucharter.


30 Katharine Donato and Donna Gabaccia, Gender and International Migration: From the Slavery Era to the Global Age (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015).

31 Ngui, Impossible Subjects, 6.

32 Lee, At America’s Gates.

33 http://editions.lib.umn.edu/immigrationsyllabus/.


36 See generally Subject and Policy Files, 1893–1957 (Entry 9), Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (RG 85), National Archives Building, Washington, DC.


Parker, *Making Foreigners*. 