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Stop Saying This Is a Nation of Immigrants!

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

A nation of immigrants: This is a convenient myth developed as a response to the 1960s movements against colonialism, neocolonialism, and white supremacy. The ruling class and its brain trust offered multiculturalism, diversity, and affirmative action in response to demands for decolonization, justice, reparations, social equality, an end of imperialism, and the rewriting of history — not to be “inclusive” — but to be accurate. What emerged to replace the liberal melting pot idea and the nationalist triumphal interpretation of the “greatest country on earth and in history,” was the “nation of immigrants” story.

By the 1980s, the “waves of immigrants” story even included the indigenous peoples who were so brutally displaced and murdered by settlers and armies, accepting the flawed “Bering Straits” theory of indigenous immigration some 12,000 years ago. Even at that time, the date was known to be wrong, there was evidence of indigenous presence in the Americas as far back as 50,000 years ago, and probably much longer, and entrance by many means across the Pacific and the Atlantic — perhaps, as Vine Deloria jr. put it, footsteps by indigenous Amer-

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icans to other continents will one day be acknowledged. But, the new official history texts claimed, the indigenous peoples were the “first immigrants.” They were followed, it was said, by immigrants from England and Africans, then by Irish, and then by Chinese, Eastern and Southern Europeans, Russians, Japanese, and Mexicans. There were some objections from African Americans to referring to enslaved Africans hauled across the ocean in chains as “immigrants,” but that has not deterred the “nation of immigrants” chorus.

Misrepresenting the process of European colonization of North America, making everyone an immigrant, serves to preserve the “official story” of a mostly benign and benevolent USA, and to mask the fact that the pre-US independence settlers, were, well, settlers, colonial settlers, just as they were in Africa and India, or the Spanish in Central and South America. The United States was founded as a settler state, and an imperialistic one from its inception (“manifest destiny,” of course). The settlers were English, Welsh, Scots, Scots-Irish, and German, not including the huge number of Africans who were not settlers. Another group of Europeans who arrived in the colonies also were not settlers or immigrants: the poor, indentured, convicted, criminalized, kidnapped from the working class (vagabonds and unemployed artificers), as Peter Linebaugh puts it, many of who opted to join indigenous communities.

Only beginning in the 1840s, with the influx of millions of Irish Catholics pushed out of Ireland by British policies, did what might be called “immigration” begin. The Irish were discriminated against cheap labor, not settlers. They were followed by the influx of other workers from Scandinavia, Eastern and Southern Europe, always more Irish, plus Chinese and Japanese, although Asian immigration was soon barred. Immigration laws were not even enacted until 1875 when the US Supreme Court declared the regulation of immigration a fed-

eral responsibility. The Immigration Service was established in 1891.

Buried beneath the tons of propaganda — from the landing of the English “pilgrims” (fanatic Protestant Christian evangelicals) to James Fennimore Cooper’s phenomenally popular “Last of the Mohicans” claiming “natural rights” to not only the indigenous peoples territories but also to the territories claimed by other European powers — is the fact that the founding of the United States was a division of the Anglo empire, with the US becoming a parallel empire to Great Britain. From day one, as was specified in the Northwest Ordinance that preceded the US Constitution, the new republic for empire (as Jefferson called the US) envisioned the future shape of what is now the lower 48 states of the US. They drew up rough maps, specifying the first territory to conquer as the “Northwest Territory,” ergo the title of the ordinance. That territory was the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes region, which was filled with indigenous farming communities.

Once the conquest of the “Northwest Territory” was accomplished through a combination of genocidal military campaigns and bringing in European settlers from the east, and the indigenous peoples moved south and north for protection into other indigenous territories, the republic for empire annexed Spanish Florida where runaway enslaved Africans and remnants of the indigenous communities that had escaped the Ohio carnage fought back during three major wars (Seminole wars) over two decades. In 1828, President Andrew Jackson¹ (who had been a general leading the Seminole wars) pushed through the Indian Removal Act to force all the agricultural indigenous nations of the Southeast, from Georgia to the Mississippi River, to transfer to Oklahoma territory that had been gained through the “Louisiana Purchase”² from France. An-

¹ www.ourdocuments.gov

² www.historycooperative.org

glo settlers with enslaved Africans seized the indigenous agricultural lands for plantation agriculture in the Southern region. Many moved on into the Mexican province of Texas — then came the US military invasion of Mexico in 1846, seizing Mexico City and forcing Mexico to give up its northern half through the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Texas were then opened to “legal” Anglo settlement, also legalizing those who had already settled illegally, and in Texas by force. The indigenous and the poor Mexican communities in the seized territory, such as the Apache, Navajo, and Comanche, resisted colonization, as they had resisted the Spanish empire, often by force of arms, for the next 40 years. The small class of Hispanic elites welcomed and collaborated with US occupation.

Are “immigrants” the appropriate designation for the indigenous peoples of North America? No.

Are “immigrants” the appropriate designation for enslaved Africans? No.

Are “immigrants” the appropriate designation for the original European settlers? No.

Are “immigrants” the appropriate designation for Mexicans who migrate for work to the United States? No. They are migrant workers crossing a border created by US military force. Many crossing that border now are also from Central America, from the small countries that were ravaged by US military intervention in the 1980s and who also have the right to make demands on the United States.

So, let’s stop saying “this is a nation of immigrants.”

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