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"YOU CANNOT SPILL A DROP OF AMERICAN BLOOD WITHOUT SPILLING THE BLOOD OF THE WHOLE WORLD.... OUR BLOOD IS AS THE FLOOD OF THE AMAZON, MADE UP OF A THOUSAND NOBLE CURRENTS, ALL POURING INTO ONE. WE ARE NOT A NATION, SO MUCH AS A WORLD." —HERMAN MELVILLE, *REDBURN: HIS FIRST VOYAGE*, 1849

BY VICKI GOLDBERG

The nineteenth century was consumed with a great urge to start over somewhere else—and that somewhere else was most often in America. From 1821 to 1924, when an American immigration act severely limited all immigration (especially from Asia), fifty-five million Europeans emigrated overseas; about thirty-three million of them came here (others came too, but not in numbers like these). Railroads and steamships having made travel easier, immigrants crossed the seas, built this country's railroads, and moved along the tracks to every corner of the land. Though people born here often felt their country was being overwhelmed by foreigners, the proportion of foreign-born people on this soil was quite stable, hovering between 13.2 percent and 14.7 percent every year between 1869 and 1920.[1]

During photography's early years, the camera recorded a lot of immigrant history without half trying. Up to the 1880s, while photographers created their trade and plied it, immigrants simply kept wandering into the frame. In avidly documenting the young republic, in diligently compiling archives—the century was awash with encyclopedic longings—in tracing the swift growth of urbanization and industrialization, photographers repeatedly, unavoidably, picked up the faces of new arrivals.

Immigrants were everywhere. In no time at all after arriving they were within camera view but not so easy to single out. Almost all of them were from northwestern Europe and Great Britain, as earlier immigrants had been, and those from urban centers already wore similar clothes. Immediately, and without even thinking about it, they set about fashioning the new nation. For half a century, photographers did not consider the new arrivals a cause. Illustrated newspapers published articles on immigration as early as the 1850s, but their engravings do not claim to be from photographs. Not till close to 1890, when the newcomers were a matter of national concern and photography an inseparable element of the news, did photographers put immigration itself into their programs as a separate and important subject. Until then, most photographs of immigrants were essentially incidental to other photographic categories.

Successful immigrants, for example, commissioned studio portraits from the beginning, just as everyone else did. Their money entitled them to the same kind of serious and respect-

David McNew, *U.S. Coast Guard man throws a blanket to Chinese boat people*, 1993. © 1995 David McNew. Checklist #200

Since the early 1990s, Chinese people without documents have attempted to reach the U.S. in aging and rusted, barely seaworthy ships. Their travel is organized by unscrupulous smuggling rings, which create exorbitant profits both by charging large sums for transportation, and by holding the passengers captive in "safe houses" in the United States until their families in China pay a ransom to release them. The immigrants then drift into the twilight world of exploitation in illegal sweatshops or subminimum-wage restaurant work. This ship was intercepted off the Mexican coast on its way to California. It was towed to Ensenada, Mexico. Its passengers were briefly held in Mexico and the majority were returned to China.

Andreas Larsen Dahl, *Rev. John A. Gilmore house and family, Dahl Ensemble, Dane County, Wisconsin*, 1874, printed later. Checklist #26

This proud and sober family poses at tea in front of their home. The Norwegian flag illustrates their continuing devotion to their country of origin.

ful images that long-time inhabitants took home (some immigrants set up their own studios to record their own kind). Or the newcomers commissioned pictures of themselves with their houses, their property, their businesses—status pictures, ownership pictures, we-made-it pictures, highly significant for a new nation that had already embraced work and success as national characteristics. Westering migrants and long-term inhabitants commissioned ownership pictures too; they were an integral part of the photographic record of American urban growth.[2]

Such property portraits from the Midwest and the West, often graced with fine land that had been wrested from native peoples, have the stiffness and charm of folk art. They were taken outdoors, probably at least as much for the light conditions as the view of the building and property. Though carefully staged, they evidently aim for the studied informality of a Gainsborough conversation piece. Often the families cart outside domestic exhibits of their success: a good chair, a tea table, a painting. A farm family in Nebraska displays their enterprise and culture: their mule, pigs, cows, farm implements—and their pump organ.

Surely some of these pictures traveled back to Europe to say the trip was worth it, life is good here, your new grandchildren are doing well, perhaps you should come too. . . . In this great era of travel, photographs became major links with people one might never see again, even a peculiar kind of substitute for family: pictures of immigrants must have been as important to those who stayed behind as to those who commissioned a record of what they had become.

Their foreign names indicate where immigrant store owners were from, but sometimes too the proprietors advertised their American-ness with a flag or a wealth of bunting. The immigrant automatically takes out a dual citizenship of the mind. Our own century is well supplied with photographs of Italian American, Cuban American

and other clubs that sport two flags side by side, as well as pictures of nation-day celebrations that insist on allegiance to this country, like the photograph of young Norwegian women in 1929 coquettishly wrapping themselves in the American flag. Immigrant ownership pictures today still feature retail stores, but now the pictures are usually taken indoors, where distinctive goods and decor make identifications that last names once supplied.

American dedication to work was immediately evident to nineteenth century observers—foreign commentators often remarked on it—and a country intent on defining itself naturally recorded its workers. The U.S. recruited labor from abroad to power its rapid industrialization: immigrants were essential to the definition of America as a mighty nation.[2]

Pictures of immigrants at work might amount to chattel records: from the seventeenth century on, men had come here as indentured workers who were little better off than slaves. A daguerreotype of a European apparently overseeing a group of Chinese miners might be such a story, told in the camera's noncommittal documentary tone.

The camera had other tones at its disposal, and labor had other conditions. Manual workers often look heroically confident—photography is good at admiration. In more ostensibly neutral images, laborers were lined up across the picture plane or arrayed in groups. Similar compositions turn up in industrializing countries around the world. No doubt the large group pictures were records of a businessman's success: my factory, my employees, and, on occasion, my strikebreakers. Once the twentieth century arrived, Lewis Hine and later photographers like Russell Lee and Gordon Parks would speak specifically to the multicultural composition of the labor pool, the ways that physical labor compels integration.

By the time Ellis Island opened in 1892 and Angel Island in 1910, primary immigration shifted, now coming principally from southeastern Europe. The number of arrivals swelled so precipitously that urban existence radically and visibly changed, and the camera moved in purposefully to record the shift. At just the right moment, photography and techniques of reproduction became capable of documenting the news for a mass audience with a compelling interest in the subject.

History had handed photography a new category: arrival pictures (departure pictures, taken at major ports across the Atlantic, had been popular among painters and photographers for some years. The painter Ford Maddox Brown, in *The Last of England* [1852–55], expressed the difficulty and melancholy of sailing out of one's homeland into the unknown). Photographs of people on boats and docks in American harbors were news; they fed curiosity and the need to understand momentous change. Photographs of medical and legal inspections at Ellis and Angel Islands early in the century might have been for government records (which would mean that almost no one saw them) or could have been journalistic assignments—it would be worth knowing if they were published, and in what context.

Unknown artist, *SE corner of Division & Noble, headquarters of the Kentucky Guards*, c. 1910s. Checklist #94

The patriotism of the newly-arrived is generally more enthusiastic than that of the second, third, or fourth generation citizen.

New immigrants, if visibly different either in costume or complexion, were tinged with an exoticism that made for saleable images. Genre pictures, coming from a long tradition in both painting and photography, combined the exotic and the winsome. Chinese vendors posed before painted, orientalizing backdrops; women in babushkas were properly shy and unassuming in the studio.

The Chinese obligingly looked distinctly different. From 1896 to 1906, Arnold Genthe photographed in San

This lovely, traditional western portrait motif was adopted by Chinese photographer Song. Thirty years earlier, identical poses were used by European photographers traveling in China.

Francisco's Chinatown, carefully removing any evidence of westerners or westernization from his frames. These pictures insisted on, even created, difference and separateness. Postcards of Chinese in traditional dress and guidebooks to New York's and San Francisco's Chinatowns also touted the lure of Asia to the tourist on his own home ground; someone could always find a way to make money off the Chinese.

Thus could immigrants be turned into objects by photographers and cameras, which defined them not merely as Other but as commodities, with limited control over their lives and none over their images. The Chinese had some control in the beginning. They first came here voluntarily in the California gold rush and staked out their own claims;[4] respectful early portraits, even daguerreotypes, exist and were probably commissioned by the sitters. But by the time Eadweard Muybridge, a British immigrant himself, took a picture of such a prospector, he was confident enough of his superior insider's position and of a widely intolerant audience to caption his photograph "the heathen Chinee" after a well-known poem by Stephen Crane.

Genthe was not much more respectful of the needs and desires of his Chinese subjects. Some covered their faces when they saw him, which he assumed was a superstitious reaction, so he cleverly concealed his camera. Maxine Hong Kingston says that, in fact, many were illegal immigrants, fearful of being identified and deported.[5]

Immigrants just off the boat, dressed in their very foreign best in hopes of passing inspection for the new land, were surveyed by Augustus Sherman, who worked as a clerk and inspector at Ellis Island beginning in 1892. An amateur, he took what amounted to genre pictures, rather like portraits of American Indians at the time.

The era's curiosity about "exotic" and disappearing cultures, spiked by photographs that fostered armchair tourism, made "native villages" at worlds' fairs highly popular. Photographs reinforced the nineteenth century colonial notion that people who were different enough were both quaint and inferior. Also, as the century progressed, anthropology was organized on a scientific basis, as were national and institutional record keeping; the camera played a major role in a kind of worldwide anthropological preservation project.

Sherman's pictures were not shown or published; today they and other pictures of arriving foreigners have a peculiar shine of ambivalence. No matter how particular the newcomers' dress and hair arrangements and, in some cases, race, their "exoticism" implies the potential of its own erasure. Racial differences are not, of course, readily eradicated, and there never was a melting pot. Some immigrants then and now clung to their separate traditions, but most came for a new life, and it was generally accepted then that assimilation was a prerequisite for success. Gradually, most new arrivals shed their distinguishing marks. It is hard to imagine

the splendid, warrior-like group of Ethiopians at Ellis Island still cloaked and carrying shields five years later.

Sometimes a photograph captures the moment of transition, another new subject: children at Ellis Island with American flags stuck in their hands; a group of Chinese boys at home, some wearing oriental robes, others western clothing. Sometimes the modern, western world asserts itself, as when contemporary Buddhist monks sit on the floor in a Bronx apartment with a telephone and electronic gadgets. Recent photography picks up on the countertrend, always present, now fervently embraced: the preservation of some elements and rituals of the past. The old and the new co-exist in the fluid balance, caught by the camera in the fleeting present: Japanese American children wear paper samurai helmets, nation-day parades temporarily restore native costumes no longer worn much even in the country where they originated.

Religions perform major preservative functions, ensuring continuities of belief, rites, the familiar language of chants, prayers, and stories, the trusted sameness of things: priestly garments, icons, aids to worship. Photographs of priests, rituals, and congregants emphasize both their strangeness and their spirituality, reminding wary viewers that the new immigrants are God-fearing people, at least in their own ways.

Departure, arrival and transition pictures are with us still. Departures have periodically become news again—at the borders of Rwanda and Zaire, on the beaches of Cuba. Arrival pictures, once brimful of the future (at least to the people in them) have now taken on an air of desperation, partly because so many immigrants are or claim to be refugees.

Haitians in tiny, makeshift boats and Mexicans running across highways may reach the other side without being killed, but what waits for them here might be only a blanket in a field, erratic and low-wage jobs, detention or deportation. In our image-conscious and cynical era, the post-arrival pictures of detention camps no longer dare the propaganda stickiness of Japanese American women happily stitching up American flags in World War II internment camps. Today, the images tend to be sulky and rough and redolent of empty days.

Mel Rosenthal, A Buddhist Monastery, Marion Avenue, the Bronx, September, 1985. © 1995 Mel Rosenthal. Checklist #139

This area of the Bronx is a relocation center for Vietnamese people. There are now more than 8,000 Vietnamese in the neighborhood. By 1985, when this photograph was taken, there were 643,000 Vietnamese people residing in the U.S.

All immigrants lose some of their original and distinctive characteristics in their frictive contact with their new country. All assimilate to a degree and, regardless of their capacity for change, none can do so absolutely. The change process is slow as customs, appearance, traditions, accents, and occupations all adapt to the here-and-now. A prayer service on the floor of a Bronx apartment can be like—but not exactly like—a similar practice in Vietnam.

Walter Michot, *Cuban refugees on open sea*, 1994. © 1994 Walter Michot, *The Miami Herald*. Checklist #202

Cuban refugees to the United States in 1994 traveled on virtually anything that floated. The ninety mile journey through often very rough water is potentially deadly, but hundreds of such rafts made the crossing. They were regularly intercepted by coast guard vessels and taken to processing centers in Guantanamo Bay on the island of Cuba.

If arrival and transition photographs were by-products of immigration, immigrants were crucial to two other new photographic subjects: poverty and social reform. Until the social reform movement gathered strength in the later nineteenth century, Americans were not prepared to see the poor depicted realistically (rather than charmingly, picturesquely) and to be concerned about their plight. Probably the first to think of documenting immigrant life and experience as independent subjects was Jacob Riis, an immigrant himself, who limned the conditions in New York tenements beginning in 1887 and encountered immigrants everywhere he looked. Lewis Hine's view was more longitudinal and historical: he began photographing at Ellis Island in 1904 at the outset of a career of social concern. Later, he followed some of the new arrivals into their jobs and homes in pursuit of an overall picture of American life and labor.

Around the turn of the century, photographers recording the social reform movement duly noted efforts to assist the new immigrants and turn them into good Americans. Religious institutions mobilized to bring the newcomers into the fold: volunteers handed out Bibles at Ellis Island. Christian societies founded orphanages, took in rescued slave girls, organized classes and orchestras, groups and Sunday schools.

The photographic records of social workers and reformers teaching foreigners how to care for their babies, speak English and learn other skills for their new lives clearly were not made for the immigrants themselves. They look rather like newsworthy propaganda for the societies whose good—and sometime vital—works they advertise. A smartly dressed New York woman counsels a poor immigrant mother, and citizens who conform in every detail of outward appearance shepherd flocks of children or adults who have not yet learned to (or wished to, or been able to) look "American."

Because immigration into this nation of immigrants has been so controversial, photographers focusing on the newly arrived have always been in a delicate position; their intentions and stance might make a difference in public opinion. For most of the nineteenth century, when photography did not engage in many polemical crusades, virulent anti-immigrant feelings were more likely to be expressed by cartoonists. When Riis set out to correct hideous living conditions, he had a stake in picturing impoverished immigrants as baldly as possible, whereas Hine was predisposed to portray the newcomers sympathetically (the popularity of his pictures of Madonna-like mothers and children and lovely, vulnerable young women has probably exaggerated the common notion of how

many women came to America when immigration was still predominantly male).

The outpouring of photographs on the subject today, encouraged by the most image-dependent communications era in history, reflects acrimonious debates about borders, employment, and identity. Enormous increases in migrations the world over have prompted unease everywhere, and economic troubles in this country have always fed anti-immigrant sentiment. The photographic response ranges across the documentary spectrum. Few photographers would profess to be anti-immigrant, but hard-hitting photojournalistic traditions encourage scathing pictures of overcrowding, wretchedness, violence. Some of the tougher photographs are meant to elicit concern, though the eye of certain beholders will not read them that way. Some are arguably images of success—people who live in good-enough housing, wear intact clothing, and are probably better off than they were before coming to America—but they generate an atmosphere of sullenness and hostility that amounts to a threat.

Many of the subjects are still exotic, some now willfully so, exalting their differences. Many of the images are apostles of good will, presenting likeable, cheerful people in family units, workers, strivers, dreamers, as if to say: this is the new America; this is a good place to be.

Immigrants' public images have been largely in someone else's hands, and for the most part still are. Journalistic and documentary photographs are generally taken by people with more access to the media than their subjects have. Illegal crossings, rescue at sea, detention are not moments proudly recorded for one's grandchildren, and even people in gentler circumstances are still strangers viewed from the outside with an agenda that might not match their own. But immigrants with only a little money can afford a camera, and they too have the common, modern desire to record their families and rites of passage. An exhibition of their family albums would doubtless tell us something these photographs do not.

Ironically, photography has unwittingly played a larger role in immigration than all its programs of documenting, commodifying and pleading the cause of the new arrivals ever accomplished: it has helped to swell the tide of immigrants. Still photography and its derivative movie and video forms have doubtless pulled people to these shores. In the last century, photographs of successful immigrants mailed back home probably encouraged others to follow. But in the twentieth century, widely distributed American movies, then television and satellite relay, spread across the globe the image of American economic success and abundant consumer goods, honing the dissatisfactions of upwardly mobile people everywhere, presenting them with images of an American candy store of opportunities.

From the lowest classes to professional doctors and lawyers, people in many lands look at our photo-essays, feature films and commercials, our soaps and our sitcoms, and see representations of better lives than they can make at home. Images lodge in their minds like promises, and thousands upon thousands, instructed by the camera, pack their belongings, kiss their relatives goodbye, and cross oceans, borders and barricades to put themselves into the American picture. ◄

1 Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 23, 25.

2 Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), pp. 25–26.

3 On labor, see Richard Rudisill, *Mirror Image: The Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), Chapter 1. On the need for laborers, see Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 13.

4 Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 36.

5 Maxine Hong Kingston, *American Heritage*, December, 1978.