CARL J. BON TEMPO
HASIA R. DINER

Immigration

An American History

immigration

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For our parents:
Carl P. Bon Tempo, Eileen S. Bon Tempo,
Esther Kite, and Moshe Schwartzman

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My heart is filled with optimism
My dreams are so close to coming true
But the same cannot be said for others.

—Kaela Aalto, "Eyes of an Immigrant"

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Acknowledgments

Kaela Aalto, now an undergraduate student at New York University, visited Ellis Island as a youngster in the fifth grade. Inspired by the lesson she received at that historic place, she turned to poetry to reflect on what she had seen. A few of her amazing words, preserved on an internet site, serve as the epigraph for this book. Her verse testifies to the fact that history does matter and that right now, in these tumultuous times, the history of immigration in particular has much to say to the American public. Our thanks to Ms. Aalto for permitting us to use her poetry to open this book.

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Introduction
Immigration: An American History

A young man with few skills, fewer resources, and no real prospects at home, John W. Nordstrom left his hardscrabble farm in Alvik Neder Lulea in northern Sweden in 1887. He headed to the United States. After some early struggles, he and a friend from back home decided to take laborers' jobs in an iron mine in Stambaugh, Michigan. "We knew we could get jobs there," he recalled. "They always needed men," he remembered, and "greenhorns like us were the only ones" the mine operators "could get," as "no American would work there."[1] Nordstrom eventually found his way to Seattle, Washington, where he opened a successful shoe store. He and his heirs turned that enterprise into a high-end department store, Nordstrom, a staple of large shopping malls in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Achut Deng, at first glance, shared little with John Nordstrom. Born in Southern Sudan in the 1980s and orphaned at age six during a civil war, she fled to refugee camps in Kenya and then Ethiopia. In 2000 a U.S. government program for Sudanese orphan refugees brought her to America. She went to college and ended up in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, working at a massive Smithfield pork processing plant. She started on the processing line, using a knife to cut fat from the hanging carcasses, and advanced to shift manager, a less physically taxing and more lucrative position. Eventually earning over eighteen dollars an hour, plus overtime, she gave her three boys

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a life she could only have dreamt of as a child. "It's not a perfect world. I'd make it perfect for them," she noted as she reflected on her efforts with pride and satisfaction. But then, in the spring of 2020, her workplace experienced a massive outbreak of coronavirus, which exposed Deng and so many others to the lethal virus. She got sick and the plant shut for weeks. When it reopened, Deng returned to work. She needed the money, but all the while she worried about her health, her finances, and the future. "I cannot afford to stay home for a long time."[2]

Nordstrom and Deng, two different people from different parts of the globe at different times and facing different challenges, both came to the United States to craft better futures for themselves. For them, and the tens of millions of others whose stories unfold in these pages, the United States represented a new start. Many came with dreams of economic security, hoping to match their industriousness to economic opportunities in the United States. Others came to escape religious or political persecution and aimed to enjoy privileges that the United States offered. For still others, the aftershocks of natural disasters played decisive roles in pushing them outward. Finally, many newcomers came to reunite with family members who had preceded them to the United States.

The chance that Nordstrom or Deng or any of the others could in fact accomplish their migration goals depended on their ability to navigate multiple, intersecting dynamics both in the places they sought to leave and in the place they hoped to enter, the United States. Governments, motivated by a mix of popular cultural and social attitudes, economic imperatives, and foreign policy concerns, could make it easier or harder for immigrants to leave or enter. Immigrants called on the latest in communications technologies to learn of opportunities in the United States and to arrange their travels and resettlement plans. They also depended on transportation networks at both ends of their journeys to ease their passage across borders and facilitate their resettlement.

Whether in the mid-nineteenth century, when John Nordstrom grabbed a shovel in Michigan, or the early twenty-first, when Achut Deng picked up her meat cleaver in the pork plant in South Dakota, and indeed in centuries earlier, immigrants stoked the material, physical, social, and cultural development of the United States. The

vast growth of the American economy depended on the willingness of individuals to leave their homes elsewhere and exchange their physical strength and mental acuity for pay. The kinds of work they performed changed, but the recognition that without them the work could not get done persisted. Away from their jobs, in their communities every day, those same immigrants brought much to America's social fabric, both reinforcing and reinventing it.

Yet at the same time, Americans consistently articulated deep fears that every new contingent of immigrants threatened the United States. Such arguments might seem inconsistent with historic realities, but at each moment in time, some Americans expressed the opinion, stating it as fact, that newcomers took work away from Americans by selling their labor for low rates of pay. They likewise, throughout this long history, deemed all or some immigrants to be less desirable, more dangerous, and more markedly defective than the ones who came before. At various times Americans feared and reviled the political beliefs, religious practices, and physical appearances of the newcomers. Some Americans abhorred immigrants as speakers of languages other than English, as bearers of cultures that seemed to jar with American ways of living, and as women and men still tied to their faraway communities.

And yet, women and men from around the world voted for America with their feet. If they could make their way to America, they did.