

Transcript of
[“How Immigrants Shape\(d\) the United States,”](#)
TEDxPSU talk by Dr. Nalini Krishnankutty, Feb 7, 2018.

What words come to your mind when you see or hear the word Immigrant?

When I ask this question in my workshops on Immigrant History and contributions, the answers are always revealing.

Illegal is a common response, as are refugee, foreign, poor, and desperate. Sometimes, someone will say family, community, freedom, borders or even languages.

But the answers are mostly negative.

And this negativity, it's not unique to the United States.

The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford studied the coverage of immigrants in the British press.

From 2006–2015, they found that illegal was the most common word used to describe immigrants.

It's really notable that there are no words like smart, creative, pioneering, enterprising, brave - words that could be used to describe Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, who was the first female doctor in the United States, or environmentalist, John Muir, whose ideas helped create our National Parks, or composer Irving Berlin, who wrote “God Bless America.”

Elizabeth Blackwell came from England, John Muir from Scotland, and Irving Berlin came from Russia.

They all came as children, when it was impossible to know their skill or their potential, and yet, they did go ahead and shape the United States of America.

Now these same positive words could be used to describe first-generation immigrants today.

Immigrants like Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, who came from Russia at the age of six, at the height of the Cold War, when we distrusted anything Russian,

Or Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo, who came from Taiwan at the age of 10; the only English word he knew when he came here was the word “shoe,”

Or Elon Musk, founder of SpaceX, co-founder of X.com which became PayPal, CEO of Tesla, associated with so many other ventures - he came from South Africa, via Canada to the United States as an undergraduate student.

Now these visionary immigrants, they used their abilities and the opportunities they had here to create companies that shaped not just the United States, but the whole world.

Now we call ourselves a Land of Immigrants.

Native Americans came here tens of thousands of years ago.

In the 1500s, there were first the French and the Spanish, followed by the British, the Scots, the Dutch, the Germans, and then people from many other countries.

Most Europeans came here as free people, but some were indentured servants.

For centuries, we also bought and transported Africans to the United States as slaves – they surely did not have any choice.

And when the United States annexed the northern part of Mexico after the US-Mexico war, the people who lived in lands that later became California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado and Nevada – they became Americans, not by crossing the border, but because the border crossed them.

All these people and their descendants, they did shape the United States. But as they did that, they took land away from the original inhabitants, the Native Americans, caused their numbers to shrink, and they did change their way of life forever.

Today, a million people come to the United States legally every year. Immigrants are 14% of the population, which amounts to about 43 million people.

We still are a Land of Immigrants, yet we do treat immigrants as the other.

Now, I myself, came to the United States as a chemical engineering graduate student. International students like me are recruited even today to fill the extreme shortage of American students in STEM fields.

For the most part, I have had really positive experiences. Yet, like many immigrants, I have had experiences that remind me of my *otherness*.

I have seen the hatred towards immigrants escalate steadily after 9/11, and that drumbeat increasing in peak and intensity over the last few years.

Many immigrants face taunts of “go back home,” some are attacked and some have even been killed. Immigrants are

detained, deported, denied entrance, even as discussions of immigration reform have been filling our news media.

Now these reactions towards immigrants, they are so visceral, as if people don't know our history of immigration or the contributions of immigrants.

Why this negativity? Are we just a generation of haters?

Now if we look at history, we find that this tussle of hating immigrants, but still wanting them to be here, because we need them – this is not new, it is in fact something as American as apple pie.

In 1751, inventor and later founding father, Ben Franklin, did not want the Germans coming to the English colony of PA.

He said the most stupid sort of people were migrating to this country.

But, he said, the Germans do have some virtues - they are hard workers, they are frugal, they are good farmers - we do need them to grow the country

Ben Franklin also worried about the swarthy complexion of the Germans, the Swedes, the Italians, the French, the Russians. He said they would just make the country less white; they were not as white as the Anglo Saxons.

Ben Franklin also worried that Germans would come in such large numbers, they would “germanize” the country instead of getting “anglicized” themselves.

Now, did Ben Franklin's fears come true?

Well, the first kindergarten was started in 1856 by a German immigrant – a first-generation German immigrant.

German immigrants championed universal education, and they shaped the public school system that we have today.

German immigrants gave us the Christmas tree, they gave us Santa Claus, and they also gave us the Easter bunny.

How about jeans? It was a first-generation German immigrant, Levi Strauss along with an immigrant from Latvia, Jacob Davis, who created these jeans, for miners, during the Gold rush.

And how about Coors, Pabst, Miller, Anheuser Busch? All these companies were started by first-generation German immigrants, not their descendants, but people who had come from Germany, and then started all these enterprises that live here today.

German immigrants were also the ones who thought that the weekend should be for recreation, not just for rest and relaxation. And in fact, one of the caricatures that people had was about Germans drinking beer on weekends.

Now Ben Franklin – and to be fair to him, a lot of people held his views – his fears did come true.

But for many of us today, we feel that the German experience is really now the American experience – they are virtually indistinguishable.

How did other groups fare? The Irish, when they came, were disliked for being poor and Catholic, and people worried that the Pope would soon be influencing the United States.

The Irish have the distinction that the first anti-immigrant party was formed to get rid of them.

The American Party, or the “Know-Nothing Party” was formed on an anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic platform. They elected governors, had hundreds of legislative seats, ran a presidential candidate and also managed to deport hundreds of Irishmen from the country.

Now the Irish and the Germans, they did gain acceptance as Americans, when people began to arrive from Central, Southern and Eastern Europe. And horror of horrors, when Asians began to arrive, from China and India.

Now the Chinese, they first came here during the Gold Rush, but later agents went all the way to China to recruit them for projects like the Transcontinental Railroad and other work.

Asians faced intense hatred – they were attacked, murdered – arson, lynching, and mass evacuations were all things they experienced.

As the diversity of immigrants grew, and percentages went very high to about 15%, xenophobia in the country peaked.

Hatred became the new normal and our laws were changed to reflect this.

The Chinese exclusion act in 1882, it did not allow Chinese laborers to enter the country for the next ten years

More Alien Labor laws were passed, followed by a literacy test for any immigrants over 16.

Finally, in 1924, a law was passed which really focused on national quotas to increase immigration from western Europe. All immigration from Asia was banned.

The period after this, the country did experience quite a bit of labor shortages and one way that we worked around it was to have a guest worker program with Mexico, where we intermittently got workers from Mexico.

It took forty years to correct this discrimination based on national origins, but in 1965, we did pass the Immigration Act where people from all countries could come in, based on skill or on family reunification. One thing that was discontinued at that time was the guest worker program we had with Mexico.

So now the doors are open. Immigrants are back in.

And today we are back to the 14 %, that very high number, which is very similar to the percentages we had in the 1890s, when xenophobia had peaked.

So, hatred is back in the United States.

The issues are the same that people can't handle the diversity of immigrants.

The issues are also same that we still do need immigrants, but the players are different.

In 1890, immigrants mainly came from Europe, and the five countries that they came mostly from were Germany, Ireland, England, and Canada and Sweden.

Today, we have immigrants mainly from Latin America and Asia, and immigrants come in from Mexico, China, India,

Phillipines, and Vietnam – these are the top five countries that they are coming from.

So, we do have all that hatred today, but immigration still remains a two-way street – we need the immigrants and immigrants need us.

So what do we do now? We do have a choice.

Are we going to be the first generation that is going to break this continuum of hate towards immigrants, that has lasted since the colonies?

Are we going to be the generation that accepts immigrants, not just tolerates them, because they have certain skills or because they are going to revitalize our towns or you know, or replace our aging work force?

Are we going to be the generation that stops shutting people out because they are poor or they are stupid or they are just from the wrong countries?

Well, if we had done that in the past, we might have missed out Andrew Carnegie, who was just a poor kid from Scotland

We might have missed out on Nikola Tesla, who came from Serbia.

We might have missed out on Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who was a refugee from Czechoslovakia, or singer Gloria Estefan, who was a refugee from Cuba.

Not to mention - we might have missed out on a whole bunch of Nobel Laureates - a large percentage of them are born abroad.

We also might have missed out on All-American experiences of Baseball, beer, and hotdogs, all of which were created by first-generation immigrants - going to Zumba, listening to hip hop, eating Chobani Yogurt, or Kraft Cheese, shopping at TJ Maxx or Kohls, Forever21 or Nautica, going to Panda Express or Sweet Frog – the list goes on and on and on.

Now, let me ask you that same question again.

What words come to your mind now when you see or hear the word immigrant?

When I ask this question at the end of my workshops on Immigration history and contributions, the answers are again revealing:

Smart, creative, pioneering, risk-takers, recruited, Nobel Laureates, professors, students, teachers, farmers, construction workers, taxi drivers – the words are many, revealing both the complexity of immigration and the multi-faceted humanity of immigrants.

Now the attendees at the workshops are beginning to see immigrants with fresh eyes, admiring both their resilience and their contribution to the American experience.

We, all of us, will need those fresh eyes in the days ahead, to ensure that hatred is not the new normal again in the United States of America.

We will also need those fresh eyes again, as individuals in all our communities, to accept immigrants, truly embrace them, and welcome them, no matter which country they come from, to this Land of Immigrants, the United States of America.