

# **The New Immigration and American Arts Policy: Stating a Case for a Research Agenda**

by Dr. Clement Price

Immigration has long stirred America's imagination of its past and of the enduring value of the Republic to the world's oppressed masses. No other society, we have believed, has been more hospitable to foreigners than ours. The historical settlement of newcomers brings to mind poignant narratives of journeys from desperate places to the Golden Door of modern American society. What is remembered about immigration is influenced in part by the spectacular vista of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island and the photographic images of seemingly roughly hewn people memorialized in Emma Lazarus' famous poem. All the more, our sense of what it is like to be an immigrant, and what immigration has done to the nation, is influenced by the stories of the first steps taken here by forebears from European places that still seem distant.

It is understandable that so many of our fellow citizens often think of America's acceptance of immigrants as a good thing. In the years that followed the Civil War, immigration marked the beginning of modern America, the making of a far more diverse society and the institutionalization of an ethos of tolerance. And the place through which most of the immigrants passed as they entered the United States, New York Harbor, was in a sense an intersection of public art and bureaucracy—the symbolism embodied in the Statue of Liberty, one of the nation's most famous artistic icons, and Ellis Island where thousands were processed into a society prepared to receive them.

Those who have studied the rise of modern American culture have generally accepted the popular premise that the nation's reception of immigrants was benign and at times forward thinking. Not only did the immigrants at the turn of the last century bring a willingness to work hard, they also brought talent and a zeal for creativity. The immigrants and the children of immigrants helped tilt the nation's culture away from the past, toward the future.

But if the sentimental view of immigration and immigrants has credible elements—the most important of which was the upward trajectory of the second and

third generation of immigrant parents—it is still uncertain if contemporary immigrant narrative has much in common with what came before.

The 2000 Federal Census revealed that the United States is once again changing dramatically as a result of immigration, a stunning influx of new settlers that rivals what Americans witnessed more than a century ago. Today 30.5 million immigrants live in the United States, which represents more than three times the number recorded as recently as 1970, and twice the level of the 1930s. As impressive as the numbers are, the suddenness of the arrival of the newest immigrants is more so. Forty-four percent of the new immigrants arrived during the 1990s. Unlike the early modern immigration pattern that disproportionately affected America's industrial regions in the Northeast and Midwest, as well as California, the contemporary wave of immigrants marks a truly national phenomenon. Its impact is felt in states like North Dakota, Nebraska, and Florida, as well as in the traditional havens for immigrants—New York, New Jersey and California. Cities once thought to be without much appeal have begun to rebound, at least in population, due to immigration. As the Brookings Institution has shown, immigration is responsible for the 20 fastest growing cities in the nation.

Latin America disproportionately contributes to the new American immigrant stream. In 1980, the Hispanic population in the United States was around 3.5%; in the 2000 Census it rose to over 12%, with Hispanics becoming the nation's largest minority group.

Immigration is, of course, a prelude to profound changes in cultural sensibilities and in matters related to political and economic power and authority. That makes immigration an important issue for arts professionals and policy makers. Consider, for example, that America is becoming not only more diverse, but less "white." The great steps forward in arts development in the United States were made in the early twentieth century, when major arts organizations were started, in part, to establish a credible arts infrastructure in an industrial nation and also to help assimilate the immigrant stock. Those immigrants were disproportionately European, and they were ultimately headed toward the privileges of whiteness. The newest immigrants, by contrast, are predominantly of color.

Generally, the new immigration has fostered considerable debate on the future of American politics, ethnic relations, and, since 9/11, national security. Comparatively less discussion and research has focused on how immigration will influence the creative sector and the proper role of the creative sector in shaping an array of issues related to immigration, cultural memory and diversity, and the existing arts and cultural hierarchy. How will arts institutions engage these new settlers? Will the new immigrants and their progeny follow in the path of earlier immigrants, those who over time sought and achieved assimilation? Will popular culture, which has emerged as the most accessible way for new immigrants to meld themselves, at least in their imagination, into elements of American life, endanger other forms of cultural expression? Or, in other words, will traditional art forms and traditional presentations of creativity matter in a society that is settled so heavily by non-European immigrants. Will new immigrants, especially as their numbers take them beyond minority status; agree to support through tax levy and patronage the current cultural hierarchy in the United States, which favors art forms and demographic clusters that are no longer dominant? And how will arts and cultural organizations, many of which came into being under old notions of race and the traditional white over black political and social paradigm, navigate through the new realities of American demography.

I propose that the cultural community take up the challenge imposed on it by the dramatic changes in American immigration since 1965 and develop a research agenda on the new immigration and United States arts policy.

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