



Hans Baluschek, *The Emigrants* [*Die Auswandernden*], 1924. Oil on canvas, 59.25 x 47.25 in. (150.5 x 120 cm). Märkisches Museum Berlin (Germany). Hans Baluschek, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

## Migration and Identity: On Experiences of Loss, Silencing, and the Re-Creation of Self

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Migrations are a legacy of living in human communities. Historically, humans migrated not only in search of new resources or as a flight from challenging circumstances but also in benign pursuits of cultural and communal interchanges to establish new religious, trade, or marital

bonds.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, from antiquity to today humans have also migrated in search of new adventures or wanderlust. However, the development of such a concept as the nation-state, with its stress on militarized borders and strict adherence to national identity, typically expressed as loyalty to a national ruling force, led to marking migration as a negotiation of the difficult choice between maintaining one's national identity status or breaking those cultural bonds by crossing distinct borders that marked a new national identity.<sup>2</sup> In addition, certain groups (e.g., Jews) began to be viewed as perpetually foreign despite their native-born status, denoting their ethnically, religiously, and culturally marginalized status within these newly unified nation-states.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the decision to relocate has often been precipitated by significant needs such as self- and family-protection in times of war or other social crises as well as by pursuits of religious freedom or economic necessities.<sup>4</sup> In turn, the newcomers and the outsiders have often been feared as capable of draining or destroying local resources even in circumstances when newly arriving persons have special skills or unique stories.<sup>5</sup> Xenophobia, ethnocentrism, nativism, and other forms of fear and hatred of the foreigner have become a legacy of modern history.<sup>6</sup>

In modern Western history, xenophobic or anti-immigrant attitudes have been deeply embedded within the cultural structure that extended prejudicial and hostile treatment to all individuals and communities perceived as Others. This hostility has been justified and authorized by religious, civic, and scientific powers.<sup>7</sup> During the Inquisition and the witch-hunting eras, which spanned European history from the early modern through Enlightenment periods, Jews, Muslims, and others who were perceived as foreign were often proclaimed to be demonic and dangerous to Christian European communities.<sup>8</sup> Enslavement and indentured servitude of foreigners further reflected violently enforced migrations of peoples colonized by Western nations.<sup>9</sup> The post-Enlightenment scientific projects of social Darwinism and eugenics ensured that all but a few Nordic-Aryan immigrant groups were perceived as threatening not just to host communities but to human evolution itself.<sup>10</sup> Eugenic scientists, many of them British and American, claimed to have empirical proof that immigrants from non-Nordic nations lack supposed superior Nordic characteristics, including not only being diseased and criminal but also too artistic rather than efficient or hard laboring. For example, in a highly popular book entitled *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, famed US eugenic leader and scientist Charles Davenport stated that immigrants were dangerous because

the recent influx of immigrants from Southeastern Europe, rapidly become darker in pigmentation, smaller in stature, more mercurial, more attached to music and art, [are] more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sex-immorality. . . than were the original English settlers.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, summarizing the results of the first large-scale study of intelligence among nearly two million military recruits, which was carried out by many of the leading American psychologists of the early twentieth century (e.g., Thorndike, Terman, Watson, Brigham, and others), Robert Yerkes, a Harvard psychologist, rebuked his American readers, "to consider [the study results'] reliability and their meaning" in order to address "the menace of race deterioration or the evident relations of immigration to national progress and welfare."<sup>12</sup> In

this empirical report on national intelligence, the vast majority of recent immigrants were supposedly proven to have the lowest levels of intelligence, and their ingress was viewed as detrimental to “a continually progressive upward evolution” of the American nation.<sup>13</sup> In this and many other eugenics-based publications, these scientists, cultural leaders, and politicians called not only for closure of the borders to do all but select Nordic individuals, but also for segregation, sterilization, and refusal of social services to newcomers.<sup>14</sup> This eugenic scientific rhetoric was and still remains at the heart of numerous legal or cultural policies toward immigrants.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while the circumstances and processes of migration are stressful and complicated for individuals under the best of conditions, the impact of demonization, hostility, Othering, fear, and problematic projections remains a significant backdrop for ways in which migrating individuals adapt their identities and experience their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these deterrents, numerous significant and often catastrophic circumstances at home (e.g., wars, genocides, famines, persecutions, prejudice, poverty), as well as the allure of hope for a new and better life elsewhere, continue to pull individuals and communities across borders. In most cases, the choice to migrate, even under the worst of conditions, is typically experienced as an individual decision, as the outflow of supposedly autonomous agency and will. Thus, migration has profound implications for individual identity because, regardless of the unbearable social forces behind such decisions to relocate, human beings also must integrate such experiences within a context of their personal life narratives.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, after relocating, individuals face profound identity transitions, which stem from significant alterations of their personal, familial, social, cultural, religious, political, and even kinesthetic-sensory ways of being.<sup>18</sup> The circumstances of migration (e.g., experiencing genocide, being undocumented, business arrangements, etc.) and the attitudinal milieu of the receiving culture (e.g., populism/nativism, xenophobia, racism, etc.) add substantial further impact on such identity shifts.<sup>19</sup>

Identity is most typically associated with individual self-concept, and a sense of self.<sup>20</sup> One of the early American psychologists who wrote about identity was William James, who noted that “a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works. . . . If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant, if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down.”<sup>21</sup> Daphna Oyserman, reviewing literature on the subject, stressed that coherent identity and self-conception are crucial to human beings, especially because it is “the tool we use to make sense of experiences,” “an organizer of experiences,” “an emotional buffer,” and “a motivational resource.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, threats to identity or significant shifts in how individuals experience their sense of self impact the ways in which human beings function as well as interact with the world and with others.

Numerous related *identity*-based psychological and sociological constructs have also been used in scholarly and popular literature, including ego identity, work identity, gender identity, ethnic identity, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, identity and self-concept are among the constructs believed to be largely shaped by cultural worldviews and beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, although Western industrialized nations stress individualism, independence, competition, and personal success as defining features of positive identity and self-conception, a majority of other cultures as well as Western subcultures (e.g., women, native-born racial minorities) may

embrace self-identity as grounded in collectivism, interdependence, relational care, and mutuality.<sup>25</sup>

Immigrant identity has also been a topic of scholarly interest, with an emphasis on the vicissitudes of migration and cultural reception.<sup>26</sup> Massey & and Sánchez, in a study with recent Latin American immigrants and subsequent generations, found that in a context of anti-immigrant cultural milieu, pressure on immigrants to assimilate and acculturate toward a US-centric, exclusively Western identity may in fact result in a “negative process” that includes forming a “reactive identity that explicitly rejects self-identification as ‘American.’”<sup>27</sup> In the case of Latin American immigration, just as in the case of migration for most individuals across the globe, identity differences not only rest on national-cultural self-identification (i.e., Mexican, Ukrainian, etc.) but encompass multiple other forms of self-identification (e.g., gender, sexuality, social class, caste, ability, religion, etc.). Although native-born individuals also possess a multiplicity of varied individual and social aspects that comprise their identity, immigrants are likely to be shaped by identity self-perceptions that may be radically different even for shared characteristics (e.g., gender). For example, in a study described below, Turkish professional immigrant women held significantly distinctive and dissimilar gender self-views from those of native-born Americans.<sup>28</sup> To illustrate, in contrast to the US, where women often hold a slightly more equal position in the private sphere than women in many other cultures, American women are nonetheless known to experience significantly more gender discrimination and marginalization in the workplace.<sup>29</sup> Notably, UNESCO global data on women in sciences and research development continually show that in many Western industrialized nations, including the US, women lag far behind their female counterparts around the world: in 2019, countries where women occupy nearly 40 percent or more of the professional scientific positions were primarily located in Eastern and Central Europe, South America, and some parts of the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the intersection of these varied forms of identity is frequently noted as one of the most complicated human factors, often stressing conflicts or compounded expectations arising from holding varied social identities.<sup>31</sup> Social identity theory and self-categorization theory further elucidate how individuals function within groups and communities, with special focus on how individual and social (or group) identities are managed, shaped, and at times manipulated by external factors.<sup>32</sup>

Scholarly models of immigrant identity development following migration have tended to focus on individual immigrant assimilation or lack thereof into the host culture.<sup>33</sup> These models are often static: immediately following migration and over time, individual immigrants supposedly become either entirely integrated with or acculturated to their new society, or become bicultural (i.e., belonging to both their own and the host culture), or they elect to maintain a “marginalized” identity by remaining committed only to their own home culture.<sup>34</sup> In contemporary cultural-political rhetoric, discussions of these varied forms of acculturation models frequently stress the importance of immigrants’ willingness to reject their prior cultural identity toward assimilation with the host culture or else be perceived as a hostile cultural threat to the host community.<sup>35</sup>

Postcolonial and critical theory scholars have added other dimensions to discussing frameworks of individual and social identity that arise within the context of historic and social inequalities that frequently underlie the processes of migration. Bhabha’s work with

postcolonial theory stressed the creation of in-between spaces, the hyphenated spaces, and more fluid movement of identity among individuals who must fit within multiple and often opposing social structures (e.g., become successful citizens yet maintain nonthreatening secondary status).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, central to Bhabha's theory is the notion that cultural histories, often reflecting colonial, imperialist, or other problematic global imbalances, continue to live on and influence individuals in both dominant and nondominant cultural positions, including native-born and immigrant populations. Among key influences within these colonial histories, Bhabha noted, are ways in which cultural signifiers of authority (e.g., language, practices) also define and impose identity on marginalized others. Thus, an immigrant must fit into particular social-cultural constructs of behavior, feeling, and physical presence in order not to be perceived and treated as a threat.

Examples of threat concepts applied to immigrants and migration are common in language and imagery.<sup>37</sup> In the US, immigration has often been referred to as a tide and a wave, evoking reminiscences of unstoppable dangerous oceanic movements, which could only be controlled by sea walls.<sup>38</sup> Ahmed discussed the hostile imagery of the immigrant as an "alien"—a slimy green intruder, who is inhuman, inhumane, threatening, and nonrelatable.<sup>39</sup> References to immigrants as animals, germs or viruses, carrying parasites, hordes, or selfish opportunists also abound.<sup>40</sup>

These allusions to migration and immigrants as aliens, hordes, and tides are long-standing in Western cultural imagery. At the turn of the twentieth century, eugenicists in both Western Europe and the US produced numerous studies and publications on the dangers of immigration and immigrants, using the terms noted above. Karl Pearson, the Britain-based founder of the field of statistics and an avowed eugenicist, published studies such as *The Problem of Alien Immigration into Great Britain*, in which UK readers were encouraged to close the borders to migrating Jews because "Jewish alien children . . . are inferior in the great bulk of the categories [varied tests and measures of intellectual, physical, and psychological characteristics] dealt with."<sup>41</sup> Frequent evocation of dangers of the "alien invasion" were common in scholarly publications by American eugenicists (e.g., *The Eugenical News*, 1916–1920).<sup>42</sup> For example, famed US psychologist and eugenicist H. H. Goddard produced proofs of how dangerous the tides of migration were by showcasing his Ellis Island-based mental testing results, supposedly demonstrating that over 80 percent of incoming Hungarians, Italians, Russians, Jews, Greeks, and others were "feeble-minded" and "morons."<sup>43</sup> Numerous other negative characteristics were applied to immigrants, claiming that studies unequivocally proved their inferiority and the dangerous that they posed:

Statistics indicate [that] the crimes of Hebrews are chiefly "gainful offenses." . . . They show the greatest proportion of offenses against chastity. . . . There is no question that . . . the hordes of Jews . . . with their intense individualism and ideals of gain at the cost of any interest, represent the opposite extreme from . . . Scandinavian immigration.<sup>44</sup>

The language applied to immigrants continues to be marked by these dehumanizing, threat-evoking signifiers, and the empirical efforts to degrade immigrants have endured.<sup>45</sup> White supremacists, such as Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke,<sup>46</sup> continue to use past and contemporary eugenicist scholarship (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Rushton, 1996) to decry

the “alien invasion” as supposedly dangerous to the purity of American Aryans.<sup>47</sup> Scholars identified as racist and White supremacist by the Southern Poverty Law Center,<sup>48</sup> such as Rushton, use social Darwinian evolutionary theories to justify xenophobic prejudice, claiming that anti-immigrant prejudice is inborn, natural, and universal because of “genetic similarity” leading to

ethnic nepotism and people’s need to identify and be with their ‘own kind’ . . .  
Nationalists often claim that their nation has organic continuity and ‘ties of blood’ that make them ‘special’ and different from outsiders, a view not fully explained by ethno-symbolism. Although the term *ethnicity* is recent, the sense of kinship, group solidarity and common culture to which it refers is often as old as the historical record. . . .  
Genetic Similarity Theory extends Smith’s theory and the unity of knowledge by providing the next link, the necessary biological mooring.<sup>49</sup>

Notably absent in such biologized and universalized accounts of hatred toward foreigners are numerous forms of evidence, including from animal and human studies, that fear and rejection of others are neither biologically common nor universal.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, even more stunningly absent is the reflection on ways that national borders and nation-states are fairly recent and constantly changing phenomena, thus putting into question the rationale for xenophobic fears as genetic and universal.<sup>51</sup>

Another disturbing trend is that of denouncing immigrants as terrorists, a new term denoting fears of immigrants as violent and hostile. Such linguistic signifiers directed at immigrants and migration not only shape cultural and political discourse but have a significant impact on the identity of immigrants who must often continually present themselves as mild, adaptable, peaceable, and quiet. When exhibiting discontent or resisting, immigrants are commanded to go home if they do not like “being here.”<sup>52</sup> Lastly, in addition to fears of immigrants as diseased, criminal, unintelligent, or mercenary, contemporary xenophobic rhetoric utilizes such social concerns as the environmental crisis to attack and blame migrating individuals. Numerous anti-immigrant groups in America use concepts of over-population and environmental degradation to call for border closure to all but a few Nordic individuals.<sup>53</sup>

The hostile human imagination and language have profound and long-lasting impact on identity and well being. Anti-colonialist scholar Franz Fanon noted that to survive in such hostile social environments human beings often internalize the oppressive stereotypes and narratives, resulting in devastating, crippling effects on individual and community life. Paraphrasing Fanon’s words, immigrants are often required to don a nativist-defined “mask” in order to survive, a mask that requires them to deny, denigrate, and disassociate all those aspects of themselves that are culturally distinct. Thus, immigrants become people who have foreign skins but who wear native-born masks. Furthermore, immigrants of color, just as native-born racial minorities, are pushed toward what Fanon described as “Black skin/White mask” forms of oppression.<sup>54</sup>

Certainly, such stereotyping and prejudice are especially directed at immigrants from countries considered culturally and socially unequal or inferior to the host community.<sup>55</sup> Just as a century ago, so now elevation of “Nordic” or wealthy or notably eminent immigrants to the status of an ideal migrant is common. Concepts such as “brain drain” or “talent drain”

define immigrant policies to Western industrialized nations since economic, cultural, academic, and other incentives could be applied to attract those individuals who could infuse ideas, wealth, and other “products” for the benefit of the host nation. Nevertheless, even in such circumstances highly skilled immigrant individuals are repeatedly mistreated, highlighting the idea that an immigrant “brain drain” can become “brain abuse.”<sup>56</sup> The individual, professional, and social identity of these immigrants can also be influenced by cultural limitations and prejudices (e.g., unequal treatment, condescension).

On the other hand, critical scholar, Stuart Hall, stressed that the identity of immigrants, who are members of subaltern or marginalized cultural communities, is marked by their continual invention and reinvention of themselves within receiving cultures.<sup>57</sup> In his writings on the African immigrant diaspora, Hall noted that immigrant communities can be marked by frequent mixing, hybridization, and adjustment of identities or by moving between, across, and within both home and host cultures. Moreover, Hall emphasized the idea that immigrants may shift between adopting and rejecting varied cultural notions that shape their lives and self-concepts. Thus, immigrants may have greater capacity to play with their identities: the canvas of experiences, ideas, values, and imagination is vastly more open for those who have had long term, distinctly diverse ways of being.

Feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldua similarly stressed that many immigrants live in the “borderlands,” either joining with, altering, or rejecting varied aspects of home and host cultures.<sup>58</sup> She emphasized that, for many immigrants, numerous other “borders” are crossed without ever traversing an international boundary: borders erected by cultural insistence on rigid gender or sexual categories, economic distinctions, or religious practices. Anzaldua recognized that most immigrants, like most individuals who hold marginal social identities, learn to code switch. However, she stressed that for many immigrants the internal and external challenges result in profound anxiety and unconscious conflicts, preventing the development of fluid “border” identity.

Intersections of varied forms of identity may be especially difficult to navigate for recent immigrants.<sup>59</sup> For example, Hattatoglu and Yakushko in a study of professional immigrant women of Middle Eastern descent found that the women described continued to shift between varied identities that were expected of them, including between their high-level scientific occupations and their traditional cultural home spaces.<sup>60</sup> This study found that the women expressed the feeling that the US science-based professional workplace was far more patriarchal than those they experienced in their Middle Eastern cultures. Participants discussed their need to shift their identity and to perform to new standards of “women-scientists,” distinct for an American male-dominated workplace milieu. On the other hand, their home and broader cultural environments were experienced by them as far more gender-fluid and egalitarian than what they experienced prior to migration. These women navigated significant hybrid immigrant dynamics, inventing and reinventing themselves, adapting to and rejecting varied demands on their lives.

For many individuals such identity shifts can be a cause of tremendous anxiety and confusion. Among the most significant psychological contributions to understanding these immigrant identity dynamics are those found in psychoanalytic scholarship. Grinberg and

Grinberg emphasized that most immigrants undergo profound experiences of loss and mourning, even if their migration was self-instigated and desired.<sup>61</sup> Catastrophic circumstances that drive individuals to migration, such as genocides or persecutions, often result in making these experiences of loss and mourning encumbered by occurrences of complex trauma.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, any dynamics—ensuing from internalized “normative unconscious processes” related to class, gender, race, or other social categories, whether stemming from home or host culture—often further contribute to inner tensions, conflicts, anxiety, and even self-hatred felt by immigrant individuals.<sup>63</sup>

Despite these significant challenges, immigrant individuals are frequently expected to be silent about conditions and experiences that may have pushed them toward migration.<sup>64</sup> After all, these individuals were expected to leave their bad past and their prior cultures behind, start a new life, and be continually grateful for having been permitted a place in the new land. If stories of catastrophic life conditions are told, host communities prefer these to be about resilience, meaning, growth, and other positive outcomes of surviving. For example, in a study by Blodgett and Yakushko of Lithuanian immigrants who survived Stalinist persecutions as children, participants repeatedly stressed that their horrifying experiences lived on within them until their late adulthood, yet no space was made for their stories.<sup>65</sup> Danieli noted that even among mental health professionals a “conspiracy of silence” remains firmly in place, including among psychotherapists listening to the recollections of Jewish Holocaust survivors who migrated to the US.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, vast scholarship on identity, self, self-conception, and related human identity phenomena stress that all of these phenomenological constructs rely on memory, specifically active biographical forms of memory.<sup>67</sup> When individuals are required to deny or suppress their memories and to adopt behaviors, feelings, and even views of themselves imposed by others, psychological patterns of disassociation, splitting, denial, and even self-hatred can emerge.<sup>68</sup> Eric Fromm, a psychoanalytic scholar and himself a Jewish immigrant to the US, described such influences, illustrating how people can begin to go through their lives being and acting like automatons.<sup>69</sup>

However, just as past eugenicists relegated human sorrow, struggles, and social maladjustment to the categories of hereditary unfitness and evolutionary parasitic danger, today’s empiricists continue to propagate biologized, context-free notions of perpetual cheerfulness. Positivity, supposed resilience, and perpetual gratitude often mask varied socially violent ways; immigrants are not only required to act as *Pollyannas* but are further told that their self-silencing is a sign of good mental health.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to these varied cultural pressures on immigrants to assimilate, reduce their identity to a “good, happy immigrant,” and act happy and grateful, even in numerous empirical proclamations such as in newly formed “positive psychology” (i.e., scientific Pollyannaism), certainly qualitative, narrative-based studies hold one place for challenging often unbearable conditions experienced by immigrants both before and after their migration.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, it is often in literature and the arts that immigrant voices are most often heard in their raw, human, complex, and living ways. Whether in writings about the horrors of the Holocaust that drove waves of Jews to migrate worldwide or those regarding the realities of other war genocides and political repressions, these accounts break hearts and inspire action.<sup>72</sup> Many emerging stories by immigrant writers speak to the challenges of their migration experience,

especially when facing xenophobia, racism, and exclusion.<sup>73</sup> Recent writings by refugees highlight how little the world community still knows about the living horrors facing many individuals worldwide.<sup>74</sup> In the words of Elie Wiesel's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, "Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." In *Night*, his memoir reflecting on the importance of remembering the Holocaust, Wiesel asserted,

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.<sup>75</sup>

Whether the catastrophic experiences of genocides or wars, or the daily vicissitudes of code-switching as an immigrant, these books and stories highlight the living human realities that shape immigrant identities. They hold important memories and resist the cultural pressure to silence stories and make immigrants or migration invisible.

During the early twentieth century, Freud noted that incapacity to mourn difficult life events and experiences causes one to become melancholic.<sup>76</sup> Using Freud's work, Butler suggested that melancholia also results from unmourned losses related to identity splitting, projection, and disassociation with regard to gender and sexuality.<sup>77</sup> Eng and Han stressed that the social and psychic lives of racial minorities, both native born and immigrant, are also marked by processes of melancholia when racial mourning is not tolerated.<sup>78</sup>

Migration and immigrant experiences are among the most notable visible spaces for mourning the losses, changes, and transitions common to all human beings. Listening to mourning that underlies migrations and relocations of all types may mitigate the melancholy, the depressed and disassociated space in which violence and evil are projected in people perceived as foreign others. If mourning is shared, if mourning is heard, if mourning is experienced, rather than experiencing melancholia and identity struggles, immigrants can be a vibrant part of the diverse fabric of human communities they share. Human stories of migration, told through arts, literature, music, or food, can encourage not only immigrant thriving but can welcome the native-born communities toward more expansive ways of being. Shared migration stories may also help make space for encouraging hybrid ways of individual and collective identity regardless of immigrant status. In such spaces, the profound creativity that comes with

diversity can also lead to expanded imagination, multiplicity, interdependence, and innovation.

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