

## Text: Black Liberation and Immigrant Rights

By The Asian American Education Project

*Asians have been immigrating to the United States for centuries, even before the country itself was founded. Yet, Asian Americans are still seen as “perpetual foreigners” and thus, have had to fight to belong despite being born here and/or having been here for generations. In order to fight for belonging and identity, the Asian American community has learned from the Black liberation movement and leaned on Black activists for support.*

### Tertiary Source:

The United States is a country that was built through the use of enslaved people on land unjustly taken from Native Americans; as such, a clear racial **hierarchy** permeates U.S. society. In this hierarchy, white people are at the top and Black people are at the bottom, with other communities of color falling in between. This racial hierarchy has impacted how Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States are perceived and treated. At times, AAPIs have been positioned near the top and at other times, they have been positioned at the bottom. Their positioning has depended on public sentiments and historical and societal events - all of which have been determined by the dominant white society.

For example, after the **abolition** of slavery, the immigration of Asian workers in the late 1800s was welcomed as Asian immigrants became an important source of labor. However, their success as a workforce threatened white labor, making Asian Americans a target of racism and hate. **Nativist** and **xenophobic** attitudes and attacks targeted Chinese Americans in the form of political cartoons, the **rhetoric** of elected officials, and massacres in towns with large Chinese populations.

In the midst of this heightened xenophobia and anti-Chinese fervor, Frederick Douglass (c. 1818-1895), a prominent formerly-enslaved abolitionist and **orator**, advocated in support of the Chinese. Douglass had a huge following and was known for his public speaking. In his famed “**Composite** Nation” speech, first delivered in Boston in 1869, Douglass used his platform to condemn anti-Asian discrimination. He argued for the right to free migration and explicitly argued against restrictions on Chinese and Japanese immigration. He further stated that he supported the **naturalization**, the voting rights, and election to public

### Glossary:

**Hierarchy:** a system or organization in which people or groups of people are ranked according to status

**Abolition:** ending of

**Nativist:** attitude or policy where existing inhabitants are favored instead of immigrants

**Xenophobic:** fearing or disliking anything or anyone perceived as being foreign

**Rhetoric:** speech or writing

**Orator:** a skilled public speaker

**Composite:** made up of various parts



office of Chinese immigrants. He defended the identity of the United States as a nation of immigrants.

It is important to note that Douglass stood alone in publicly voicing his views. In championing a multi-racial America, historians have commented that he was ahead of his time. His statements directly challenged the **stereotypes** that were commonly applied to Chinese people at the time who were accused of being **unassimilable**, uncivilized, and untrustworthy. Douglass's defense of Chinese and Japanese Americans was hugely significant as it represented the support of the Black community, who also faced exclusion from equal opportunity.

Despite his support, anti-Asian sentiments prevailed. Chinese people became so unwelcomed that laws excluding them from entry into the nation were passed. The first federal law restricting immigration into the United States, the Page Act of 1875, prohibited the importation of laborers from "China, Japan or any Oriental country" who were unfree or brought for "**immoral** purposes." The law was enforced primarily against Chinese women, acting on racist stereotypes that depicted nearly all Chinese women as sex workers. This opened the door for additional restrictions on immigration, and just seven years later, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed. This Act banned the entry of Chinese laborers into the United States. For decades, restrictions to immigration would expand and grow to severely limit immigrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. This would all change with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 replaced the existing **quota**-based system of immigration which favored those coming from western European nations. Instead, the Act prioritized immigrants with family members already in the United States, immigrants with special professional skills, and **refugees**. The Act also forbade discrimination on the basis of race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence.

This immigration reform came as a direct result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement was launched and led by Black Americans who were seeking to abolish legalized racial discrimination, **disenfranchisement**, and **segregation**. The Civil Rights Movement had a major victory with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. This led other racist and discriminatory laws to be reviewed. As a result, the quota-based immigration

**Naturalization:** the process of becoming a citizen

**Stereotype:** a widely held image or idea that may be incomplete and/or inaccurate

**Unassimilable:** unable to fit in

**Immoral:** not conforming to accepted standards of behavior

**Quota:** a fixed minimum or maximum number of a particular group of people allowed to do something

**Refugees:** people who had to flee their native countries to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster

**Disenfranchisement** : deprivation of a legal right (i.e., the right to vote),

system used at the time was reviewed and targeted for reform because it had been used to encourage white immigration while severely limiting the immigration of people of color. In fact, policymakers linked the passage of the legislation directly to the civil rights narrative. In 1964, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy stated, referring to the impact of the Civil Rights Movement, “Everywhere else in our national life, we have eliminated discrimination based on one’s place of birth. Yet this system is still the foundation of our immigration law.” Asian American legislators had attempted to reform the immigration system prior to this but their numbers in the legislature and constituencies were too small to effectively enact any change.

With the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, there was a significant increase of immigration from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Ten years after the signing of the Act, the population of Asian immigrants in the United States doubled. By the 21st century, 80 percent of immigrants to the United States came from Asia or Latin America, transforming American society. As such, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 significantly changed the composition of the United States. It helped realize Douglass’ idea of a “composite nation.”

This shift in national policy, from the purposeful exclusion of non-white immigrants, to adding national origin as a **protected class**, came as a direct result of Black liberatory organizing and movements. The Civil Rights Movement had successfully outlawed discrimination based on one’s race, color, sex, religion, and national origin. Racist laws in the areas of housing, voting, education and more were quickly targeted for reform based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Accordingly, immigration laws that excluded migrants based on race and national origin were targeted as well. Without this outlawing of discrimination, the discriminatory, quota-based immigration system could not have been so swiftly challenged and replaced.

Furthermore, as Black movements – such as the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) and the Black Power movement (1960s and 1970s) – articulated, challenged, and disrupted racial **subjugation** in the United States, Asian Americans became inspired. Asian American community leaders and organizations emerged, dedicated to not only addressing the issues impacting Asian Americans but also working with other Black, Brown, and **Indigenous** people to target **white supremacy** as the root cause of the subjugation of all non-white people in the United States.

privilege, or  
immunity

**Segregation:**  
separating people by  
races

**Protected Class:** a  
group protected by  
anti-discrimination  
laws

**Subjugation:** act of  
bringing someone  
or something under  
control/domination

**Indigenous:** native  
to a place

**White Supremacy:**  
social, economic,  
and political  
systems that  
collectively enable



For example, for decades, **undocumented** immigration has been a major issue in the United States. There are an estimated eleven million undocumented immigrants in the United States as of 2019. An estimated nine percent of the undocumented immigrant population is Black, but Black immigrants are often invisibilized in the issue of immigration. This is due to the popular understanding and depiction of undocumented immigration as primarily coming from Latin American, especially Mexico, and more recently, Asia. Yet, Black undocumented immigrants face unique challenges in the United States, as they face both the xenophobia that targets all immigrants, in addition to the racial prejudice that specifically impacts Black people. Black people are more likely to be stopped by police, thus putting Black immigrants at a higher risk of **detention** and **deportation**. Additionally, when Black immigrants are detained, their **bond** tends to be set at higher amounts than non-Black immigrants, making it harder for them to purchase their freedom and better fight their case.

While Black immigrants and organizations have successfully fought for greater representation in immigration discussions and policy solutions, Latinx and Asian immigrants and organizations have also used their position as more visible immigrant groups to be inclusive of Black immigrants and their needs.

For example, **Temporary Protected Status** was set to be terminated for immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Sudan. In response, Black, Latinx, and Asian immigrant groups across the United States organized to try to **revert** the decision. They directly appealed to elected officials and filed lawsuits.

By treating immigration as a racial justice issue, multiracial coalitions of immigration-focused organizations – such as the Coalition of African, Arab, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois (CAAAELII), Protecting Immigrant Families, and more – have emerged to advocate for the needs of all immigrant groups, to help ensure that Black immigrants don't continue to be left out of the fight. With white supremacy as the root cause of racial and migratory injustice, migrant justice and Black liberation go hand-in-hand. This solidarity has been happening since the era of Chinese exclusion, to the Civil Rights Movement, and to the present.

white people to maintain power over people of other races

**Undocumented:** lacking legal paperwork

**Detention:** being held in custody

**Deportation:** being sent back to one's native country

**Bond:** money that must be paid to get out of jail

**Temporary Protected Status:** allows immigrants who are unable to return home safely to reside and work legally in the U.S.

**Revert:** return to previous state

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