
Young offers in Alien Nation an important counter to dominant narratives of migration by challenging the single trajectory, nation-state centered biases of such narratives. In this multidimensional study of the experiences of Chinese migrants through several sites in the Western Hemisphere, he argues that many migration histories and studies reproduce the hegemony of the single nation-state paradigm in defining, describing, or representing the experience of migrants. Instead, he examines the migrant experience through multinational and transnational frameworks that place the policies, agendas, and actions of nation-states and their representatives on the table for comparative study. In so doing, Young also produces a cultural study of ideologies of race, technologies of resistance (to borrow from Omi and Winant’s thesis on racial formation), and other axes within a matrix of contested identity formations such as sexuality, gender, gender identity. Not only does Young’s new book model an improved transnational narrative, it prompts new thinking about how to teach migration history.

Alien Nation details a multinational study of the “coolie trade” between 1847 and 1874. This particular chapter highlights the important international competitions implicit in hypocritical migration policies, the sometimes violent resistance Chinese migrants offered against exploitation and oppressive treatment, and the conditions of this global trafficking in humans.

In opening his account of this migration in the mid-19th century, Young states that about 750,000 Chinese migrants left China for other Southeast Asian countries, and as many left with the intention of going to places in the Western hemisphere. Unfortunately, his narrative doesn’t track the movements and intentions of those who moved to places closer to home. Instead his research exclusively details the experiences of many of the people who arrived in the Americas. This scholarly choice may reflect language or other barriers to archives in Asia but it also places important limits on the theoretical framework offered in his opening. While the focus of the book as it is displaces a nation-state focus, because the larger context of Chinese migration isn’t addressed, it still places the movement to the Americas at the center of Chinese migration.

The study of the “coolie trade” to the Americas, however, reveals significant details about the experiences of Chinese migrants as they sought to gain entry into countries for work and other economic opportunities. The physical abuse, the selling of migrants at auction, and the lack of legal protections for migrants linked, in Young’s mind, the “coolie trade” to racial slavery, both in its form and its content. In this section of the book, Young scrutinizes closely international comment and policies on the “coolie trade.” In the 1840s, countries such as Cuba and Peru, with the aid of European and U.S. shipping and plantation interests, openly encouraged the “coolie trade,” the creation of contract labor funded by a credit-ticket system ultimately paid for by the migrant. According to Young, “the precise details” of such contracts “provided for a system of forced labor in which the owner controlled nearly every aspect of the laborers’ lives,
including food, healthcare, work, mobility, and family relations” (68). (Authorities in
Cuba may have sought an entrée in the coolie trade in order to diversify their exploitable
labor supply. In his recent book, Race to Revolution, historian Gerald Horne shows that
Cuban authorities were deeply concerned about U.S. and British abolitionism and the
potential for economic collapse should a slave rebellion of Haitian proportions take place
there.)

Despite this goal, Chinese rebellion was both imminent and frequent. Migrants frequently
mutinied aboard the vessels that carried them to the Americas. In the plantation system
in South America and the U.S. labor, unrest and resistance in the form of flight were so
frequent that in Peru, for example, escaped Chinese migrants were referred to as
cimarron, the same term applied to escaped slaves. Such linguistic references suggest an
equation in the Peruvian mind between the two groups of people and the conditions under
which they labored.

Government policies designed to control migration after the close of the coolie trade
period in the mid-1870s reflected Western racial animus toward Asian people above all
else. In the middle section of Alien Nation, Young provides a comparative reading of
immigration policies established in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Cuba, and Peru. Using
some translated archival documents from the respective countries, Young charts the
development of such policies, ultimately pointing to the predominant influence of the
U.S. in shaping immigration law in the other countries. For example, Young uses the
example of Chin Chung, who migrates through the Western Hemisphere via Canada and
Mexico to the U.S. in the early 1900s. Deported more than once, Chin Chung would
revise his legal identity on several occasions in order to regain entry into the U.S. in order
to locate job opportunities there. The U.S. government frequently pressured its neighbors
to revise their own immigration policies in order to fit U.S. needs and goals regarding
Chinese migration.

Meanwhile, Chin Chung’s successful maneuvering to gain entry into these countries
testifies to the quality of the transnational networks Chinese migrants of varying legal
status, social class, and hometown connection had built to “evade [immigration] barriers,
find jobs, establish families, and keep [migrants] mobile, ever on the search for the
elusive Gold Mountain” (18). In the closing and most fascinating section of the book,
Young reconstructs the activities and connections made by Chinese transnational
networks, such as the Casino Chung Wah in Havana, which maintained a near monopoly
on migration to Cuba. Other networks like Baohuanghui, operated across numerous
national borders in Canada, Mexico, the U.S. and Cuba. While this organization
originally began as a political movement against the Qing dynasty in China, it soon built
up international networks, provided business opportunities to its members, and
participated in the broader economic development of the local communities in which it
existed. In sum, these networks “provided material support in the form of health benefits,
burial expenses, legal resources, an alternative family structure, and, most important, a
psychic space in which individuals thousands of miles from home could reproduce their
social lives” (269).
Alien Nation could be effectively used in an upper-division or graduate migration studies course. It also lays some good foundations for additional research in the archives of the several countries under study to continue to follow Young’s research agenda of redrawing the global map of human movement and to reconstruct the lives of Chinese migrants in the past two centuries.

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