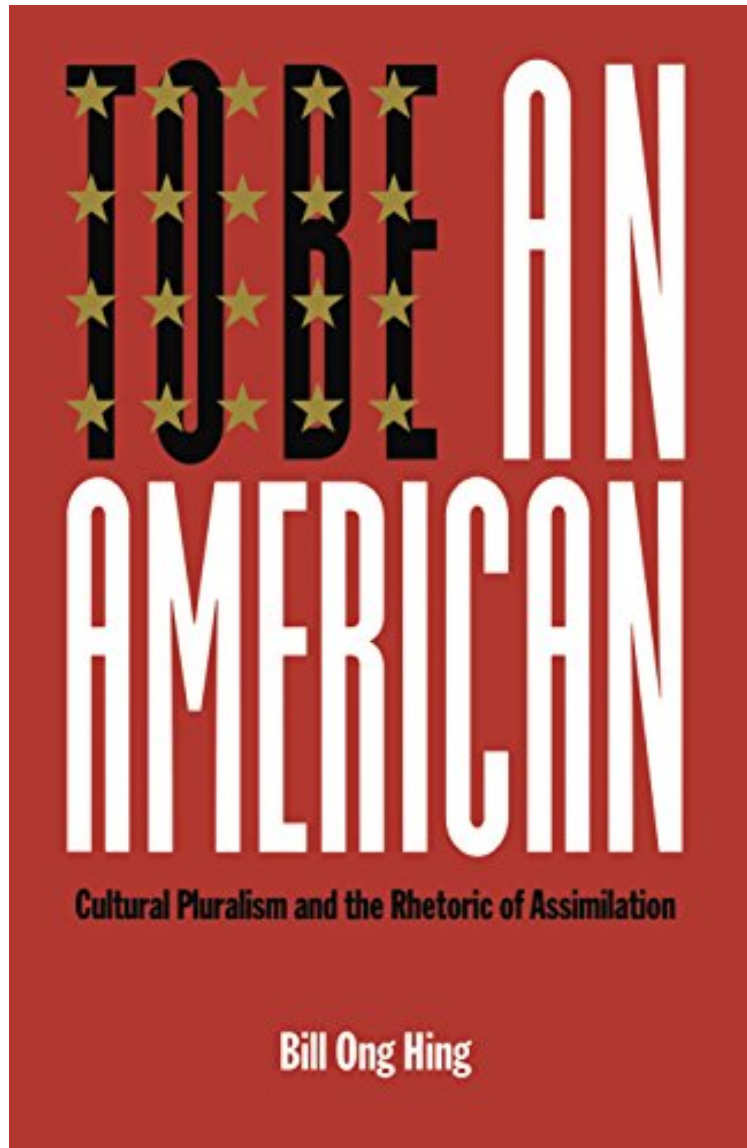


## To Be An American: Cultural Pluralism and the Rhetoric of Assimilation (Critical America)

*Bill Ong Hing*

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**Bill Ong Hing : To Be An American: Cultural Pluralism and the Rhetoric of Assimilation (Critical America)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised To Be An American: Cultural Pluralism and the Rhetoric of Assimilation (Critical America):

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. One of the best books of its kindBy Philip Tajitsu NashHis is a

familiar story for Pacific Americans. His father told the immigration officer that his name was Ong Chun Hing. Ignoring the fact that he had probably seen hundreds of Chinese immigrants before and knew that they put their family names first, the immigration officer put "Hing" in the box for "family name." A generation later, an immigration lawyer was born who would address hundreds of such indignities Bill Ong Hing. Combining this personal awareness with a scholar's detachment and an advocate's engagement, Professor Hing has written the book you need to read if you only have time for one book on immigration this year. "To be An American: Cultural Pluralism and the Rhetoric of Assimilation" includes discussions about the the jobs taken by immigrants, their interactions with African Americans, and their role in the larger debates about the type of nation we are and aspire to be. Like other thought-provoking books in the outstanding "Critical America" series by New York University Press, it takes a strong position but first reaches out to help us understand all sides of difficult issues. Despite his many accomplishments as a lawyer, law professor, writer, family man, and rock musician, Bill Hing is one of the least pretentious people you have ever met. That's why I was surprised to open his new book and find that his first chapter was called, "A Superior Multicultural Experience." Rather than extolling the virtues of his childhood over anyone else's, however, he points out that, "Our experiences, from childhood through adolescence, young adult, and beyond, inevitably shape our views of race, assimilation, and a multicultural society." That being said, he puts on his raconteur's hat and races us back in time to a small mining town, Superior, Arizona, where his family maintained a trilingual grocery store and where his playmates included many Latinos and Native Americans. Customers included migrant workers and immigrants of all backgrounds--African Americans, Anglos, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans. Playing baseball was one event that shaped his life, but so were copper mine strikes, Native American summer festivals, and meals at the local Mexican restaurant, the Triple X Caf. Professor Hing, who has taught at Stanford Law School and who now serves as Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Resource Center while continuing to teach part time at UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law, rebuts those who advocate cultural assimilation and greater immigration from Europe by pointing out that this is "already a multiracial, multicultural country whose culture is constantly evolving, and that today's immigrants actually do acculturate." His vision encompasses, "a new approach to cultural pluralism which respects diverse views and cultures, which is constantly attentive to race relations, and which shares a core set of values." These values, for Hing, would include, "respect for laws, the democratic political and economic system, equal opportunity, and human rights. This concept does not, however, imply a lack of support for ethnic communities. Indeed, diversity must be the basis for an 'American' identity." Rather than putting the blame for social ills on immigrants, or simply seeing immigrants as blameless and the society at large as racist and nativist, Professor Hing encourages us to share the responsibility for building a better society. "Ethnic communities are critical to providing a sense of identity, fulfillment, and self-confidence for many. Society should respect those who hold separatist views and prefer to live and work among others of the same background. At the same time, society should strive to eradicate the harmful situations that lead to separatist sentiment. We cannot expect those at the margins to buy into a core without the commitment of the power structure. Immigrant adaption, and the creation of a common core, must be viewed as the dual responsibility of the immigrant and the mainstream." Bill Hing is well known among immigrant's rights advocates for his keen insights as well as his offhand witticisms. He was among the first to consider separating the functions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) so that service to legal immigrants could be separated from enforcement of immigration restrictions. He reasoned, quite correctly, that the opposing impulses of helping them in and keeping them out would make it hard for INS officials to perform their tasks effectively. Now, over a decade later, immigrant rights groups, government officials, and others are still debating the merits of separating INS functions into Labor Department, Justice Department, and even State Department functions. On a personal level, I remember many years ago hearing a moving speech by Bill Hing where, when discussing why immigration has been more difficult for immigrants from Asia than for those from Europe, he said, "It's no mistake that the back of the Statue of Liberty faces west." When the chuckles subsided, he went on to lay out the history of immigration in a clear 20 minute lecture. You could see why he was so revered by his students and colleagues for his humor as well as his lucidity. To measure the extent of Bill Hing's impact on immigration reform, I took an informal survey of immigration activists, scholars, and attorneys. The results were surprisingly uniform, given the geographic, demographic, and political diversity. Andrew Leong, himself a nationally-recognized scholar and activist attorney from the University of Massachusetts at Boston, summarized the feelings of attorneys such as Karin Wang, from the Immigrant Welfare Project at the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California and Stan Mark from the New York-based Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Leong said, "I think Bill Hing is our preeminent scholar on APA immigration history, reminding us about the vestiges of the past in current immigration reform. He performs the very difficult task of being both a scholar and an advocate from the community, and is a great role model for young lawyers who want to give back to the community." Added Frank Wu, another activist-scholar who teaches at Howard University Law School, "Bill Ong Hing's work has helped many Asian Americans understand that immigration policies have defined our communities, severely and subtly, but it also has shown that Asian Americans can participate in changing thos

The impetus behind California's Proposition 187 clearly reflects the growing anti-immigrant sentiment in this country. Many Americans regard today's new immigrants as not truly American, as somehow less committed to the ideals on which the country was founded. In clear, precise terms, Bill Ong Hing considers immigration in the context of the global economy, a sluggish national economy, and the hard facts about downsizing. Importantly, he also confronts the emphatic claims of immigrant supporters that immigrants do assimilate, take jobs that native workers don't want, and contribute more to the tax coffers than they take out of the system. A major contribution of Hing's book is its emphasis on such often-overlooked issues as the competition between immigrants and African Americans, inter-group tension, and ethnic separatism, issues constantly brushed aside both by immigrant rights groups and the anti-immigrant right. Drawing on Hing's work as a lawyer deeply involved in the day-to-day life of his immigrant clients, *To Be An American* is a unique blend of substantive analysis, policy, and personal experience.

The United States' "melting pot" has boiled dry in recent years amid a climate of rising anti-immigrant sentiment. When politicians pick up on the dissatisfaction, the rhetoric often takes a sharper edge but offers no better understanding of the issues. Controversial measures such as California's Proposition 187 and the movement to make English the official language have prompted citizens to draw their own battle lines. In *To Be an American: Cultural Pluralism and the Rhetoric of Assimilation*, Bill Ong Hing examines both sides and attempts to bring needed rationality to this emotional debate, although he believes strongly in maintaining the present level of legal immigration. Hing points to other periods of U.S. history in which immigration was blamed for economic and social ills and then analyzes whether fears that immigrants take away needed jobs and refuse to assimilate into American society are justified. By combining economic facts with a keen understanding of cultural identity, *To Be an American* makes us look anew at this conflict as old as the country itself. He never quite defends the immigration status quo-- more than a million legal and illegal immigrants arriving each year. Nor does he feel the need to justify his faith in the social policies he habitually offers as alternatives to immigration control. Instead, he dismisses all efforts to exert control over the influx as "anti-immigrant" or as "attacks" on immigrants. -- *The New York Times Book Review*, Peter Skerry

From the Back Cover Hing considers immigration in the context of the global economy, the American national economy, and hard facts about downsizing, employment, and job loss.