Assimilation—A Good or Bad Word?

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Assimilation—A Good or Bad Word?¹

JOSEF JAŇAB

Introduction

The history of American nation building has undoubtedly been a dramatic process. Most of the drama ensued from the continuous tension, and occasional clash, between the basic democratic principles incorporated in the relevant political documents formulated and agreed upon in the course and aftermath of the American Revolution and the changing demographic reality of the country resulting from the ongoing, and at times massive, immigration. The original settlers, mostly English and English-speaking colonists, represented the decisive mainstream population. But the observant French visitor, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who called himself an American farmer, saw a lot more happening in the American English colonies. He felt that the people exchanging the Old World for the New World were not just fresh immigrants—to him they emerged as new people, “a new race of men.” And he welcomed them as Americans. He did not leave his later, often and widely quoted question, “What is an American?,” unanswered, and hastened with his own understanding of the new phenomenon: “He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new modes of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.” Such was his answer. In addition, Americans for him were “the western pilgrims,

¹ The idea for the topic of the colloquium occurred when the organizers realized that the growing attention being paid in recent years to the phenomena and manifestations of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism may have led to a one-sided or even misleading understanding of the past and present and the very nature of American national culture. The aim was to discuss assimilation in its greater complexity. Such an idea seems also to be supported by the wording of the corresponding entry in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* which reads as “Assimilation and Pluralism,” presumably to suggest that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. See Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1980).
who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry which began long since in the east” and they were to complete “the great circle.” Crèvecoeur believed that the English would willingly pursue their mission along with settlers of other nationalities (of course only European, and Western European, preferably) though occasional complaints about the “otherness” of the non-English could already be heard quite early. For instance, the numerous Germans in Pennsylvania who resisted the use of the English language made Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of independent America, very concerned. And beside the fact that people of other races were not even taken into consideration as Americans, which of course was in accordance with the general feelings and view of the white majority population at that time Crèvecoeur’s expectation that neither the national nor religious differences of the settlers would cause any problems in the creative “smelting” of the new race also proved rather overoptimistic and were hardly justified by reality, as later events and subsequent historical studies would confirm. (The violent resistance to Catholic Irish immigrants who tried to escape from starvation and death after the great potato famine in their country, or, later in the nineteenth century, the negative reaction to the Jewish mass escape to America from pogroms in eastern Europe were certainly two examples of a rather hostile reception for obviously religious reasons.)

Sacvan Bercovitch, the prominent interpreter of early American literature, believed that “the United States is a country founded on rhetoric” which he saw in the oratories of the New England Puritans and the Great Awakening, in the political documents of the newly established republic, in the general Americanization of the Bible and the biblical language. He found this particular rhetoric responsible for the mythological explanation and understanding of American history. The rhetorically created myth of America then served as an attractive element in the “American Dream,” which thousands of immigrants came to seek in the New World. (And it is quite noticeable how the rhetoric, including the biblical imagery and metaphors, survives to the present day when most presidential candidates in the United States speak of the city upon a hill, the promised land, or the chosen people and the manifest destiny. And it

is not just the more “conservative” candidates who try to make the best out of the use of such rhetoric.)

It remains true that all through the nineteenth century most newcomers pursued their American dream by following as a model the American mainstream, that is, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant citizens and their fundamental values. In his very useful reminder of this fact, the sociologist Milton M. Gordon, looking at history, stated that “‘Anglo-conformity’ is really a broad ‘umbrella’ term which may be used to cover a variety of viewpoints about assimilation and immigration. All have as a central assumption the desirability of maintaining English institutions (as modified by the American Revolution), the English language, and English-oriented cultural patterns as dominant and standard in American life.”

Despite some quotable, and indeed frequently quoted, statements admitting and occasionally even praising the diversity of the American nation by leading personalities of the American Renaissance period, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Walt Whitman, the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race was hardly ever questioned. This opinion was nothing but a deeply rooted superstition though it pretended to be supported by racialist academic theories. Thus, sociologist Edward Ross of the University of Nebraska alerted the society of “race suicide” if further immigration were not stopped or limited. And a zoologist from Columbia University, Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr., warned that “assimilation of certain types of immigrants meant weakening “America’s capacity for self-government.” Judging the demographic situation in the country, when in the four decades after 1880 the population doubled from 50 to 105 million and most of the increase came from Eastern and Southern Europe, the racist and yet very popular eugenist “scholar,” Madison Grant, published, to great popular acclaim, his pessimistic book The Passing of the Great Race (1916) in which he lamented that “Polish Jews’ dwarf stature, peculiar mentality, and ruthless concentration on self-interest are being grafted upon the stock of the nation.”

But it was exactly two Polish Jews who introduced new impulses and views into the national discourse on immigration and the integration of immigrants into American society. In the year 1908 a Jewish playwright from London,

5 Gordon, Assimilation in American Life, 88.
Israel Zangwill, brought over to America his play, *The Melting Pot*, and thus provided a fitting metaphor for those who preached the necessity of full assimilation of newcomers before they could be accepted as citizens of the United States. An intensive program of radical and in fact-forced Americanization was launched at the same time as restrictionists of immigration managed to pass a law regulating the number of newcomers by national origin quotas. And Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, from their presidential positions, decided to recognize as citizens only “hundred percenters” with full loyalty to the United States but certainly no hyphenated Americans.8

Horace M. Kallen, whom his Jewish parents brought to America as a child and who as an adult became a Harvard graduate and teacher, rejected the metaphor of Zangwill’s play and contested popular racist views (those of Edward Ross and others) as well as policies of forced Americanization of immigrants as undemocratic. His novel, and indeed revolutionary, notion was the concept of *cultural pluralism* which he proposed in two articles in 1915 as an idea.9 And he used the term literally in 1924 in his book of essays *Culture and Democracy in the United States*.10 Kallen’s vision of American culture as a federation of various national and minority cultures provoked long-lasting disputes in which a number of experts from various fields participated. Journalists, educationalists, cultural critics, philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists contributed to the intensive and undoubtedly fruitful discourse for more than two decades. Fear that diversity could result in divisiveness, that ethnicity and especially ethnocentrism could lead to fragmentation of the nation and national culture, as well as the problem of how to define American identity, what, indeed, the relation between nationalism and patriotism is, etc., etc. were issues bravely addressed by many. Randolph Bourne, John Dewey, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Erik Erikson—each pushed the discourse towards a more considerate state. The most realistic theory, however, proved to be the views of sociologist Robert E. Park and his colleagues from the Chicago school. They were based on the recognition of diverse groups in society who in their interaction move through stages from competition and conflict to accommodation and assimilation. Obviously, the Parkian version of

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Americanization did not presume as its final goal the homogenization of the society. He saw the process as more dynamic, open, and complex. The function of assimilation for him, and for anthropologists like Mead and Benedict, was to achieve tolerance of diversity which would best serve for getting on with others. So Park's version of assimilation, left room for much “diversity within the framework of consensus on basics,” as one of the authorities in the national debate on Americanization, Philip Gleason, assessed it.11

Paradoxically, it was the American involvement in World War II that speeded up the acceptance and final recognition of the plurality of American culture. Fighting against racist and fanatical ideologies and regimes in Europe and the Pacific helped to evoke in the fighting soldiers some second thoughts regarding the racial and xenophobic prejudices which back home were even legally sanctioned.

It was the monumental study An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (1944) by Gunnar Myrdal and his team of sociologists that proved to be a mighty step in the right and highly desirable direction. Not only did the book help the Supreme Court in 1954 to reach a just decision in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka but, in fact, it recruited a substantial part of the population for active participation in the civil and human rights movement in the decades after World War II. The African Americans were not left alone in their struggle for their civil and human rights and the whole nation then started changing its mentality. In the general new atmosphere of the movement it was logical that attention would also be turned to the “nearly intolerable” legal situation in the immigration policies, as President John F. Kennedy realized and consequently initiated some activities for improvements. His assassination in 1963 ended his chances of doing so. His two younger brothers and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, continued in the effort and changed the restrictive legislation from the 1920s that was still in force. Testimony before Congress by Harvard professor of history Oscar Handlin (himself the son of Russian Jewish parents) played an important role in the passage of the new law. Handlin’s book on immigration, The Uprooted (1951) was very much in line with John F. Kennedy’s idea that the history of immigrants to America is very much the history of the nation.12


When the new Immigration and Nationality Act was signed in 1965 politicians, including Senator Edward Kennedy, thought, and indeed promised, that the new act would not change the demographic situation in the country, but the opposite has proved true. After the gates had been opened especially to Latin America and Asia the waves of immigrants kept pouring in and the national, racial, and linguistic composition of the nation started changing quite dramatically. And predictions maintain that soon white Americans will no longer be a majority in the United States of America.

What will the newcomers (more than a million every year) accommodate to, if anything? What is the reason for their decision to go to the United States? Do they want to become citizens of the country? Is the American Dream still attractive for people from the rest of the world? Can the American society manage to accept and integrate the masses of newcomers? What language will the country speak in the future? Will ethnicity matter in defining American culture and literature? Etc., etc. Such queries appear and reappear in the endless questioning of the new and fast changing demographic situation of the country.

What seems to be unquestionable is that the fact of cultural pluralism and the recognition of its existence won in America after World War II and during the civil and human rights movement. A book by two sociologists, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, called *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (1963), attempted to sum up for the record and for assessment purposes the demographic situation of the preceding decade but to admit how dynamic it all was they had to revise some of their views in the enlarged second edition of 1970. The basic message, however, was to remain that, in fact, melting pot assimilation, never happened. In the general national discourse the very metaphor was being replaced with new ones, such as *salad bowl, kaleidoscope, mosaic, quilt,* or Kallen’s original *orchestra,* suggesting that the pluralist concept of culture was finally accepted.

In his later book of 1997, with a tongue-in-cheek sounding title, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now,* Nathan Glazer submits, though not very willingly, to the idea that multiculturalism is an inevitable force in shaping the current society and especially the field of education. Together with the philosopher Charles Taylor he understands it as “an expression of a politics of recognition.”13 His range of views is already suggested by titles of the individual chapters of the book, such as “Where Assimilation Failed,” “What Is at Stake in Multicultural-

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ism?,” or “Can We Be Brought Together?” Glazer believes that multiculturalism is in fact “a price America is paying for its inability or unwillingness to incorporate into its society African Americans, in the same way and to the same degree it has incorporated so many groups.”

In the era of the civil and human rights movement attention was also brought to such issues as group rights, ethnicity and the problems of ethnocentricity which had been opened by anthropologists already in the 1930s but were revisited as something relevant again twenty/thirty years later. Werner Sollors in his rich and unbiased book, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (1986) presented the situation as a new American dilemma—which way groups or individuals would turn in their search for identity. They could move either—to the old and inherited, racial, national or ethnic one or a new one of their own choice and making. They could resist change or go forward as the book generally suggests.

If the terms such as melting pot assimilation and Americanization sounded like “dirty words” to cultural pluralists some tendencies in multiculturalism (especially radical ethnocentrism and separatism) represented to believers in the original motto from the times of the American Revolution and Crèvecoeur, e pluribus unum, a cause for panic. The renowned historian and former advisor to President John F. Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., wrote a disturbing warning in his The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society (1991). The book was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. But despite the author’s misgivings he too had to recognize the undeniable plurality of the national identity and culture. Sociologist John Miller sounded even more concerned in his The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism Has Undermined the Assimilation Ethic (1998). He is deeply disturbed by requirements for group rights in a country where individualism is one of the fundamental gospels, and he sees a great threat to patriotism and national unity in demands for bilingual education. The mood of his book is not just one of disagreement but politically motivated anger. Another defender of assimilation, journalist Michael Barone, is more positive and optimistic, as the subtitle of his book suggests—The New Americans: How the Melting Pot Can Work Again. It was published in 2001, just a few months before the terrorist attacks of September 11. In a new edition in 2006 the author felt it proper to add a preface on integration and terrorism in

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14 Glazer, We Are All Multiculturalists Now, 147.
15 See Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
which his complaints are, surprisingly, addressed to the leaders of the country. All in all the book is meant as a praise of Americanization and assimilation to a common, American, civic culture and civic citizenship. Barone believes that “immigration remains, as it has always been, one of the engines of America's economic growth and prosperity.” But as a defender of the melting pot he is very critical of all attempts to discredit its legacy. He is convinced that America is strong enough to manage assimilation of the new masses of immigrants today drawing confidence from the times of earlier success. But Barone also encourages learning from mistakes committed in the past. Still, if there are any authorities or parties to be blamed for anything going wrong in America they are, in his mind, the “elites” that favor providing immigrants with protective civil rights legislation and various social programs. In his eyes, all that is wrong. Similarly with Barone, John Miller is convinced that

immigrants needed to become a part of American society, not mere sojourners in it. They had responsibilities to their new home. In a rough order of priority, these included living by its laws, working at jobs, learning English, and earning citizenship. The native-born population would reap some reward when immigrants performed any of these duties, ranging from simple matters like preservation of the peace to more complex benefits like economic gain, national cohesion, and domestic tranquility. The immigrant would profit as well … since assimilation underwrote success in the United States. 

The platform from which the course of traditional assimilation is being recommended is strongly political, based on rather conservative national pride: “We Americans have the advantage of a heritage and a history that has combined the best of immigration and assimilation. We should neither retreat into a posture of isolationism nor embrace multiculturalism, but continue, improving as we go, in the American way.” Barone also believes that the American way is much more advisable than “the European-style multiculturalism” which “encourages immigrants to put themselves in opposition to the host country.” 

A comparative and global view of immigration and integration policies would certainly be of great use and there can be no doubt that Europe is going to deal with many problems that America has already had to face, and that there will be lessons to learn from both its positive and negative experience. Such a comparative view of the immigration history between the United States

and Canada (where multiculturalist policies in fact originated) is presented in the book by Seymour Martin Lipset called *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (1990).\(^{21}\) And again the similarities and differences are not just informative but worth closer study.

As migration, and even mass migration of people becomes a world problem, it is turning gradually into political dilemmas for world leaders and in the United States immigration has been a strongly politically charged question that politicians have had to deal with. The culmination of contesting political programs for the integration of immigrants into the society reappears regularly before all kinds of elections in which immigrants, and racial, and ethnic groups can make the decisive difference. A book by Paula D. McClain and Joseph Stewart Jr., *“Can We All Get Along?”: Racial and Ethnic Minorities in American Politics* (1995; 2014, 6th ed.) confirms this truth through statistical data and critical analysis dealing with the political status and behavior of four major groups, the African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.\(^{22}\)

The continuous rivalry of the two sides in the contest over fusion and fragmentation seems to have been come to the point of no possible agreement or compromise and therefore an open-minded and comprehensive view is certainly welcome and potentially useful and usable. Most reviewers appreciated exactly in these words a book by sociologist Vincent Parrillo, *Strangers to These Shores* (1980).\(^{23}\) Its relevance is enhanced by the fact that it is a textbook whose educational potential is increased by the fact that the year 2014 already saw its eleventh edition, each new one updated. Any publication challenging and moderating extreme views of the defenders of assimilation and the defenders of multi-culturalism sounds like a beneficial and moderating contribution to the lasting quarrel.


Bibliography


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Assimilation and Pluralism in the United States: Are They Dual or Dueling Realities?

VINCENT N. PARRILLO

ABSTRACT: The unprecedented numbers of immigrants to the United States in recent decades have raised concerns about the country’s ability to absorb so many newcomers. With so many racially and religiously different arrivals, far exceeding those from the traditional European nations, fears have also arisen about cultural cohesion. Exacerbating the situation is the belief among many native-born Americans that the foreign-born do not even want to assimilate and fulfill their civic responsibilities. This paper looks at the prevailing social forces of assimilation and pluralism in the United States within its cultural milieu, with an eye to the perceptions and realities of immigrant numbers and demographic contrasts, language acquisition and retention, and citizenship. The paper concludes with an answer to its title question.

KEYWORDS: assimilation; citizenship; Dillingham Flaw; immigration; language retention; nativism; pluralism

Fairly universal agreement exists that assimilation is a process whereby individuals acquire sufficient social characteristics and acceptance to become absorbed into the societal mainstream. The American sociologist Milton M. Gordon, in his seminal work, *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), suggested the existence of several phases. Generally, cultural assimilation (also known as acculturation) occurs first, during which behavioral patterns change to match the host country. A more inclusive phase occurs with structural assimilation, which is large-scale entrance into organizations and institutions on a primary-group level. Such close, personal interactions in those settings typically follow a more impersonal form of social interaction in the public sphere, that is, intergroup mingling in civic, recreational, school, or work environments on a secondary-group level. Gordon thought that structural assimilation is more complete when marital assimilation, large-scale intermarriage with mainstream society, occurs.1

More than fifty years have elapsed since Gordon’s contribution. His model has been tweaked somewhat to overcome its unidirectional impetus and ethnocentric undercurrent, but the approach remains rooted in the classical approach. An alternative approach is segmented assimilation theory, which holds that people could follow one of several adaptation trajectories, either upward or downward. Another component in thinking about assimilation, or the lack thereof, is that instant electronic communication and transactions compress time and space, allowing individuals to be culturally and socially anchored in multiple locales. Today’s immigrant, therefore, can retain more intense, interconnected, and even legitimized links (cultural, economic, familial, and political) than ever before. This is why some scholars argue that transnationalism renders obsolete the traditional terms assimilation and integration.

Numerous factors can affect the degree and speed of the assimilation process, and even if assimilation is or is not possible. Clearly, one element is the cultural milieu of the host country with respect to the “other.” On this point, several sharp distinctions exist between the United States and many European countries. The United States has always been a receiving country of immigrants from all over the world, while most European countries have been, until recently, primarily sending countries with far less diversity beyond internal regional differences. In the US citizenship has always been jus soli, literally “right of soil” or birthright citizenship. Excluding cooperative EU arrangements, most European countries have traditionally utilized jus sanguinis citizenship, which literally means “right of blood,” or according to the parents’ citizenship.

Following from that distinction is how Americans and Europeans typically describe others, as well as themselves. In the United States, American is the common denominator and thus the last term. For example, it would be “Czech American” and not “American Czech.” E pluribus unum—“from the many, one”—is the mindset; the first is your heritage and the second your commonality. In Europe, as I have encountered countless times in numerous countries, the reverse is the norm. With bloodlines as the centuries-old determinant of citizenship, one is, for example, never a Hungarian Romanian

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(born in Romania of Hungarian descent) but rather a Romanian Hungarian, or never a Syrian Swede but instead a Swedish Syrian, even if one’s grandparents had migrated from Syria.\textsuperscript{5} Such identifications quite naturally play a role in the assimilation process.

Although the United States seems more predisposed to assimilating newcomers than most European countries, in recent years the arrival of increased numbers of new arrivals, especially from countries that were not previously among the major sending countries, has triggered alarm bells for some. Questions fill the air about the ability of the nation to absorb so many diverse peoples; controversy ensues over their foreign language retention rather than English language acquisition, and over the newcomers’ motivation to assimilate and become citizens. This paper addresses these four concerns, first in terms of perceptions and fears, then in the realities about each.

### The Number of Immigrants

Immigrant totals in the past two decades have been far higher than in previous decades: 9.8 million in the 1990s and 10.3 million in the following decade (see figure 1). Since 1990, the total number of immigrant arrivals now exceeds 24 million, more than the entire population of the Czech Republic.\textsuperscript{6} These numbers are the highest in US history.

The numbers in the aggregate, however, impact less upon Americans than does perception of the immigrant presence in one’s community, whether in residential patterns, school enrollments, shopping in stores, or jobs. Some of the fifty states attract far more immigrants than the others. California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois—in that order—receive about 62 percent of all immigrants annually. In three states more than one-fifth of the population is foreign-born: California (27 percent), New York (22 percent), and New Jersey (21 percent). Florida and Nevada are close behind at 19 percent. A few other states also have large foreign-born populations: Texas (16 percent), Massachusetts (15 percent), Connecticut and Maryland (14 percent).

\textsuperscript{5} This statement is based on the author’s firsthand knowledge, drawn partly from meetings in 2006 with senators and deputies serving in the Romanian Parliament and representing various national minorities. A typical example is the Romanian senator who rejected my calling him a “Hungarian Romanian,” saying he is “only a Hungarian.” In conversations a few years earlier in Stockholm, a high-level official called third-generation Swedes “immigrants,” as did a Czech senator in reference to the Roma, who had lived there for many generations.

cent), and Arizona and Washington State (13 percent). The foreign-born popu-
lations of the remaining states are also increasing.7

Figure 1  Immigration to the United States, 1820–2010

Some opposition to current immigration results from concern about the
ability of the United States to absorb so many immigrants. Echoing the xen-
ophobic fears of earlier generations, today’s opponents of immigration worry
that US citizens will lose control of the country to foreigners. This time, instead
of past fears about religiously different Catholics and Jews or the physically
different Mediterranean whites who were dark-complexioned, the new anti-
immigration groups fear the significantly growing presence of religiously and/
or physically different immigrants of color.

7 See US Census Bureau, “American Community Survey: 5-Year Estimates,” US Census Bureau,
kits/2015/20151210_acs5yr2014.html.
Composition of the Foreign-Born Population

Certainly, the increase in visible, non-English-speaking minorities has made Americans aware of societal changes. About 12.5 percent of the total US population (38.5 million) are foreign-born, mostly Asians and Hispanics. The 2010 Census racially identified the total population—native- and foreign-born combined—as 72.4 percent white (63.7 percent non-Hispanic white), 12.6 percent black, 4.8 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, 0.9 percent American Indian and Alaska Native, and 2.9 percent multiracial. Hispanics, who can be of any race, constituted 16.3 percent of the total population. These are substantially different proportions than in 1990, when blacks were the largest minority group at 12 percent, Hispanics comprised 9 percent, and Asians accounted for 3 percent.

Many immigrants still come from European countries, but they have accounted for less than 10 percent of the total number in recent years as a result of the large increase in the numbers of Asian and Hispanic immigrants (see figure 2). Given the higher birth rates and economic deprivation in the sending countries of Asia and Latin America, and the ongoing processes of chain migration and family reunification—coupled with lower birth rates in Europe—we can safely assume the continued dominance of developing nations in sending new immigrants to the United States. That means the increased presence of people of color, sometimes not from the Judeo-Christian tradition, might further prompt an “us” and “them” mentality, and possibly then affect the progress of assimilation.

Because the foreign-born population, continuing a centuries-old pattern, continues to have a higher birth rate than the native-born population, today’s immigrants will probably have a greater impact on the size and composition of the population than previous generations because of the nation’s lower birth rate. To illustrate, in 2010, about 23 percent of all US children under the age of 18 had at least one foreign-born parent. If current trends continue, by 2065 the US foreign-born may be 18 percent of the total US population.

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Figure 2  Percentage Distribution of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: 1960 to 2010

Language Usage

For many native-born Americans and descendants of European immigrants, the presence of groups who do not speak English goes to the heart of their assumptions that the newcomers are not even trying to assimilate. The large-scale presence of an immigrant group—whether on a national level, such as the Hispanics, or in a local area, such as the Vietnamese in California—intensifies this perception. On a personal level, witnessing foreign-born parents speaking in public to their children in the language of their homeland or seeing signs or television programs in languages other than English also deepens concerns individuals feel.

With a million or more immigrants entering the United States each year, the extensive use of other languages alarms many nativists. The US Census Bureau identifies 20.8 percent of Americans, whether foreign- or native-born, as not speaking English at home. Of these, 25.3 million said they speak English less than “very well.”

For generations, English-language acquisition has been both a benchmark in the assimilation process and a key variable in public acceptance of newcom-
ers. Awareness of an increase in public displays of bilingual signage or foreign-language conversations thus often serves to intensify nativist resentment.11

**Citizenship**

One lament often heard in recent decades is that today’s immigrants to the US do not want to assimilate. In 1998, a major newspaper, the *Washington Post*, ran a five-part series that questioned if “one nation, indivisible” was now an anachronism, given what it claimed was “immigrants shunning the idea of assimilation.”12 That series paralleled thoughts expressed by noted historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who denounced “the cult of ethnicity” (an insistence on maintaining vibrant ethnic subcultures) as a forerunner to the imminent “balkanization” of US society.13 His reference to the then-ongoing violence and “ethnic cleansing” among Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs in the Balkan Peninsula was a scary one. No one wanted US society disintegrating into a collectivity of groups hostile to one another.

Immigrants, as strangers in their new society, cluster together and re-create in miniature the land they left behind with parallel social institutions and a support network in their ethnic communities, a place where they adhere to the language, dress, and cultural norms of their native land. As the years pass—possibly across several generations—these ethnic groups in the US usually assimilate, even as vestiges of cultural pluralism remain. One hallmark of this process of convergence is citizenship.

As a nation of immigrants, American identity has long rested on the commonality of a mixed heritage, as Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (1782) noted in asking and answering the question, “What is an American? He is … that strange mixture of blood that you will find in no other country.”14 Since then, about 80 million immigrants have arrived. Accordingly, the US experience has been the continual expansion of its definition of a *mainstream American*, evolving from originally referring only to British Americans, then to Northern and Western Europeans, next to all Europeans (whites), and now—in

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multi-racial America with a biracial president—to African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics as well.

In European countries mainstream identities have remained fairly intact, despite growing diversity. The inclusion of others into an expanding national identity has not occurred, and for many, an immigrant is anyone whose bloodline is not of that nation, regardless of their place of birth or multi-generational residence. Such a viewpoint is a barrier to the integration of newcomers and maintenance of social cohesion. As a result, ethnocentric views prevail on both sides, encouraging the prevalence of national minorities who usually remain part of the outgroup.

In contrast, any society encouraging its foreign-born residents to become citizens by not placing daunting obstacles in their path (e.g., lengthy residency requirements, bureaucratic mazes, expensive fees) promotes its own societal cohesion. That policy of inclusiveness, accompanied by positive actions flowing from it, is in essence an unspoken but clear statement that “we want you to be part of us.” Such a hospitable environment can motivate foreigners to identify more with the host country and eventually become an active participant in the larger society, not just within their own ethnic community. Once on that path, becoming a citizen is the logical next step in structural assimilation, as the newcomer becomes more involved in the political process.

The foregoing discussion returns us to concerns about today’s immigrants not wanting to assimilate. If those who become US citizens are demonstrating a desire to join American society fully through this formal process, what do the data illustrated in figure 3 tell us about the newcomers’ willingness to become citizens compared to past generations? At first glance, those fears about non-assimilation appear justified. Arrivals since 2000 (depicted in the top horizontal bars) have progressively far lower rates of acquiring citizenship than earlier cohorts. However, to understand structural assimilation completely, we need to look beyond these percentages.

A strong correlation exists between the length of US residence and the proportion of those becoming citizens, and this is a pattern that has continued for decades. For example, although eight out of ten of all immigrants who arrived before 1980 are citizens now, less than half of them were citizens in the 1990s. Similarly, each succeeding year witnesses steadily increasing numbers of people naturalizing (780,000 in 2013, up from 757,000 in 2012 and 694,000 in 2011). Interestingly, Asia has been the leading region of origin of new citizens in most years since 1976.15

Figure 3  Percentage of Naturalized Citizens by Region of Birth: 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>91.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A minimum of five years of residency is required for eligibility for US citizenship. Currently, persons who naturalize spend a median of seven years as “lawful permanent residents” before becoming citizens, a length of time that has remained fairly constant for decades. This continuing pattern and the steadily increasing numbers of naturalized citizens speak of the still-strong process of assimilation that is occurring in the United States.

Language Usage Revisited

As mentioned earlier, one-fifth of the US population speak a language other than English at home, and foreign language usage in signage and conversation is frequent in public. Because this has always been a reality since the nation’s founding, the question before us is whether or not English language acquisition is less than in the past, and the answer is “no.” For example, a highly respected research organization, the Pew Hispanic Center, reported that while only 38 percent of Latino immigrants speak English very well, 92 percent of their adult children do so, and that figure increases to 96 percent in the next generation.17

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In the largest longitudinal study of second-generation Americans (5,200 immigrant children in Miami and San Diego), researchers found that 99 percent spoke fluent English and less than one-third maintained fluency in their parents’ tongues by age seventeen. Similarly, another study in southern California revealed the preferences by 73 percent of second-generation immigrants with two foreign-born parents to speak English at home instead of their native tongue. By the third generation, more than 97 percent of these immigrants—Chinese, Filipino, Guatemalan, Korean, Mexican, Salvadoran, and Vietnamese—preferred to speak only English at home.

On a broader scale, the Census Bureau reports that, of those US residents aged eighteen to sixty-four who spoke a language other than English at home in 2011, 58 percent (more than 35 million) reported that they also spoke English “very well.” When combined with those who spoke only English at home, 91 percent of the population aged five and older had no difficulty speaking English. Often, those who do not speak English well or at all are disproportionately the elderly (especially those in ethnic enclaves), the most recently arrived, the undocumented, and the least educated.

Consequently, we may conclude that, despite extensive evidence of non-English-language usage in the United States, it is due primarily to the greater number of immigrants and not to any new pattern against fluency in English.

The Number of Immigrants Revisited

Context is important in any discussion about the highest-ever number of immigrants arriving in recent decades. Because both the US and world total populations are also the highest ever, we require a means to make comparisons, irrespective of changing population sizes. We do so by utilizing the immigration rate, which is computed per thousand persons in the general population by dividing the sum of the annual immigration totals by the sum of annual US population totals for the same number of years. At present, the annual immigration rate in the United States is about 3.1. That number is lower than

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in recent decades and far below the high-water marks of 10.5 in the 1880s and 10.4 in the 1900s. And, in comparing aggregate statistics over the four-decade periods of the three major waves of immigration to the United States, we find additional evidence that the current situation is less intense than was the case in earlier years (see figure 4).

**Figure 4** Relationship between Immigration and Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th># Immigrants</th>
<th>U. S. Population</th>
<th>Immigration Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820–1860</td>
<td>5 million</td>
<td>31 million</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880–1920</td>
<td>24 million</td>
<td>106 million</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–2013</td>
<td>30 million</td>
<td>317 million</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from data from the US Office of Immigration Statistics*

Another indicator is the *net migration rate*, which compares the difference between the number of persons entering and leaving a country during the year per one thousand persons. By 2015, the US net migration rate was 3.86, placing it thirty-fourth among countries in the ratio of immigrants to population. Among the countries with higher proportions of immigrants vs. emigrants are Norway (7.25), Belgium (5.87), Canada (5.66), Australia (5.65), Austria (5.56), Sweden (5.42), Italy (4.10), and Ireland (4.09).22

**Population Composition Revisited**

By 2030, the US population will have increased from 321.2 million in 2015 to 359.4 million, and to 398.3 million in 2050, thereby maintaining the country’s position as the world’s third most populous country (behind China and India).23 Most of this growth will come from immigrants and their immediate descendants. For example, as shown in figure 5, immigration from Africa and the Caribbean will help drive up the black population from 42.5 million in 2015 to about 56 million (14 percent) in 2050. Asians may nearly double from 17.5 million in 2015 to 34.4 million (9 percent) by 2050, and Hispanics

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will more than double from 56.8 to 105.5 million (27 percent). Meanwhile, non-Hispanic whites will drop from 62 to 47 percent.\(^{24}\)

Such numbers are misleading because these projections may fall victim to the *Dillingham Flaw*, which is an inaccurate comparison based on simplistic categorizations and anachronistic judgments.\(^{25}\) Who is to say that today’s group categories will have the same meaning in the second half of the twenty-first century? To illustrate, *Hispanic* is an ethnic classification, but Hispanics may be of any race. Over the next two generations, many Hispanics will probably assimilate, and as members of the mainstream, ethnicity will not be their everyday reality. In fact, it is already happening, as is evidenced by the steadily increasing number of Hispanic Americans marrying outside their ethnic group. In 2014, more than 2.7 million married couples had only one Hispanic spouse, up from 2.2 million in 2010. Of all married Hispanic couples (especially second-generation), 28 percent have a non-Hispanic spouse and that proportion is growing steadily. Of all unmarried Hispanic couples with children, 39 percent had only one Hispanic partner, also a steadily increasing percentage.\(^{26}\) The children born from these exogamous marriages are obviously of mixed-ethnic heritage, and if this trend continues, one day, *Hispanic American* may no longer be a distinctly visible ethnic category, but rather a marker of one’s heritage.

Even so, the United States will continue to become far more diverse—religiously and racially—than ever before. As it does so, its society will be tested as to how well it adapts to its changing demographics. History teaches us that culture evolves; it is not static. As Charles Dickens once wrote, “Change begets change.”\(^{27}\) It is too soon to evaluate how significantly this change will affect American society, but we can reasonably assume it will have some effect. That outcome will *not* be a change in the core culture or sense of national identity, given the American cultural milieu. The cultural context of the host society is of vital importance, and in the United States, children identify with the country in which they grow up, not the homeland of their parents. Everyday ethnicity is a reality for immigrant families, but, by the third generation, ethnicity typically exists only as a marker of one’s heritage and not as an ongoing practice.


Assimilation and pluralism have always been part of the American experience and that will not change. What we are experiencing today in large-scale immigration and minority group challenges to the status quo is part of the continuing dynamics of a nation evolving to make its reality resemble its ideals more closely.

Despite fears about divisiveness, the mainstream group is larger than ever before. Despite concerns about language retention, today’s immigrants want to learn English and do so no more slowly than past immigrants and perhaps even more quickly. Despite some people’s fears about the fabric of US society unraveling, more immigrants than ever before are choosing to be woven into that fabric through citizenship.

Multiculturalism is neither new nor a threat to the stabilization and integration of US society. Extremists come and go, but the core culture remains strong, the American Dream prevails, and men and women seek to be part of it, bringing with them the diversity that is America. Multiculturalism, then, is an old, continuing presence that strengthens not weakens, enriches not diminishes, and nourishes not drains—a civilization whose character and temperament have long reflected the diversity of its people.
Bibliography


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Creolization and All That Jazz: Culture Formation in New Orleans

BERNDT OSTENDORF

ABSTRACT: New Orleans was founded in 1719, situated on the nexus of three European colonial empires and three core cultures, France, Spain and Anglo-America. European settlers interacted (and mixed) with enslaved Africans, with free people of color, with Native Americans, and with migrants from Spain, Mexico, Canada, Germany, the Caribbean, the American colonies and Cuba. At the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century there was massive immigration from France after the French Revolution and from St. Domingue after the Haitian revolution—doubling the population. After the Louisiana Purchase (1803) this francophone Creole ancienne population was over-layered by an anglophone American port city with Irish, German, Jewish and later Italian immigrants creating a complicated political urban arena with a byzantine caste system and complicated racial order, but also with a range of unique subcultural fusions across the color line. As an urban space and in terms of culture formation New Orleans has more in common with the Caribbean than with North America. The Civil War and Reconstruction threatened to force the Caribbean city into an American mold, particularly in terms of race relations and public policy. But this pressure to assimilate to standards of anglo-conformity also energized culture formation processes that may best be described as antagonistic creolization. Over time this layering of historical scapes has given us Mardi Gras, the Second Line, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, jazz funerals, Mardi Gras Indians, gospel music and a unique set of cuisines which represent a cultural counterpoint and a permanent challenge to Anglo-Saxon habits of the heart. The crowning result of these processes of creolization has been to set up New Orleans as the cradle of jazz—the only truly American art form and a true creole.

KEYWORDS: New Orleans; creolization; culture formation; indigenization

In order to appreciate the special qualities of New Orleans as an urban space it is essential to first comprehend the historical layering that went into the formation of New Orleans culture and then grasp both the dynamic synergy and the multiple force fields between these layers and scapes: forces of assimilation,

1 This paper draws on and updates material previously printed in Berndt Ostendorf, New Orleans: Creolization and All That Jazz (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2013).
dissimilation, acculturation and antagonism. To do this we must understand the historical indigenization of the city’s unique sets of multiple scapes that come together to form a rich cultural gumbo: streetscapes, ethnoscapes, financescapes, foodscapes, soundscapes, seascapes, landscapes. Dr. John in his autobiography *Under a Hoodoo Moon* captures the hidden complexity and connectedness of New Orleans culture in a fitting image:

In New Orleans, everything—food, music, religion, even the way people talk and act—has deep, deep roots; and like the tangled veins of cypress roots that meander this way and that in the swamps, everything in New Orleans is interrelated, wrapped around itself in ways that aren’t always obvious.

These processes of syncretism and synergy are deeply rooted in the senses and in what one might call libidinal urban exchange. Many cities of this world may have any single one of the characteristic layers or scapes mentioned below, but it is their collusion in an urban space and their specific interactions over three centuries that makes New Orleans an outstanding example of what I would like to call antagonistic creolization. Here is my personal list of scapes that need to be understood first in order to comprehend the hidden mysteries of New Orleans. It will become clear that the concept of assimilation is of limited service to explain the complications of New Orleans culture formation.

**Cultural Palimpsest of Three Colonial Empires**

New Orleans was founded and grew in the contact zone of three major empires: France, Spain and Anglo-America. Founded by France in 1718, it was ceded to Spain in 1766. The town was Spanish during a crucial period of growth, the early charter period, when many cultural habits gelled. New Orleans burnt down twice, in 1788 and again in 1794, and was rebuilt by Creole artisans under Spanish control. Therefore the so-called French Quarter may just as well be called Spanish Quarter. The three most impressive buildings, St. Louis Cathedral, the Cabildo and the Presbytère date from this period. Finally the territory was bought by the United States in the most spectacular real estate

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3 Dr. John [Mac Rebennack], *Under a Hoodoo Moon: The Life of Dr. John the Night Tripper* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 250.
transaction in modern history: The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, engineered by Thomas Jefferson, cost the United States a mere $15 million. For that sum the young republic received the Louisiana Territory, that is, the western part of the continent up to the Rockies. As a result of this history there are three layers of colonial practice that form a palimpsest of public space, of customs, habits and laws. Three systems of slavery, three racial (and sexual) etiquettes, three legal systems, three governmental bureaucracies and traditions of governance, three types of architecture with specific traditions of public space, three culinary, and several religious traditions thrived at the periphery of three colonial empires and are now layered in a rich cultural memory. Because of this tricultural genesis New Orleans should not be seen as the southernmost North-American city, but the northernmost city of the Caribbean. And in that historical, demographic and economic setting it is one of the first cosmopolitan cities of early modernity.

**Economy: Seaport and River Port**

New Orleans’ dual role as a seaport and a river port had important ramifications. The seaport served the Atlantic and made hemispheric trade networking with Europe, Africa and the Caribbean possible. The river port connected the American colonies with the Atlantic rim and became the meeting place for multicultural sailors as carriers of culture. The Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs of New Orleans were inspired by a tradition of urban slaves in Havana, probably transported from there by merchant marines. (In Cuba the Buena Vista Social Club is a belated heir to this tradition.) The economy of New Orleans harbor was dominated by a single commodity: sugar in the eighteenth, cotton in the nineteenth and oil in the twentieth centuries. Hence New Orleans began as an early captive of globalization. Each commodity created its attendant urban ecology and sensory spectrum. It is often forgotten that before the Civil War, New Orleans was the second largest port of the United States after New York. The river port connected with the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Midwestern hinterland and Canada. Immigrants who wanted to travel to the Midwest sought out ships that went to New Orleans, not to New York. Ships brought manufactured goods or immigrants from Europe and returned with cotton.
Rule of Law: Three Revolutions

New Orleans was deeply affected by three world revolutions: the French, the Haitian and the American. First, there were the demographic after-effects of these revolutions. The French revolution drove a number of foreign French, most of them professionals, to New Orleans, and the Haitian revolution and subsequent exodus caused the population to double between 1810 and 1820. Both augmented a francophone professional class at the very moment when the Americans had arrived intent on improving and modernizing the city. As the city governance became more “Americanized,” French or Creole cultural traditions were stubbornly and defensively reaffirmed. This accounts for the edge of resentment and antagonism in Creole identity.

Second, the cultural impact of Saint Domingue on New Orleans needs to be studied in greater detail. The Haitian and French revolutionary utopias are alive in the population and continue to affect voting behavior. To this day New Orleans’ Creoles cherish the radical universalism of the Haitian and French revolutions whereas Protestant African Americans hold on to cultural nationalism, for example, to maintaining historical black colleges. The recognition that the Haitian revolution was the only successful one by slaves has made Toussaint L’Ouverture a revered figure of New Orleans folklore. Each of the three revolutions introduced a different spin on civil rights. The French and Haitian revolutions went for a radical universalism in civil rights. The American Revolution and its Constitution held that promise only in theory for the gens de couleur libres. In practice civil rights were displaced by the protection of property, by chattel slavery and the one-drop rule. As a consequence New Orleans became the most important entrepôt of the US slave trade. Homer Plessy, who gave his name to Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), was a New Orleans Creole committed to the universalism of the Haitian and French revolutions. With his legal action Plessy put the American Constitution to a test—which it lost. Many of the lawyers and journalists supporting the legal action had a Saint Domingue background.

Third, it is in the area of music that New Orleans owes most to the Haitian revolution. Most of the refugees entered New Orleans via Cuba. The first serious American composer, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, whose mother was from Saint Domingue, learned his music from his black Haitian wet-nurse. Throughout his life he remained committed to a Caribbean style of music as is demonstrated in his “Bamboula: Danse Nègre.” Many jazz musicians including the self-proclaimed “inventor of jazz,” Jelly Roll Morton, have ancestors from Saint Domingue, which accounts for a musical quality known as “funky.”
Morton spoke of a noticeable “Latin tinge” and others call it the “habanera roll” which adds a propulsive, Latin energy to the New Orleans style.

**Slavery and Race: Creoles and African Americans**

There has always been a powerful African connection active in New Orleans. Its strength is due to a homogeneous African charter generation from Senegambia. The second important source for slaves was the Congo. Some scholars argue that in 1760 New Orleans, black culture was more coherent than the white demimonde.5 Whereas the white population consisted of drifters, prostitutes, deported galley slaves, trappers, gold-hunters, adventurers and foreign legionaries from many different nations, all slaves imported to New Orleans between the years 1720 and 1732 came from one cultural region. They belonged to what was then known as the Bambara Empire in what today is Senegambia. Later a sprinkling of slaves from the Congo was added. Normally slave traders would mix their slaves in order to prevent communication that would lead to plotting or insurrection. Most importantly the Bambara and Congo slaves brought with them a small market economy and plenty of crafts—hence there is a strong African baseline due to an early synthesis, that is, creolization. Traditions such as the market on Congo Square, Vodun, Mardi Gras Indians drumming practices, Second Line Parades, jazz, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs are evidence of this fact. In the early period the plantation economy of Louisiana was lagging behind other colonial enterprises. In order to save on expenses, Louisiana slave owners allowed slaves to plant their own provisions and develop small markets or to hire themselves out as craftsmen. This practice not only resulted in Monday to Friday slavery with weekends off, but it also gave slaves and free blacks enormous leverage and opened the door to material independence. Particularly during Spanish rule, many slaves earned their own money to buy their freedom. By the time of the Louisiana Purchase this practice of self-purchase, called *coartación*, had resulted in the largest community of free blacks on the continent. Congo Square began in the late eighteenth century as a market that blacks, slaves or free, had created for selling their provisions to the city. When a Cédula Real by the Spanish king ordered the cessation of market activities on Congo Square for reasons of public safety, the governor wrote back that the king might as well close the city, for it had come to depend on that market. The governor simply ignored the

command of the distant king. By the early nineteenth century Congo Square had become the center of black dancing immortalized by George Washington Cable’s essay “The Dance in Congo Square.” Cable, however, fails to mention the most important fact: there would not have been a dance without the previous market. Then there was an active Maroon culture where run-away slaves bonded with Indians in the extensive bayous. The tradition of Mardi Gras Indians and their mythology are the cultural products of this bonding. Most of all, memories of a porous tripartite racial system persist which is more Caribbean than North American. The elaborate system of dual marriages, known as *plaqage*, had created first a sensory intimacy between the races and a kinship system of “dual” families—one black, one white—bearing the same last names and sharing their DNA. Manumission was widespread as many Creole slave owners gave freedom to their biracial sons and daughters. The dual family track is traceable in the history of jazz, where there are black and white family dynasties with identical names, a tradition immortalized by George Washington Cable in *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (1880). Before the abolition of slavery the Creoles of color formed the largest group of free blacks on the continent.

**Religion: Catholicism, Spiritualism, Vodun**

There is a great variety of religious expression in New Orleans. First we have several versions of Catholicism with a French, Spanish, German, Irish, Italian, Afro-Creole touch; then there are any number of Protestant denominations; but most of all the off-beat religious traditions are active in New Orleans. Spiritualist Churches, Santería from Cuba, Vodun from Haiti, and Root Work from the American South, all add the special flavor to the gumbo of religious energy. Their confluence created a particular taste for a non-dogmatic spiritualism and for an energetic, liturgical *mise en scène*. This fountain of religious enthusiasm explains among other things the rise of gospel music and of a certain kind of rock ‘n’ roll. (Not surprisingly Mahalia Jackson hails from New Orleans.) Mardi Gras Indians, the caretakers of African drumming practices, often network with Spiritualist Churches. Many future musicians have learned their musical skills in such rocking churches. The emergence of jazz funerals was only possible in a dance-driven, religious New Orleans with its tradition of a second line. Unfortunately many of the small store-front, Spiritualist churches in the

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Lower Ninth Ward were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, as were the neighborhoods that sustained them.

**Immigration and Ethnicity:**
**Irish, Germans, Italians, Dalmatians, Mexicans**

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 the city had 10,000 inhabitants; by 1840 their number had risen to 102,000. By this time New Orleans had become the second largest immigrant port after New York. After 1825 a multi-ethnic immigration set in and radically changed the demographic profile of the city. The Tulane historian Lawrence Powell writes: “A major entrepôt to the Mississippi Valley, and between 1812 and 1840 the fastest growing urban area in North America, the Crescent City by 1860 boasted the highest percentage of foreign-born white persons of any urban area in America—45 percent, a figure that is probably too low.” The super-imposition first of an Anglo-American and then of an immigrant population on the Afro-Hispano-French Creole traditions created a new set of social problems, for the Americans brought with them an economic program, as well as a new racial order with the color line and the one-drop rule. Again the result is a very special palimpsest of conflicting traditions. Now German, Irish and Italian immigrant workers, craftsmen and traders competed with Creoles and blacks in a small market economy that was non-industrial and non-manufacturing. Hence there emerged a checkerboard settlement pattern, unique for small market economies with a strong craft tradition. Blacks and whites who were competing for the same jobs settled in close proximity, hence inter-racial contacts were more numerous. Jazz emerged in these inter-ethnic urban spaces. The Catholic *ancienne population* (the Creoles) rubbed shoulders with Protestant Americans; French-speaking Catholic slaves and free blacks encountered Protestant ex-slaves from the Mississippi Delta, then ethnic immigration added Germans, Irish and Italians to the melee—this created conflicts, but it also set free multipolar cultural synergies. In 1836 the inherent divisions became unmanageable and the city divided into three municipalities, one American—today the business district—a second for the Creole population in the French Quarter and Tremé, a third for an ethnic mix in Faubourg Marigny and Bywater. This political boundary maintenance lasted for two decades. After the Civil War, New Orleans

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received a massive migration of former slaves from Mississippi, Alabama and the Carolinas. A marked division in the black population between sophisticated Creole-Catholic-francophone blacks (downtown) and simple, illiterate African American Protestant blacks (uptown) continues to impact politics and cultural practices today. New Orleans school politics and universities reflect this multi-racial-ethnic mix to this day. Tulane, Xavier, Loyola, UNO, Dillard and Southern service these different constituencies. New Orleans’ own dialect known as “Yat” reflects this immigrant history. Linguists call it a phonetic mix between the accents of Brooklyn and New Orleans ethnic workers plus residual Creole admixtures.

Catastrophes

New Orleans and the lower Mississippi river saw repeated outbreaks of yellow fever. Napoleon’s army in St. Domingue had experienced severe losses (up to 75 per cent) from yellow fever before he gave up and withdrew as a political player from the area. Today few people realize that the Louisiana Purchase was made possible by yellow fever. After the Louisiana Purchase New Orleans experienced a series of yellow fever epidemics, the worst in 1853 when the toll was 7,849 dead, and another 4,000 in 1878. From 1817 to 1905 a total of 45,000 New Orleanians had died of yellow fever. In other words, “the city that care forgot” had experienced a long history of living with disaster by the time Katrina struck in 2005. The human casualties of Hurricane Katrina reached a “mere” 1,800 dead, but this time the material losses were immense. The public recognition of its aft ereff ects and the record of its recovery may be organized along the good news, bad news trope: For New Orleans after Katrina the record is mixed. Whether the good news outweighs the bad or vice versa depends very much on what aspect of the city you look at, whether you consider macroeconomic factors or the quotidian experiences of individual victims, whether you ask African Americans and Creoles in the Seventh and Ninth Wards or whites in the Garden District, Carrollton or Metairie. Catastrophes such as yellow fever or Katrina bring into the open the deep social, economic, and cultural divisions that have long plagued New Orleans, particularly the class


privileges of certain rich white families, the inadequate social services and the political corruption in city hall. But then the city soldiers on and tries to ignore the bad news. Both after the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 and after Katrina the question was raised whether to celebrate “frivolous” Mardi Gras or not. Both times the Krewes decided to parade. The *New Orleans Louisianian* warned in 1878, “that we are about to get supreme contempt as a silly people, or a tender pity as madmen who know no better.”¹⁰ And city councilwoman Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson said in 2005 after Katrina “we can’t afford to miss a beat.” In New Orleans the beat alone keeps the city going.¹¹

**Carnival Culture: Mardi Gras, Mardi Gras Indians, Zulu, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs**

My main thesis: A tolerant Caribbean culture in which everyone participates is a substitute for the lack of a civil society. Examples of this carnival culture include Mardi Gras, Zulu, Mardi Gras Indians, Jazz Fest, and any number of ad hoc festivals. Public misrule is over-layered by a string of parties. While urban politics may divide, carnivalesque street culture connects. This tradition is already in evidence with the early emergence of a masked ball culture between 1803 and the 1850s where the two races met under cover of a mask. The system of *placage* (informal marriages between octoroons and white planters) increased the number of free blacks of (light) color who participated in this carnival culture and its sexual license. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Governor William C. C. Claiborne complained that Americans talked about improvement, whereas Creoles were only interested in dance and music. The French civil servant Moreau de St. Méry identified certain Caribbean traits concerning the management of senses that still apply to the city at large: “The Creole loses sight of everything that is not part of satisfying his penchants, disdaining everything not marked with the seal of pleasure, giving himself up freely to the swirl that carries him along. Transported by his love of dance, music, parties, and everything that charms and entertains his delirium, he seems to live only for voluptuous pleasures.”¹² The official Mardi Gras parade as it exists today was introduced by the American business class (modeled after English and French

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Renaissance pageants) in order to control the inter-racial octoroon balls and the attendant street carnival, which was getting out of hand. Though a prominent spectacle for the tourist trade the official Mardi Gras is by no means of central importance for the locals. In fact, today’s carnival operates on several socio-political and cultural levels: First, the official Mardi Gras parades of the white krewes serves as a control mechanism to maintain law and order, affirm a patriarchal system and prevent interracial mayhem. Second, the black Zulu parade is an anti-carnival or reversed minstrel show that mocks the social pretensions of the white business class by adopting and exaggerating their excessive caricature of black behavior. Third, the spontaneous street carnival of the Mardi Gras Indians is virtually uncontrollable and thumbs its nose at the forces of law and order. Fourth, there is the gay carnival in the French Quarter with its politically incorrect, brazen gender transgressions. It speaks for the resiliency of New Orleanians that Mardi Gras was not canceled after Katrina; indeed the first post-Katrina carnival in 2006 thematized the will to survive. In his 2006 documentary *When the Levees Broke*, Spike Lee captures the spirit of carnival in various neighborhoods destroyed by Katrina.

**Food and Cuisine: Creole, Cajun, N’awlins**

Harvey Levenstein attributes the rise of what he calls “negative nutrition” in Protestant Anglo-America to a basic fear of New World abundance, a fear promoted by dietary gurus such as Sylvester Graham, John Harvey Kellogg and Horace Fletcher. “Food has replaced sex as object of guilt… a culture that seems doomed to celebrate its food abundance while simultaneously avoiding enjoying it too much.” Their crusades for abstinence and anti-sensory repression have resulted in America’s *dietary confusion*. Here New Orleans is the exception to the American rule. Many American cities may have good restaurants that bravely battle these repressive habits. But New Orleans according to the Zagat Survey does not suffer from dietary confusion; instead it has three distinct cuisines: Creole, Cajun, and N’awlins. “Creole is the European-by-birth urban cuisine of the sophisticated French and Spanish settlers of the city that’s been seasoned with the aromatic herbs and spices of New Orleans’

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African, Native American and Caribbean ancestors. A mix of sweet, salty and hot tastes from a variety of ethnic origins is added, always relying heavily on the availability of fresh local ingredients.” This food is found at Galatoire’s, Antoine’s, or Brennan’s. Roux and Gumbo Filé create a typical New Orleans sensation in terms of smell and taste. “Cajun is the earthy, spicy, rural cuisine of the Southwest Louisiana Bayou country. Developed in home kitchens, it is dominated by what many chefs now call the holy trinity of seasonings—chopped celery, onion and green pepper.” Though Cajuns do not properly belong to New Orleans there has been a massive immigration of rural Cajun cooking—particularly of its black version—to the city, a spirit of fusion which has given rise to the final and most interesting culinary tradition: “N’awlins combines Creole and Cajun dishes with Italian, Country or Classic French—and even an occasional Caribbean or German dish. ‘Haute New Orleans’ and ‘Down Home N’awlins’ respectively, describe fancy restaurant and simple home versions of New Orleansstyle cooking.”

My personal favorites here were Upperline and Uglesich restaurants, the latter a Creole-Dalmatian fusion cuisine.

Literary Profile: A Sense of Place

New Orleans belongs to the small number of American cities with a distinct literary profile. No city in the United States, with the possible exception of New York, has a stronger sense of place. After the Civil War, the city went into deep economic decline. But a veritable New Orleans renaissance occurred during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and became the chronicler of the languid, exotic, mysterious, Creole life style. Lafcadio Hearn and George Washington Cable did much to popularize this moribund urban culture just as it was expiring, thus adding the typical nostalgic spin to these cherished traditions, which thus became the motor of the emerging tourist industry. The literary interpretation of this conflict-ridden languid decline can be found in the works of Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Kate Chopin. Many authors such as Sherwood Anderson and William Faulkner were profoundly attracted by the aura of decay, the latter also by the fact that prohibition did not seem to have any effect on the pursuit of pleasure or the availability of liquor. Faulkner called the city an aging courtesan, thus capturing a certain feminine, laid-back spirit. During the twenties the French Quarter became a “Greenwich Village South” with the journal Double Dealer expressing New Orleans’ ambiguity about modernism. Faulkner’s New Orleans Sketches and

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later his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) capture his own ambivalent attitude of distancing from and involvement with the New Orleans scene. Tennessee Williams enjoyed the free bohemian and decadent world of New Orleans and stressed the cosmopolitan sense of freedom. Lyle Saxon recorded the wacky folklore of the city that gave him the moniker Mr. French Quarter. Lillian Hellman used New Orleans as a setting for her play *Toys in the Attic* (1960). New Orleans’ languid, lazy, laissez-faire approach to religion, business, politics, law enforcement, labor, intellectual pursuit and sexuality excited the imagination of many a fugitive from puritan prohibition-ridden North America. A. J. Liebling called Louisiana politics the greatest free show on earth, and Robert Penn Warren, a typical refugee from the puritan North, immortalized Louisiana politics, especially Huey Long, in *All the Kings’ Men* (1946). Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961) is “sunk in the everydayness of his own life” and John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980) celebrates the carnivalesque outrage of the city. Both are milestones of New Orleans storytelling. Toole’s gargantuan character Ignatius Reilly represents a distillation of New Orleans’ transgressions “a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas” as Walker Percy calls him, an “intellectual ideologue, deadbeat, goof-off, glutton who is in violent revolt against the entire modern age.” Anne Rice’s fascination with vampires draws upon the strand of sensual morbidity in the city that reflects her early upbringing. A thriving black literary scene involving Tom Dent, Brenda Marie Osbey and Kalamu ya Salaam, particularly in poetry, developed after the seventies until Katrina swept it all away.

**Jazz and Dance: African Rules of Performance**

Before jazz there was a strong tradition in classical music, particularly opera. But it was the dance-driven musical culture that put New Orleans on the world map of music. The propulsive quality that musicians call “funky” owes its genesis to New Orleans dance. The second line is a common training ground for musicians and dancers, and represents a kinesthetic arena of the first order. New Orleans’ best known music, jazz, emerged from the combination of many factors: (1) the social stratification of Creoles and African Americans, (2) the decline of Creoles of color and their exchange with an African American blues culture, (3) the surge of a Latin tinge and musical and demographic exchange.

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with Cuba and Veracruz in Mexico, (4) the spatial proximity of black and white ethnic entertainment cultures, (5) the love of dancing in the street by the second line. There was a love of music in the city ranging from classical music and Italian bel canto and French opera to ethnic popular dance traditions and black spiritual and blues. In the early nineteenth century New Orleans maintained two opera companies that would regularly travel to New York and Havana. A trans-racial musical exchange has worked until today: Mardi Gras Indian music liberally quotes from the Cuban musical styles. The white pianist Harry Connick Jr. studied with James Booker. Dr. John (alias Mac Rebennack) learned his funky New Orleans style from Professor Longhair. New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA), a high school for the creative arts, had a lasting impact on the biracial revitalization of the musical scene with Wynton Marsalis leading both the classical and jazz cohorts. Tellingly, he ended up at the Lincoln Center in New York—thus again bridging the gap between classical and popular traditions. And rightly so; for most of the musical innovations in the United States owe an important impulse to the dance-driven musical traditions of New Orleans: New Orleans piano jazz (James Booker, Professor Longhair), rhythm and blues (Fats Domino), country and western (Hank Williams), rock ’n’ roll (Neville Brothers), Zydeco and Cajun (Clifton Chenier), Mardi Gras Indians (Neville Brothers, The Wild Tchoupitoulas), gospel (Mahalia Jackson). The majority of active musicians, some say 80 per cent, lived in the parts of town that were affected by Katrina. After Katrina the mood of local musicians was grim; ten years after it is still ambivalent. Michael White and Fats Domino, who lost their rich collection of memorabilia and instruments, come to mind. So the reconstruction of musical New Orleans depends on the will to bring those neighborhoods back. Not revitalizing these areas would mean that the continued diversification of the musical heritage of New Orleans has come to an end. Mary Niall Mitchell captures the ambivalence using the image of the restored, but unplayable baby grand of Fats Domino as a metaphor: “The residents of the city before Katrina who have lived through the flood’s long aftermath (this writer among them) have proven to be a resilient bunch, but they are not, nor can they ever be, fully restored. By the same token, post-diluvian New Orleans has lost whole segments of itself in the people who have not returned and the neighborhoods that have not been rebuilt.”

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19 See Larry Blumenfeld, “‘It’s not just a party, it’s our life’: Jazz Musicians Led the Way Back to the City after Katrina—But What Is This ‘New’ New Orleans?,” Salon, August 23, 2015, http://www.salon.com/writer/larry_blumenfeld/.

Nik Cohn writes that especially those at the poor end of music making, that is, rap artists, are affected by the near-complete destruction of their creative milieus. Tom Piazza is also skeptical whether New Orleans will regain its central importance. But the New Orleans musical market has improved locally and nationally, and there is a new optimism in the air.

Public Space

New Orleans represents a singular urban space in North America with its own vernacular architectural tradition: shotgun, camel back, Creole cottage, and the balconies of the French-Spanish Quarter. Particularly remarkable is the Creole Hispanic architecture of the plantation houses such as Destrehan or Pitot house and of the West-Indian-inspired Creole Cottages, which were built by planters for their concubines, and the French-Spanish-Creole town architecture of the French Quarter with the elaborate balconies. Their ensembles form real neighborhoods and stabilize a sense of community. Though the age of the automobile has partly destroyed some classic Creole neighborhoods such as Tremé, New Orleans has remained a city for flâneurs with a lively street life. People walk in the French Quarter, Garden District, Carrollton, and Magazine Street and talk to residents who are socializing on the porches. Where else in the United States can you walk the streets with a drink in your hand? Visitors can roam in the Garden District for hours and be overwhelmed with ever-new building styles, a continuous architectural bricolage that has created a unique urban aura. Street names evoke magical and mythical memories. Where else would Race and Religious Street meet, where do you find Piety Street connecting with Desire, where else would Jefferson Davis run into Martin Luther King? Lafcadio Hearn gave expression to a local sentiment in 1880: “It is better to live here in sackcloth and ashes, than to own the whole state of Ohio.”22 And a black street artist on Jackson Square seconds him: “I’d rather be poor in New Orleans than rich in Pittsburgh.”

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Bibliography


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From Mum Bett to Franz Boas: Race and Human Equality in American Intellectual Culture

Mark A. Brandon

Abstract: This paper explores the Enlightenment concept of basic human equality in the history and culture of the United States. Since Jefferson, the notion of equality has always been fraught with hypocrisy, but also charged with cultural power, even to the point of questioning racial and gender inequality. Later, in the nineteenth century, proponents of scientific racism mocked (and maybe feared) the idea of universal equality, which they viewed as naïve when compared to their version of “science.” In the early twentieth century, important intellectuals, such as Franz Boas, returned to the simple, equalitarian foundation, albeit in a new way. By the 1950s and 1960s, much of the civil rights movement still found inspiration in the old formula of equality, even though it was marred by years of duplicity. This paper argues that the idea of the “equality of man” has become an influential (though not uncontested) cultural formula in the United States that has promoted assimilation. It is a recipe that is different from “racial” rights, “national” rights, or “multiculturalism.” Could this old and tested principle still be the best way forward?

Keywords: anthropology; assimilation; civil rights; Enlightenment; equality; immigration; race; racism

Introduction

Although Thomas Jefferson was a slave owner, his famous words, “all men are created equal” could even apply to a black slave woman, and even in eighteenth-century America. In 1781 a Massachusetts slave woman named “Mum” Bett overheard her white owners discussing political ideas. Amazingly, she concluded that the phrase “all men are born free and equal” applied to her, a black slave woman. She managed to take her case to court and win her freedom.¹ This case shows how the idea of equality, even in the cruel age of slavery, could still be relevant to both slaves and women. What follows is a brief history of how

this idea developed over the centuries and became an inspirational piece of American culture. The main argument is that despite hypocrisy and incomplete application, Jefferson's old-fashioned statement has been a central formula for assimilation throughout American history.

Today, this premise of human equality is sometimes written off as old-fashioned at best, or as bourgeois hypocrisy at worst. It is easy to become cynical in the light of continued racism and discrimination, yet even in the darkest times of injustice, some Americans have looked back to Jefferson's words for moral inspiration. Despite the hypocrisy of some, the idea that all men are created equal has always implied that slavery was immoral, that the "facts" of scientific racism were wrong, that segregation was inhumane, and that women should be treated as equal citizens. The idea that all humans are equal and equally deserving of rights has always been exhilarating, and it remains so today.

As a formula for solving the "problem" of assimilation, the equality proposition is somehow unique and different from other solutions. It is not the same as moral claims based on the assumption that certain kinds of humans are essentially different from others, and that therefore an individual's most important rights derive from his or her membership of a special group. It is not the same as the moral system founded on the "rights of nations," which came into vogue in the late nineteenth century and won diplomatic recognition at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Similarly, it is not a moral system based on securing the power of the state singularly for the preservation and benefit of a linguistic or ethnic group. Nor is it quite the same as "multiculturalism," which, although full of old-fashioned liberal intentions, seems to lose the equality of each individual in its celebration of the presumed "rights" of cultures.²

² Although many confuse "national rights" and "individual rights," the two are not the same, and may well be mutually incompatible. The classic critical appraisals of nationalism, the relatively recent invention of national cultures, and the assertion of national "rights" are Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991) and Eric Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). A discussion about the contradiction between individual rights and "multiculturalism" can be found in Allan Bloom: "Here again we live with two contradictory understandings of what counts for man… One is cosmopolitan, the other is particularistic. Human rights are connected with one school, respect for cultures with the other.” Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students (New York: Touchstone, 1987), 191.
Scientific racism and equality

There always have been, and always will be, some Americans who neither desire nor believe in equality, and who insist that human groups are innately different. There was a time in American history, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when science seemed to support this view. For those Americans determined not to believe in equality, Jefferson's words have always been a little threatening.

The acrimony that racists have heaped upon Jefferson's equality proposition is testimony to its persuasive power. The disciples of scientific racism, in America and elsewhere, mocked the old assertion of human equality as a disproven daydream. Equality might be a nice moralistic claim, but scientific “facts” proved it false, and no more discussion was needed. The believers in race science were always a little intimidated by the idea that all men might really be equal.

For racists, one strategy was to argue that the words “all men are created equal” never had anything to do with race. In the very opening pages of The Passing of the Great Race, America's most notorious scientific racist, Madison Grant, felt impelled to explain how Jefferson, one of America's esteemed “Founding Fathers,” could have been so wrong about human nature. Grant's interpretation of Jefferson is based on a logical fallacy, but it is still common today: he avoided the idea of equality itself by focusing instead on the men who uttered it. According to Grant, “The men who wrote the words … ‘that all men are created equal’ … were themselves the owners of slaves and despised Indians as something less than human.” Grant was correct in his recognition that the Founders probably never intended to apply equality to all. This fact does not invalidate the proposition of equality itself.

Grant’s discomfort with this piece of America’s Enlightenment heritage was not unusual. Many champions of race science, and not only Americans, expressed an almost obsessive hatred for what they considered the whimsical and old-fashioned equalitarianism of the eighteenth century. The British race guru Houston Stewart Chamberlain thought that documents such as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man belonged in “the waste-paper basket” and that Enlightenment-style human equality was a “foolish humanitarian day-dream.” In another place, Madison Grant mocked “the loose thinkers of

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4 Quoted in Jonathan Spiro, Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant (Lebanon, NH: University of Vermont Press, 2008), 111.
the French Revolution and their American mimics” and “the dogma of the Brotherhood of man.” The infamous German physical anthropologist Eugen Fischer agreed with Grant and Chamberlain: “genetics has … destroyed the theory of the equality of men.”

The proponents of racial science imposed their fanatical insistence on innate human differences on a real world that often provided more evidence of human similarities. One of the most striking cases was the Berlin Colonial Show of 1896. According to historians David Olusoga and Casper Erichsen, “The official purpose of the show was to expose the unbridgeable gap between savage and cultured peoples.” In order to expose supposedly “civilized” Europeans and Americans to authentic colonial barbarians, shows like the one in Berlin imported human beings as living exhibits. To the exasperation of the German ethnologists, however, many of the Africans in the Berlin Colonial Show were highly Europeanized and refused to wear “authentic” tribal clothing, which they had long ago traded in for more modest and fashionable Western attire. Similar exhibitions throughout the United States were designed to reorder the real, complicated world of cultural syncretism according to the needs of a comparatively simplistic racial ideology. Despite the reality that many Asians and Africans were quick to learn European ways, the scientific racists were blind to all evidence suggesting that similarities between human groups might be more significant than differences. The colonial exhibitions illustrate how intellectuals took active steps to reshape the physical world according to the race fantasies in their heads.

5 Quoted in Spiro, Defending the Master Race, 155.
6 Quoted in Spiro, Defending the Master Race, 358.
7 Casper Erichsen and David Olusoga, The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 95.
9 See Gérard Prunier, “Interview,” Frontline PBS, 1997, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/etc/interview.html. Prunier has argued, with considerable bitterness, that overactive European imaginations turned what were once social and economic roles into irrevocable racial categories (Hutu and Tutsi) in Rwanda: “you have to read anthropology books written about European groups in the 19th century, you measure the cranial angles, and facial angles of peasants from Brittany or Shropshire or wherever … and you have all kinds of complicated theories about their racial origins and where they migrated from and whether they are an upper or a lower race. And we projected all this bogus science on Africa where of course all blacks were considered inferior, but some were more inferior than others… I say, ‘we’ because it was done by the Germans first and the Belgians later, but I think all the Europeans were more or less guilty of the same thing.”
The supposedly scientific fact of race difference and inequality reduced the capacity for moral empathy with other humans and became a justification for cruelty. In the famous case of Ota Benga, the African Pygmy who was displayed as an exhibit in the Bronx Zoo, the New York Times reassured its readers that the unfortunate African was not maltreated because: “The idea that men are all much alike … is now far out of date.” For anyone who was “up to date” on the latest science of the day, it was clearly a waste of time to compare Benga with a white man.

In the same vein, why should lower races be allowed self-government? The cold facts of science made it clear that some men were not evolved enough for self-rule, and any humanitarian objection was considered juvenile. On the occasion of America’s conquest of the Philippines, the famous author Josiah Strong claimed that thanks to modern science, “The opinions of men who in this enlightened day believe that the Filipinos are capable of self-government because everybody is, are not worth considering.” The scientific “fact” of innate differences made old-fashioned empathy irrelevant.

The liberal interpretation of equality

For Americans who have favored equality, Jefferson's words were not a threat, but a central promise of American history. For this reason, the idea has a development of its own, which is independent of slave owners like Jefferson. For the believers in equality, Jefferson's words were only a starting point, a moral goal that might one day be realized. The old eighteenth-century equalitarian principle deserves more respect than it usually gets, and it is worthwhile to trace the development of this moral hypothesis throughout American history.

Indeed, even Jefferson's statement is more of a hopeful hypothesis than the conclusion of meticulous research. Instead of making a detailed argument and presenting evidence, Jefferson seemed satisfied to accept human equality as a “self-evident” truth. When the ever-thoughtful Abraham Lincoln cited the same words in 1863, he was more sophisticated. He just called the idea of human equality a “proposition” and left it at that.

If the validation of the idea was left unclear, so was its application. Who was it for? As Madison Grant so jubilantly pointed out, the Declaration of Independence was not intended to be a proclamation of emancipation or racial equality. Jefferson not only owned slaves, but he may have also believed that

10 Quoted in Spiro, Defending the Master Race, 48.
blacks were inherently inferior to whites. Precisely as a result of this hypocrisy, the old Enlightenment formula of human equality has suffered bitter criticism over the years. Still, the snobbery of bourgeois revolutionaries did not deflate the exhilarating premise of human equality.

The story of Mum Bett is a specific example of how catchy the idea of equality could be in the early America. On a more general level, there is quite a lot of evidence that equality proved inspiring for more than just white men, even in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The equalitarian premise was so powerfully contagious that it was always open to a more liberal interpretation. The French Revolution produced serious discussions about whether slavery and racial discrimination were consistent with the equality statement expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. For example, the National Assembly declared in 1792 that anyone arriving in France, regardless of color, was free. It is well known today that the revolution in France also produced a discussion about female equality.

Eighty-seven years after the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln showed his agreement with Mum Bett that the idea of equality was inconsistent with slavery. Drawing on the American cultural tradition in his majestic Gettysburg Address, Lincoln dedicated the Civil War, and the nation, to the “proposition that all men are created equal.” He offered no apologies for using the words of a slave owner as an argument for ending slavery. Furthermore, the iconic stature of the Gettysburg Address ensured that Jefferson’s words became inextricably bound together in American culture with the eradication of slavery.

Sadly, Lincoln’s progressive interpretation of Jefferson’s words was still not a clear statement of racial equality. Lincoln is an affable historical character, yet his personal views on race are disappointing. Nevertheless, Lincoln’s am-


biguity about race only strengthens the argument for the cultural power of his formulaic word choice. In his quest for meaning in the midst of desolation, he turned to an old slogan from American history and gave it a new and expanded interpretation.

In the early twentieth century, the moral proposition of human equality confronted the intimidating postulates of scientific racism, which have already been discussed. By this time, the old Enlightenment idea was in need of an overhaul. No longer was man “created,” and for that matter, no longer was it just “man” that was equal, but “woman” as well. Furthermore, since racial inequality seemed to have science on its side, the argument for equality needed to be dressed up in a more modern, scientific outfit. It could no longer be assumed that equality was a “self-evident” truth. Foremost among the new, scientific champions of equality was the great anthropologist Franz Boas.17

Moral commitment to human equality determined Boas’ science, not the other way round. Carl Degler, an expert on American Social Darwinism, summarizes Boas’ a priori commitments thusly: “Boas came to the United States with an outlook that emphasized equality of opportunity, freedom of inquiry, and openness toward people who were different and socially excluded. Racial explanations, as far [as] he was concerned, only closed off opportunity and acceptance… In short, Boas approached the question of race with a defined ideological position that shaped his answer.”18 Boas willfully chose to argue for racial equality although he admitted that conclusive proof was still lacking. He also worked unrelentingly to demolish the daunting assertion that racial inequality was a scientifically certified axiom. He and his many students left no stone unturned in the quest to promote their equality thesis and debunk the science behind racism.

Boas longed to believe, and to convince others, that racial differences were ephemeral and that all humans were more or less equal. He claimed that the Enlightenment ideals of German liberalism had appealed to him even before his arrival in the United States.19 Mostly because of anti-Semitism in Germany, Boas became one of the millions of immigrants, considered racially inferior by Madison Grant, to find refuge and opportunities in the United States. Boas’ successful relocation to the United States is even more poignant when one considers that in Central Europe Jews were increasingly marginalized, in ut-

19 See Degler, In Search of Human Nature, 72–73.
ter defiance of historical reality, as “foreigners.”20 It makes sense that a liberal Jewish immigrant would thrive in this new home, where the slogan “all men are created equal” was enshrined as a part of the national culture. It is also understandable that he would make it his business to fight for this creed. No wonder he made a personal crusade out of decimating the arguments for scientific racism.

One might be tempted to think that the equality of the Enlightenment and the equality of Boas were unconnected, but Martin Luther King Jr. deliberately put them together. The anthropologists’ updated version of human equality, combined with the tradition of Jefferson and Lincoln, helped to fuel the ideological engine of the civil rights movement. King clearly saw a connection between the slave owner’s words and the anthropologist’s thesis, and in his speeches he frequently drew on both.

Although he often alluded to both traditions, he put these sources together in a 1961 speech called “The American Dream.” In this elucidation of the “American dream,” King first cited those key words from Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, which he praised as “the sublime words, words lifted to cosmic proportions.”21 King, unlike Madison Grant, thought that the ideals of the Founding Fathers stood on the side of racial equality, and he often appealed to their tradition: “But if the problem [of racial inequality] is solved, America will just as surely be on the high road to the fulfillment of the Founding Fathers’ dream, when they wrote: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident.’”22

Just a little later in the same 1961 “American Dream” speech, he made sure to specify that Jeffersonian equality must now mean racial equality. In arguing against scientific racism, King named as authorities three famous students of Boas: Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovits, who “have

20 Theodore Herzl, *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question* (New York: Dover, 1988), 76. Herzl matter-of-factly noted this shift: “In countries where we have lived for centuries we are still cried down as strangers, and often by those whose ancestors were not yet domiciled in the land where Jews had already had experience of suffering. The majority may decide which are the strangers; for this, as indeed every point which arises in the relations between nations, is a question of might.”


pointed out and made it clear through scientific evidence that there are no superior races and there are no inferior races."^{23}

Although he called forth the Enlightenment tradition to help his cause, King was not naïve about it. If anyone had a right to be cynical about the Jeffersonian tradition of equality, it was African Americans. It is fitting to empathize with those angry and frustrated African Americans who were ready to throw away the American tradition altogether, but King was not one of these. He chose instead to develop the idea of equality and leave the hypocrisy behind. “Indeed,” he pointed out, “slavery and segregation have been strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal.”^{24}

**Conclusion**

There will always be those whose views are determined by their belief in innate and insurmountable differences between human groups. There are those who insist that all human individuals *must* be stamped with irreversible and innate qualities of “race” or “nationality,” or that certain ethnic and linguistic groups have a superior “right” to a particular piece of geography or state apparatus. I believe that such people tacitly fear the equality of man. They may well think of the equality principle as a type of “cultural imperialism” because to them it is an abomination of what they presume to be clear boundaries, supposedly rooted in “nature,” that neatly separate humans into distinct and manageable parts. Those who desire to keep human groups separate like to appeal to hereditary biology because it seems to provide an argument from “science” and “nature.”

Such people are deeply threatened by the notion that all humans are more or less similar and are constantly interacting and mixing to create culture. Madison Grant, who wanted to believe that hereditary biology made human groups permanently different, astutely recognized his enemies as: “the advocates of the obliteration, under the guise of internationalism, of all existing

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^{23} King, “The American Dream,” 211. King often cited scientific evidence, for example, “Playboy Interview,” 358: “The American Anthropological Association has unanimously adopted a resolution repudiating statements that Negroes are biologically, in innate mental ability or in any other way inferior to whites. The collective weight and authority of world scientists are embodied in a UNESCO report on races which flatly refutes the theory of innate superiority among any ethnic group. And as far as Negro ‘blood’ is concerned, medical science finds the same four blood types in all race groups.”

^{24} King, “The American Dream,” 208.
distinctions based on nationality, language, race, religion and class.”25 For some, the extinction of racial and national categories is an unthinkable apocalypse.

For others, Grant’s doomsday scenario is not an abomination of nature but emancipation from synthetic and unnecessary classifications. The opportunity to be an equal citizen, freed from the supposedly “innate” brand of difference, has been a breath-taking vision of hope for many. For these, the vision of a state, in which one’s civil status is entirely detached from one’s “race,” “nationality,” language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or social position, is a thrilling dream. This exhilarating model has taken root in the culture of the United States. Historian Arthur Mann once wrote that by accepting and assimilating millions of immigrants, the United States “released a liberating idea for mankind—that nationalities are changeable rather than irrevocable.”26

Despite hypocrisy and imperfection, the thesis of human equality can always be expanded. So far, it has proven its inspirational value repeatedly in American history in very positive ways: for Jefferson, for Mum Bett, for Lincoln, for Franz Boas, and for Martin Luther King Jr. As a premise for assimilating outcasts and newcomers, the principle that all individuals are equal and equally deserving of all civil rights is still a good starting point.

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The Problematic of Becoming American

BRENDA A. FLANAGAN

ABSTRACT: This article argues that African Americans are the most assimilated of Americans because they are the conscience of the nation.

KEYWORDS: African Americans; assimilation; Black Aesthetic Movement

The making of an American begins at the point where he himself rejects all other ties, any other history, and himself adopts the vesture of his adopted land.

(James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone”)1

In spring 2015, the American media and news outlets serving the English-speaking world were transfixed by the story of a woman in America who was born white but who, in the last few years, has claimed on job applications, and in various other situations, that she is a Black American. In the way in which she wears her hair—or a wig—and in claiming to have a Black father, Rachel Dolezal assumed a Black identity. Her claim was unmasked when her white parents outed her as being born white of European, and in particular, Czech ancestry. They produced pictures of their daughter as a teenager looking far, far from black, and to the media they rejected the lies she had told of being beaten—like a Black person—when she was a child. Every day came some new revelation of what some commentators called her “bizarre” behavior.

Social media was more flooded than the Charles River had been a few years ago with comments about this person. Some people saw her behavior as the height of insult and injury to Black people in America—their history, their efforts to survive, their culture, even their institutions, for, it was revealed, Rachel Dolezal was President of the local Spokane, Washington, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Although it is

usually identified as an historically Black organization, whites have long been members of the NAACP, so having a white person in a leadership position would not have been an egregious issue, but Dolezal had claimed to be Black.

Accusations swirled around her claims, and she became a nine-day wonder, as, many people asked sotto voce, who in their right mind would want to claim to be Black in America when they were white, given the ways in which America has mistreated Blacks? If, however, we accept James Baldwin’s claim that “[t]he story of the Negro in America is the story of America, or more precisely, it is the story of Americans,” then Dolezal’s behavior can be seen as an attempt to become a true American. But what did Baldwin mean by that statement?

In his essay, “Many Thousands Gone,” published in 1955, a critical year in the history of America’s relationship with its Black citizens, Baldwin wrote, provocatively, one must admit, that African Americans were the most American of the country’s citizenry, and that in becoming so, they had lived an American story that “[was] not a very pretty story; the story of a people is never pretty.”

The many frames of that story are well known: enslavement, lynchings, Jim Crow, police brutality, discriminatory housing sometimes accompanied by cross burnings, unfair bank lending practices, deliberate attempts to keep Black people under-employed or incarcerated … the litany is long and continues to be injurious. I submit that what Baldwin meant when he said that the story of the Negro in America is the story of America is that because of those very atrocities that African Americans had suffered and survived, because of the changes that their battles had forced America to make, they had become the conscience of the nation. Without a conscience, humans would be like un fettered animals. Because of what racist Americans had done to Black people, and precisely because of Black people’s responses, America was a country with a conscience, though the story of how it came to embody such a conscience is not a pretty one.

One could argue further that because of the fact that when their ancestors had been brought to the Americas, African Americans had been forced to leave behind their artifacts, practices, languages, and their very ways of walking the earth, and coerced into adopting a new “American” way of surviving, they are, indeed, the most assimilated of Americans.

The quote from Baldwin which serves as the motto of this essay echoes the oath that all immigrants who are allowed to become Americans must declare and affirm:

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I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or a citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.³

One can safely argue that Baldwin's ancestors did not take that oath, but they were forced to abide by its principles, even when those principles did not apply to them, for they were, after all, considered property and not people, for far too long. It took, then, their efforts to change that particular America into one that truly abides by certain values, to make the country into what it needed to be. The process continues, and African Americans are still in the frontlines.

A Czech friend who had been to America on a Fulbright Fellowship a few years ago recently insisted that African Americans constituted more than half the population of the United States. Even after I had cited the latest population census figures that showed African Americans representing only about 12.6 percent of the American population, he had a very difficult time believing me. Why? To him it was simply not possible, or feasible, that such a minority could have so significantly shaped what he perceives as America: the world's leading democracy; a land of fairness and opportunity, unique in its contributions to music, and multifarious in its culture. That they have done so is, to him, remarkable, but to many others, it remains a story that must be denied or vilified.

Some sociologists have accused African Americans of trying to destroy the vestures that make America what it is. Peter D. Salins, for example, in his book *Assimilation, American Style* (1997) accuses African Americans of spurning assimilation, and of trying to wreck the sacred project. In particular, he deplores those African Americans who, in the late 1950s, and into the 1960s, were adherents of the Black Power or Black Aesthetic Movements. In the same period in which James Baldwin was claiming that African Americans had shaped, indelibly, what it means to be American, Salins' accusations were published:

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Just when the country finally made good on its universalist promises by formally embracing blacks within the parameters of the American Idea—allowing them, at long last, to assimilate—many blacks, after a brief moment of celebration, rejected essential features of the paradigm. Seeing blacks reject assimilation, other groups—native and immigrant—followed suit, and now America risks forsaking its historic assimilationist mission to embrace the kind of ethnocentrism whose eradication its founders made a keystone of the new republic’s principles.4

What ingrates these Blacks are, Salins seems to be saying. Here we are, having abolished slavery, dismantled Jim Crow, integrated the United States Armed Forces and public schools, and passed the Voting Rights Act that ended institutionalized racial discrimination once and for all, and how do these Black Americans respond?

Salins asserts that “the perverse tragedy of contemporary American racial relations is that just when American laws and behavior were finally moving the nation toward the kind of society the once-dominant integrationist leaders had fought for, the recessive black nationalist impulse suddenly became ascendant” (A, 170). They preferred, Salins argues, the “pyrrhic benefits of ethnic federalism” (A, 170) over integration and assimilation. In essence, he claims that African Americans resorted to making war on other Americans instead of dancing with them. He disdains what he calls “ethnic federalism” (A, 223) which, to him, is just another term for multiculturalism. “[M]ulticulturalists demand certain ethnic rights and concessions,” he claims, that they have no right to demand (A, 47).

He argues further that being assimilated into America has nothing to do with culture; it has only to do with national unity. And what is national unity? Salins defines it as:

First, they had to accept English as the national language. Second, they were expected to take pride in their American identity and believe in America’s liberal democratic and egalitarian principles. Third, they were expected to live by what is commonly referred to as the Protestant ethic (to be self-reliant, hardworking, and morally upright. (A, 6)

In his chapter entitled “Black Americans and Assimilation,” Salins decries the ascendance of black nationalists like Al Sharpton, who, he claims, continue to perpetuate the belief that white Americans are still, largely, racist, and that there are still far too many structural barriers in America that prevent Black Americans from moving on up (A, 167–84). Salins is particularly critical of

any attempts by Black Americans to associate or identify as African Americans. His criticism extends to the establishment of Kwanzaa as an alternative to Christmas celebrations, and Salins is particularly dismissive of the proponents of the Black Power Movements of the 1960s and men like Amiri Baraka who fought to link Black American culture to Africa (A, 223, 167).

Here are the problems with Salins’ claims.

First, his narrative pays little attention to the real facts that African Americans, aided financially, and in person, by well-meaning, supportive non-African Americans, were largely responsible for the gains that were made in civil rights. They fought hard, and they fought long. They lost their lives. They succeeded, some might argue in only a small fraction of the struggle, but their successes changed America.

Second, the existence of a law does not necessarily alter the habits and attitudes of millions of Americans who believed that African Americans should always be kept on the lowest rung of any measurable ladder. De jure is quite, quite different from the lived reality for many African Americans. The passage of the civil rights Voting Rights Act of 1965 did little, if anything, to curb discrimination in employment, housing, police brutality, and life as usual.

When African Americans reacted to those discriminatory practices, they were not, as Salins argues, biting the welcoming hand of the nation. They were, instead, demanding redress for the absence, in reality, of civil rights, of the right to be treated as human beings, as true Americans.

As one who immigrated from Trinidad, West Indies, to America many years ago, I came to understand, quite early, what it means to be an African American, something that neither Salins nor Rachel Dolezal, for that matter, will ever know, regardless of how frizzy she wears her hair, or how tan she makes her complexion, for growing up white in America is vastly, vastly different from growing up Black in America.

I have spent most of my life, forty-eight years, in America, so my perspective is shaped by knowledge I have gained as an insider as well as an outsider. For twenty years I was shaped by a different racial climate—one that certainly included ignorance, but an ignorance that sheltered me from the vicissitudes of racism that many people my age had experienced growing up Black or Negro in America.

I arrived in America in 1967, two years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1967 and 1968, I experienced many of the atrocities that caused people who looked like me to continue to demand that America should have a conscience. Neither Dolezal nor Salins will ever know how it feels to cry blood when a white person, a religious person, a minister of God,
tells you, “I’m sorry. I can’t take your child into this kindergarten. If I do, all the white people will take their children out.”

They will never experience the rage, followed by impotence, when one is told that an apartment is available when one has made a telephone inquiry, but when one arrives to inspect that apartment, one is told that it has just been rented.

It is possible that in adopting a young Black man, Rachel Dolezal will experience how it feels when he is stopped by the police for DWI (driving while Black), or shot down in the streets even when he has surrendered, or put in jail for years for misdemeanors or on faked evidence. Maybe she will feel indignation, but I doubt she will experience my heartbreak, or that of millions of parents, real African Americans, who have endured those occurrences. Why? Because millions of Americans still considered them unworthy of full American citizenship. They were only, after all, the descendants of slaves.

It was an effort to go beyond the history of their ancestors as slaves only, that African Americans, in the 1960s, began the Black Aesthetic Movement. Such an act of recovery was an attempt to come to understand what it meant to be Black in an affirming way, to connect to a continent from which their ancestors had been forced to depart, a continent whose riches in diamonds, gold, uranium, and so much else had lined the pockets of Americans and Europeans for hundreds of years.

African Americans were trying to define themselves in ways that would and could undermine the definitions that were imposed upon them. To do so, they would have to go back to Africa, not in ships purveyed by Marcus Garvey, but intellectually, and to a lesser extent, physically.

So they went to conferences in Ghana and Nigeria; they read Frantz Fanon, they talked about Pan-Africanism; they read, and they came to understand that they were not just black descendants of slaves, but their people had come from cultures and civilizations. In their writings, many of the poets sought to decenter the power of Standard English.

In the recovery of their stories, such as Alex Haley’s Roots (1976), they blazed the trails that many immigrant Americans would follow in their own searches to locate their origins so that they, too, could come to an understanding of themselves that would lead, eventually, to what it means to be American. This is why James Baldwin is correct in his statement that “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America,” for it is they who created the correctives that America needed in order to live out its truest principles.
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Hannah Arendt on Nationalism and the Nation State

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ABSTRACT: The present article explores Hannah Arendt’s critique of nationalism and the nation state and examines its lasting political relevance in the context of the current surge of anti-Muslim ethnic nationalism in Europe. Its primary contention is that the juxtaposition between Western European civic nationalism and Central and Eastern European tribal nationalism introduced by Arendt in The Origins of Totalitarianism is misleading, insofar as it implies that Arendt endorses the former type of nationalism and rejects the latter one. Arendt’s other works, as well as some other passages from The Origins of Totalitarianism, reveal that Arendt ultimately rejects all types of nationalism, as well as the European model of nation state, against which she juxtaposes the American model of a decentralized federal republic.

KEYWORDS: Hannah Arendt; anti-Semitism; nationalism; nation state; republicanism; Zionism

Introduction

In the first part of The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), Hannah Arendt makes a sharp distinction between Western European civic, or political nationalism and the tribal, or ethnic nationalism that developed in the ethnically mixed areas of Central and Eastern Europe. Arendt is clearly highly critical of tribal nationalism, which she regards as an atavistic and inherently racist movement that can be considered as a direct precursor of totalitarianism. On the other hand, her discussion of Western European civic nationalism is cast in a much more positive light. She describes it essentially as a form of modern democratic patriotism, which enables the very existence of a democratic nation state. Arendt’s assessment of the Western European model of the nation state (i.e., the political form that gave rise to and was legitimized by civic nationalism)

1 The author is grateful to the participants in the 20th International Colloquium of American Studies, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this text.
is likewise largely positive, since she argues that the rise of totalitarianism was caused precisely by the crisis of the nation state. Some authors, for example, Margaret Canovan, therefore conclude that Arendt regards the nation state as “an essentially humanist institution, a civilized structure providing a legal order and guaranteeing rights,”² in other words, that she endorses the Western European model of the nation state exemplified by the French Republic, as well as Western European (and in particular French) civic nationalism, as indispensable conditions of modern democratic politics.

The primary aim of this paper is to challenge the interpretation given above of Arendt’s assessment of civic nationalism and the nation state as a typically modern political form. If we take into account Arendt’s other works, especially On Revolution (1963), but also her articles on Zionism from the 1940s, or some other passages from The Origins of Totalitarianism, it turns out that her critique of nationalism is in fact much more thorough. As I shall argue, Arendt ultimately regards nationalism in all its forms as a tribal and therefore (in her sense) fundamentally anti-political movement. Moreover, I shall argue, drawing mostly from her comparison of the guiding political ideals of the French and American Revolutions, that Arendt ultimately also rejects the Western European model of a democratic nation state based on the notion of popular sovereignty, which she juxtaposes with the American model of a decentralized federal republic based on the notion of the rule of the law. Arendt endorses the American rather than the French version of republicanism and regards the American model of a decentralized federal republic as a viable political form that may provide a framework for authentic political action in the modern world.

This paper consists of three parts. The first part interprets Arendt’s critique of nationalism and the nation state by linking her discussion of nationalism from The Origins of Totalitarianism with her later critique of the French Revolution and its guiding political ideal that appears in On Revolution and The Human Condition (1958). The second part turns to Arendt’s understanding of anti-Semitism and her critique of Zionism. The third and final part then assesses the lasting political relevance of Arendt’s critique of nationalism and the nation state in the light of the current resurgence of ethno-nationalist and in particular anti-Muslim sentiments across Europe.

² Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 32.
Nationalism and the Nation State

Arendt’s critique of nationalism and the nation state, as it is presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, can be divided into three steps. First and most obviously, the model of the nation state is unsuitable for ethnically mixed areas. Second, the tribal nationalism that developed in the ethnically mixed areas of Central and Eastern Europe is qualitatively different from Western European civic nationalism. Third, the nation state has from its inception contained certain inherent tensions, which fully surfaced only after the whole European system of nation states had been shaken by World War I. It is in this third stage that Arendt’s criticism of nationalism reaches its most fundamental level. As we shall see, this last stage of her critique of nationalism can also be directly linked with her later critique of the notion of popular sovereignty that appears in *On Revolution*.

The limitations of the nation state as a typically modern political form were first revealed in the aftermath of World War I, when the Habsburg, Ottoman, and to a lesser extent Russian Empires were partitioned into new “nation states.” The attempt to organize ethnically mixed areas of Central and Eastern Europe according to the principle of national self-determination ended up, quite predictably, as a disaster. The newly-established “nation states” inevitably contained numerous national minorities. The minorities, which, in contrast to the “state peoples” of the new “nation states,” did not attain statehood (e.g., Slovaks in Czechoslovakia or Croats and Slovenians in Yugoslavia) or ended up living in a different country than in their “national homeland” (e.g., Germans in Czechoslovakia or Poland), felt wronged and excluded from the body politic of the states they inhabited. Although members of the national minorities formally enjoyed full civil and political rights, they were treated as an alien element in the body politic of the nation. On the other hand, members of the national minorities were often not loyal to their governments and pursued secessionist policies. The newly established states could not possibly have functioned as nation states; all of them, with the exception of Czechoslovakia, developed into authoritarian or semi-fascist regimes. The existence of national minorities was a constant source of tension and instability on the international level and contributed to the rise of Nazism in Germany and to the outbreak of World War II.

The ethnically mixed character of Central and Eastern Europe, which prevented the successful development of nation states, gave also rise to a new type of nationalism—to *tribal nationalism*. “This new type of tribal nationalism, more or less characteristic of all Central and Eastern European nations and nationalities, was quite different in content and significance—though not in
violence—from Western nationalist excesses.” The key difference between Western European civic nationalism and Central and Eastern European tribal nationalism is that the former is “extroverted, concerned with visible spiritual and material achievements of the nation,” while the latter is “introverted, [and] concentrates on the individual’s own soul which is considered as the embodiment of general national qualities” (OT, 227).

Civic nationalism, in other words, construes the nation as a political community united by a common culture and history and, most importantly, by allegiance to the nation state. Tribal nationalism, on the other hand, construes the nation as an ethnic community, which is defined primarily by a common language and ancestry. While civic nationalism defines nationality by membership in the body politic, tribal nationalism defines it in terms of personal identity, as some inherent quality of one’s soul or body.

Tribal nationalism, which construes the nation as a quasi-natural community unified by common blood, is inherently racist. One of its typical traits is the notion of the exclusivity of one’s own nation, which is perceived as surrounded by a “world of enemies” (OT, 227). This notion gave rise to the quasi-religious theory about the divine chosenness of the Russian people that was developed by the Pan-Slavic nationalists, as well as to the quasi-scientific Nazi theory about the racial superiority of the Germans. As Arendt notes, these theories directly contradict the Judeo-Christian teaching about the divine origin of all men, as well as the liberal principle of the intrinsic dignity and equality of all human beings (OT, 223).

The main purpose of Arendt’s comparison of the two types of nationalism is to elucidate certain pathological features of Central and Eastern European nationalisms. This approach has the unfortunate effect of overemphasizing the differences between the two kinds of nationalism and obscuring what they have in common. Central and Eastern European nationalisms invariably contained a political or civic dimension. Their objective, after all, was national political emancipation. In this respect, the main difference between civic and tribal nationalism appears to be that while the former legitimizes an existing nation state, the latter legitimizes a project of creating such a state.

The differences between the two kinds of nationalism can then be explained by the different historical circumstances under which they evolved. Western European nationalism could have developed as a form of patriotism only because the existence of the nation state preceded the existence of the nation as a self-conscious political community. The French had constituted a political

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community long before the French Revolution, which gave rise to modern French nationalism. On the other hand, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe could not develop out of pre-existing political communities for the simple reason that their territorial boundaries did not coincide with the political boundaries. This, of course, is a consequence of the absence of large and powerful monarchies and constantly shifting borders.⁴

While Arendt’s discussion of tribal nationalism tends to obscure its political dimension, she does ultimately admit that both types of nationalism stem from the same root. This becomes obvious in her discussion of the origins of Western European nationalism, which immediately follows her critique of tribal nationalism, and can be considered as the third and final stage of her discussion of nationalism. Somewhat surprisingly (given the previous emphasis on the differences between the two types of nationalism) Arendt ends up arguing that *every* nationalism is, at its core, tribal.

Arendt traces the origins of both modern nationalism and the modern nation state to the French Revolution. She explains that after the revolution, the *nation* in effect replaced the king as a symbol of the unity and common interest of the country.

> The only remaining bond between the citizens of a nation-state without a monarch to symbolize their essential community, seemed to be national, that is, common origin. So that in a century when every class and section in the population was dominated by class or group interest, the interest of the nation as a whole was supposedly guaranteed in a common origin, which sentimentally expressed itself in nationalism. (*OT*, 230)

The emphasis on the common origin—that is to say, common blood—of its members, as well as the sentimental nature of the bond among its members, reveals that the nation is by definition a quasi-natural community, which is based on the model of a family or a tribe. And it is precisely the quasi-natural or tribal character of the nation that makes nationalism, from Arendt’s perspective, problematic and at least potentially dangerous. The point is that the fiction of the organic nature of the nation may be used to demand absolute and unquestioning self-identification of the citizens with their country. The very existence of nationalism therefore threatens political freedom.

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⁴ For historical differences in the development of Western and Central and Eastern European nationalisms see Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983). For similarities between French and German nationalisms, especially with regard to their use of history and culture, see George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: Fertig, 1974).
The notion of the nation as a quasi-natural community is closely related to the concept of **popular sovereignty**. And it is this concept that is at the center of Arendt’s critique of the European nation state. The point is that **sovereignty** (i.e., unlimited and absolute power) is incompatible with the ideas of the rule of law or inalienable rights. In Arendt’s words, the nation state has therefore been burdened since its very inception by a “secret conflict between state and nation,” which was revealed “when the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty” (*OT*, 230).

The conflict between the state and nation remained “secret” or latent as long as popular sovereignty was checked by parliamentary democracy. In Europe, this conflict emerged fully in the interwar period. The notion of popular sovereignty was seized on by various fascist parties that claimed to represent the interest of the entire nation, and not just of particular classes or interest groups that had been represented by traditional political parties. The ambition of these parties was to abolish the parliamentary farce and finally realize the notion of popular sovereignty in practice.

Arendt further develops her critique of the modern nation state as a political form that embodies the principle of popular sovereignty, which is based on Rousseau’s notion of **general will**, in *On Revolution*. This text, rather than *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, fully reveals the depth of Arendt’s critique of nationalism and of the nation state. In *On Revolution* Arendt compares the French and the American Revolutions. She argues that the French Revolution ended in a disaster, because unlike the “triumphantly successful American Revolution” it failed to establish a lasting republic. As is well known, Arendt explains the failure of the French Revolution by the rise of the social question. The revolution, according to her, was doomed once “the poor, driven by the need of their bodies, burst on [its scene].” At this point, the revolution became concerned with **social** rather than with **political** objectives, with the welfare of the people rather than with political freedom.

In this context it is important to note that Arendt also describes the change in the course of the French Revolution in terms of the displacement of its original ideals of the **rule of law** and **consent of the governed** by the ideal of **popular sovereignty**. It is precisely because of the adoption of this ideal that the French Revolution, in contrast to the American, failed to establish a genuine political realm in Arendt’s sense, that is, a space where citizens could enjoy their political freedom by participating in the administration of their common affairs. The point is that the French Revolution, as Arendt puts it, “failed to transform the

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relationship between the rulers and the ruled, between the government and the people” (OR, 74) because the sovereign will of the people or the nation in effect replaced the will of the absolutist monarch as the source of both political power and of the law.

In theory, that is to say according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s political theory that served as the source of inspiration for the Jacobins, the formula of popular sovereignty should guarantee that each citizen is both a subject of the law and (as a part of the sovereign people) its co-author, so that obedience to the law is not perceived as a restriction but, on the contrary, as realization of his or her civic freedom. As Rousseau himself was very much aware, this argument can work only insofar as individual citizens fully identify themselves with the nation, which is conceived as a unitary entity endowed with a single common interest and will. In other words, civic freedom as conceived by Rousseau requires as its necessary prerequisite a specific kind of political virtue, which consists in always subordinating one’s own selfish interest to the general interest of the nation, in self-identification with the general will.

According to Arendt, the notion of national unity and the requirement that the nation be guided by a single will belong properly to the sphere of foreign relations: “Only in the presence of the enemy can such a thing as la nation une et indivisible, the ideal of French and of all other nationalism, come to pass” (OR, 77). Rousseau, according to Arendt, “wanted to discover a unifying principle within the nation itself that would be valid for domestic politics as well” (OR, 78). To do so, he had to discover or invent a common national enemy within the nation itself. Rousseau in fact discovered such a common enemy not just within the nation, but within each individual citizen. The common enemy of the nation and its single interest and will is nothing other than the particular will and interest of each and every citizen. Rousseau, according to Arendt, in effect transformed political conflict with a common national enemy into an internal, essentially moral conflict between selflessness and selfishness.

Rousseau’s notion of the general will, which requires not just complete obedience, but voluntary identification of one’s will with the will of the nation, was of course heavily influenced by the Christian tradition. According to Arendt, the general will can be seen as a replacement for the Christian notion of the divine law as a commandment that must not only be obeyed but also internalized and willed. The question of political loyalty thus transformed into a moral question concerning not just one’s acts, but one’s will and even one’s

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identity. Rousseau’s general will denies human plurality, which Arendt regards as the foundation of freedom and politics. In this respect, it sets a precedent for both tribal nationalism and totalitarianism. We could say that the nation, as a quasi-organic sentimental community, as well as the nation state, as the embodiment of Rousseau’s general will that requires not just absolute obedience, but complete identification of the citizen with the community, are, from Arendt’s perspective, essentially anti-political entities. A genuinely political community, according to Arendt, on the contrary, fosters human plurality. It provides a space in which individuals can reveal themselves as unique human beings by taking part in care for public affairs. A genuinely political community, as Arendt understands it, is incompatible with the notion of sovereignty or with the demand of absolute, unquestioning loyalty. While it also demands allegiance, it is allegiance of a different kind. It is not based on self-abrogation or identification with the community, but rather on participation in the same project, on loyalty to the political principles upon which the political community is founded.

According to Arendt, a modern form of such a genuinely political community is not a nation state, but rather a republic. While it is true that in The Origins of Totalitarianism Arendt expresses her respect for France, as Canavan puts it, she does not admire France the nation state based on the dubious principle of popular sovereignty, but rather France the republic based on the principles of freedom, justice, and equality. The true nature of Arendt’s admiration of France becomes apparent in her analysis of the Dreyfus affair. Her hero is not Dreyfus, who was an unfortunate victim of circumstances, but Clemenceau, who led the campaign for Dreyfus’s acquittal in the name of republican principles. Clemenceau did not get engaged in the affair because of any particular sympathy for Dreyfus, but because he believed that “by infringing the rights of one, you infringe the rights of all” (OT, 106). “The greatness of Clemenceau’s approach lies in the fact that it was not directed against a particular miscarriage of justice, but was based on such ‘abstract’ ideas as justice, liberty, and civic virtue” (OT, 110). Against the fanaticized mob, rallied under the slogans Death to the Jews or France for the French, Clemenceau managed to organize a broad coalition consisting of men of different social and political backgrounds, who were not united by any common interest but by their belief in the abstract republican principles of justice, liberty, and civic virtue.

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8 See Canovan, Hannah Arendt, 32.
Such principles, rather than the interest of the nation, form the basis of true republican patriotism.

Nevertheless, the primary model of a modern republic for Arendt is not France but the United States. In France the republican principles have been on the defensive ever since the Jacobins replaced them with the notion of the sovereignty of the French people. In contrast to France, the United States, with its principles of constitutionalism, separation of powers, federalism, and local self-government, according to Arendt, proved to be a viable and exemplary modern republic.

In Arendt’s understanding, the American model of a decentralized federal republic based on the rule of law and upheld by reverence for the Constitution differs considerably from the European model of a democratic nation state, which, as we have just seen, is, in Arendt’s mind, heavily influenced by Rousseau’s republican theory.9 Instead of proclaiming the sovereignty of the people, the American Founding Fathers devised a new system of government based on the separation of powers, in other words on the constitutional system of checks and balances. This “new principle of power” that was devised by the Founding Fathers does not conceive of the people as a unitary entity endowed with a single interest and single will, but rather as an “organized multitude” (OR, 166) of free citizens who had already associated themselves in self-governing townships and colonies before the revolution. The aim of the new federal constitution was not to dissolve these pre-existing civic associations into a single unitary nation state (conceived as la nation une et indivisible) but rather to unite them into a federal union that would actually foster and protect the political freedom of its constitutive parts.10

10 Arendt’s understanding of American republicanism and in particular the juxtaposition she makes between the American republican model and the European nation state model closely follows the argument of the Federalist Papers. According to James Madison, the principal aim of the system of checks and balances is to prevent the emergence of tyranny, especially of the tyranny of a majority, in other words the reversal of a republican government into democratic government (or “simple democracy”). It should also be noted that according to Madison, the system of checks and balances includes not only the horizontal separation of powers, i.e., the separation between legislative, executive, and judiciary powers, but also a vertical separation of powers, i.e., the separation of the powers of the national government and state governments.
The Jewish Question

The discussion of Arendt’s critique of nationalism would be incomplete without considering her understanding of anti-Semitism, as well as her critique of Zionism, not only because these issues were of direct personal relevance to Arendt as a German Jew but also, and more importantly, because her reflections on the Jewish question further complicate her account (and critique) of nationalism. The discussion of Arendt’s critique of nationalism and the nationalism contained in the previous section might lead to an impression that Arendt simply denies the political relevance of ethnic identity or that she would prefer to thin it down in the name of strictly political citizenship. That, however, is not the case. From her perspective, this would be just a liberal version of the nationalistic imposition of a common identity on the members of the society.

According to Arendt, modern society has an innate tendency to “normalize” its members. Society requires its members to behave and castigates those that do not follow the prescribed standards as asocial or abnormal, that is to say, as somehow essentially deficient. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt explains this normalizing tendency as a perversion of the political principle of the equality of rights into a requirement of the actual equality, sameness, or normalcy of every individual (*OT*, 54).

The tendency of modern society to normalize its members, to eliminate all otherness as “abnormal,” played a crucial role in the development of modern anti-Semitism. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even the proponents of Jewish emancipation called at the same time for Jewish assimilation (*OT*, 56). In order to gain equal rights, the Jews were supposed to become “educated” and “civilized,” to get rid of their “otherness,” that is to say, of their Jewishness. That, however, proved practically impossible. The Jews could not simply renounce their Jewish identity and become “normal” members of society. Even if they got baptized and cut themselves completely from the Jewish culture, they continued to be identified as Jews.

The Jews were unable to escape their “otherness” because secularizing society came to define Jewishness as a matter of racially determined identity, rather than as a religious or cultural attribute. And it is precisely this racial definition of Jewishness that, for Arendt, distinguishes modern anti-Semitism from traditional anti-Judaism. Modern anti-Semitism, as she puts it, transformed the “crime of Judaism” into the “vice of Jewishness.” This transformation proved

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11 See also Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 42.
to be fatal. “Jews had been able to escape from Judaism into conversion; from Jewishness [as a hereditary vice] there was no escape. A crime, moreover, is met with punishment; a vice can only be exterminated” (OT, 87).

As a German Jew, Arendt was herself personally affected by this brand of anti-Semitism. As she explains in an interview with Günter Gaus, the rise to power of the Nazis made her realize that “[i]f one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man.”12 Before she left Germany she worked briefly for an underground Jewish organization and later, after emigrating, she worked for various Zionist organizations.

Nonetheless, Arendt’s support for Zionism was at best lukewarm. In fact she was vocally critical both of the ideological roots of mainstream (i.e., Herzlian) Zionism and of various Zionist policies. In her 1942 essay “Herzl and Lazare” she severely criticized Theodor Herzl’s Zionism, comparing it with the less well-known and much less influential position of Bernard Lazare. She argued that Herzl’s Zionism constituted essentially a mirror image of anti-Semitism, in reaction to which it evolved. Herzl took inspiration from German as opposed to French nationalism and in consequence ended up developing a Jewish version of tribal nationalism. Herzl did not, and properly speaking could not, oppose anti-Semitism as a matter of principle. In his own words, he understood anti-Semites because he regarded inter-ethnic hostility as a natural phenomenon.13 According to Arendt Herzl’s solution to anti-Semitism, the creation of a Jewish national state, is, in the final analysis, not a solution to anti-Semitism, but an escape from it.

Arendt is much more sympathetic to Bernard Lazare’s version of Zionism. Similarly to Herzl, Lazare was turned into a conscious Jew and a Zionist by anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, his response to anti-Semitism was radically different from Herzl’s. In contrast to Herzl, he rejected the persecution not only of Jews but of all oppressed peoples as a matter of principle. The territorial question, or the creation of a Jewish national state, was only of secondary importance to Lazare.14

During World War II, Arendt criticized the Zionist leaders for their reliance on the great powers and for their exclusive focus on the establishment of a Jewish nation state in Palestine, as well as for their organic Herzlian nationalism.

She advocated the creation of a Jewish army that would fight against Hitler alongside the Allies and hoped for the creation of a Jewish national homeland as a part of a Federation of European Peoples after the war.\textsuperscript{15} Arendt gave up hope for such a European solution of the Jewish question after the full extent of the Jewish tragedy had become clear.

Nevertheless, she remained very critical of the project of the creation of the Jewish nation state in Palestine. In her 1945 article “Zionism Reconsidered”\textsuperscript{16} she criticized the 1944 resolution of the American Zionist Organization that called for the creation of a Jewish state on the entire territory of Palestine. The failure of the resolution to even mention the Palestinian Arabs, according to Arendt, implied that they would have to choose “between voluntary emigration and second-class citizenship.”\textsuperscript{17} The resolution in effect confirmed the victory of Herzl’s chauvinistic tribal nationalism. Arendt predicted that a Jewish state in Palestine would have to constantly struggle with the oppressed Arab population within its borders, as well as with the neighboring Arab countries. She also argued that the survival of the Jewish state would depend on protection by one of the great powers—most likely the United States. As Benhabib points out, Arendt in effect anticipated the post-1968 development of the American Middle Eastern policy.\textsuperscript{18}

Arendt opposed not just the plan for a single Jewish state, but also the partition plan that eventually became accepted by the United Nations. She believed that the partition plan could not solve any of the problems posed by the plan for a single Jewish state. Instead, she supported the position held by a minority of advocates of Jewish-Arab cooperation, such as Jehuda Magnes, that called for the creation of a bi-national state on a federal basis. Arendt continued to hold this position even after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 in her essays “To Save the Jewish Homeland” and “Peace or Armistice in the Near East?”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} See Seyla Benhabib, \textit{The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt} (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 38.

\textsuperscript{16} Originally published in \textit{Menorah Journal} 33, no. 2 (August 1945). Reprinted in Arendt, \textit{The Jew as a Pariah}.


\textsuperscript{18} See Benhabib, \textit{The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt}, 40.

\textsuperscript{19} Originally published in \textit{Commentary} 5 (May 1948) and then in \textit{Review of Politics} 12, no. 1 (January 1950): 56–82. Both articles were reprinted in Arendt, \textit{The Jewish Writings}.
Arendt’s support for a bi-national state in Palestine is often cited as a proof of her lack of political realism. It is true that the bi-national plan Arendt supported was most probably not viable as a result of the lack of support from the Arab side. On the other hand, one could also argue that the historical development since the creation of the State of Israel vindicates most of Arendt’s arguments. While it is true that Israel survived for more than sixty years as the only democracy in the region, it is also true that so far it has not resolved any of the problems that Arendt identified in her essays from the 1940s. While the Israeli Arabs do enjoy political and civil rights, they are de facto second-class citizens. Their position is comparable to that of the national minorities in Central Europe in the interwar period. The position of the Palestinian Arabs in the occupied territories is obviously even worse. Israel also continues to be surrounded by hostile Arab countries and depends for its survival on the military assistance of the United States.

This situation seems to confirm Arendt’s argument that the solution of the Israeli-Arab conflict must be political, rather than military. And while the idea of a bi-national federal state seems even less realistic now than it was in the 1940s, it is clear that any peaceful solution of the Israeli-Arab conflict will require close cooperation between Israel and Arab Palestine. Confederation or some other form of close cooperation between Israel, the future Palestinian state, and possibly Jordan was envisioned as a part of the long-term solution of the Israeli-Arab conflict by the Israeli peace movement Gush Shalom, as well as by the former Prime Minister and later President Shimon Peres.

**European Integration and the Muslim Question**

At first glance it might seem that Arendt’s critique of nationalism and the nation state might have—at least in the European context—only a limited lasting relevance. After all, the postwar development in Europe (or at least in Western Europe) was characterized by a steep decline in the political relevance of nationalism, which was utterly discredited by the Nazis, and by the peaceful cooperation of European nation states, exemplified primarily by the project of European integration.

Nonetheless, some of the more recent political developments in Europe appear to confirm the lasting relevance of Arendt’s analysis. Since the end of

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the Cold War, Europe has witnessed a resurgence of tribal nationalism both in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where it led to the disintegration of the former federations (the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia), and in Western Europe, where it led to the federalization of Belgium, or the reinvigoration of the nationalist movements of the ethnic groups (Basque, Corsican, or Scottish nationalism). This new nationalism also gave rise to xenophobic anti-immigration political parties (the National Front in France, the British National Party in the United Kingdom, Jobbik in Hungary, or True Finns Party in Finland).

This last brand of xenophobic nationalism, which is aimed primarily against immigrants from non-European, mostly Muslim countries, seems to be especially important for the future of European integration. It also proves the continuing relevance of Arendt’s critique of nationalism and of the nation state. The failure of European societies to integrate immigrants suggests that nationalism in Europe continues to be an “expression of this perversion of the state into an instrument of the nation and the identification of the citizen with the member of the nation” (OT, 231) and reveals the ethnic or tribal core of all nationalisms. The prime example is offered by France, which continues to be the nation par excellence. French nationalism is ostentatiously republican and cultural. French politicians steadfastly reject the notion of affirmative action as “reverse discrimination,” as well as the notion of multiculturalism and of “hyphenated identities.” These Anglo-Saxon ideas are supposedly incompatible with the French republican ideal of égalité. The French Republic is allegedly color-blind and treats all French citizens as equal. The problem is that the notion of égalité, as the French still understand it, is not limited to the principle of the political and legal equality of all citizens before the law, but entails the requirement that all French citizens identify themselves as French, as members of France as la nation une et indivisible.

To identify oneself as a French-Algerian or French-Muslim, to be both a loyal and patriotic citizen of the French Republic and a proud heir of the Muslim culture, is apparently incompatible with the French understanding of equality and nationality. The French understanding of nationality is ostentatiously political and cultural. The immigrants are encouraged to become assimilated into French society and to adopt French culture. This requirement, however, entails a perverse demand that one gives up one’s inherited identity.

A prime example of the French approach to assimilation is the 2004 Law on Secularity and Conspicuous Religious Symbols in Schools, which bans the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols—that is, primarily Muslim head-scarves, although it also applies to Jewish kipas—in French public schools.
It should be noted that the ban on headscarves was widely supported by all political parties, as well as the French public, including a narrow majority of French Muslims. Nonetheless this policy appears not only objectionable on moral grounds (both because it infringes upon freedom of religion and because it forces teenage Muslim girls to give up part of their cultural heritage) but also counterproductive. The students who insist (or whose parents insist) on wearing the hijab are essentially forced to leave the public school system in favor of either home-schooling or Muslim religious schools.22

Nevertheless, as the Muslim and African immigrants and their children in France have discovered, the requirement of cultural assimilation is impossible to meet even if one is willing to cast off one’s inherited identity and become “civilized.” As the French nationalists put it, to be French, one must be born French. Someone with dark skin or an Arabic name will never be perceived as French, no matter how well versed he or she is in French culture. Muslim and other non-European immigrants in France and many other European countries are in a similar position to Jews in the nineteenth century.23 Society requires that they become assimilated and get rid of their otherness but at the same time makes such assimilation impossible. The situation of Muslim and other non-European immigrants in France proves that even cultural nationalism has an ethnic or tribal core. National culture is a symbolic expression of the common identity of the nation, which is defined as an affective community based on the common origin of its members.

The progressive integration of the European Union is in itself unlikely to solve the problems with the integration of immigrants that are caused by the continuing presence of nationalism in continental Europe. On the contrary, the debate about the accession of Turkey to the European Union reveals a tendency of unifying Europe to construe common European identity in cultural terms. Such a development could be disastrous in the long term. Regardless of how the question of Turkish membership is resolved, Europe will live in close proximity to Muslim countries. More importantly, the numbers of Muslim and other non-European immigrants to Europe will continue rising in the future. This development is inevitable, and, in the light of European demographic trends, even desirable. The construction of European identity on a cultural


23 For a comparison between the situation of Jews in nineteenth-century France and Muslims in contemporary France see Esther Benbassa, La République face à ses minorités: Les juifs hier, les musulmans aujourd’hui (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2003).
basis would prevent the integration of these immigrants and relegate them to the status of second-class citizens; it would essentially affirm their identity as aliens and Muslims and encourage them to adopt political Islamism. To avoid this prospect, both individual European states and the unifying Europe should abandon the model of the nation state and construe their identity on a political, rather than cultural basis.

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Passports & Poems: Nationalism, Assimilation and The New American Poetry

Stephan Delbos

Abstract: Beginning from the topic of assimilation in America, this essay will examine the editorial process of the seminal poetry anthology The New American Poetry, 1945–1960, edited by Donald Allen and published in 1960. In it, Allen claims to bring together for the first time the disparate strands of the American postwar avant-garde. This essay reads the anthology through a nationalist lens, showing how Allen’s editorial practices were rather arbitrarily exclusionary on the basis of nationality. His correspondence with Scottish poet Gael Turnbull, for example, reveals that Allen was willing to include him if he would apply for American citizenship. Allen did include Scottish poet Helen Adam and British poet Denise Levertov, however, because they had lived in America for extended periods and had taken American citizenship. Thus assimilation is central to one of the most influential poetry anthologies of the twentieth century. By claiming the postwar Anglophone poetic avant-garde for America, Allen in effect assimilated what was a decidedly transnational movement, with poets writing, living and publishing on several continents and in several countries. This essay utilizes national and transnational theory as well as Allen’s unpublished correspondence to explore these complexities.

Keywords: The New American Poetry; nationalism; assimilation; avant-garde American poetry; postwar American poetry

Donald Allen’s The New American Poetry, 1945–1960 (1960) was perhaps the most influential English-language poetry anthology of the twentieth century, permanently altering the critical discourse of postwar Anglophone poetry by helping to establish a two-camp, avant-garde versus academic model of American poetry, and also by creating the perception that American poetry is innovative while British poetry is traditional, an interpretation that persists today. Allen’s presentation of a nation-wide outpouring of anti-academic freedom of expression brought many of the most-studied poets of recent years, including Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Frank O’Hara and Jack Spicer, who until that time had published only with small, independent magazines and
presses, to widespread public attention. It is crucial to note that Allen’s vision of avant-garde American poetry developed during the Cold War, when American nationalism reached a feverish public intensity. This essay examines the nationalism inherent in Allen’s presentation of innovative postwar American poetry, and shows how this poetry was in truth transnational. Nationalist and transnational theory help place The New American Poetry in a larger cultural context, which is important for our understanding of the book and the lasting effect it has had on the critical discourse of Anglophone poetry. Considering Allen’s conception of avant-garde American poetry through the lens of Cold War nationalism and the more recent emergence of transnationalism reveals how the anthology—which definitively established American poetry as independent of British poetry—is marked by the cultural politics of the Cold War.

The New American Poetry has been referred to as “germinal,”¹ “ground-breaking,”² “epoch-making”³ and “indispensable,”⁴ among other honorifics. According to the publisher and the editor, it has sold more than a hundred thousand copies at a rate of several thousand per year,⁵ making it one of the most highly praised and economically successful anthologies of postwar American poetry. Writing in 2003, Allen reminisced about his stay at the writer’s colony Yaddo in 1957, when he “began to ponder what I saw happening in American poetry, beginning to think that this new writing connected … a possible movement, and I began to think about the possibility of doing an anthology.”⁶ Writing to Charles Olson on September 24, 1958, the editor lays out the details for the first time:

As you know, I am compiling an anthology of modern American poetry (1948 to 1958–9). … My aims in compiling this anthology are: (1) to show the continuation of the modern movement in American poetry during the past decade, (2) to show what new trends have developed, and what new conceptions of the poem have emerged during

⁶ Ralph Maud, Poet to Publisher: Charles Olson’s Correspondence with Donald Allen (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003), 7.
the period, (3) to demonstrate, too, the continuance and modification of several of the older, basic traditions in American verse, (4) to present a number of the younger poets who have appeared in the last few years. My bases for selecting poems are derived in part from William Carlos Williams’ essays (especially Measure) and Charles Olson’s Projective Verse; they are, very briefly: (1) voice, and breathing (2) heat of the poem, energy, feeling, (3) use of the American language, (4) stance of the poet in the poem (5) strategy: use of techniques—traditional or newly recovered from ancient or primitive literature, as well as newer devices (dream effects, cutting, montage, dissolve, etc., etc.) … The academic poets of the decade are well enough represented in the Meridian Books anthology edited by Donald Hall, and others, and I do not plan to include their work in the anthology I am compiling … The anthology will be published by Grove Press in 1959.7

In an earlier letter to Robert Creeley, written on April 17, 1958, Allen writes: “Thank you for notes on the anthol[ogy]. Since this will be limited to American poets I’ll not be including [Canadian poet Irving] Layton and [Scottish poet Gael] Turnbull.”8 Whether owing to polite diplomacy or the fact that the exact designs of the anthology remained fluid, Allen’s correspondence with others, including Turnbull himself, reveals a less determined editorial attitude.9 Writing to Olson in early September, 1959, a year after his letter to Creeley, Allen mentions that he is “also think[ing] of throwing in a couple of poems by Layton and Gael Turnbull to round it out, taking American in the wider sense.”10

Olson’s response to this suggestion, on September 12, 1959, was unequivocal and would set Allen’s tone for deciding who would and would not be included in the anthology.

Yr anthology ought to be the decisive defining factor, that American writing went into a new gear, which is what it is now running on, and going over to Canada, England

7 Maud, Poet to Publisher, 46.
8 Donald Allen to Robert Creeley, April 17, 1958, box 10, folder 15, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.
9 The precise designs of the anthology remained fluid from beginning to end. That timespan begins in early 1958, when writing to Olson, Allen says “Barney [Rosset] has okayed my plans to put together an anthology of postwar American poetry.” Donald Allen to Charles Olson, February 27, 1958, Correspondence Series, Charles Olson Research Collection, University of Connecticut, Storrs. It wasn’t until late 1959 that Allen had decided on the title, writing to James Broughton on September 4 of that year, “I propose to call the anthology The New American Poetry.” Donald Allen to James Broughton, September 4, 1959, box 10, folder 3, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.
10 Donald Allen to Charles Olson, September 9, 1959, box 93, folder 5, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.
Scotland and out (and by god none of those older ghosts like—even the papas were international, this thing is most national).  

With this letter the nationalist focus of Allen’s anthology was confirmed, and with it the idea that Anglophone avant-garde poetry originated in the United States after World War II. This would extend to every aspect of the anthology, from its title to its cover image of a stylized version of the American flag, to its organization along the geographic regions of the North American continent. The title *The New American Poetry*, for example, suggests a national movement, whereas the title of the other dominant anthology of the period which Allen mentioned in his outline, *The New Poets of England and America* (1957), suggests a gathering of individuals from two countries. This collective, national focus, along with the anthology’s emphasis on newness, would create the image of a united poetic community that differentiated itself both from tradition and from the poetry of other English-speaking countries, which in effect nationalized a transnational movement.

The Scottish poet Gael Turnbull exemplifies the complexities of the nationalism of *The New American Poetry*. Born in Scotland in 1928, Turnbull would seem to have been immediately ineligible for Allen’s consideration. Yet the poet’s situation was somewhat more nuanced. Although he had been raised and educated in the United Kingdom, Turnbull lived in the United States and Canada during the 1950s, and was well-known as a contributor to avant-garde American poetry journals. Poets including Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg suggested to Allen in correspondence that Turnbull’s work should be included in *The New American Poetry*. Allen’s correspondence with others regarding Turnbull, and with the poet himself, show both the initial fluidity of his idea of “American in the wider sense” and the narrow definition of “American” he ultimately utilized for the anthology.

Dear Gael Turnbull … are you now becoming an American citizen? The limits I’ve set for this anthology of modern American poetry I’m preparing excludes poets who aren’t actually Americans, unfortunately. If you are becoming, I’d very much like to include some of your poems.  

The fact that Turnbull’s inclusion hinges not on the quality or style of his work, nor on the poetic milieu in which he had established himself, nor on the impact

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11 Maud, *Poet to Publisher*, 61.
12 Donald Allen to Gael Turnbull, September 8, 1959, box 70, folder 17, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.
he had had on the work of his American contemporaries, but on the fact that he did not possess American citizenship, shows the seeming dominance for Allen of this non-literary consideration. Perhaps predictably, Turnbull responded somewhat facetiously to Allen’s request:

I’m rather tickled that you should think of me for your anthology. Gregory Corso already gave me a temporary honorary alternative citizenship for some group of US and Canadian poems he chose for some German anthology. However, otherwise, I expect to travel on my British Passport for some time to come. Which may sound a bit like flag-waving. I don’t mean it quite like that. Actually, when I’m in England, I am often dubbed a Canadian or a “yank.” Never mind. Lawrence lived abroad a good bit too, if I recall.13

Here Turnbull subtly, if definitively, deflates Allen’s concept of nationalism. Turnbull points out that other American editors, namely Corso, have dealt with issues of nationality more flexibly than Allen. At the same time, he illustrates the elasticity of national identity with the example of D. H. Lawrence, which poses an interesting question: If a British writer composes a poem or novel in the United States, is it a work of American literature? For Allen, clearly not. Turnbull points this out by mentioning how poets like him might fall through the cracks: In the United Kingdom he was “often dubbed a Canadian or a ‘yank,’” while in the United States he cannot escape the fact that his passport is not blue.

Turnbull provides a specific example of nationalism and assimilation at work in Allen’s anthology, but the issue is not as simple as a strong editorial policy. The question of nationalism and The New American Poetry is made even more complicated by the inclusion of Helen Adam and Denise Levertov, born in Scotland and Britain, respectively. When Allen was compiling his anthology, Helen Adam was a San Francisco-based poet and a member of the poetic community surrounding Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer. Born in Glasgow, Adam did not move to the United States until the age of thirty, in 1939.14 As one of only four female poets included in the anthology, and as one whose work was regularly praised in reviews, Adam’s inclusion makes The New American Poetry a decidedly richer collection.15

13 Gael Turnbull to Donald Allen, September 12, 1959, box 70, folder 17, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.
15 According to Ron Silliman, Duncan claimed to have played an extremely active role in choosing who was to be included in the anthology. He writes: “Listening to Duncan personally in San
The case of Denise Levertov is similar. Born in Essex in 1923, she published her first book in London in 1946 and lived in Europe until settling in New York at the end of 1948. Previous to Levertov’s trans-Atlantic relocation, Kenneth Rexroth had included her work in his anthology The New British Poets (1947). Allen does not seem to have questioned her suitability. The inclusion of Helen Adam and Denise Levertov—and the exclusion of Gael Turnbull—suggests the fluidity of nationalism and the problems of organizing a poetry anthology around national identity without taking into account the lineage of influence, which for many of the poets included in Allen’s anthology must be traced to non-American sources, a fact that critic Katherine Garrison Chapin pointed out in her review of Allen’s anthology for the New Republic:

Nearly all of these poets have travelled; lived, worked and gathered impressions (and clichés) in different corners of the globe from the far East to the West; they have read and listened to foreign rhythms, languages, and music. Clearly then, even in the background of the anthology, Allen’s insistent nationalism is persistent and problematic. Also in terms of the anthology’s ultimate effect on the critical discourse, this American nationalism is significant, yet remains unsettling, especially when we consider the transnational aspects of the postwar avant-garde.

Some of Allen’s supporters were skeptical about the possibility of publishing a specifically American poetry anthology. As poet and editor Cid Corman wrote to Allen in early 1958:

Francisco, on several occasions. He made it sound as if Allen had been his amanuensis or grad student assistant.” Ron Silliman, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2014. However, Allen’s correspondence indicates that he considered Duncan more of a nuisance than an aide. To Robert Creeley in August, 1959, Allen wrote: “Duncan has been a considerable problem. When I was working on the San Francisco issue [of the Evergreen Review] he refused to appear in it if I included any of Gregory Corso. On the one hand he has urged the publication of the Maidens (Collins, Adam, Broughton, Gleason and Triem); a little of Helen Adam and of James Broughton is all right but were I to follow his directives (which change from day to day) I should end up with something close to Daisy Aldan’s Folder anthology. In short I have tried to compose the anthology as objectively as possible and continue to oppose those arguments from all sides which seem purely political to me. Each poet would edit his anthology very differently, nor is mine a compromise but rather my view of the center of the present.” Donald Allen to Robert Creeley, August 10, 1959, box 9, folder 12, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.

16 See the letter from James Schuyler to Donald Allen, September 20, 1959, box 1, folder 11, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego: “If there is a New York ‘school’ now, it certainly began elsewhere, even abroad.”

I don't know how you can make such an anthology pertinent without taking a particular stand. I have pushed for such an anthology for several years, and then when it was in hand, I realized that in all honesty there wasn't enough material to fill 75 pages.18

While calling on Allen to take a “particular stand,” Corman chastises the editor for undertaking a project he deems pointless. What Corman did not realize, however, is that Allen’s decision to include only American poets was a stand, and one that involved more imagination than may be apparent. For in actual fact, the American avant-garde poetry scene of the 1940s and 1950s was much less American than Allen’s anthology would suggest.

Allen’s image of the new poetry of his nation would have been gleaned from contemporary publications. The 1950s were a boom time for small presses. In the “Short Bibliography” of *The New American Poetry*, there are no fewer than fifteen addresses of independent poetry publishers, and thirty-seven magazines and journals listed under “Chief Periodicals” and those that are “Also of Value.” Tellingly, many of these are located outside the United States. The journal *Contact* is located in Toronto; *Fragmente* is located in Freiburg im Breisgau; *Jabberwock 1959* is from Edinburgh; *Artisan* is from Liverpool; *Prospect* is located in Cambridge, England; and *Botteghe Oscura* is from Rome (and incidentally published in Italian, French, Spanish and German as well as English, which allowed it to promote “a new international spirit and the opening to a larger literary world for a generation of writers who would find each other through its pages”).19 One of the presses, *Migrant*, has addresses both in California and in England.20 So even on the level of publication, there was less that was specifically American about the new American poetry in the decade after World War II than it seems. While it is true that many of these publications were printed in foreign countries because it was cheaper to do so, the very existence of foreign presses that are considered “American” opens cracks in the façade of a supposedly united national avant-garde. It also shows that the conception of American poetry as something taking place within the borders of the American continent is inaccurate. To understand why Allen would insist on assimilation and a national conception of what was clearly a transnational movement, we turn to nationalist and transnational theory.

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18 Cid Corman to Donald Allen, April 16, 1958, box 11, folder 1, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.
In his seminal study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson writes: “Since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms.” 21 In as much as the American postwar poetry avant-garde can be said to comprise a revolution in literature, Anderson’s observation holds true, as does his definition of a nation as an “imagined community,” held together more by a shared narrative and an imaginary conception of wholeness than by actual fact. Allen established precisely this sense of community with his description of the poets included in the anthology as “a strong third generation … our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry.” 22 The use of “our” puts the nationalism of the anthology in sharp focus, as it presupposes an American readership and an American context for the book. Indeed, within the confines of an anthology entitled *The New American Poetry*, which has an American flag on the cover, and the majority of whose biographical notes begin, “Born [year] in [American city],” the disparate characteristics of these poets are smoothed over as individual personalities become secondary to the overtly American collective.

But Allen’s national focus is limiting. Claiming that innovative postwar poetry was the province of the United States alone discounts the significant experimental poetry being written in Canada and the United Kingdom by poets such as Basil Bunting and many others, whose works appear even more innovative and significant in hindsight. Allen does not specifically claim that no innovative poetry was being written in other countries during this period, but his insistence on the separate American tradition could certainly give one that impression.

What is even more apparent with the passing of years are the critical limitations of the nationalism of *The New American Poetry* and the myopic nature of Allen’s approach, especially given the recent transnational turn of American literary studies. Allen’s Anglo-centric approach now seems an aberration in a critical discourse that increasingly insists on the permeability of national borders in the field of literature. The examples of Levertov, Adam and Turnbull bear this out, as do the locations of the magazines and publishers of the postwar avant-garde. The production of “American” poetry during this period was literally transnational, and there was a fluidity of movement and influence among the poets, both in terms of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, and even farther afield in the realm of influence, with virtually all

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of the poets in *The New American Poetry* tracing influences to poetry in other languages.

Numerous literary critics of the past two decades, including Jahan Ramazani, Ignacio Infante, Wai Chee Dimock and Donald E. Pease have rightly insisted on the necessity of reading American literature in a global context. This transnational turn is particularly relevant to our discussion of Allen’s anthology and his insistence on a nationalist framework for postwar poetry, as transnationalism effectively argues against the necessity or even the possibility of reading literature through a purely national lens. Ramazani’s *A Transnational Poetics* is particularly insightful in this regard, as it “proposes various ways of vivifying circuits of poetic connection and dialogue across political and geographic borders and even hemispheres, of examining cross-cultural and cross-national exchanges, influences, and confluences in poetry” by taking into account “globalization, migration, travel, genre, influence, modernity, decolonization, and diaspora,”23 most of which can be applied directly to the poets of *The New American Poetry*. By dealing primarily with establishment figures such as T. S. Eliot and Derek Walcott, who are undeniably transnational in biography as well as poetry, Ramazani helped open the transnational discussion for poetry. His subjects, however, are canonical poets, rather than the burgeoning transnationalism of postwar poetry, perhaps in part because Allen’s national narrative has been so compelling.24

Allen’s anthology both perpetuated and was influenced by the Cold War insistence on American nationalism. His editorial decisions limited and normalized a rich flowering of postwar Anglophone poetry that had its roots in countries, continents and languages around the world. That Allen’s recontextualization of Anglophone poetry should appear in 1960 is significant, given the following year saw the publication of *The Continuity of American Poetry* by Roy Harvey Pearce. In this study, Pearce argues for the unbroken line the title suggests from the Puritan poets to those of the mid-twentieth century.

Despite the detail and erudition of Pearce’s work, he does not account for any of the poets included in Allen’s anthology, being concerned instead with their predecessors. His book thus has a belated quality, and like much of the criticism of the 1950s, deals well with tradition but says little about contempo-

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24 This effect was international. As case in point, Marjorie Perloff wrote to Donald Allen on October 12, 1998: “Incidentally in England, they call the New York School and Beats, the New Americans. All because of your book. There’s much talk of the New Americans versus the language poets etc. New Americans includes Ginsberg, Creeley, Dorn along with O’Hara and Ashbery and Koch and it’s not a bad term.” Marjorie Perloff to Donald Allen, October 12, 1998, box 10, folder 12, Donald Allen Collection, University of California, San Diego.
rary American poetry. It is curious too, how Pearce and Allen could survey the mid-century landscape and come away with two very different impressions. Pearce’s insistence that the strongest characteristic of American poetry is “the dignity of man,” as well as his claim that “American poets have always been conservatives” do not seem to do justice to the most innovative poetry written in the postwar years. Yet Pearce does look forward to new possibilities. He predicted that “American poetry, and thus American culture, is moving into a series of new, perhaps radically new, forms,”25 words that were perhaps more prescient than he knew. Despite their seeming differences, Allen’s and Pearce’s national-focused approaches both grew out of the same cultural moment.

From the contemporary critic’s point of view, some twenty years after the so-called transnational turn of American literary studies, Allen’s editorial nationalism seems quaint at best and manipulative at worst. The New American Poetry effectively assimilated international avant-garde poetic developments into an American context. Allen’s somewhat arbitrary exclusion of non-American poets also points to other lacunae in the anthology which seem to mirror the general social atmosphere in the United States during these years, including the unfortunate imbalance between men and women, and whites and minorities. Whereas, for contemporary transnational critics, a poem is itself a passport, with the ability to travel unfettered through geographic and linguistic borders, picking up and disseminating influences along the way, for Allen “new” poetry was synonymous with “American” poetry, and a poet’s ability to write it depended on his country of origin.

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Opusculum paedagogum:
Assimilation & Acculturation

Michal Klepřlík

Abstract: The paper focuses on the process of assimilation and acculturation in the context of American pluralism. It consists of three parts; the first part aims to survey the topic from the perspective of a person who is assimilating and tries to bring out several characteristic features of the United States as a place in which to live, whereas the second part, an interpretation of a poem by Wallace Stevens, approaches the topic the other way around, from the perspective of a person who is being assimilated. Finally, the last part comes up with a concept of aesthetic principle, on the grounds of which the author claims to provide a general basis for assimilation and acculturation, respectively.

Keywords: assimilation; acculturation; United States; plurality, Wallace Stevens; ἐπιφάνεια

When one scans through characters in literature, it is probably Virgil’s Aeneas, a Trojan hero, a mythical ancestor of Romulus and Remus, who might be considered a true model of the man called a fugitive. As in the case of the Iliad, where the destroyed city provides a parallel to the vanishing world of Mycenaean culture, the Aeneid also represents a turning point in the history of ideas. The central realization of the Iliad is the trivial fact that when an advanced civilization (city) falls apart, man is compelled to wander the earth, unable to take shelter from wild nature, thus tending, in a way, to return to the manner of a beast. No wonder that for George Steiner the destruction of a city is one of the greatest disasters that can befall man.¹ In the Aeneid, we become aware of another shift, a shift from the classical polis of the Hellenistic period to the new world order of the Roman Empire. Having escaped the burning walls of Troy, Aeneas must have steered his vessel to the unknown piece of land, he must have challenged the old peasant manner of life to set the scene

for life in the big city and not even Dido’s love could have stopped him, since Carthage also represented the past.

Nowadays, many of us might feel as if we are in Aeneas’ shoes, sailing the risky waters of deep oceans, teetering on the edge of an abyss as we search for a better place to live. The number of refugees and their rich diversity suggest that the roots of those shifts are to be found deeper than on the level of politics and economics; much more, they are related to the rapid development of technology and media and to an intense process of modernization, as well as to population growth. New ways of living require new modes of thinking; it seems to be of the greatest importance to become conscious of the fact that we are failing to find those new modes by means of which we can deal with the issues of modernity. It is clear that to be modern means to be mobile or, as aptly stated by Zygmunt Bauman, to be liquid, liquid in a sense of having no bounds, in order to have hands that are free to seize an opportunity when it comes. When approaching the issue of assimilation and acculturation, it is necessary to bear this liquid aspect of modernity in mind.

When presidential candidates run for office in the White House, no matter which party they are fighting for, it has become almost an unwritten rule to mention, at least occasionally, those three famous words from the obverse of The Great Seal of the United States, “E pluribus unum,” notwithstanding the fact that as a motto it was never codified by law as in the case of “In God We Trust.” The meaning of “E pluribus unum” is popularly known, celebrating the essential pluralism of the New World. However, as a counter-motto we may quote not that well-known line from a poem by Wallace Stevens, who, meditating on plurality, points out that “In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.” America consists of small units, being a kaleidoscope of various patterns, but, in such a rich scale of subjective viewpoints, are we able to find an objective value which might serve as a bond that links all, or do we stay separated, forming a sum of partial, autonomous parts? Politicians would claim that this multicultural space works; nevertheless, real life corroborates the sage words of the poet.

“Assimilation” as a good or bad word; when racking our brains over this topic, we are placed in a dilemma as to whether to treat this issue from the perspective of those who constitute the native culture and whose measures and standards the newcomer is to attain; or from the perspective of the newcomer. It is clear that the latter will talk about uprootedness, about expatriation, about a loss of traditional habits and modes of feeling which may lead to to chronic

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anxiety or aggression; on the other hand, the former will assume the preservation of the status quo, the current codes and rules, which are to be adopted by newcomers. This is the reason why the term “acculturation” finds its place in the title. “Assimilation” and “acculturation” are joined by an ampersand, since they are interrelated, looking the same way. What I aim at is to stress the fact that when we think about the viability of assimilation, it is essential to consider acculturation in a broad sense as the mutual relationship of two different cultures coming close together. It is then self-evident that when we embark on the scrutiny of this coming close together, both parts must be reflected and judged individually, from all due perspectives.

I

As early as in his novel Under Western Eyes (1911), Joseph Conrad gives an account of the difficulties, of the deep cultural and intellectual incongruity within a single continent. Unsurprisingly, when viewed from outside, from elsewhere the task of aptly expressing the essential meaning is far more complicated. However, discussing the issue of assimilation within the United States requires the enumeration of a few aspects which might serve as a characterization of America as a place for living in, for it is this order, this sum of values honored, which an immigrant is expected to accept.

Seen from the perspective of a European, the American continent itself proved to play a crucial role in weakening the strong position of Europe, which is often ignored, even though the harsh criticism of Eurocentrism is still on the increase. The discovery of America by the explorer and navigator from Genoa eroded the dominance of Europe; beyond the Pillars of Hercules there used to be a great void, the realm of the Unknown, but now another part, another place for men to discover, was revealed, the notion of which Europe tried to handle by means of colonial politics. And a similar course might be traced on a higher level of planetary issues: most probably, the existence of “another” world, another space, led to the final rejection of the geocentric model, which eventually proved to be a sine qua non of new, enlightened ways of thinking and apprehension. America as a continent and its erosion of concepts about the world gave the impetus to a new principle of equality under the law, which the most influential Enlightenment thinkers had been striving for. It may be said that this new principle had originally been imported from Europe, but it was John Locke who was inspired, while writing his famous A Letter Concerning Toleration (1689), by the Native Americans and the way they provided “an
inconsiderable and weak number of Christians, destitute of every thing,"⁴ with
the things essential for life. In the words of Walt Whitman: “Not till the sun
excludes you, do I exclude you.”⁵

Seen from another perspective, the perspective of empirical evidence, the
events of 1492 are also significant. When the Crusaders had captured Terra
Sacra and established the Kingdom of Jerusalem, they found the Holy Sepul-
chre of Jesus Christ empty in more than the literal sense of the word. They did
not find physical evidence of the divine presence and as they longed to find the
union of the Eternal and the Secular, they left disappointed and betrayed. On
account of this disillusionment they came to the conclusion that the natural
existence of God was to be looked for not in external objects, in the outside
world, but inside; that it is not apprehended as an object but solely as subjec-
tive consciousness; one has to dip into the inner world to find “that definite
embodiment of being which is of a divine nature” (das Dieses, welches göttlicher
Art ist).⁶ This idea was also expressed by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka,
who, when meditating on this shift in Western history, claimed that from
the sixteenth century onwards, ἐπιμέλεια, a care for the soul, was gradually
replaced by a care of another quality: “not a care for the soul, a care for being,
but a care for having, a care for the outer world and for gaining control over it
begins to dominate.”⁷ This conflict between being and having, esse and habere,
with the shift towards the latter anticipating the genesis of the “pursuit of hap-
piness,” a postulate mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, stressing the

⁶ “Christendom found the empty Sepulchre, but not the union of the Secular and the Eternal; and so it lost the Holy Land. It was practically undeceived; and the result which it brought back with it was of a negative kind: viz., that the definite embodiment which it was seeking, was to be looked for in Subjective Consciousness alone, and in no external object; that the definite form in question, presenting the union of the Secular with the Eternal, is the Spiritual self-cognizant independence of the individual. Thus the world attains the conviction that man must look within himself for that definite embodiment of being which is of a divine nature: subjectivity thereby receives absolute authorization, and claims to determine for itself the relation [of all that exists] to the Divine. This then was the absolute result of the Crusades, and from them we may date the commencement of self-reliance and spontaneous activity. The West bade an eternal farewell to the East at the Holy Sepulchre, and gained a comprehension of its own principle of subjective infinite Freedom.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Philosophy of History, trans. John Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 412. Italics in the original.
importance of practical considerations, which consequently—predominantly as a result of the Protestant ethic—had an impact on the necessity of a new political order.

The third aspect depicting the typical features of the American region also finds its roots deep in the manners of its native inhabitants. When in the second decade of the twentieth century modernists provoked discussion on defining what indigenous American art should look like and where to draw inspiration from—whether to import the tradition from Europe, as postulated by Gertrude Stein or Sherwood Anderson, or whether to search for its own tradition—the number of artists who left for Paris to forge the “uncreated conscience of the race” speaks for itself. Nevertheless, there were outstanding artists, for instance William Carlos Williams, who believed that the tradition was to be found in the uniqueness of America. In his quite short book *The Great American Novel* (1923), Williams ponders a set of values which may be considered typically American. His concept of “Americanness” appears at the end of the novel, in a story about the early maturity of Esquimau women:

It has been generally supposed that among the peoples of the earth the age of maturity comes earliest in the tropics and increases gradually as one goes northward. But in North America this rule has one striking exception. It is not rare among Esquimau women that they have their first child at 12 and children born before the mothers were 11 have been recorded. Point Barrow Alaska 300 miles north of the Arctic circle.

But the early maturity of the Esquimau girls is strictly in accord with the supposition that the hotter the environment the earlier the maturity. To all intents and purposes the typical Esquimau lives under tropical and subtropical conditions. The temperature of the Esquimau house indoors frequently rises to 90° [F]. When they go out the cold air does not have a chance to come in contact with the body, except for a limited area of the face. When an Esquimau is well dressed his two layers of fur clothing imprison the body heat so effectively that the air in actual contact with his skin is always at the temperature of a tropical summer. He carries the climate with him inside his clothes.⁸

A system perfectly adapted to a cold climate, a system that perfectly understands the phenomenology of a living place, is what Williams learns from the native inhabitants of North America and what he is pointing out when investigating “Americanness.” Of course, Williams does not say anything new; the idea of living inside the *Lebenswelt* while *lowly* listening what the things are

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saying may be found in Emerson, who claimed that all “spiritual laws” should pursue this principle.9

By these above-mentioned aspects—(I) equality under the law, (II) the “pursuit of happiness” with the emphasis on pragmatism, and (III) perfect understanding of a living place—I do not claim to cover all the features of being an American, but they do represent the most distinct phenomena which a person trying to merge with their American surroundings should think about.

II

Assimilation is not a state of static definitiveness, but an occurrence that has a certain course, which implies the presence of at least two parts. Seen from this perspective, it seems to be fitter to use the term “acculturation,” since it reflects the process of various cultures coming close together, in the same way as two different sets try to find their intersection. However, another meaning of the prefix a shows that it may also express a negative statement, such as in the case of “atheist,” “agnostic” or “apathy.” Now, is there any possibility of preventing a newcomer from repudiating their original culture, and, consequently, preserving its uniqueness while adapting it to another cultural sphere?

It is no accident that at the beginning of this essay a line from a poem by Wallace Stevens was quoted, since it is Stevens whose aesthetics offers a way which may bring us to a better understanding of “otherness.” The poem which will be analyzed is called “Study of Two Pears” and comes from the collection *Parts of a World* (1942), the name of which aptly suggests Stevens’s task and endeavor: to define and to make meaningful the individual parts constituting the sum.

Study of Two Pears

I

Opusculum paedagogum.
The pears are not viols,
Nudes or bottles.
They resemble nothing else.

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9 “The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only obey. There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word… For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right and a perfect contentment.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Spiritual Laws,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 309.
II
They are yellow forms
Composed of curves
Bulging toward the base
They are touched red.

III
They are not flat surfaces
Having curved outlines.
They are round
Tapering toward the top.

IV
In the way they are modelled
There are bits of blue.
A hard dry leaf hangs
From the stem.

V
The yellow glistens.
It glistens with various yellows,
Citrons, oranges and greens
Flowering over the skin.

VI
The shadows of the pears
Are blobs on the green cloth.
The pears are not seen
As the observer wills.10

Within the scope of six stanzas Stevens attempts to depict a still life of two pears, being a patient study, almost a Cézannesque “genealogy of matter.” The very first stanza begins with a striking line: “Opusculum paedagogum”—a short pedagogic work, a definition of reality with the aim being to educate. It is hardly ever, in daily life, that we have the time to meditate on the shape of pears; it is not until we want to tell somebody that we become aware of the trivial fact that in the way they are shaped, pears do not resemble viols or bottles or nudes, that they are unique, their shapes essentially original: a yellow form composed of curves bulging towards the base and in some places touched with red, showing ripeness. The third stanza specifies the shape of pears, which, because of their curved lines, are not flat but fill the space: they

extend, they enter the space, being an inherent, factual part of it. A hard dry leaf hangs from the stem, which grows from the neck tapering toward the top: such is the way they are modeled, such is the way they were designed, one by one, without exception.

In the next stanza Stevens turns to color, taking note of the skin glistening with various yellows typical of other fruits (citrons, oranges) as well as of bits of green, mirroring other crops which surround pears when they are ripening. As if a pear—in order to achieve its uniqueness—were to bring into accord all its surrounding area, as if it were to study it in detail, as if it were to embrace all the diversity of the circumjacent fruits in order not to repeat them and form its specific shape and trait *sui generis*.

The last stanza sums up the whole *opusculum*; the pears are corporeal, albeit not living bodies; they influence their surroundings, they cast a shadow, touching the cloth in the form of dark blobs; they transfigure the light in the room, they restructure the air flowing around them, they charge it with a certain fragrance. For Stevens, the pears are inherent parts of their environs, interrelated with other objects, being considered, being seen not as an observer wills but in the way the pears let themselves be seen, in the way they want to be shown. This last couplet is the message of the whole poem; this is the essential meaning of Steven’s *opusculum paedagogum*.

**III**

At the beginning of this essay the question of assimilation was raised. Are the above chapters of any use when discussing this issue, do they suggest anything which may contribute to a better comprehension of this phenomenon?

At first, I was trying to point out that both parts involved in the process of assimilation must be given the floor, that it is necessary to consider both perspectives as being equally important. Nevertheless, such a postulation implies negative features of multiculturalism in the sense of obstinate clashes of cultures and ideologies, including reluctance to tolerate the migration of ethnic and religious groups and denominations. Is there any possibility of avoiding the danger of “negative plurality”? Josef Jařab refers to this danger when reflecting on the absence of a third party, of a universal value extending beyond the borders of provincialism, which could serve as a vanishing point where separate parallel lines may meet.11 It is self-evident that the presence of such

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a third party is indispensable for a viable process of assimilation, that without this universal value it will hardly ever work. Would it have been possible for the Sophoclean tragic heroes to strive for an ideal of excellence of character and soundness of mind if Sophocles had not introduced a third actor into his plays? The revelation experienced by Sophocles must have followed the same goal as we are now pursuing.

In the Middle Ages, this universal value was represented by the Christian concept of God; the lancet arch of Gothic cathedrals, an acutely pointed arch having two centers of equal radii, is a poignant expression of duality, of an omnipresent value exceeding one’s consciousness, as stated by Ortega y Gasset. Nowadays, after all the Reformation and Counter-Reformation endeavors having resulted in the fragmentation of “universal doctrine,” we can definitely admit that this unity within the scope of the Catholic Church seems to be worn out, lacking any hope of being restored.

Another attempt in the quest for the value that would be universal for man appeared in the late eighteenth century under the auspices of German spirituality, paying attention to art as the way to achieve moral perfection. With his concept of an aesthetic state, Friedrich Schiller endeavored to found a state of being in which all men would be free, yielding only to the idea of beauty, since taste—the ability to judge beauty—is solely a disinterested interest, ergo an interest which is free, independent, and not subject to the dictates of senses or reason. Schiller’s concept, drawing on and elaborating on Immanuel Kant’s theory, reflected, and, to a certain extent, completed the efforts of the German literary and cultural movement based in Weimar. Nevertheless, history itself proved this concept to be false: the idea to perfect man on account of aesthetic education failed when exposed to the cruelties of the Nazi regime, and the fact that the walls of a concentration camp were built only a few miles from the gardens of Tiefurt Castle, where Schiller gave his reading, seems to be eloquent enough. But we can draw inspiration from Schiller’s shift towards aesthetics, towards the way of perception, the way we regard things, and make an attempt to find a universal principle which could also be appropriate within the plurality of subjective points of view. Such an aesthetic principle might be

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found in Stevens’s poem mentioned above. The keynote of this poem mirrors the necessity of viewing objects from their own standpoints, not vice versa; when attempting to discover objects or define them in a true sense of stating distinctive features, we should let objects appear themselves; we should let them approach us and regard them in the way they manifest themselves. “The pears are not seen / As the observer wills”: to follow such a principle is the way to sail through the difficulties of projecting our inner feelings onto the objects that we are judging.

The process of assimilation includes acculturation, an encounter of two different objects; to be successful, this acculturation requires a precise understanding of the given object. To understand it, to comprehend its meaningful existence, means to grasp it as a thing, to grasp its excellence, its ἀρετή. To depict this phenomenon the Greeks used the word ἐπιφάνεια, which literally means “to be uncovered, to manifest itself.”16 It is not we who cast light on the thing, thus revealing its essence, but always the thing itself that achieves its epiphany, as aptly expressed by James Joyce:

This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognise that the object is one integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.17

To let the objects approach us, to regard them, while judging them, in the way they manifest themselves, in the way they want to be seen and not as an observer wills: could such a principle based on empirical evidence—hence universal, common for all—a principle that is essentially unbiased, that a priori does not require us to take a stand on religious, political, social or gender issues, could it serve as the universal value, as the glue joining the pieces of the puzzle together?

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16 The word ἐπιφάνεια comes from ἐπί (on, upon) and φαίνω (to bring to light). The Greeks also used another word, δεικνύω, denoting the activity of “showing, pointing out,” however in a transitive sense of pointing “to” something, whereas the verb φαίνω can also form the mediopassive φαίνεσθαι. Having considered this distinction, we may conclude that the meaning of the word epiphany is to be understood as the moment when a thing reveals or manifests itself, its soul, its whatness. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 152, 750.

17 James Joyce, Stephen Hero, ed. Theodore Spencer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), 190. Italics in the original.
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The Enemy of My Enemy Is … the Result of an Unsuccessful Assimilation Process

LADA HOMOLOVÁ

Abstract: The article examines the causes and consequences of a failed assimilation process as illustrated in Percival Everett's novel Watershed (1996) in which he features an African American hydrologist and a Native American little person who first become friends and then also partners in crime with a common goal to expose a conspiracy that had caused the anthrax poisoning of the local Native American reservation's water source. As the familial and social backgrounds of both the characters are gradually unveiled in the novel through the combination of the present event narrative and flashbacks from the past, the level of assimilation (or its failure) of the African American and Native American protagonists and their families is compared and evaluated.

Keywords: Percival Everett; African Americans; Native Americans; assimilation; racism

At first glance, Percival Everett’s Watershed (1996) could be read simply as a modern political thriller that employs many of the current popular, sensational topics such as domestic terrorism, anthrax poisoning and even an ever-popular FBI murder investigation. However, in the background of this story, an interesting phenomenon can be traced as the novel presents both the causes and, later, the consequences of a failed assimilation process which has pushed the African American and Native American protagonists to the bottom of the social ladder, causing them to be perceived as criminals by the rest of the society and making them despise the general American political and power establishment. The basic narrative line is relatively uncomplicated—the protagonist, an African American hydrologist, Robert Hawks, is spending some time in his woodland cabin near the Plata Indian Reservation, both as a part of his work assignment and to escape from his overly attached, mentally unstable ex-girlfriend. During one of his trips to the nearby city, he meets Louise Yellow Calf, a Native American little person, to whom he gives a ride on his way back to his cabin. Later that night, Louise, who previously said that she wanted to
hike in the local forests, appears on his doorstep in a snowstorm and Hawks lets her stay overnight so that she does not freeze to death. However, soon it is revealed that during that same night, two FBI agents (one African American and one Native American) were killed in the woods. Almost unwittingly, Hawks becomes not only a part of the investigation as a potential witness, but in a way, a rather biased investigator himself, as through Louise, he befriends more members of her family and the local Native American community and helps them uncover the authorities’ attempt to conceal a leak from their secret cache of anthrax in the mountains.

Since the book features many Native American characters and the plot mostly takes place in or nearby one of their reservations, the paperback edition (printed in 2003) was published with an introduction written by poet and novelist Sherman Alexie. Alexie, as a Native American himself, admits that he “used to believe only Native American writers should write about Native Americans” but having assessed the novel, he praises it and also gives it his blessing. Alexie writes:

In *Watershed*, Everett fictionalizes the 1970s political battles on the Lakota Sioux’s Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, combines them with fictional and real events during the 1960s civil rights battles for African Americans, and sets it all on a contemporary and fictional Indian reservation where a Native American dwarf and an African American hydrologist struggle to save themselves and the tribe from evil corporate bastards.

The relation between the fictional representation and social reality is also explored by William R. Handley in his essay called “Detecting the Real Fictions of History in *Watershed*” (2005). He considers very seriously the book’s disclaimer in which Everett denies that any characters or places in the novel would be based on real people or a particular landscape, directly opposing to what Alexie had stated in his preface. Handley thinks that Everett has done so simply as a measure of precaution in case that someone would want to question the authenticity of the Native American characters:

Much is at stake, of course, in assigning “resemblance” to native characters created by a non-native writer, given the history of American conquest: taken in earnest, the caveats in Everett’s acknowledgments might seem an anticipatory defense against criticism of non-Native appropriation of Native characters.

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1 Sherman Alexie, introduction to *Watershed*, by Percival Everett (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), vii.
2 Alexie, introduction to *Watershed*, ix–x.
Eventually, Handley reaches a compromise solution of Everett’s and Alexie’s contradiction regarding the historical accuracy, professing that:

[This work] of western fiction [is] historical in the deepest sense: not because [it] offer[s] up “facts” or because [it] “faithfully represent[s] a bygone era,” but because [it is] self-conscious about the way in which the “truth” of history is never objective but always subjectively imagined. Moreover, “history”—especially the history of American racism, is itself a record of discourses that, however factually false or fictional, have had the very real power to bruise or destroy people, cultures, and landscapes.⁴

The importance of this realization lies in the fact that even though Everett works with only a limited number of characters and the novel does not attempt to give an impartial or even a whole historical picture of the African and/or Native American experience with racism, it makes his narrative no less relevant. Also, the connection of these two races is anything but random, because the reasons for the almost instantaneous kinship that Robert Hawks feels towards his new Native American friends can be seen as something that reaches beyond personal sympathies. In the novel, he and the Native Americans share a common enemy—both personally and historically, as these two groups have more in common than it may seem. According to the Blauner Hypothesis as defined in Healey’s and O’Brien’s Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change: “Minority groups created by colonization will experience more intense prejudice, racism, and discrimination than those created by immigration,”⁵ and also they “will be attacked, denigrated, and, if possible, eliminated, and this assertion seems well validated by the experiences of the African Americans. African cultures and languages were largely eradicated under slavery.”⁶ Since both African and Native Americans were colonized and/or enslaved by the white Americans, they therefore share not only the aforementioned enemy in the form of a white aggressor, but also the similar position in a society which singles them out even from the otherwise already nationally and culturally varied crowd. Because of this, the characters also have similar experiences with racism and discrimination, causing their distrust in the white race and governmental institutions which have either directly or indirectly made such injustices possible.

To determine the actual level of assimilation of the African and Native American communities in the novel, I have decided to use a combination of Milton Gordon’s criteria from his 1964 book *Assimilation in America,* whose extensive description served as the basis for the analysis, and supplement it by the category of residential patterns from Mary C. Waters’ and Tomás R. Jiménez’s 2005 paper “Assessing Immigrant Assimilation: New Empirical and Theoretical Challenges.”

The first criterion examined is the change in the cultural patterns of the minority, including their religious beliefs. For the African American characters in the novel, this change has already taken place in the past. They are either Christians, or atheists—the latter in the case of Robert Hawks and Hawks’ father and grandfather. For the grandfather, however, atheism was not only about rejecting the notion of the existence of a supernatural force or spirituality itself, his aversion towards religion was aimed at Christianity in particular as a form of a racial protest. At one point, he says that: “It’s that Christian bullshit that bothers me the most. Black people running around after some white man’s invention,” and also expresses his strong distaste towards Christian dogmatism: “They’re sick. They believe in one way, their way” (*W*, 72).

However, while the African American characters have otherwise completely adopted the mainstream American lifestyle, the Native Americans are portrayed as those who chose to maintain their own culture and traditions. They gather at the meetings of the Native American Church where they practice peyote ceremonies, they have kept the traditional system of beliefs and the traditional Native American naming system. The best example of how deeply rooted the culture is can be seen in the character of Louise, who, even though she did not grow up in the reservation, still carries her heritage with her. First, when asked about her surname, Hawks notices her discomfort: “‘Yellow Calf,’ she said and I could see that the information has been released automatically and that she was sorry for that” (*W*, 20), but it is apparent from the invitation to come and visit her family that she extends to Hawks that whether she likes it or not, she still shares the values and beliefs of her tribe: “You should come to the reservation and meet my people. They’re a part of this land. I didn’t

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10 Peyote (lat. Lophophora williamsii) is a cactus known for its psychoactive properties when ingested.
grow up here, so I’m not. But my mother is as much a part of this land as Silly Man Creek” (W, 19).

When it comes to the names of the other Native American characters, Everett is creative to the point of mocking the stereotype. Louise's mother is introduced as and never called by anything else but “Old Woman” (W, 25), and the local authority, named Hiram Kills Enemy, has a grandson “Dicky Kills Enemy” (W, 146). Though these names probably serve mostly as comic relief to amuse the reader, they still do not fail to illustrate the unwillingness of the local Native Americans to adjust to the Anglo-conformist naming “norm.”

Another criterion that renders similar results is large scale entrance into institutions. While the Native Americans in the novel live in a somewhat closed community and, because of both tradition and their distrust in the governmental institutions, they have their separate tribal council, the African Americans are shown to have formal, university education and jobs corresponding with that—medical doctors or, in the case of Robert Hawks, hydrologists, which makes them part of their work-related circles and organizations.

However, when it comes to the absence of prejudice and discrimination, the differences between African and Native American characters are suddenly completely erased as both groups are shown to be on the receiving end of numerous racially motivated acts of violence and oppression. For the Native Americans, these are supported by the paragraphs from the treaties between the United States government and various Indian Nations that are scattered throughout the text. The first such excerpt that even introduces the very first chapter of the novel is from Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1874) by Edward Parmelee Smith. Everett chooses this passage:

> except under extraordinary provocation, or in circumstances not at all to be apprehended, it is not probable that as many as five hundred Indian warriors will ever again be mustered at one point for a fight; and with the conflicting interests of the different tribes, and the occupation of the intervening country by advancing settlements, such an event as a general Indian war can never occur in the United states. (Qtd. in W, 1; italics in the original)

Because he starts in the middle of the sentence and only discloses the author and the year of publication, several interesting facts stay hidden without reading the original text—one of them being that this particular excerpt comes from the part of the report called “The Wilder Tribes” concerning the least assimilated Native American tribes which, in Smith’s vivid description, “are as yet unreached by missionary work, and are in their native paganism, whose

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superstition often forbids their being counted for enrollment and the attendance of their children at school.”

Edward Parmelee Smith also sees these tribes as the most dangerous: “It is from Indians in this class that any such hostilities are to be apprehended as hereafter to require the presence or use of the military.” This excerpt therefore sets the tone for the whole following narrative in *Watershed*, assigning the Native American characters the roles of maladjusted rebels in the Anglo-conformist society.

The various pieces of legal documents and treaties are not the only example of unfairness towards the group, though. This excursion to the history between the white settlers and Native tribes is connected to the present storyline as the water contaminated by anthrax is deliberately led to the Native American reservation to prevent it from spreading to the nearby town as it otherwise would, regardless of the damage, the health issues it causes to the locals or the number of victims that the poisoning claims.

African American characters are shown to be treated with similar callousness, but instead of showing the injustice in the nationwide, historical scale like it was done with the Native Americans, both the past and present transgressions are illustrated in the personal stories of Robert Hawks and his family. Hawks is aware of the racial problematics from his early childhood—his family has to take turns in picking him up from school, because, as he later finds out, his father “had received threatening calls from rednecks expressing concern about my [Robert Hawks’] safety” (*W*, 100). Though his grandfather warns him that:

> “When you’re older,” he said, “the police will stop you and search you and, if they don’t shoot you, they’ll take you in and say you look like another ‘nigger.’ They may not use that word, but that’s what they’ll mean. It’s happened to me. It’s happened to your father. It will happen to you.” (*W*, 14)

Hawks is still understandably unprepared for the harsh reality. In one of his many flashbacks, he captures the roots of his future inability to trust the law enforcement forces and the government:

> I was fourteen and just beginning to catch the attention of white policemen when I walked down the street. It scared me. I found that I was angry because I had to be scared. I was angry because I had to worry about how I was walking or where I was...

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walking, whether it looked as if I were running, or whether I had too much money or too little money in my pocket, or whether something had happened two blocks over involving “a nigger who looked just like me.” The flashing lights of a police car made me and my friends hold out breath. (W, 129)

Throughout the book, there are many instances in which either Hawks or someone from his family become targets of racism, police brutality, threats or injustice. The consequences of this directly manifests in Gordon’s next category—“the sense of peoplehood.” It is shown that the African American characters lack the sense of belonging—Robert Hawks even says about his grandfather and father that: “They hated America, policemen, and especially churches” (W, 3) and though he himself would like to fit in and consequently see himself as a part of the American nation, he has reached the point where he does not feel comfortable in a town’s restaurant when he realizes that he is the only African American guest there and later only finds out that the feeling was mutual when a waitress admits that she does “not like his looks” (W, 54) because he is black. However, it is only after he discovers the anthrax conspiracy, when he finally realizes about the United States: “But it wasn’t my country” (W, 140).

Similarly, not only the Native American characters identify themselves as “Indians” or “American Americans” (W, 138) instead of “Americans” or “Native Americans,” many of those who live in the reservation also stand directly against the American establishment. One of the Indian men claims that: “Well, I am at war with the government” (W, 48), while other dares to defy even the most basic ideas and values of the American society, saying that: “If you’re an Indian, you don’t believe in civil rights. It simply doesn’t make sense. They come and talk about equality again and again, but they always lie” (W, 138). The distrust and resentment that these men express is even more strongly accumulated in the character of Hiram Kills Enemy. Since his son came back from the Korean War changed (probably suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress syndrome) and became an alcoholic, which eventually leads to him freezing to death outside, Hiram not only blames the white Americans for causing his son’s untimely and undignified death, he—based on the similarity in the physical appearance—actually feels closer to the Koreans than his fel-

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low Americans: “‘The white army and killing those people.’ He shook his head. ‘They look like us, you know’” (W, 69).

Another related category—“absence of value and power conflict”\(^\text{16}\)—generates the same result. The past and ongoing power conflicts of the Native Americans and the United States are reminded in the excerpts from the treaties and a large-scale future conflict can be predicted, though at the end of the narrative, Hawks is still on his way to deliver the evidence of the anthrax leak to the authorities. Apart from that, the Native Americans from the reservation and the white inhabitants of a nearby town are also in a dispute over the water rights. Interestingly enough, when Robert Hawks overhears several men discussing the water situation in a local store, they ask his opinion as a hydrologist to tell them who the water belongs to. Hawks first refuses to choose, since the question would be more suitable for a lawyer than a hydrologist, but when the men push for an answer, he eventually takes the Native Americans’ side, replying that: “Besides, the treaty says it’s theirs. They were here first” (W, 30), which, of course, angers the locals and again instantly alienates Hawks from them. Apart from similar little battles of words, the African Americans, too, are shown in a power conflict with the “white authorities” and also in the ongoing fight for equality and fair treatment as is apparent from Hawks’ many childhood memories.

The tension that stems from the previously discussed points contributes to the result in the category of residential patterns that is not a part of Gordon’s otherwise exhaustive table, but can be found in the previously mentioned article “Assessing Immigrant Assimilation: New Empirical and Theoretical Challenges” by Mary C. Waters and Tomás R. Jiménez. The focal point of this criterion is whether residential segregation is present or not and in both cases in the novel, there is a certain degree of physical distance between the groups. The Native Americans are shown to live mostly in the reservation—and even if they decide or are forced to leave it for some reason like Louise Yellow Calf or Dicky Kills Enemy, they always return after some time. The African Americans in the novel do not live in such isolation but through the excerpts from Hawks’ grandfather’s medical visits to his patients, it is still obvious that they lived in a predominantly African American neighborhood within the city, which is, as Joseph F. Healey describes in *Diversity and Society: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender*, still not an uncommon occurrence:

Since Jim Crow segregation ended in the 1960s, residential integration has advanced slowly, if at all. Black and white Americans continue to live in separate areas and racial

residential segregation has been the norm across the nation. This pattern is reinforced by the fact that African Americans are more urbanized than whites and especially concentrated in densely populated center-city areas. Today, the extent of residential segregation varies around the nation, but African Americans continue to be residentially isolated, especially in the older industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest and in the South.¹⁷

Therefore, even though the degree of separation is not as prominent as in the case of the Native Americans, it is still present to some point.

The last criterion, again, renders a similar, yet brief, outcome. Intermarriage is something that is not specifically mentioned in any of the families portrayed in the novel and both the focus families—that is of Robert Hawks and Louise Yellow Calf—are monoracial.

So, if put together for a clearer summary, the Watershed table with all the criteria for a successful process of assimilation would then look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in the cultural patterns</th>
<th>Native Americans</th>
<th>African Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large scale entrance into institutions</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Partially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of prejudice</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of discrimination</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of peoplehood</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of power and value conflict</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Patterns</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Partially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermarriage</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this overview, it is even more obvious that though neither of the groups can be considered successfully assimilated into the mainstream American society, it is the Native American characters who stand out more as a separated unit. They have kept their unique cultural traditions. They have (apart from the one killed FBI agent) not entered the governmental institutions, but rather maintained their own. Prejudice and discrimination suffered from the major society have resulted in the Native Americans’ need to still identify themselves as Indians, rather than Americans. They live separately and are in a conflict with the government because of the land rights and water rights. Because all of these reasons, it is easy for the general public to see the Plata Indians as outcasts and, by failing all the Gordon’s, Waters’ and Jiménez’ criteria, as an unassimilated, closed unit within the United States’ society. And while the

¹⁷ Healey, Diversity and Society, 208.
African American characters are not portrayed in such a radical way, being shown as either Christians or atheists\(^{18}\) who are culturally assimilated into the white majority, they are still only scarcely represented in the institutions or public offices and are subjected to such an amount of prejudice and racially motivated discrimination that it, just like with the Native Americans, results in their hatred of America. Also similarly, the African American characters live in a partial separation and there is no mention of any intermarriage.

Therefore, when Robert Hawks joins his seven Native American friends from the American Indian Revolution who are locked up in a church compound with two FBI agents that they intend to hold hostage until the government or someone responsible for the situation admits that there has been an anthrax leak, they are—and from an unbiased point of view, probably rightfully so—labeled as dangerous criminals and, as Hawks describes the situation: “Out there, there are two hundred and fifty police—FBI, all clad in blue windbreakers with large gold letters, and National Guardsmen, looking like the soldiers they want to be” (\(W\), 1). Outnumbered, outgunned and portrayed as terrorists Hawks and his companions would logically be those to blame for the situation into which they (although unintentionally) got themselves and for the loss of lives of at least two of their friends and one FBI agent, but as some scholars, such as L. Paul Metzger, point out, even the formation of these organizations is often rooted in the problem of assimilation and racism. In his 1971 essay “American Sociology and Black Assimilation” Metzger says:

> The potential for racial divisiveness—and in the extreme case, revolutionary confrontation—which resides in such movements should also be recognized, but the source of this “pathological” potential should be seen as resting primarily within the racism of the wider society rather than in the “extremist” response to it on the part of the victimized minority.\(^{19}\)

Though a simplification of a more complicated phenomena, in the case of\(^{9}\)\(Watershed\), Metzger’s statement is accurate. As he stands quite radically against assimilation, claiming that: “The belief that racial assimilation constitutes the only democratic solution to the race problem in the United States should be


relinquished by sociologists,”\textsuperscript{20} it is interesting to see the actual outcome of the failure of the assimilation process in the novel.

As has been stated in the connection to the Blauner Hypothesis, both African and Native Americans in \textit{Watershed} share the same oppressor and because of their similar experience it is easier for them to connect with one another. But although being pushed by the society to assimilate into the very same society that, in reality, makes it no secret that strangers are not actually welcomed, makes the process almost a Sisyphean task, the novel also proves that the characters are able and willing to do so—only not with the white Americans, but with each other.

Robert Hawks, an atheist, joins a peyote ceremony of the Native American Church, not because he would suddenly become religious, but because of his respect for the cultural traditions of his new friends. There is also no racial discrimination between them—in fact, Hawks realizes that while he does not feel comfortable being the only African American person in the local restaurant, he did not have the same problem in the Native American reservation. He also allows Louise to stay overnight at his cabin when she needs shelter from the storm and, in return, gets invited into the reservation and the homes of the local inhabitants on multiple occasions, so although the residential patterns do not change permanently, they at least start deliberately crossing, which seemed not to be the case with neither African American nor Native American characters and the white Americans.

Finally, when being trapped in the church and surrounded by heavily armed federal agents, Hawks—who refused the Christian faith and could not bring himself to see the United States of America as “his country”—decides to accept the cause of his Native American friends truly as his own. He, as the person who knows the place best because of his work, volunteers to sneak out of the compound through the only unguarded way—a ditch filled with water contaminated with anthrax—and deliver the material proof to the Naturalist Conservancy office in Denver, though by doings so, he is condemning himself to certain death. In addition to that, before he goes, Hawks asks the Native American leader of the group: “Give me an Indian name or something like that when all this shit is over,” and his request is immediately accepted: “You got it,” Bisset said (\textit{W}, 197).

\textit{Watershed} shows that the assimilation in the American society is definitely neither an easy nor smooth process, and it also points out the schizophrenic nature of the unification pressure exerted on minorities combined with the constant racial struggle and prejudices held by the majority. However, the novel also presents one of the very few outcomes of such predicament that could be labeled as positive—it reveals how failing to assimilate may bring different people and

\textsuperscript{20} Metzger, “American Sociology and Black Assimilation,” 643.
cultures much closer together in their common goal and in sharing the sense of “otherness.” Because of this, though dealing with serious topics such as racism, violence and death, *Watershed* demonstrates that the most effective solution for two or more groups of people to be able to peacefully live together, may not be a complete assimilation, but rather mutual respect, tolerance and open mind.

**Bibliography**


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American Academia under the Threat of Assimilation in Ishmael Reed’s *Japanese by Spring*

**PETR ANTÉNE**

**ABSTRACT:** The article contextualizes Ishmael Reed’s 1993 satirical campus novel *Japanese by Spring* against the background of the Culture Wars, arguing that the novel illustrates the dangers of assimilation in American academia. Set at the fictional Jack London College, named after a writer known for his white supremacist views, the book perceives assimilation as a threat to ethnic minorities’ sense of identity. Thus, the protagonist, an African American instructor and a former supporter of affirmative action named Chappie Puttbutt, is satirized for his willingness to assimilate in order to obtain tenure. Besides denouncing African Americans in his scholarship and dreaming of moving to an all-white neighborhood, Puttbutt decides to learn Japanese in reaction to the rising influence of Japan in the globalized economy. In Reed’s satirical hyperbole, the college is eventually bought by a Japanese corporation and the new administration’s effort to Japanize the campus echoes parallels with institutionalized white supremacy. Besides examining the criticism of assimilation in *Japanese by Spring*, this article relates it to Reed’s contemporaneous essay collection *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1994), in which the author comments extensively on the drawbacks of monoculturalist views and their perpetuation by higher education.

**KEYWORDS:** Ishmael Reed; *Japanese by Spring*; *Airing Dirty Laundry*; campus novel; satire; multiculturalism; assimilation

In his essay collection *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1994), Ishmael Reed writes that “American ethnic literature might be divided between the missionary tradition, that which espouses assimilation and preaches adherence to what one newspaper critic of black behavior calls ‘white mainstream values’ (whatever that might mean), and the satirical comic ‘trickster’ tradition that undercuts and even mocks the writing of assimilation.”¹ As an author of satirical novels challenging American political and cultural oppression of ethnic minorities, Reed himself has made an important contribution to the latter literary tradition. In

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¹ Ishmael Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 154. Hereafter cited in the text as *ADL*. 
the essay collection, Reed goes on to quote the Irish American literary historian Charles Fanning, who, in his study *The Irish Voice in America* (1990), argues that the satirical tradition is the one employed by the underdog: “The power of words is a great offensive weapon, a potent and public act of comic aggression that fortifies one against one’s enemies” (qtd. in *ADL*, 154). This observation may explain why satire continues to be a crucial element of Reed’s oeuvre.

While all of the author’s texts deal with American politics and society, his 1993 novel *Japanese by Spring* devotes a great deal of attention to American academia. Reed thus works in the tradition of the Anglo-American campus novel, a satirical genre that has, according to the critics, been highlighting various vices and follies of academia ever since Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954) and Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe* (1951). Reed, who taught at the University of California in Berkeley from 1970 to 2005, was attracted to the genre because of the Culture Wars, or the Canon Debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time of heated discussion about the merits of teaching ethnic literature at American universities prompted by the former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett and his 1985 report on American education. As Jeffrey J. Williams points out, because of these discussions, the university became “a main battlefield of American culture,” since the nation perceived the debates about whether ethnic authors were to be studied as being of direct social importance. While Reed mentioned that “the average person would say that one ends [the division between American ethnic groups] through education” (*ADL*, 47), the Culture Wars strengthened the conflicts between those who aimed to extend the literary canon to ethnic writers and those who insisted that only authors of European descent should be included in university curricula. Importantly, while the former view recognizes America as a multicultural nation, the latter glorifies Americans of European ancestry and suggests that African Americans, Native Americans and other ethnic minorities in the United States have not produced any cultural tradition worth the attention of the mainstream society, implicitly urging the members of these ethnicities to cultural and linguistic assimilation. Therefore, Reed believes that “it’s because of the Eurocentric control of the public school curriculum that the United States produces generation after generation of white bigots and black, yellow and brown intellectuals who spend half of their adult lives seeking their ‘identity’” (*ADL*, 87). Accordingly, in *Japanese by Spring*, the author

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illustrates the dangers of assimilation in American academia by focusing on the fictional Jack London College in Oakland, California, from spring 1990 to spring 1991, against the background of a heated debate about American educational curricula.

Named after a writer known for his white supremacist views, the college and its white administration are predominantly neoconservative, as both the board of trustees and the president are convinced that the institution “should be dedicated to the values of the West”\(^4\) rather than serve the local multiethnic community. While the college’s faculty members seem to be torn apart between the supporters of Eurocentric monoculturalism and the proponents of a more inclusive multiculturalism, even some of the multiculturalists may lean towards assimilation. For instance, this is the case of the protagonist, a forty-two-year-old untenured African American instructor, Chappie Puttbutt, who teaches at the departments of African American Studies, Women’s Studies, and the ironically named Humanity Department, devoted to the study of European-based culture. A former supporter of affirmative action who had been expelled from the Air Force Academy for trying to organize a Black Panther Chapter in the 1960s, Puttbutt readily disregards his past in order to obtain tenure. As the novel is narrated in the third person, with the narrator having access to the protagonist’s mind, the reader learns that Puttbutt’s goal is to leave the Department of African American Studies and become a tenured member of the Humanity Department. Puttbutt even claims that ethnic courses are “merely vehicles for spewing invective against white people” (JS, 20). Besides obtaining tenure, he dreams of moving to an all-white neighborhood, thus joining “Oakland’s affluent political, intellectual and artistic aristocracy” (JS, 18–19).

In an effort to impress the college’s administration as well as his most influential neoconservative colleagues in the Humanity department, Puttbutt becomes a member of what he thinks of as “the growing anti-affirmative action industry” (JS, 10). Therefore, he deliberately starts to criticize affirmative action and denounce African Americans in his scholarship, as he thinks this would be the easiest way to achieve his aim: “Throw together a three-hundred-page book with graphs and articles about illegitimacy, welfare dependency, single-family households, drugs and violence; paint the inner cities as the circles of hell in the American paradise—the suburban and rural Americas which were, in the media’s imagination, wonderlands with sets by Disney—and you could write your way to the top of the bestseller list” (JS, 10). In his study entitled *Blacks, America’s Misfortune*, Puttbutt claims that in spite of affirmative action, African

Americans have remained the least achieving and most violent ethnic minority in the United States. While he is not convinced about the validity of this claim, he hopes that voicing it will enable him to gain recognition from the neoconservative and monoculturalist members of the local academic community.

Puttbutt does not change his proclaimed views even after several black students are repeatedly beaten by their white classmates on the campus of Jack London College. As he is interviewed about these events on television, he maintains:

The black students bring this on themselves … With their separatism, their inability to fit in, their denial of mainstream values, they get the white students angry. The white students want them to join in, to participate in this generous pie called the United States of America. To end their disaffiliation from the common culture. Black students, and indeed black faculty, should stop their confrontational tactics. They should start to negotiate … After all, the whites are the real oppressed minority. (JS, 6)

This passage shows that in his inconsiderate struggle for tenure, Puttbutt has become blatantly unsympathetic towards his African American students and colleagues. At another point, Puttbutt even tolerates racist jokes made in the classroom by his predominantly white students at his own expense. As the jokes get increasingly more violent, Bass Jr., a shaved-head white student wearing a swastika armband, sends Puttbutt death threats, hangs his dog, writes KKK on his car, and prints a collage in the student newspaper of him having intercourse with an ostrich. Bass Jr.’s behavior thus seems to confirm the results of a 1993 survey referred to in one of Reed’s essays that suggests that whites, rather than blacks, “are the ones most likely to engage in violence against all other groups, Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, gays, lesbians, Jews” (ADL, 15).

However, when the dean of Humanity, Robert Hurt, threatens to suspend Bass Jr., Puttbutt emphasizes that in accordance with his professed opinions, he does not feel offended by the student’s behavior. Moreover, as Bass Jr. is the son of the wealthiest sponsor of the college, Robert Bass of Caesar Synthetics, the administrators refuse to suspend him. In particular, the racist and uncultivated President Stool, who is portrayed as smearing mayonnaise on his moustache in a meeting, appreciates Puttbutt’s stance on the issue and even calls Blacks, America’s Misfortune a “brave work” and a “masterpiece” (JS, 43). Throughout the novel, Puttbutt is thus satirized for his assimilationist proclamations, which are admired by white monoculturalists and racists such as President Stool. Not surprisingly, the members of the African American Studies Department are rather uncomfortable with Puttbutt. Charles Obi, the department chairman,
tells Puttbutt: “You know the people don’t like you. Your controversial stand on affirmative action and your disparaging remarks about almost anything black” (JS, 32).

As a typical campus novel, *Japanese by Spring* includes an introductory note claiming that names, characters, places, and incidents in the text are either “the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental” (JS, vi). However, Darryl Dickson-Carr argues that Chappie Puttbutt is “a thinly veiled caricature of Shelby Steele, reductio ad absurdum, whose eloquent 1990 essay collection *The Content of Our Character* received lavish praise from numerous neoconservatives and many liberals for its tendency to place the responsibility for improving racial relations on the shoulders of African Americans.” However, whereas Steele’s opposition to affirmative action eventually earned him an appointment to the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, Puttbutt does not obtain the tenure he craves.

Although Chappie’s book impresses President Stool, he is denied tenure because of other academic intricacies and policies. While some of the monoculturalist members of the academic community congratulate Puttbutt on his “lonely stand” and on “how he was risking ostracism from blacks by saying things that were hard to say” (JS, 17), Dr. Crabtree, the most influential Eurocentric traditionalist on campus, keeps ignoring him. Later on, Puttbutt learns that Crabtree, who is probably the unidentified “white male professor whom the newspapers quoted as having said that the blacks and Hispanics were lowering the standards of Jack London College” (JS, 21), objected to awarding him tenure. In particular, Crabtree was annoyed by a paper on racism in Shakespeare’s *Othello* that Puttbutt had written as a graduate student many years ago. In addition, as one of the traditionalists from Crabtree’s circle had died last year, the others insist that another Miltonian be hired immediately rather than Puttbutt.

Furthermore, other influential members of the academic community that eventually assist the traditionalists in denying Puttbutt tenure are the feminists from the Department of Women’s Studies, chaired by the white professor Marsha Marx. As Puttbutt is aware that “the few black women who had joined the white feminist cause had walked out and formed their own organizations” (JS, 11), his contacts with the feminists become another manifestation of his assimilation to white values. Even though Puttbutt makes an effort to please the feminists by teaching more women writers, they stop supporting him after

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Marsha Marx announces that she might be able to hire the academic star April Jokujoku instead of him. April is considerably more successful than Puttbutt, as she has achieved what he dreams of by assimilating to mainstream values. Consequently, she also becomes one of the satirical targets in the text, as she represents what Reed elsewhere calls “the media-certified ‘talented tenth’ black elite, who claim to speak for blacks but who don’t live among them” (ADL, 53). A self-identified black lesbian feminist, April can indulge in a lavish lifestyle while lecturing about oppressed women in the ghettos. Thus, on the day Puttbutt learns that he has been denied tenure and April has just been hired, he cannot but regret “all of the butt he had kissed, the boots he had licked” (JS, 70). In anger that his opportunism and self-denial did not enable him to achieve his aims, he takes out his old Black Panther beret.

However, Puttbutt never embraces African American causes for long. The novel is titled *Japanese by Spring*, as from its beginning, the protagonist has been taking private Japanese classes in reaction to the rising influence of Japan in the globalized economy. While nowadays China is often talked about as the future world power, many theories of the late 1980s and early 1990s claimed that Japan aimed to surpass American economic dominance. *Japanese by Spring* is also the title of the textbook Puttbutt’s private tutor, Dr. Yamato, uses. In Reed’s satirical hyperbole, soon after Puttbutt is denied tenure, Robert Bass cuts his financial support for the college over the threatened suspension of his son. In turn, the institution is bought by a mysterious Japanese corporation that forces President Stool into early retirement and appoints Dr. Yamato the acting college president. Immediately, the campus is in turmoil, as rumor has it that the Japanese want to make some radical changes. Dean Hurt hands out leaflets saying Protest Japanese Invasion and Effie, the secretary at the African American Studies Department, tells Puttbutt: “You know what [the Japanese] think of black people. Everybody knows how they treat their minorities, the Koreans and the Pakistanis. The Okinawans” (JS, 76‒77). However, while the other members of the academic community tend to stick together against the Japanese, Puttbutt gladly accepts Dr. Yamato’s offer to cooperate with him. Puttbutt simply decides that “after being double-crossed by white racists who played him like a violin, using him to front their side of the argument concerning affirmative action, … he was willing to try some new kind of racism, yellow racism” (JS, 80). Thus, although he is aware that the new administration seeks to Japanize the campus, Chappie again defects to those in power.

Soon, Yamato tells Puttbutt about his plans to reorganize the study programs offered at the college: “You have African Studies, Chicano Studies, Asian American Studies, Native American Studies and African American Studies.
We will have a new department, European Studies, with the same size budget and faculty as the rest … We will allow for these frills. Are they really necessary? All they accomplish for these people is to glorify some mythic past and to promote such dubious claims that Europe is the birthplace of science, religion, technology and philosophy” (JS, 90). As a result, Yamato’s attitude highlights the limitations of a monoculturalist academic curriculum idealizing European civilization. However, the curriculum Yamato introduces to Jack London College is similarly monoculturalist, the only difference being the new president’s conviction that Japanese rather than European culture “should be emulated by the world” (JS, 107). Crystal S. Anderson thus rightly observes that “within an American context, [Reed] uses the Japanese as a metaphor for white supremacy.” In particular, when Yamato complains that course offerings such as the Milton seminar taught by Professor Crabtree and attended by only two students “constitute Anglo-Saxon ethnic cheerleading and feelgoodism” (JS, 99), the language he uses echoes the criticism of ethnic literature and culture courses voiced by the Department of Education during the Bush administration (ADL, 47).

At first, Puttbutt delights in his status as the second most powerful man on campus, enjoying the opportunity to take revenge on his colleagues who contributed to his being denied tenure. However, while Puttbutt is satirized throughout the text for his opportunistic assimilation to the values of the powerful, his dealings with his former colleagues also serve to highlight their own flaws. For instance, Puttbutt announces to Professor Crabtree that the only way he can keep his job is to start teaching the West African language Yoruba. When the astonished Crabtree objects, Puttbutt retorts by quoting a statement from an article in which the professor belittled African culture by claiming that “if Yoruba would produce a Turgenev he would be glad to read him” (JS, 112). As Puttbutt asks Crabtree: “Being the scholar you are, you wouldn’t comment about a language of which you had no knowledge, would you?” (JS, 113), the professor has no option but to start taking Yoruba lessons from Sanya, the African American owner of a local book store. Puttbutt thus discloses Crabtree’s pomposity and self-importance.

Similarly, when Marsha Marx complains about Yamato’s announcement that the Women’s Studies Department is going to become a part of the new Department of European Studies, Puttbutt only quotes from a speech she had made at the Modern Language Association convention: “Europe is the source of our law, our values, and our culture, yet little had been done to recognize

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the role of women in the establishment of this great civilization” (JS, 105). When Marsha still protests, urging Puttbutt to be on her side so they can fight together against racism and sexism, Puttbutt asks her to explain to him why there are few women of color in the main feminist organizations. Thus, in Puttbutt’s view, Marsha’s decision to hire April Jokujoku was motivated by the effort to counter the criticism that Women’s Studies employs only white women. In addition, Puttbutt accuses Marsha and other feminist scholars like her of focusing the majority of their criticism on black rather than white men: “You don’t jump on men of your background as much as you do the fellas” (JS, 107). Consequently, Puttbutt highlights the numerous inconsistencies in Marsha’s thinking. Overall, while in dealing with his colleagues, Puttbutt is mainly motivated by getting his revenge, he also shows considerable wit and inventiveness. In these scenes, Puttbutt may even remind the reader of the trickster figures from African or Native American tales “who use guile, wit and flattery to accomplish their ends” and are, according to Ishmael Reed, “quintessentially American” (ADL, 97). Therefore, Puttbutt may occasionally be seen as a somewhat sympathetic figure, capable of identifying the faults of his former colleagues and resourcefully turning the tables on them.

Moreover, rather strikingly, some of Puttbutt’s opinions, such as those on feminism, seem to echo the views Ishmael Reed himself expresses in Airing Dirty Laundry. For instance, Reed writes that the “contemporary feminist movement is exploiting the rhetoric of black women while excluding them from the movement” (ADL, 58). Furthermore, Reed also mentions that white middle-class feminists “are harder on black men than on the white men,” and refers to the leading black feminist intellectual bell hooks, who suggests that the reason for this difference is that the white men “are able to provide [white middle-class feminists] with career opportunities” (ADL, 55). Thus, even though some scholars criticize Reed for what they call misogynist views, I agree with Kenneth Womack, who argues that “Reed’s skepticism about the feminist movement’s neglect of the culture of African American men emerges from his distaste for any even remotely monoculturalist ideology.” By extension, Reed’s satirical treatment of the Women’s Studies Department in Japanese by Spring serves as an exemplary critique of any monoculturalist view.

Nevertheless, in spite of these affinities between Ishmael Reed and Chappie Puttbutt, the character’s opportunism and careerism often prevent him from realizing the complexity of the situations he finds himself in. In addition, besides mischievously informing his colleagues about their new status at the

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college, Puttbutt further perpetuates Dr. Yamato’s monoculturalist agenda by giving them a copy of the *Japanese by Spring* textbook. To comment on these problematic aspects of Puttbutt’s behavior, the author inserts a character named Ishmael Reed into the text. Dickson-Carr thus aptly notes that *Japanese by Spring* “makes Reed’s ideology increasingly explicit via the introduction of Reed himself as an eponymous character, one who actively contributes invective material to the novel’s plot and discursive strategies.” For instance, while the motivation for Puttbutt’s effort to learn Japanese is purely pragmatic, the passages about Japanese written from the point of view of the character of Ishmael Reed show a genuine interest in the language and culture. Similarly, while Puttbutt only forces Crabtree to study Yoruba in order to humiliate his enemy, the character of Ishmael Reed studies Yoruba in order to get acquainted with the culture of his West African ancestors, “who must have been geniuses to be able to communicate in a language which was not only of great charm, beauty and poetry, but whose qualifiers were frustrating to someone who’d been raised on a simple language like English” (*JS*, 120). Thus, I agree with Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, who observes that Ishmael Reed the character “seriously ponders the idea that multiculturalism ideally should work to reflect the diversity of American and world culture.”

However, Puttbutt is not the only member of the local academic community in *Japanese by Spring* who does not fully appreciate his African American heritage. While Charles Obi supports affirmative action and struggles to keep the African American Studies Department open under a conservative administration that would prefer to close it down, he also pays a price for that. As Puttbutt notes, the African American Studies Department was similar to some of the other departments at the college in that all were “paralyzed by theory” (*JS*, 82). In result, Puttbutt realizes the paradox that Charles Obi, with a PhD from Harvard, “talked a lot of corny ghetto when he communicated with the brothers, but his stuff published in scholarly journals was unreadable” (*JS*, 32). Obi’s success is thus achieved by means of assimilation to the dominant trends in scholarly publishing. Consequently, while Reed the author clearly supports multicultural views, he also encourages the alleged proponents of multiculturalism to reconsider what the means and aims of multiculturalist higher education are.

It is after informing Obi that Dr. Yamato wants him to take early retirement that Puttbutt starts to reevaluate his recent behavior. By this time, Ya-

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mato’s administration has turned out to be even more monoculturalist than its predecessors. When Yamato requires all faculty and students to take an IQ test designed by a Japanese educational firm and most of them fail, as many questions focus on Japanese culture, the incident again highlights the drawbacks of any monoculturalist education. However, in turn, the administration announces that “the student body and the faculty will have to attend courses in order to remedy their intellectual deficiency. If that doesn’t work, then we will bring in a Japanese faculty. Maybe Americans should be put to work at things that will not strain their intellectual capacities” (JS, 134). While this announcement serves to undermine the monoculturalist conviction of white intellectual supremacy, it also foreshadows Yamato’s future reorganization of the college. First, the statue of Jack London is removed from the campus and the university is renamed after Hideki Tojo, the prime minister of Japan during World War II. Then Yamato announces that he is going to expel all American-born Japanese and Chinese students because he suspects that they might act as agents for American interests. The text thus situates the Culture Wars against the background of the wars waged by the Americans and the Asians in the twentieth century. Anderson observes that in this context, “Reed’s characterization of the Japanese as military threats parallels the ways African Americans allegedly intimidate the dominant society.”¹⁰ The Japanese naming the college after a man whom the Americans consider a war criminal may also challenge the belief that Asian Americans, as opposed to other ethnicities in the United States, are a model minority, prone to quick assimilation to mainstream values.

After these radical changes, all of Puttbutt’s colleagues gather in his office, and agree that the college needs to go back to the Americans. The next day, they have Dr. Yamato put under arrest. While some of the members of the academic community might have been motivated to remove Yamato primarily by the rather pragmatic need to get their jobs and social status back, others claim to have changed their viewpoints during the time the college was under the Japanese administration. Most strikingly, Dr. Crabtree tries to convince the other professors that studying Yoruba has opened his mind and made him see himself and his colleagues more critically: “We should be the ones to lead our students and our country to new intellectual frontiers. Instead, we’re like the archaic Dixiecrats of the Old South, but instead of yelling segregation forever, we’re yelling Western culture forever” (JS, 155). In result, studying Yoruba made the Eurocentric professor realize the limitations of monoculturalist education.

The change in Crabtree’s thinking is paralleled by a similar change in the whole academic society. Towards the end of the text, Ishmael Reed the character highlights the paradox that “[the monoculturalists] are denouncing American popular culture when that’s one of the few salable products that we export” (JS, 197) when his friends, European scholars in American studies, teach courses on American film or African American culture at the oldest universities in Europe. As the novel suggests that an analogous development is on the rise in America itself, it expresses the hope that education might eventually contribute to canceling the divisions and incomprehension among various ethnic groups both in the United States and worldwide.

In conclusion, in Japanese by Spring, as well as in the essays collected in Airing Dirty Laundry, Ishmael Reed views assimilation in American academia, manifested as an insistence on monoculturalist education, as a denial of multiculturalism in the United States and consequently a threat to the harmonic coexistence of various ethnic groups in the nation. Throughout the text of Japanese by Spring, Reed uses several authorial strategies in order to satirize monoculturalist education. First, he points out the flaws of the novel’s numerous characters who embrace extremely one-sided ideologies, most notably Eurocentric traditionalism but also a predominantly white middle-class version of feminism. Second, Reed highlights Chappie Puttbutt’s opportunism and self-denial in the protagonist’s inconsiderate quest for tenure, which leads the African American instructor to ingratiate himself first with the neoconservative white administration, then with the nationalistic Japanese administration. Finally, the author also comments on the limitations of monoculturalism by inserting a character named Ishmael Reed into the text, in order to emphasize what the means and aims of multiculturalist higher education are. In turn, while monoculturalist education forces the members of ethnic minorities to cultural assimilation, multicultural education as viewed by the author will encourage the whole of American society to appreciate other cultures.

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“Finding America:” Assimilation of Female Immigrants in Early Jewish American Fiction

ANDREA CRHONKOVÁ

ABSTRACT: In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a great wave of Jewish immigration, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, to the United States. Almost half of these immigrants were women. The struggle of the female characters to assimilate into American culture as depicted in early Jewish American fiction is the main issue addressed in the paper. The books used for the analysis are Anzia Yeierska’s collection of short stories Hungry Hearts (1920) and Henry Roth’s novel Call It Sleep (1934). The ten short stories in Yeierska’s Hungry Hearts narrate the quest of young female Jewish immigrants to achieve the American dream and focus on the problems of acculturation and assimilation which their protagonists experienced in their new environment. In Henry Roth’s novel Call It Sleep two female characters, the protagonist’s mother and her sister, demonstrate different attitudes towards assimilation and being part of American culture. Even though Jewish women’s immigration to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century did not differ greatly from the experience of other immigrant women, their experience was still influenced by their religion and gender. The paper analyzes their search for acceptance and different approaches towards assimilation. Attempts to assimilate were not always successful, and in the majority of cases they were accompanied by a sense of disillusionment, the loss of a dream, doubts, and an inability to separate themselves from their past, which made the process more difficult.

KEYWORDS: assimilation; immigration; Anzia Yeierska; Henry Roth; Jewish immigration

In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century there was a great wave of Jewish immigration, mainly from central and eastern Europe, to the United States. Almost half of these immigrants were women.¹ During this great wave of Jewish immigration many of these immigrants arrived in New York, where they also settled. In 1890 the Jewish population of New York

numbered two hundred thousand. By the 1910s Jews formed a quarter of the entire population of the city. During three decades, from the 1890s to the 1920s, the Jewish population of New York grew fourfold.\(^2\) New York, and especially the Lower East Side, played an important role in the assimilation of the immigrants—and the protagonists of the books analyzed here. The Lower East Side is a neighborhood located in the lower eastern part of Manhattan. In the middle of the nineteenth century it was mainly home to German and Irish immigrants.\(^3\) However, this changed quickly and Jewish immigrants soon came to outnumber the German and Irish population. The Lower East Side was a distinctive place which influenced its inhabitants. The main features of the neighborhood, also known as the Jewish ghetto, were tenement houses where the majority of the people lived and worked in poor conditions. Both Roth and Yezierska chose the Lower East Side as the location of their stories and described the living conditions there on the basis of their own experiences.

In this paper I will analyze the experience of the female characters in the collection of short stories *Hungry Hearts* (1920) by Anzia Yezierska and the novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) by Henry Roth. Both writers came from immigrant families. Anzia Yezierska was born in the 1880s; the exact year of her birth is not known, and different sources state different years.\(^4\) When Yezierska was fifteen years old her family immigrated to the United States and settled in New York’s Lower East Side. They fled to America in the hope of a better life, but unfortunately the reality was different. Yezierska grew up in a traditional Jewish family where she and her sisters had to support their pious and studious father and their mother, whereas her brothers were able to study and then left the ghetto. Yezierska started to work as a live-in maid. However, when she had learnt enough English she left the job and began working in a sweatshop.\(^5\)

Later on Yezierska began to write in English, and in the 1920s her fiction gained popularity and she became a celebrity, labeled by the media as “the Queen of the Ghetto” or “the Immigrant Cinderella.” Nevertheless, her fame gradually started to fade, and she was not able to regain it, though this fact did

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not stop her from writing. During her life Yezierska wrote numerous books, including *Hungry Hearts* (1920), *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), *Children of Loneliness* (1923), *Bread Givers* (1925), *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), *All I Could Never Be* (1932), and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950). She died in 1970.\(^6\)

Henry Roth was born in 1906. Not long after his birth his father immigrated to the United States, and one year later he and his mother followed his father to America. When they arrived they lived in Brownsville, a Yiddish-speaking quarter of New York, and later they moved to the Lower East Side. In 1914 they moved uptown to Harlem, where the inhabitants were predominantly of Irish and Italian origin. In this neighborhood Roth witnessed various manifestations of anti-Semitism, and this experience partially influenced his loss of faith and later atheism.\(^7\) Furthermore, Roth's childhood was not ideal. His parents quarreled frequently, and his father's abusive behavior influenced Roth's relationship with his parents: he hated his father and was strongly attached to his mother.\(^8\) In 1927 Roth met Eda Lou Walton, a New York University lecturer, poet, critic, and scholar, who supported him and encouraged him to write *Call It Sleep*.\(^9\)

Roth spent the last five years of his life writing and editing a manuscript that was later published as a series of novels: *Mercy of a Rude Stream: A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park* (1994), *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* (1995), and then (published posthumously) *From Bondage* (1996) and *Requiem for Harlem* (1998).\(^10\)

Both Roth and Yezierska used autobiographical features and their own experience in their works. In addition, both books narrate the struggles of Jewish immigrants to find their place in the New World and depict the process of assimilation—that is, when a “minority group adapts to a surrounding culture, usually at the expense of part or all of its own original culture.”\(^11\) Living in a diaspora, Jews have faced the pressure of assimilation since ancient times. The Jewish way of life has always been powerfully influenced by the need to

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\(^{10}\) See Wirth-Nesher, “Henry Roth,” 327; see Sternlicht, *Masterpieces of Jewish American Literature*, 49.

adapt to different cultures, sometimes in a creative and sometimes in a destructive way. Throughout their long and rich history, Jews have become integrated into one culture after another; during this process they have acquired various cultural traits that they eventually internalized and adopted as their own.  

Adapting to a surrounding culture is a complicated process that consists of various stages or degrees. One of the degrees of assimilation is often termed accommodation, or acculturation. When we apply it to Jewish culture, it is a process in which one's Jewish identity is preserved, and it is characterized by “adapting Jewish tradition, culture, and rituals to the non-Jewish cultures of the modern world.” According to Gordon, acculturation (or in other words, cultural assimilation) tends to be the first type of assimilation that occurs after the arrival of the minority group in a new area.

The Jewish immigrants were very eager to assimilate into American culture. As Elaine M. Kauvar has stated, “Jews wanted to become Americans as soon as possible, so they embraced America wholeheartedly and succumbed to the lure of American culture.” Nevertheless, in order to assimilate, Jewish immigrants had to undergo a variety of changes that were very difficult and challenging for many of them. In the case of American Jews, the process of acculturation radically modified their traditional life, influenced by the adoption of American middle-class values; nevertheless, this process did not destroy the group in a structural sense. The adaption to American culture was not always successful. Insufficient assimilation led to the creation of ethnic enclaves where immigrants lived in a symbiotic relationship with the larger community. In the nineteenth century it was believed that such enclaves would not last long. By the twentieth century, however, for some immigrants these enclaves were not transitional places on the way to assimilation, but liminal places where they remained segregated from the rest of the United States. The word “ghetto” was used to denominate such Jewish urban enclaves. One of these enclaves was the above-mentioned ghetto of the Lower East Side in Manhattan. These places

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13 Karesh and Hurvitz, Encyclopedia of Judaism, 3, 34.
16 See Gordon, Assimilation in American Life, 194.
were so influential that they affected the ways in which immigrants perceived themselves and their surroundings.\footnote{See Priscilla Wald, “Of Crucibles and Grandfathers: The East European Immigrants,” in The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 57–58.}

Anzia Yezierska’s collection \textit{Hungry Hearts} consists of ten short stories featuring mainly female Jewish characters, narrating the experiences of immigrants living in poverty in the Lower East Side in New York during the 1920s. As Amy M. Kiel has stated, Yezierska reflects in her literature “Kallen’s description of Jews on the Lower East Side in that their plight for Americanization does not always yield the promises of the American dream as their ethnic heritage weighs upon them.”\footnote{Amy M. Kiel, “‘Make Yourself for a Person’: Anzia Yezierska’s Alternative Americanization,” Digital Commons at Illinois Wesleyan University, Illinois Wesleyan, http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/history_honproj/12.} For some immigrants the Lower East Side represents a drive for assimilation, whereas for others the place represents the aforementioned enclave which does not require them to change their way of life. In Yezierska’s fiction it is possible to detect both these contrasting approaches in various characters.

The immigrants’ arrival, and sometimes their life in the United States, were characterized by experiences of disillusionment. Many of them arrived in the United States with the idea of America being the “Promised Land.” Having limited access to information, most of the Jewish immigrants got their idea of American life only from the letters they or their neighbors received from people who were already there. From these letters they created unrealistic images of life in the New World; they therefore arrived in the United States full of hopes and dreams, expecting a better life. However, the reality was usually very different. The streets in America were not paved with gold, as they expected, and their lives did not improve; sometimes their living standards actually worsened. Some of the Jewish immigrants lost the social status that they had enjoyed in their homeland, whereas for others it was the lack of spiritual atmosphere that caused their first disillusionment with life in America.\footnote{See Bernard Cohen, Sociocultural Changes in American Jewish Life as Reflected in Selected Jewish Literature (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), 66.}

Many of Yezierska’s characters experienced disillusionment on their arrival in New York and the Lower East Side. Shenah Pessah, the protagonist of the short story “Hunger,” moved to New York believing that her aunt and uncle wanted a better life for her; however, instead of that, she encountered only hard work: “the awakening of her dreams of America! In her simple faith she had really believed that they wanted her … She thought they wanted to give
her a chance for happiness, for life and love. And then she came—to find the paralytic aunt—housework—janitor’s drudgery.”

Here we can observe the disillusionment caused by the conflict between expectations and reality. Shenah Pessah believed her relatives wanted to provide a better life for her, whereas the truth was that her uncle needed somebody to take care of his paralyzed wife.

In the short story “The Lost ‘Beautifulness,’” Hanneh Hayyeh experiences her own version of disillusionment with the United States because her decision to paint her kitchen white has led to a rent increase. Her reaction is shown in the following quotation: “Is this already America? What for was my Aby [Hanneh Hayyeh’s son] fighting? Was it only a dream? … Did I wake myself from my dreaming to see myself back in the black times of Russia under the czar?” (HH, 93–94). The way the landlord of the Lower East Side tenement treats her leads to a bitter awakening from her previous perceptions of life in America. This situation reminds her of the experience of her homeland during the czarist oppression. She wanted to make her life in the Lower East Side tenement better by creating something beautiful, a white kitchen; however, she encounters a greedy landlord who wants to take advantage of the betterment.

The collection’s last story, “How I Found America,” is divided into two parts, and it presents the quest to find the real meaning of America. A young Jewish immigrant wants to discover what America is and what it represents. Initially, her search for the spirit of the country is filled with disillusionment: “America, as the oppressed of all lands have dreamed America to be, and America as it is, flashed before me—a banner of fire! Behind me I felt masses pressing—thousands of immigrants—thousands upon thousands crushed by injustice” (HH, 270; italics in the original). Her perception of the reality of American life is negative. She sees America as an oppressor of immigrants, whose experience in the United States is filled with injustice.

However, despite her initially negative perception of America, the protagonist eventually finds the real meaning of America. Yezierska ends her short story with a quotation from a book by Waldo Frank: “We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her. In the quality of our search shall be the nature of the America that we create” (HH, 297). This quotation helps the protagonist to complete her search for America, and furthermore it resolves all her problems created by unrealistic illusions.

After overcoming the initial shock caused by confrontation with the American reality, Yezierska’s protagonists begin to undergo a long process of assimilation. The importance of the first stage of assimilation or acculturation

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is visible in several short stories. In many cases the protagonists emphasize the importance of appearance in belonging to American society. The female immigrants usually did not pay much attention to their looks until they were confronted by the mainstream society. There were several reasons why clothes played a secondary role for some immigrants; the main reason was the Lower East Side itself, where some people did not feel the need to make drastic changes in their life (and thus their appearance).

The protagonist of Yezierska’s first short story “Wings,” Shenah Pessah, has been living in the Lower East Side for two years. During this time she has not made any great effort to assimilate. The moment that changes her perception of her appearance happens after a young American sociologist moves into her building. She falls in love with him and realizes how un-American her appearance is. “For the first time she realized how shabby and impossible her clothes were” (HH, 17). Among the inhabitants of the Lower East Side Shenah Pessah has never felt as if she were a stranger; moreover, she has never realized how different her appearance is from that of Americans. It is only after the arrival of the young American sociologist Mr. Barnes—who creates a contrast with the population of the un-Americanized neighborhood—that she becomes aware of her otherness.

To achieve a better appearance in the presence of the young sociologist, Shenah Pessah is willing to pawn her “last memory from Russia” (HH, 20), a feather bed that her mother made for her, in order to buy new clothes. Despite all her efforts to become more assimilated by purchasing new clothes, she fails to unbind herself from her past. Even while purchasing the new American clothes she is unable to repress her memories of her homeland. The green color of her dress and the red cherries on her hat remind her of the fields and orchards in Russia (HH, 21).

However, Yezierska does not allow her protagonist to assimilate and create her identity through clothing. Even when wearing the new clothes, when Mr. Barnes talks to an American librarian Shenah feels alienated; she senses “that these two were of the same world and that she was different” (HH, 27). Later on Shenah comes to the conclusion that men respect women for more than just their clothes. This knowledge causes a change in Shenah’s attitude towards assimilation; instead of trying to Americanize herself through clothing and a general change in her appearance, she wants to educate herself.

Poverty—so characteristic of life in the ghetto—also had an effect on assimilation; this is visible in Yezierska’s short story “Soap and Water.” The poverty of the Lower East Side and its inhabitants has prevented the young immigrant

21 See Kiel, “Make Yourself for a Person,” 15.
protagonist from further assimilation. The protagonist is trapped in a vicious circle where she is forced to accept the lowest-paid position in order to be able to eat. Her wages are low and unstable, so she cannot save enough money to buy clothes that would make her appear decent enough to secure a better-paid position (HH, 171). The protagonist thinks it is possible to escape the torments of her wasted life in three ways: "madness, suicide, or a heart-to-heart confession to someone who understood" (HH, 173). Like many of Yezierska’s other characters, she also immigrated to America full of hopes and dreams, and after her arrival she tries to find America. However, she is not able to find it, even in schools and colleges. But despite being haggard and exhausted by work and life in general, she does not lose her hope and faith in America. At the end, as Kiel also mentions, a heart-to-heart conversation and confession of her struggles to an Anglo-Saxon who does not have any prejudices against her ethnic background help the protagonist to free herself from her almost self-destructive way of thinking and ultimately to find America.²²

Another theme Yezierska deals with in her short story collection is the struggle between assimilation and preservation of one’s old identity. This inability to abandon one’s past causes difficulties in the process of assimilation and also produces inner conflicts. This theme is perceptible in the short story “Wings,” and it is also one of the main themes of the short story “The Fat of the Land.” Hanneh Breineh’s children, already Americanized and successful, want to make their mother into an American lady. However, their mother, as she herself admits, is different. She does not want to adopt a new identity and abandon her old one. Life amid the luxury of her daughter’s house on Riverside Drive limits her and oppresses her: “When I was poor, I was free, and could holler and do what I like in my own house. Here I got to lie still like a mouse under a broom” (HH, 203). She lives between two worlds, not being totally assimilated and yet already assimilated enough not to return to her old way of life.

As Hanneh Breineh’s children become more successful, the gap between them and her widens. The Lower East Side represents a shameful part of their past that they would rather forget. In spite of all the efforts of Hanneh Breineh’s daughter to “civilize” (HH, 209) her mother, buying her clothes from Paris, they fail to hide her Lower East Side background. However, for Hanneh Breineh the Lower East Side symbolizes freedom. There she did not have to pretend to be someone else; she could be herself. Moreover, there she did not have to obey the strict rules of wealthy American society. The neighborhood forms a part of Hanneh’s identity, so despite all the efforts her children have made, it cannot

be hidden or erased. Although the Lower East Side is an integral part of her identity, once she leaves the ghetto she is unable to find full acceptance—either in her old world or the new one.

The short story “The Fat of the Land” is not only a story about the struggle between the repression of the past and adoption of a new identity. In it we can also observe the difference between generations. Hanneh Breineh embodies the first generation of immigrants, having been born outside America, whereas her children represent the second generation. Their childhood and upbringing were affected by the American environment. They attended American schools, so it was easier for them to become part of American society. Their different way of life created a gulf between them and their mother.

Another possible factor contributing to the immigrants’ Americanization was the existence of charity organizations. These organizations were set up to help the immigrants to settle in the United States; the Anglo-Saxon charity workers also taught the immigrants the basic values of American culture, such as the importance of cleanliness, financial planning, and meal planning, in order to make the newcomers’ acculturation easier. However, Yezierska was very critical of these institutions. The hypocrisy of the charities and the arrogant behavior of the charity workers are a frequent theme in Yezierska's writings.

This theme can be observed in the short story “My Own People,” in which the poor tailor Shmendrik receives a cake and grape juice from his friend. He decides to invite his neighbors, Hanneh Breineh with her starving children and the young Sophie, to share the gifts with them. During the little celebration they are paid an unannounced visit by a “friendly visitor” (HH, 243) from one of the charities. The charity workers—who were supposed to help the immigrants in the Lower East Side with their assimilation into American culture and improve their living standards—accuse Mr. Shmendrik of “an intent to deceive and obtain assistance by dishonest means” (HH, 246). In this way, instead of helping the poor immigrant, they falsely accuse him of exploiting the charity and deny him their help. Thus by their insensitiveness they ultimately complicate his process of assimilation.

Another short story that criticizes the actions and behavior of the charity workers is “The Free Vacation House.” A haggard mother takes advantage of an offer by a charity organization to spend time in a vacation house free of charge. However, instead of offering a relaxing atmosphere, the experience in the vacation house is, as the protagonist describes, nothing more than humili-

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23 See Kiel, “Make Yourself for a Person,” 22.
ation. The charity workers act inappropriately and the visitors have to obey strict rules. One of the workers states: “How nice for these poor creatures to have a restful place like this” (HH, 111). They do not consider the immigrants respectable, calling them “creatures.” In the end the narrator is glad to return to her poor apartment in the Lower East Side, where she can at least feel free.

Another phenomenon that complicated the life of female immigrants in the United States was loneliness. As Oscar Handlin states, loneliness itself involves two dimensions: one is unfamiliarity and the other is isolation. The unfamiliarity was caused by the immigrants’ surroundings, which were fundamentally different from their homeland. In New York, among the tall buildings, immigrants, who usually came from rural areas, were not able to find a familiar horizon that resembled their old village. Even though the immigrants were almost constantly surrounded by people, living in crowded cities and tenements and working in factories full of people, they felt lonely. According to Ron H. Feldman, creating lonely individuals from dissolving communities was a process that was most clearly perceptible among the assimilating Jews.

Loneliness and longing for love are also frequent themes in Yezierska’s short story collection. The lives of many of the female characters are filled with bitter loneliness, caused by their separation from their old culture and their difficulties in adapting to the new one. The very first short story, “Wings,” starts with the protagonist wailing “My heart chokes in me like in a prison! I’m dying for a little love and I got nobody—nobody!” (HH, 1). Yezierska describes her protagonist as being “crushed by her loneliness” (HH, 2). The reasons for her loneliness are the absence of a loved one and the unfamiliarity of the neighborhood. This is the reason why she does not identify the place where she lives as home.

Sara Reisel, the protagonist of the short story “The Miracle,” is also deeply affected by loneliness. She is a poor immigrant, who has nothing but her dreams and her hunger for love. She is alone in the New World, having no friends or family members there. Although she works in a shirt-waist factory full of people, she still feels lonely, and because she does not have anyone to open her heart to, she does not know how to deal with her feelings: “I felt like stopping all the machines and crying out loud to the world the heaviness that pressed on my heart. Sometimes when I walked in the street I felt like going over to the first man I met and cry out to him: ‘Oh, I’m so lonely!"

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26 See Ron H. Feldman, introduction to The Jewish Writings, by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 2008), lxvi.
I’m so lonely!’’ (HH, 128). Sara decides to take an active approach and deal with her situation. She wants to solve her problems and troubles, and so she decides to start studying English: “Begin to learn English. Make yourself for an American if you want to live in America. American girls don’t go to match-makers” (HH, 132). It seems that the main reason for Sara Reisel’s striving for assimilation is her desire to find an American husband; her decision to study the language is motivated by her rejection of the old ways of finding a husband. Furthermore, she wants to abandon her characteristic features that she identifies with the Old World, such as daydreaming; she wants to learn how to be calmer and more sensible, and keep herself down to earth like people born in America. Nevertheless, when the school closes for the vacation she experiences an inner conflict. On the one hand it seems that her mental health worsens; she becomes depressed and wallows in self-pity. On the other hand, she knows that this behavior is counterproductive in the process of assimilation and bettering her life. In the end her strong wins and she overcomes the depression and starts to live her dream life.

Yeziarska’s characters find America and assimilate into American society when they realize that they do not have to abandon their Old World traditions completely while also embracing American ideals of freedom. Delia Caparoso Konzett explains the function of the Lower East Side in the process of assimilation in Yeziarska’s short stories as follows: “The Lower East Side thus functioned … as a cultural vortex in which the habits of the Old World could be recast to suit the cultural topography of contemporary America.” Konzett’s explanation resembles H. G. Wells’ description of the Lower East Side as a place manifesting both the spirit of Americanization and the conservation of the traditional culture.

In the next part of the paper I turn to focus on the assimilation of the female characters in Henry Roth’s novel Call It Sleep. The novel narrates the story of a young boy named David Schearl, who immigrated to the United States with his mother Genya. They were following his father Albert, who had already been living in America for some time. First they settled in Brownsville, and later they moved to the Lower East Side, where most of the novel is set. I will focus on

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29 H. G. Wells describes the Lower East Side as “a city within a city … although it is far more in tune with Americanism than the other quarters, it is also far more autonomous in spirit and self-conscious in culture.” Quoted in Horace M. Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot,” Pluralism and Unity, Michigan State University, 1998, www.expo98.msu.edu. Originally published in Nation, February 25, 1915.
the assimilation of two female characters. One is David's mother, and the other one is David's aunt Bertha, who spent some time with the Schearls when she arrived in New York. The novel shares some similarities with Yenerska's short story collection. We can sense disillusionment in Bertha's attitude towards life in the United States, especially in the Lower East Side. Again, this disillusionment has been caused by the difference between expectations and reality. In the quotation below we can observe Bertha's view of America: “I thought when I came to this golden land there would be something better to bathe in than a box full of stony burrs … I'll not be content with a cold water flat. I'll not live on a top-floor that was meant for goyim and paupers! This is a land where a Jew can make his fortune if he's got it in him—not to sit piously at a horse's tail all his life!”30 For Bertha America represents a land of opportunities; nevertheless, she also expresses a degree of discontent with the reality. Moreover, the quotation contains a criticism of her brother-in-law, who is unable to provide for his family and to arrange better living conditions for them.

In this novel, similarly to Yeberska's short story collection, the neighborhood plays an important role in the process of assimilation. It is possible to detect two different approaches towards assimilation and the perception of the New York ghetto in *Call It Sleep*. Bertha represents an inclination towards assimilation into American society. The environment of the Lower East Side pressures her to become more Americanized—not only in her appearance, but also in her approach to her way of living. She finds a man whom she marries; they later open a candy store together, and unlike her sister she starts to work. Genya represents the opposite attitude towards assimilation. The only stage of assimilation she undergoes was a change in her appearance. She does not speak English, and she makes almost no effort to assimilate to American culture.

Aunt Bertha's striving for assimilation is based mainly on her identification of happiness with wealth and material possessions. According to Bertha's materialistic attitude, it seems that only money can better her life. “I don’t care where we live,’ said aunt Bertha, ‘as long as we make money. Money, cursed money!” (CIS, 183). Bertha seems willing to sacrifice her comfort in order to earn enough money to live a better life. The Lower East Side and life in the tenement houses do not represent an ideal state for Bertha; she wants to save money and buy a house. She ponders: “when we'll have a home we'll have a decent home. Thick furniture with red legs … Handsome chandeliers! We'll work our way up! What bliss to wake up in the morning without chilling the marrow! A white sink! A toilet inside! A bath-tub!” (CIS, 183). Regarding Bertha's view of the Lower East Side, we can state that she is not content with

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the living standards offered by the neighborhood. She perceives it (or at least the poorest part of it) merely as a transitional place, and she does not desire to remain segregated from the rest of America.

By contrast, Genya's life in the Lower East Side is filled with nostalgia. The area where she lives is unfamiliar and alien for her. Similarly to Yezierska's character Shenah Pessah, she does not consider America her home; she frequently reminisces about her homeland in order to escape from the depressing present. Like the characters of Shenah Pessah or Hanneh Breineh in Yezierska's collection of short stories, she is not able to part with her past, especially with the familiar rural landscape, which is diametrically opposite to the urban landscape of the New York ghetto. She buys a piece of decoration to remind her of her old home: a picture of a cornfield with little blue flowers that reminds Genya of her former lover, who was a gentile organist. Genya's love affair is the reason behind the tension between her and her husband Albert; Albert is convinced that he is not David's father and that David is in fact the son of Genya's Christian lover. The loveless marriage with Albert and his difficult personality are further causes of the loneliness she feels. She spends most of her time alone in their apartment because Albert works long hours. When he is at home, their relationship is very formal and Albert does not show any profound interest in his family, so Genya has formed a strong attachment to David. Genya's resistance to total assimilation into American culture can also be seen in the fact that although she is not very pious or strictly religious, she enrolls David in a *cheder*. The act of enrolling him in a traditional Jewish school represents an endeavor to preserve Jewish traditions and roots in her son. Nevertheless, in terms of religious and traditional aspects, it is, surprisingly, Bertha who is the more scrupulous of the two women, even though she is keener to assimilate into American society. We can see it in David's observation “Only eat kosher meat … Mustn’t eat meat and then drink milk. Mama don’t care except when Bertha was looking! How she used to holler on her because she mixed up the meat-knives with the milk-knives” (*CIS*, 223).

Genya and her husband are not typical Jewish immigrants who had to flee from their countries because of political or religious oppression or economic necessity; instead they came to America because of family relationships. Their experience is anomalous among Jewish immigrants to the New World. Both Genya and Albert live in their own type of exile. Genya had to leave her former home because of her affair with the Christian organist—an episode which brought shame not only on her but also on her whole family. Albert was forced to emigrate because of the part he played in the death of his father—which he could have prevented but chose not to. However, it seems that Genya's af-
fair was the reason behind Albert’s hasty immigration to the United States. Moreover, Genya’s parents’ endeavor to send Albert to America supports his conviction that David is not his son, and thus complicates the relationship between husband and wife. This almost forced and involuntary immigration increases the claustrophobic feelings that result from a state of entrapment. Albert has problems with frustration and rage, whereas Genya longs for love. For both of them the Lower East Side represents an ethnic enclave characterized by segregation from the rest of New York and America. However, for Genya the situation seems to be even more frustrating. The neighborhood represents a world within a world, and even in this small world Genya dissociates herself from her surroundings.

After analyzing the female characters in works by Yezierska and Roth we can conclude that for many immigrants, their arrival in the New World was marked by a sense of disillusionment. This was usually caused by the difference between life in America as they had imagined it and the harsh reality of the Lower East Side. After overcoming their initial shock, they attempted to assimilate into American society. The books discussed in this paper reflect many factors that influenced the process of assimilation—and one of these factors is the neighborhood of the Lower East Side itself. For the majority of the characters the neighborhood functions as a motivational factor supporting assimilation; nevertheless, for some it represents a point of stagnation, a place where they are comfortable and feel no great urge to change themselves. In both the books analyzed here the first step towards assimilation is a change of appearance. However, Anzia Yezierska’s characters realize that their appearance is not the main factor in becoming American, and therefore they want to find America through education. Some of the characters are unable to abandon their past. This inability to leave the past behind and failure to internalize American values lead to a sense of alienation, characterized by strong feelings of loneliness. Such feelings of loneliness were typical of female Jewish immigrants. These feelings were in many cases caused by the absence of a loved one. The immigrants found themselves alone in the unknown environment of the New World, and they were yearning for love. Another factor was the conflict between generations; the older generation struggled with assimilation while the younger generation, already assimilated, lacked patience and understanding and felt ashamed of their parents—causing feelings of loneliness and alienation within the older generation. Another characteristic feature of the female Jewish immigrant characters is their longing for education. They also want to escape from the stereotypical role of women in the traditional patriarchal society of the Jewish community, where women usually had to stay at home and take care
of the children or work to support the pious and studious men. Yezierska then comes to the conclusion that to live peacefully the immigrants must reconcile both their past and present and their Jewish and American selves.

In Roth’s novel Call It Sleep we can observe differences in the perception of the Lower East Side, as well as in the process of assimilation. The neighborhood itself works as a factor which hinders assimilation. Genya does not feel any need to become more American, whereas for her sister the neighborhood represents an urge to assimilate. For Bertha the Lower East Side and its tenement houses are the reasons why she wants to become more Americanized and leave the place. However, for Bertha assimilation means striving for wealth and material possessions. Both Yezierska and Roth were able to depict the life of female Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side realistically, as their fiction was grounded in their deep personal knowledge of life in New York’s ghetto.

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“One Must Not Be a Greenhorn”: The Process of Assimilation in Abraham Cahan’s Fiction

Stanislav Kolář

Abstract: Dramatic internal and external conflicts between assimilative forces and resistance to them, as reflected in Abraham Cahan’s fiction, closely mirror varying concepts of Americanization and Americanism in the light of increasing immigration to the United States. This paper attempts to show that although Cahan was well aware of the inevitability of the assimilation of Eastern European Jewish immigrants into American culture, his view of their “melting into the mainstream” was a critical one. Cahan depicted the process of assimilation as a process of gain (usually, though not always, material gain) and loss. His Jewish immigrant characters pay too high a price for their Americanization; their effort to conform to America often results in their uprootedness, alienation from Jewish religion and culture and estrangement in interpersonal relations, resulting in their all-pervasive sense of loneliness, feelings of emptiness, disillusionment and overall lack of fulfillment. Surprisingly, among these rather solemn topics of Cahan’s fiction we can also find certain comic elements, though they are deployed only sporadically. The paper examines all the above-mentioned aspects of Cahan’s fiction—not only in his most significant novel, The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), but also in his novellas Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto (1896) and The Imported Bridegroom (1898) and his short stories, which served as a preparatory phase for his major works.

Keywords: Abraham Cahan; Jewish American literature; assimilation; religion; Lower East Side; motherland

The ambiguity of the term “assimilation” does not allow us to give an unequivocal answer to the question of whether this social process is desirable or not. It may have both positive and negative connotations, since assimilation is always a process of gaining yet at the same time also a process of losing. It is usually associated with unity, homogeneity and cultural cohesion. If we think about assimilation in connection with the motto of the United States of America, e pluribus unum, “out of many, one,” one question may come to our mind—which component of this motto should be stressed. The search for common values is undoubtedly a beneficial factor in creating a peaceful and harmonious
social coexistence. However, in an extreme case, one-sided unity—achieved by forced assimilation—may lead to uniformity and conformism. In metaphorical terms, the external outcomes of emphasizing *unum* are McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, hamburgers or pizza. The search for differences seems to be in opposition to assimilative forces, since it accentuates diversity and plurality, making our world more colorful. But it nevertheless poses certain threats—the threat of isolation—and, seen from our European (though not solely European) perspective, the threat of nationalism, resulting in wars and ethnic cleansing.

The ambiguous meaning of assimilation comes to the fore when one is reading Abraham Cahan's fiction. Cahan's works reflect both internal and external conflicts between assimilative forces and resistance to them, the tension between assimilation and the inassimilability of some of his characters. The texts closely echo theoretical approaches to “the odd couple—pluralism and assimilation,” to use Philip Gleason's phrase from his book *Speaking of Diversity*;² in other words, they mirror varying concepts of Americanization and Americanism in the light of increasing immigration to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Cahan was well aware of the inevitability of the assimilation of East European Jewish immigrants into American culture, and of the process of secularization and the overall transformation that they experienced. Assimilation became a distinct topic in his fiction, and perhaps this is the reason why he is often presented as an assimilationist writer. However, here I argue that his view of immigrants “melting into the mainstream” was critical, or at least ambivalent.

Assimilation is one of the central topics in one of Cahan’s best-known works, the immigrant novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), which depicts the history of East European Jewish immigration to America through the eponymous main character. We can say that even its title is assimilative, being cognate with William Dean Howells’ novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). The analogy between both titles is not coincidental, bearing in mind that the American realist Howells became Cahan’s mentor, helping him to launch his writing career. It is known that Cahan, as a deeply committed socialist, admired Howells’ works for their realistic delineation of class differences in American society and their depiction of poverty in particular.

David Levinsky’s Americanization starts on the very first day after his arrival in New York. His arrival itself is compared to a “second birth,” and he feels

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as if he is a “new-born babe in possession of a fully developed intellect.” \(^2\) After landing on the New World’s shores, he knows that he is starting a new chapter of his life. His sense of newness, comparable to Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s vision of America in his essay “What Is an American?,” is ecstatic; his fresh gaze embraces the sublime of his new home’s landscape, so unfamiliar to him. However, his initial rapture is short-lived, as he soon faces some very harsh realities. Being an outsider, a stranger in a strange city, he becomes aware of his “otherness.” Subconsciously, he wants to look like Americans, and thus he is upset when a passer-by, looking at him, exclaims: “There goes a green one” \(^\text{RDL}, 93\). Although in the Lower East Side, with its dense concentration of Jewish inhabitants, he appears to be among his own people, he painfully realizes that he does not belong to his new country. His “inappropriateness” points to the Old World, to the Russian town of Antomir, where he spent his rather dismal childhood.

Ronald Takaki, in his book \textit{A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America} (1993), describes the unwanted status of the newcomers as follows:

“Oysgrinen zikh,” Jewish immigrants said to themselves, “Don’t be a greenhorn.” When they arrived in America, they were foreigners in their dress, language, and thinking. “I just didn’t know how to cope with it all,” a Jewish immigrant recalled. “I was unhappy because I didn’t know anything, and I was frightened… When they used to call me names like ‘greenhorn,’ I felt that I would rather die than hear it again.”

The passion to become American was reflected in one of the most frequently asked questions in the Lower East Side: “How long have you been in America?” “How long” was measured by their degree of assimilation. \(^3\)

Being a greenhorn meant not being Americanized. Un-Americanness was perceived as a sign of inferiority, a serious obstacle to full acceptance in the adoptive country. Its antonyms were “allrightnik” or “Yankee,” used to denote those immigrants who had succeeded in America, having already mastered American ways of behavior.

Commonly, the first and outmost display of immigrants’ assimilation is linked with a change in outward appearance, and Levinsky is no exception. He soon notices that people in America are better dressed than the newcomers. Visiting the synagogue, he attracts the attention of his countryman Mr. Even, who buys him new clothes, handkerchiefs, shoes and even a necktie, taking


\(^3\) Ronald Takaki, \textit{A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America} (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 298. Italics in the original.
him to a barber shop where he pays for the protagonist’s bath and haircut. Looking in the mirror, Levinsky himself is confused by the change in his appearance after his beard and earlocks have been shaved off. “It was as though the hair-cut and the American clothes had changed my identity” (RDL, 101), he ruminates with a certain embarrassment; however, despite his initial confusion, he is eager to leave his old manners behind, to shed his “greenness” and to embrace America with an unfeigned fervor. It is not easy for him to cast off his old ways of behaving; like Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Abba in the story “The Little Shoemakers,” he still thinks in religious images, bearing in mind the Talmud and judging the New World through the prism of the psalms.

In the Lower East Side, Jews were the majority group in terms of population, but Levinsky realizes their subordination to the Anglo-society. He envies Americans their self-confidence, energy and ambition, and considers English-speaking people to be superior beings. He regards his Jewish manners as a physical defect, which explains why he tries to hide his Talmudic gestures. His attitude to Americans confirms the theory that the status of a social minority is not determined by the number of people in the group, but by the question of who wields economic and political power—in other words, which group controls society. Levinsky’s social rise from otherness to the mainstream is closely bound up with this question.

The change in Levinsky’s outer appearance is only the first step in the process of his assimilation. Though we can regard it merely as an external manifestation of his attempt at adjusting to the dominant society, having his earlocks cut off is not without significance since this act symbolically foreshadows the protagonist’s more significant spiritual transformation—his secularization. Levinsky, who, while living in Russia, was deeply committed to Judaism thanks to the influence of his mother, gradually abandons his religion once he starts living in America. As we know, religion is still important for him after his arrival in the New World, and he is unable to renounce it. He is even annoyed by the secularism of the inhabitants of the Lower East Side. The novel contains a scene in which Levinsky buys his first meal in America, in Essex Street, and wants to wash his hands and pray before eating; however, his insistence on practicing this accustomed ritual is ridiculed by a woman, whom he asks: “Can’t a fellow be a good Jew in America?” (RDL, 94). Later on he gets an answer to this question from an older Jewish immigrant in a synagogue, who complains: “It isn’t Russia … Judaism has not much of a chance here” (RDL, 96).

Cahan’s main character soon finds out that his religious observance is not compatible with American life, which is ultimately the reason why he does not sustain his religious faith. As a matter of fact, he subordinates all his activity
to material success, which he finds in business; true to the economic history of East European Jews in New York City, he goes into the garment industry. His temple is no longer a synagogue but a secular school, which he calls “the synagogue of [his] new life” (RDL, 169), and the authority figure for him is no longer a rabbi, but Joe—a worker in a textile factory to whom he is apprenticed, learning to bind seams, to stitch and so forth. Levinsky calls Joe “my ‘rabbi’ at the art of cloak-making” (RDL, 170). Instead of the Talmud, he reads Dickens and Thackeray, and he studies the theories of Darwin and Spencer. Shedding his initial reluctance to adapt to the gentile world, he adopts the new American lifestyle (the titles of the sections depicting his assimilation are telling: “Book V—I Discover America,” “Book VI—A Greenhorn No Longer”). His fascination with the American dream and his endeavor to enter mainstream society cause him to become alienated from his Jewish roots.

Language acquisition is another important step to assimilation. In the case of Levinsky, Yiddish is gradually replaced by English. Cahan accentuates his protagonist’s longing for education, a typical desire for thousands of Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side, as “[t]he Ghetto rang with a clamor for knowledge” (RDL, 156). However, he soon realizes that material success in America is not necessarily determined by education. In the chapter entitled “The Destruction of My Temple,” Levinsky sacrifices the money he has saved for schooling to set up his own business. When he becomes the owner of a textile factory whose success is symbolized by the opening of his offices on Fifth Avenue, his assimilation seems to be accomplished. Viewed only in terms of material factors, the transformation of a hungry peddler on Essex Street into a major tycoon may be interpreted as a fulfillment of the American dream. However, as we will see later, Cahan does not restrict his focus solely to economic issues.4

The assimilative forces that cause the transformation of Cahan’s characters are also depicted in the short stories which represented a preparatory phase for his novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*. The novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) primarily presents the story of the Americanization of its protagonist. Similarly to David Levinsky, Yekl is an immigrant from northeastern Russia. In America, the first symptom of his assimilation is his change

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4 The protagonist perceives the deficit of learning in America as a very harrowing loss. Philip Barrish, in his study of Cahan’s novel, explains this loss in the broader context of immigrant literature: “Perhaps because of the value that Jewish culture has always accorded to intellect and learning, Jewish American immigrant literature foregrounds, more so than other immigrant literatures, the male immigrant’s loss upon arrival in America of anything that might previously have served him as intellectual capital.” Phillip Barrish, *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory and Intellectual Prestige, 1880–1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76–77.
of name to Jake. The humorous side of this change is that the immigrants from his neighborhood (but also he himself) mispronounce his Anglicized name as “Dzake.” In Hana Wirth-Nesher’s view, “it [Dzake] measures the distance between him and his desired Americanness.” What is conspicuous in Yekl/Jake’s behavior in America is his effort to distance himself from his immigrant co-workers in the cloak workshop where he works. With his credo “One must not be a greenhorn,” he feels disdain for his fellows in Hester Street, while showing off his Americanness. His persistent effort to attain an American identity, manifested in his emulation of American manners, is the reason why his co-workers derisively call him “Yankee.”

As I have already noted, despite the prevailingly serious tone of Cahan’s novella, the description of the protagonist’s assimilation is not devoid of comic elements. Cahan uses especially linguistic humor, based on interlingual puns. Yekl’s wife is called Gitl; however, her husband perceives her name as unrefined and gives her the Anglicized name Gertie. He pronounces this name as “Goitie,” which is phonetically close to the Yiddish expression meaning gentile. In the light of Gitl’s inassimilability, it acquires an ironic meaning. Moreover, for English readers the mispronounced word sounds like “goiter” or maybe even “goat.” Gitl asks Yekl about “varimess,” which is a Yiddish word for dinner. Yekl asks his wife to use the English word “dinner,” which is the Yiddish word for “thinner.” Thus she reacts: “Dinner? And what if one becomes fatter?” (YAIB, 38). Yekl’s use of American idioms in a distorted form also has a comic effect, as does Cahan’s description of the ways in which his protagonist wants to become the Americanized Jake. His fondness for talking about baseball may serve as an illustrative example of his adoption of American interests.

Like many male immigrants to America, Yekl left his wife and son in his home country to prepare living conditions for the whole family in the New World. Such a separation often had inauspicious effects on immigrants’ marriages, and in the protagonist’s case it leads to mutual alienation between this married couple and the eventual break-up of the whole family. Enjoying the freedom he has acquired in America, Yekl/Jake incessantly postpones the date of his family’s arrival from Russia. Meanwhile he behaves as if he were a single man. In the New York ghetto, he takes dancing lessons and dates women, and above all he conceals his married status. It is no wonder that the family reunion

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7 Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, 46.
after three years of separation is very cold. Their encounter on Ellis Island may remind us of the meeting between the husband and wife in the “Prologue” of Henry Roth’s novel *Call It Sleep* (1934). Yekl and Gitl are completely estranged from each other. The protagonist’s assimilation and his wife’s un-Americaness create a huge chasm between them that becomes even wider as a result of Gitl’s unwillingness to adapt to the new alien environment.

Gitl’s reaction to America mirrors her entirely different cultural experience. Immediately after her arrival she is shocked by her husband’s non-Jewish appearance, seeing his haircut and shaved face. However, her response to the already assimilated Jake also has a religious dimension. She is disturbed by the fact that Yekl/Jake does not observe Sabbath and breaks its rules by riding on a horse car and paying money on a holy day. Essentially, she sees him as a stranger. From the opposite side, Yekl cannot suppress his disgust at his wife. He is repelled by her steerage odor and particularly ashamed by her appearance. Spotting her and their son Yosselé from a distance, “his heart had sunk at the sight of his wife’s uncouth and un-American appearance. She was slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut, and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue” (*YAIB*, 34). He can hardly suppress his physical revulsion for her: “Jake had no sooner caught sight of her than he had averted his face, as if loth to rest his eyes on her, in the presence of the surging crowd around him, before it was inevitable… [H]e vaguely wished that her release were delayed indefinitely” (*YAIB*, 34). The contrast between them is so striking that even the officer at Ellis Island wants to make sure that they are husband and wife, belonging to each other. Yekl’s disgust for Gitl is exacerbated by her poor command of English. He sees his wife and partly their son as an obstacle to his coveted process of assimilation. He has to resolve his inner conflict between the repugnance he feels for his wife and his sense of responsibility for his family.

Nor is Gitl spared from internal psychological conflict—a conflict between pressures to assimilate and her resistance to them. As has already been noted, she is almost unassimilable. Being aware of the estrangement from her husband and her displacement, she feels homesick and very lonely in America. In her struggle to preserve her marriage, she partly succumbs to the forces of assimilation. She believes that changing her “greenhorn” appearance will make her husband love her again, and so she removes her kerchief from her head and has her hair cut. However, not even this act ultimately helps to save her crumbling marriage, and she begins to vent her negative feelings about her adoptive country. In a conversation with one of her neighbors, Mrs. Kavarsky, Gitl even damns America: “America has made a mountain of ashes out of
me. Really, a curse upon Columbus!” (YAIB, 66; italics in the original). Her attitude to America is miles apart from that of Yekl, who is proud of his new country. His boastful words “I am an American feller, a Yankee—that’s what I am” (YAIB, 70; italics in the original) testify to his intense patriotism.

“The Imported Bridegroom,” the title story and the longest text in the collection *The Imported Bridegroom, and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (1898), tells the story of its protagonist’s failed attempt to return to his Jewish roots. It focuses on the wealthy Jewish entrepreneur Asriel Stroon and his assimilated daughter Flora, living in the Lower East Side. Asriel is a widower who, having reached old age, decides out of a vague nostalgia to return to his long-neglected religious faith and reassert his Jewishness. His spiritual awakening is manifested by his journey to his native shtetl, Pravly. The motives for his visit to his birthplace, which he left thirty-five years previously, are merely sentimental; however, after his arrival in his town, his nostalgia soon disappears as he finds himself unable to identify with the place and its people. Nevertheless, his journey proves not to be completely worthless; in this backward shtetl he finds a gifted young Talmudic scholar named Shaya, whose religious knowledge makes a deep impression on him. Wishing to bring the religious observance of his childhood hometown to New York’s ghetto, he conceives a crazy scheme to marry Shaya to his daughter, though the Americanized Flora (who reads Dickens, Thackeray and Scott instead of religious books) has absolutely different ideas about her future husband—he should be a physician! In the beginning, Asriel’s plan to “import a bridegroom” seems to succeed, as the innocent and sincere Shaya wins Flora’s heart. However, Asriel does not know that the transplantation of the young Talmudist to the American secular milieu will ultimately turn against his original intention. Under Flora’s influence, Shaya very easily succumbs to the lures of the gentile world. At her wish, he starts to study at a secular school with a genuine fervor, while neglecting his studies of the Talmud. He knows that his father-in-law would never approve of the change in his attitudes and values, and so he lies to Asriel, telling him that he is attending the synagogue and religious studies classes, whereas in fact he is reading in a city library. The revelation of the truth—Shaya’s abandonment of religion—represents a major disappointment for Asriel, who considers this apostasy a betrayal of him and of Jewish values. Disenchanted, he proclaims his son-in-law dead, asserting that “a convert Jew is worse than a dead one” (YAIB, 154). Despite his well-meant intentions, his plan was thwarted by the power of assimilation, which he had not taken into account in his intricate scheme.
Although Cahan was a meticulous chronicler of the unavoidable assimilation of Jewish immigrants in New York’s ghetto, he by no means celebrated this process—unlike Mary Antin. His work shows that he was aware of assimilation’s pros and cons. His characters’ striving to conform to the New World often results in their uprootedness, cultural displacement, alienation from Jewish religion and culture and estrangement in interpersonal relations, giving rise to their all-pervasive sense of loneliness, feelings of emptiness, disillusionment and an overall lack of fulfillment. David Levinsky must pay the price of admission to America through many losses. As depicted by Cahan, assimilation has some clearly negative effects on his protagonist. If the novel is about Levinsky’s material rise, at the same time it is also about his moral fall. His success is achieved through the dishonest exploitation of workers. His contempt for less successful people and his hatred for trade unions and the socialist movement, as well as the deceitful methods he uses against them, indicate that he has forgotten his class roots. His moral failure is manifested in his lying. He lies not only in the tough competitive world of business—in which he learns to be ruthless and cunning and to use dirty tricks—but also in his private life; for example, he lies to his friend Max about his relationship with Max’s wife Dora. Generally, he loses the innocence that was a feature of his personality in the Old World.

Another moral flaw that Cahan sees as a negative result of the process of assimilation is Levinsky’s denial of old values and his Jewish identity. As a matter of fact, by abandoning the Jewish religion, he has betrayed his mother’s legacy, since she wanted him to become a religious scholar. Therefore it is not surprising that the protagonist’s betrayal of his religion and class is punished by the author. Cahan makes Levinsky fail in his personal life, experiencing several unhappy loves. At the novel’s close, he is extremely lonely and nostalgic, caused by his awareness of multiple losses, including those of home, faith, culture and language. His overall despondency attests to Priscilla Wald’s assertion that a “sense of loss, an experience typically described in the language of melancholy, infuses the experience of assimilation.”

Richard J. Fein, in his essay “The Rise of David Levinsky and the Migrant Self,” (1976) compares the protagonist’s wretched beginnings on Essex Street and his subsequent social elevation to those of Benjamin Franklin, but it is

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more apt to find analogies with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), considering Levinsky’s immoral means of acquiring wealth and his accompanying solitude. He becomes alienated not only from his people but also from himself, from his identity. In this respect, Cahan’s novel deals with self-estrangement, which leads to dislocation and spiritual emptiness. As Sanford Pinsker claims, “[u]nfulfillment is the central theme of Abraham Cahan’s realistic portrayal of New York City’s Lower East Side, just as unfulfillment was the spine that held together the complex appetites and ambitions of Cahan himself.”

Levinsky’s self-estrangement manifests itself in his identity crisis. His numerous losses include the loss of himself. He fails to internalize his success because it has lost its meaning. It seems that his newly acquired social status takes him by surprise, as we can see in one of his confessions: “There were moments, however, when my success would seem something incredible. That was usually when I chanced to think of some scene of my past life with special vividness. Could it be possible that I was worth a hundred thousand dollars, that I wore six-dollar shoes, ate dollar lunches, and had an army of employees at my beck and call?” (*RDL*, 348).

At the novel’s end, it is apparent that Cahan’s central character is unable to integrate his American experience with his Old World past or to create a bridge between the Jewish and American worlds. He is aware of the huge gulf that separates his former life in his native Russian town of Antomir from his present life in New York’s Lower East Side, and of the great distance between his youth and adulthood—a distance that cannot be reconciled because his past and present are inconsistent. In fact, it is the past with which he identifies more, and which is more valuable for him—despite its gloomy history. In connection with the protagonist’s split identity, his divided self, David Engel speaks about the “failure of wholeness”: “Suspended between his unhappy present and his unrecoverable past, Levinsky is nowhere at home.”

This “schizophrenic” state pervades his last words at the very end of the novel: “I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak manufacturer” (*RDL*, 530). These words point to the double identity of Cahan’s protagonist, who has never become fully established in America despite his triumphant professional career.

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We know that Yekl’s private life in his adopted country was not happy either. The differences in the pace of the assimilative process between him and his wife Gitl brought about the disintegration of their marriage and their subsequent divorce—which was very painful for Gitl in particular. Yet the final chapter, entitled “A Defeated Victor,” indicates that Yekl’s/Jake’s victory is relative. While Cahan links Gitl with an optimistic future—seen in her marriage to her pious suitor Bernstein, an opposite to the Americanized Yekl—the title character is uncertain, doubting the rightness of his decision to get divorced and to marry another woman, Mamie, an assimilated immigrant of Polish origin. It is as if Cahan suggests that complete assimilation, accompanied by the repudiation of traditional values, is not in fact a victory, but a defeat. It does not lead to a satisfactory life but to a certain spiritual void. However, this raises the question whether Cahan’s characters are completely assimilated. It is not difficult to detect the residues of the past in them, causing the already-mentioned feelings of uncertainty that are so typical of many immigrant characters in Jewish American fiction. We can observe a perpetual inner conflict between two forces in them—their desire to forget the dark past, stained by religious, political and economic oppression in the Old World, and simultaneously their inability to repress memories, childhood memories of family in particular. As Wald aptly notes, “[i]n his marriage not to an American but to a more Americanized Jew, Yekl/Jake lives the pattern of assimilation as Cahan understands it. Americanization does not mean complete incorporation into the ‘homogeneous whole’ of America.”

In “The Imported Bridegroom,” Flora aims to remodel the Orthodox Shaya into a modern American man; however, despite the fulfillment of her plan, she does not seem to be happy at the end of the story. Similarly to Yekl, her victory is relativized; instead of feeling satisfaction over molding her lover into her image, she is in fact tormented by doubts. She realizes that Shaya has outgrown her intellectually. Being excluded from the company of Shaya’s intellectual friends, she feels desperately incompetent. Like Caroline Meeber in Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (1900) or David Levinsky, she knows that she lacks something in her life and that material affluence does not guarantee happiness. As far as Shaya’s development towards total assimilation is concerned, according to Jules Chametzky, “Shaya’s career illustrates a process familiar to many—the prodigious intellectual effort to bridge in a lifetime the gap from the Middle Ages to the modern world.” Further, Chametzky adds that “in this

story Shaya moves away from Asriel and his traditionalism; and for venerable sages swaying over volumes of Talmud he substitutes in his American paradise intense intellectuals poring over volumes of the latest in advanced thought.”14 In the end, the disenchanted Asriel, who arranged the “import” of the bridegroom as part of his plan to achieve a religious revival, finds his lost integrity in a journey to Palestine with his new partner.

Cahan has more stories in which he recounts the rather inauspicious effects of the assimilative process on immigrant figures. For example, in “A Providential Match,” which is another variation on David Levinsky, he delineates the transformation of a Jewish country-dweller into a successful businessman. In fact, the story has a similar pattern to The Rise of David Levinsky, showing the material rise of Rouvke Arbel (whose anglicized name is Robert Friedman) and depicting the negative impact of his assimilation on his character. His loneliness is heightened by his failed match with a girl from his native shtetl, Kropovetz. Chametzky points out the protagonist’s paradoxical status in America: “He is a ‘freed man’ in America, but as the story shows, he is not fully liberated.”15 Estrangement and the disintegration of the family are also the topics of the story “Circumstances”; however, unlike in the novella Yekl, the cause of the break-up of the protagonist’s marriage in this story is a burdensome economic situation. In a story reminiscent of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906), the East European immigrants Tatyana Markovna and her husband Boris live in poverty in the Jewish ghetto of New York, and since they have difficulties paying the rent, they take in the boarder Dalsky, who will contribute to the family budget. However, the hard-working Boris becomes alienated from his wife, who eventually falls in love with Dalsky, for whom she leaves her husband. Nevertheless, even she is not satisfied with her life in America. Being forced to work manually to secure her independence, she misses the rich intellectual life she led in Kiev. Bent over a sewing machine, “a cruel anguish choked her. Everybody and everything about her was so strange, so hideously hostile, so exile-like!” (YAIB, 222), while Boris is plagued by his sense of loneliness in an empty, abandoned apartment. Although the “circumstances” that led to the disintegration of their marriage are different from those experienced by Yekl, and although Boris’s loneliness sees him in an entirely different social position from that of David Levinsky, the story has one thing in common with the above-mentioned works. It is an absence of spiritual life and the dictates of materialism that make all these characters incomplete persons.

14 Chametzky, From the Ghetto, 84.
15 Chametzky, From the Ghetto, 49.
Cahan’s fiction reflects his ambiguous approach to the process of the assimilation of Jewish immigrants in America. On the one hand, he was aware of its inevitability; on the other hand, however, he saw its undesirable consequences. Unlike Mary Antin, he was reluctant to celebrate the melting of immigrants in the American crucible, and in this respect he was closer to such writers as Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth or Michael Gold, who were also able to see the dark sides of the assimilation of immigrant groups (in their case, Jewish immigrants). Cahan knew that immigrants, once stripped of their cultural heritage, failed to live full, meaningful lives in the new country. Therefore his immigrant characters are very often tormented by a sense of loneliness and uprootedness, be it David Levinsky, Yekl aka Jake or the other characters of his short fiction. Suppressing their ethnic, religious and class background and succumbing too willingly to the imposition of Anglo-Saxonism in their fear not to remain “greenhorns,” they become conflicted persons, wracked with doubts and uncertainties. They mirror a large body of literature by East European Jewish immigrant writers of the late 1890s and early twentieth century which “registers both uncertainties of the dominant culture and their own ambivalent responses to assimilation.” Cahan’s depiction of the negative epiphenomena of assimilation does not mean that he wholly rejected it; he knew that this would ultimately lead to traumatic isolation, as we can see in the storyline of Yekl’s wife Gitl, who breaks out of the cycle of her loneliness only thanks to her adaptation (though hesitant and only partial) to American norms. What troubles Cahan about assimilation is the one-sided focus on the materialistic aspects of life in America. His accentuation of the importance of spirituality, without which life cannot be truly fulfilled, is a message which can still address contemporary readers.

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The Quest for Cultural Identity vs. Assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Short Stories

MIRIAM SVÍTKOVÁ

ABSTRACT: Under the pressure of assimilation, the South Asian immigrants in the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri experience both internal conflicts and conflicts within society. This paper examines how their attempts to maintain their own cultural identity slow down the process of their integration into American society, bringing about feelings of loneliness and isolation. The clash of these two cultures is especially significant in their customs and traditions; food and clothes become signs of ongoing assimilation (or resistance to it). Nevertheless, these stories do not only provide a first-generation view of the United States. The importance of cultural heritage is reflected in the way in which parents raise their children—including their emphasis on knowledge of South Asian history and their acknowledgment of the cultural background and roots of Asian Americans. The opinions of the second generation of immigrants on assimilation are to a certain extent influenced by American educational and cultural institutions; this gives rise to conflicts within immigrant homes. This paper also compares relationships within South Asian society and within American society, contrasting the importance of family with individualism. The paper also focuses on loneliness, human relationships, barriers to communication, and isolation—all recurring themes and motifs in *Interpreter of Maladies*.

KEYWORDS: assimilation; cultural identity; first-generation vs. second-generation immigrants; South Asian American literature

Although born in London in 1967 to a Bengali couple that had emigrated to the United Kingdom from Calcutta, the writer Jhumpa Lahiri was raised in South Kingston, Rhode Island, and thus belongs among the South Asian American authors.¹ The group of South Asian American authors comprises writers who are first-, second-, or third-generation immigrants from various South Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh. The term “South

Asian” thus cannot be looked upon as a monolithic ethnicity; it covers a multiplicity of ethnicities, religions, languages, and cultures.²

Lahiri became well known especially because of her debut work, the Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection Interpreter of Maladies (1999), and her first novel, The Namesake (2003). Her most recent book in English, The Lowland (2013), was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and nominated for the National Book Award.³ At the beginning of 2015 another book, In Altre Parole,⁴ was published. It is the first book by Lahiri which is written in Italian, a language that she has been studying for over twenty years. Lahiri claims always to have felt displaced and not to have been able to quite fit into either India or the United States; this is why three years ago she moved to Italy, where she finally feels ‘a casa.’⁵ She states in her interview for the Financial Times: “Here, I’m able to accept myself in a way that I haven’t ever been able to in the United States or India because these two sides were always at war. I felt I could never please either and it was always a battle and a loss.”⁶ Having been born to Bengali parents and raised in the United States from the age of two, Lahiri says “she felt eternally torn between the language in which she was educated (English) and the language in which she was raised (Bengali).”⁷ The constant struggle between two identities is typical of second-generation immigrants, among which Lahiri belongs and whose point of view she also presents in her works. Many of Lahiri’s characters find themselves between cultures, forming a diasporic community which has to deal with the cultural clashes and identity problems that arise from their complex position.

The focus of this paper is the question of assimilation and the quest for identity present in Lahiri’s short stories from the collection Interpreter of Maladies. Altogether, this collection consists of nine short stories which were previously published in various magazines and journals. Despite being written and published separately, certain features are shared by several of them, namely the recurring themes and motifs of loneliness, human relationships, the impact of strangers, communication barriers, exile, isolation, neglect, care, marriage,
and identity. These recurring themes and motifs leave the reader with a sense of interconnections among the stories; the stories thus form a short story cycle rather than a loose collection. Moreover, these themes of emotional struggle and communication barriers are universal issues appealing to a broad readership, yet at the same time they are explored against the backdrop of the immigrant experience, enabling the reader to focus on the protagonists’ quest for cultural identity and their struggles to integrate into the new culture.

The protagonist of the first short story to be analyzed, “Mrs. Sen’s,” is the wife of an Indian academic, a mathematics professor at an American university; Mrs. Sen follows her husband to the United States. She is a housewife who is hired to babysit an eleven-year-old American boy, Eliot, in her house. Despite the differences in their ages, Mrs. Sen and Eliot become close friends and it is Eliot with whom she shares the memories of the life she had to leave behind. In their conversations and stories, the value systems of the Indian and American societies are contrasted and the differences become more and more obvious. When Eliot is asked whether he misses his mother in the afternoons, to her surprise Mrs. Sen finds out that such an idea has never even occurred to him. The strong individualism and independence of Americans are represented in the character of Eliot’s mother, who is contrasted with the dependent Mrs. Sen, whose life in America is strongly bound to her husband. Nevertheless, the figure of Mrs. Sen is associated with warmth, contrasted with the cool distance and formal style embodied by Eliot’s mother.

Mrs. Sen attempts to become a global citizen by maintaining her cultural identity while at the same time trying to adapt to American culture. However, the traditional role of a wife as a homemaker and nurturer in Indian culture proves difficult to maintain in the individualistic American society. This intense loneliness is a universal issue experienced by many young Bengali housewives who are transplanted into a new land and culture, becoming uprooted in American society as they are cut off from their traditional cultural roots. Mrs. Sen is a submissive, obedient housewife, while her husband is an educated man, an academic, busy with his job. She misses her family in Calcutta, her neighborhood, and the close community ties which are absent from American culture. Since her childhood she has been accustomed to be-

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ing with her entire family, which is why she finds the silence in the American neighborhood somewhat oppressive.

Mrs. Sen’s quest for cultural identity is represented especially through traditional customs, rituals, and traditions; food and clothing become symbols of her assimilation, or, on the contrary, of her resistance to assimilation. According to Wong, eating is a socially adaptable human act; eating practices are shaped by culture to an extraordinary extent, thus expressing social relations. Being so different from American food, Asian food becomes an ethnic sign which binds individuals together, defines identity, and emphasizes their cultural cohesion. For Williams, food in Asian American literature serves as a metaphor that “constructs and reflects relationships to racialized subjectivity and also addresses issues of authenticity, assimilation, and desire… The snacks and treats consumed by the characters, and even an abundance of ingredients, can reflect those characters’ poverty (both monetary and emotional) and isolation.” Mrs. Sen’s careful attention to preparing Indian food reflects her struggle to maintain what seems traditional and home-like to her. The cutting blade reestablishes the connection with the community of women she had to leave behind:

Whenever there is a wedding in the family … or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night… It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter.

It is the preparation of food and the chatter that give the women the sense of companionship and a common purpose. The chatter of these women in India is contrasted with the American silence and with various noises that are to be heard outside American homes. The sounds in America are strange to Mrs. Sen, who perceives them not as harmonious but rather as cacophonous, thus making the United States a rather unfriendly setting for her.

Similarly to Williams, Choubey also claims that the food in Lahiri’s short stories has a metaphorical function. She elaborates especially on the importance of fish for Mrs. Sen, claiming that it is the one story in the cycle where

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food actually appears as a character in its own right. Fish, a typical food in Calcutta, becomes an obsession in the United States. When a fish arrives at the local store Mrs. Sen takes it as a piece of news from home and is very excited about the chance to hold it, cook it, and serve it to Mr. Sen. As Mrs. Sen's existence and her survival in America revolve around and depend upon this specific food item, it might be said that the fish becomes the leitmotif of the story. “The fish becomes her home, her state, her neighborhood, her friend and her family.”\(^{14}\) It is the fish that gives Mrs. Sen a sense of proximity to her people. However, the fish in the States tastes different and needs additional ingredients and spices. It seems that for Mrs. Sen the United States do not have the right flavor.

Mrs. Sen’s sense of responsibility, which involves participation in the lives of others, is another feature that connects her with the Indian community: “Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come? … At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements” (IM, 116). By contrast, American society is presented as rather individualistic and self-obsessed, as Eliot responds: “They might call you… But they might complain that you were making too much noise” (IM, 117).

Mrs. Sen’s struggle to adapt into American society is also strongly influenced by her husband, who is striving to speed up the whole process. She affirms her inferior role in their relationship by even introducing and defining herself by her husband’s name and employment, instead of asserting her own autonomous and self-defined identity. It appears that the only identity she longs for is that of being a part of the Indian community. It is the trips to the fish market and the waiting for letters from India that sustain her. Nevertheless, forced by her husband, she takes driving lessons, which are meant to help her adjust to the new society. Nevertheless, she finds a way to use this skill to get in touch with her home, as she wonders whether she could drive all the way to Calcutta as soon as she gets her driving license: “Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?” (IM, 119). Mrs. Sen is not able to merge with the other cars, and her struggle to learn to drive finally ends in an accident. This inability to merge with the traffic symbolizes her inability to merge with American society itself. Although she is not physically harmed, the psychological impact of the

accident on Mrs. Sen is severe. As a result she abandons her cutting blade and Indian cuisine and replaces it with peanut butter and crackers. This act represents the loss of her identity as a nurturer, directly connected to the Indian communal identity. The reader is left with the impression that the effort to adapt has led to the loss of a sense of community, finally resulting in Mrs. Sen’s loneliness and isolation.

Assimilation and the quest for cultural identity among South Asian immigrants in the United States are also present in the short story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.” Although set in Boston, this short story also gives the reader a political and historical insight into South Asia. The narrator of the story is a ten-year-old girl, Lilia, who, together with her father, casts light on the situation in India in 1971, especially through a series of encounters with Mr. Pirzada, a Muslim Pakistani-Bengali, who visits this Hindu Indian-Bengali family as a regular dinner guest. This act, which becomes a custom, seems strange, as “during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other’s homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other’s company was still unthinkable” (IM, 25). On the other hand, for Lilia it is setting fire to each other’s homes and being split that she cannot comprehend: “Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same… Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference” (IM, 25). Lilia, as a US-born child, is unfamiliar with the history of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. While Lilia’s father is disappointed by what his daughter learns and does not learn about the world at school, her mother dismisses her daughter’s need to know about the affairs of the faraway subcontinent: “Lilia has plenty to learn at school. We live here now, she was born here” (IM, 26). Both the physical and the psychological distance of Lilia from her roots are taken as inevitable by Lilia’s mother, who understands the need of second-generation immigrants to form their own identities as Americans. The opportunities given to her daughter in the United States are contrasted with the harsh conditions she would have experienced in Calcutta, and thus appreciated by Lilia’s mother.15 Moreover, they serve to justify their leaving home:

I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food or obey curfews, or watch riots from my roof top, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had. I imagine her having to read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps. (IM, 26–27)

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15 See Akhter, “Images of Bengal and Bengalis in English Narratives from the Bengali Diaspora.”
Another factor that influences how people in the United States perceive the situation in South Asia is the coverage of the events and the positions taken by the American media. The daily news of the war proves to be full of stereotypes, and is thus disconnected from the people’s actual condition. Lilia’s living room is filled with anxiety over the fate of Mr. Pirzada’s family and others stricken by the war, yet the reality outside their home is completely different: “No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation, and memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence” (IM, 32–33). The whole drama unfolding in Dacca (today the capital of Bangladesh, but back in 1971 a part of Pakistan), which included a civil war and organized killings of poets and intellectuals, and which caused the outbreak of war between India and Pakistan, left most Americans untouched. Despite the fact that West Pakistan was backed by the United States, whereas the Soviet Union sided with India and the emerging Bangladeshi state, with every passing week it grew rarer to see any footage of the situation on the subcontinent on the American news bulletins. Finally, after thirteen days of fighting, the Pakistan Army surrendered in Dacca on December 16, 1971, enabling Mr. Pirzada to go back home and be reunited with his family (IM, 40–41).

However, it is not only the position of the media that is depicted as a determinant of the way in which immigrants stay connected with their roots and perceive their homelands. The American education system is also portrayed in this short story as limiting, self-obsessed, and causing the marginalization of immigrants to the United States. The school system does not grant Lilia any possibilities or awaken any interest in her in understanding her own cultural roots and ethnicity. At one point, when Lilia is found looking up a book about the history of South Asia, she is admonished by her teacher: “Is this book a part of your report, Lilia? … Then I see no reason to consult it” (IM, 33). Lilia is obviously expected to focus her interest purely on matters happening in the United States. The author herself had a similar experience in her schooldays, as she recalled in an interview for the Indian web portal Rediff: “I never experienced anything but a very superficial interest from my friends and my teachers about India and so I never felt motivated to know more. I felt my heritage was a private part of me to be experienced through my home and parents and so I was never motivated to write about my experiences in India.”

Apart from the limiting school system and confusing media coverage, some of the concerns felt by Lilia’s parents are similar to those of Mrs. Sen, such as the lack of ingredients necessary for traditional Indian dishes or the rather individualistic American society: “The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained” (IM, 24). The food becomes significant for another reason too: it can be viewed as a way to forge a connection between the Muslim Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s Hindu family and to point out their similarities: “They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea” (IM, 25). Together, they are trying to hold on to anything that seems traditional and home-like to them.

Lahiri states in her interview for the Newsweek International that most of the short stories from Interpreter of Maladies truly have autobiographical features:

The characters are semi-real—most are composites—but the situations are invented. Mr. Pirzada is a man who actually came to our home but I was four then, not 10. I had seen photos of him in the family album but knew only that he was a Muslim. I had no details. Our relationship is imagined. Mrs Sen is based on my mother who babysat in our home. I saw her one way but imagined that an American child may see her differently, reacting with curiosity, fascination, or fear to the things I took for granted.17

Besides being partly autobiographical, there are certain other features that the two short stories already discussed have in common. First, they both offer a child’s point of view on the position of South Asian immigrants in the United States. Whereas in “Mrs. Sen’s” it is the American boy Eliot and his friendship with an immigrant that casts light on the interaction of immigrants and natives, in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” it is Lilia, a daughter of immigrants, who describes the life within immigrant homes. Moreover, both short stories revolve around academics, university professors, a position stereotypically acquired by South Asians in the United States. Looking back at the history of immigration to the United States, the South Asian Americans belong among the newest voices in multiethnic Asian America. Their history is marked by British colonialism and the establishment of cultural imperialism, which brought with

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it the imposition and institutionalism of the English language, in which many South Asians gained fluency. The immigration of South Asians to the United States has been especially significant since the 1960s, when mainly members of the professional class, with adequate educational skills, decided to find new homes in the States.\textsuperscript{18}

The last short story in the collection, “The Third and Final Continent,” depicts the emigration of a male protagonist from Calcutta to London and his final settlement in Boston, Massachusetts. The assimilation of the protagonists is also explored in this short story; the separation and homesickness of Mrs. Sen can be contrasted with the adaptability of Mala, the female protagonist of this short story, whose assimilation appears to be faster and more natural. Mala’s early experiences of the United States are rather difficult; she gets a taste of America even before her arrival when she is offered oxtail soup on the plane, which makes her lose her appetite. But despite this, and the fact that she brings along her customs and traditions from India, she is willing to adapt to the new life and culture very quickly, making her survival in this strange new country much easier: “The first morning when I came into the kitchen she has heated up the leftovers and set a plate with a spoonful of salt on its edge on the table, assuming I would eat rice for breakfast, as most Bengali husbands did. I told her cereal would do, and the next morning when I came into the kitchen she had already poured the cornflakes into my bowl” (IM, 192).

Moreover, Mala’s arrival in the States enables the reader to find out more about the customs and obligations revolving around marriages, gender issues, and the position of women in Indian society. In order to become the wife of an Indian man, an Indian woman has to go through a careful process of selection arranged by her family and the groom’s family, in which certain features and abilities of the bride are considered more or less desirable, thus either lowering or increasing her chances of a propitious marriage. One of the features that is most sought after and appreciated in Indian women is that of having a fair complexion. Mala’s situation was no different:

My wife’s name was Mala. The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife. I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man. She was the daughter of a schoolteacher in Beleghata. I was told that she could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore, but these talents could not make up for the fact that she did not possess a fair complexion, and so a string of men had rejected her to her face. She was twenty-seven, an age when her parents had begun to fear that she would never marry,

\textsuperscript{18} See Katrak, “South Asian American Literature,” 192–93.
and so they were willing to ship their only child halfway across the world in order to save her from spinsterhood. (*IM*, 181)

The relationship between the protagonist and his wife Mala is quite cool at the beginning, lacking any kind of romance; she is viewed rather as an obligation, a burden which he has to carry. However, the two become more intimate for the first time during a visit to the home of Mrs. Croft—a 103-year-old widow at whose house the protagonist used to reside during his first months in the United States. It is here that they finally establish a meaningful connection and reach a mutual understanding. The importance of the figure of Mrs. Croft also lies in her acceptance of these strange newcomers. The protagonist is worried that Mala, wearing a sari and with a vermilion dot on her forehead, will be judged and misunderstood by Mrs. Croft, but to his surprise this conservative old lady finds her ideal:

I wondered if Mrs. Croft had ever seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she would object to. I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala's feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari. At last Mrs Croft declared, with the equal measures of disbelief and delight I knew well: ‘She is a perfect lady!’ (*IM*, 195).

The fact that despite being so different from what was familiar to this old lady, they still manage to win her acceptance opens up a new way of looking at the new country, giving the immigrant couple a sense of hope for their acceptance by other Americans.

Besides the way marriages operate in South Asia and in the United States, there are also many differences in other spheres of life connected with the values and lifestyles of these two distant cultures. As in the case of “Mrs. Sen's,” the communal life of Indians is contrasted with the independence of self-absorbed American individuals. The protagonist of “The Third and the Final Continent” is shocked at the lack of interest shown by Mrs. Croft’s children in their mother. This old lady has nobody at home beside the occasional tenants and is visited by her daughter only on a weekly basis. Such scant interest on the part of her children is viewed by the protagonist as a neglect of care and a sign of disrespect. He worries about Mrs. Croft and remembers his own mother, who could not handle the death of her husband and went insane despite the constant presence and care of her sons. Nevertheless, Mrs. Croft is more independent, as she found the strength to go on with her life and managed to raise her children on her own by giving piano lessons.
Comparing the stories of Mala and Mrs. Sen, Lahiri presents different examples of the adaptation of South Asian female protagonists to American society. She thus offers the reader balanced representations of assimilation and the struggles not only of individuals but also of married couples. The final couple stands for all the couples that have experienced and overcome a series of trials while migrating across continents, their journey to the new world being compared to the Americans landing on the Moon. After all, the successful integration of every immigrant into a foreign society are no less extraordinary than conquering another planet. Moreover, the motif of the landing on the moon reinforces the temporal setting of the short story and becomes a symbol of progress and of the modern era, building up a contrast with the old-fashioned manners of Mrs. Croft. The American flag on the moon is also a major breakthrough in the times of the Cold War, which evokes the patriotism not only of Mrs. Croft, who considers this achievement to be “splendid” (IM, 179), but of the whole American nation.

Mala’s assimilation is reflected in her abandoning some of the traditional ways of dressing and eating. Nevertheless, the couple do not give up on their traditions completely; they also emphasize the importance of cultural heritage as a part of the education of their children, just as it was emphasized by Lilia’s father. They show their concern for their son, who represents the second generation of immigrants and who seems to them to be more and more disconnected from his roots and culture:

We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die. (IM, 197)

“The Third and the Final Continent” concludes the short story collection, making the outcome of the whole cycle appear rather positive and hopeful. After all, America is the third and the final continent:

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in the new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first, still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (IM, 198)
Since its publication, *Interpreter of Maladies* has enjoyed great success, one of the reasons being that it not only describes the immigrant experience and the clash of cultures, but also has a more general appeal. Some of the problems experienced by the protagonists are not entirely determined by their origins; their troubles seem to be more general, and thus a broader readership may identify with them. On the back cover of *Interpreter of Maladies* Amy Tan acknowledges: “Jhumpa Lahiri is the kind of writer who makes you want to grab the next person you see and say, 'Read this!'” —and I have to agree.

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High Walls in *The Lowland*: Nomadic Sensibility in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Novel

**PATRYCJA AUSTIN**

**ABSTRACT:** The paper deals with Lahiri’s take on migration and mobility in *The Lowland*. The analysis of the novel draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the rhizome and especially its dissolution of borders and boundaries, as well as the deconstruction of the center. This allows a model of inhabiting the world to be proposed which is more sustaining for both humans and the environment. A large portion of this article is devoted to a close reading of the natural imagery in the novel, which provides clues for understanding its social and cultural critique.

**KEYWORDS:** Jhumpa Lahiri; *The Lowland*; *Unaccustomed Earth*; nomad; rhizome; Gilles Deleuze; Félix Guattari; Herbert Marcuse

Many people have a tree growing in their heads, but the brain itself is much more a grass than a tree.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s 2013 novel, *The Lowland*, the protagonist, Subhash, a PhD researcher in the field of oceanography, sends a letter from America to his brother Udayan in India, describing the Rhode Island coastal landscape, which in a palimpsest manner reminds him of the lowland in Tollygunge, the Calcutta district where they grew up: “when the sky is overcast, when the clouds are low, something about the coastal landscape here, the water and the grass, the smell of bacteria when I visit the mudflats, takes me home.” Subhash’s observations on the natural world are invested with thoughts on migration, assimilation, and possible ways of inhabiting the world. In his letter he continues:

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They call the grass marsh spartina. I learned today that it has special glands for excreting salt, so that it's often covered with a residue of crystals. Snails migrate up and down the stems. It's been growing here over millennia, in deposits of peat. Its roots stabilize the shore. Did you know? It propagates by spreading rhizomes? Something like the mangroves that once thrived in Tollygunge. I had to tell you. (Lowland, 43–44)

This passage, dense with metaphors, as is much of Lahiri's prose, provides clues to the major themes of the novel. Spartina forms a natural barrier between land and water, one that spreads arbitrarily and is subject to change with the wind, tidal cycles, or the passing of the seasons. It provides nourishment for the snails which climb its blades. It is a local plant which, nevertheless, has a counterpart in the mangrove trees that used to form the Calcutta landscape and which also help stabilize the coast and river banks with their “tangled roots above the waterline, their special pores for obtaining air. Their elongated seedlings, called propagules, shaped like cigars” (L, 13). These propagules, if they drop at low tide, reproduce alongside their parents; however, if the water is high, they drift for up to a year in order to mature in a suitable environment. The two routes for maturing are reflected in the way the two brothers grow up—one remaining in his family home in Tollygunge, the other one leaving his parents and crossing the ocean to study in the United States. Interestingly, a synonym for the word *propagule* is *diaspora*, etymologically *dia*—through—and *speirein*—to scatter, describing the process of sowing seeds and implying a continual, transitional growth of roots. In the twentieth century, however, the word came to signify the scattering of people more than of seeds, the question of roots, whether sought for or lost, being at the heart of the debate, which, at the same time, questions essentialist models, especially that of the center and margins. In the image of spartina and the mangroves, however, the attention shifts and the focus is laid on continual growth, a resilience which does not depend on the presence of a strong, central base. This rhizomatic propagation has inspired, among others, a social theory by Deleuze and Guattari which examines and reflects upon the stems of a plant that burrow into the earth in an acentric way and is connected with 'deterritorialization' and nomadology. This theory will be applied to enhance the understanding of the major motifs in *The Lowland*.

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It will be supplemented by a reading of Herbert Marcuse’s social critique in *One-Dimensional Man* and an essay on “Ecology and Revolution.”

Deleuze and Guattari maintain that every philosophy operates according to a given tendency, a set of features that distinguish it from other philosophies. They propose that there are three types of books, the first one being “the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree.” They explain: “This is the classical book… The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do. The law of the book is the law of reflection, the One that becomes two.” That is, the book is the reflection of the world, like in linguistics, where the tree root morphology mirrors the tree. There is thus always a dichotomy: the world and the book, the signifier and the signified. This image presupposes a strong central unity, a pivotal taproot which supports secondary ones. And yet, Deleuze and Guattari maintain, nature does not work in this way: “in nature, roots are taproots with a more lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one.”

The notion of the principal root is challenged by the second figure of the book, called the radicle system, in which the core has been replaced by a flourishing “multiplicity of secondary roots.” However, the sense of central unity still remains, either as a memory or potentiality, and there is a danger of an attempt to compensate for its lack with “an even more comprehensive secret unity, or a more extensive totality.” This new model does not break, then, with the dualism of representation, even if it does get closer to thinking *with the world* rather than representing or mirroring it. In their attempt to escape entirely from the apparatus of representation-signification which stands between us and the world and to form a reciprocal relationship of thinking with the world rather than about it, Deleuze and Guattari put forward a rhizome-book in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They explain:

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6 See Herbert Marcuse, “Ecology and Revolution,” *Liberation* 16 (1972) 10–12. Interestingly, Marcuse’s texts were written around the time when the most pivotal action in the novel—the Naxalite revolution—takes place; Deleuze and Guattari’s cooperation began in the late 1960s during the student unrest in Paris, which inspired them to write what is considered to be the first volume of *A Thousand Plateaus*, *Anti-Oedipus*.


To be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses. We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes.\(^{12}\)

Arborescent systems are built around a hierarchy and central systems of significance, to which Deleuze and Guattari oppose rhizomorphous multiplicity and connectivity.

There are many detailed portrayals of trees in the novel, some of them lacking a core and some frightening with their exposed roots. They can be read as an attempt to abolish or diminish the arborescent image of thought in favor of the rhizome or point to the difficulty or impossibility of such an endeavor. One such image is located within the very walls of the Tolly Club, where Subhash takes Bela, Udayan’s daughter, whom he raises as his own child, for the celebration of her twelfth birthday. While roaming the grounds, “they stopped under an enormous banyan. Her father explained that it was a tree that began life attached to another, sprouting from its crown. The mass of twisted strands, hanging down like ropes, were aerial roots surrounding the host. Over time they coalesced, forming additional trunks, encircling a hollow core if the host happened to die” (L, 207). Since the lack of a core does not weaken the tree, which remains just as magnificent and strong without it, other centers which produce hierarchical relations might likewise be seen as redundant or even harmful.

One of those harmful centers is the idea of cultural authenticity and adhering to tradition. In *The Lowland* Lahiri goes beyond and develops her understanding of these issues from her earlier writing. For example, in *Unaccustomed Earth*, scrambling for her Indian heritage is a source of melancholia, deep unhappiness and cultural confusion for Ruma, an American of Indian origin. She is visited by her father, a first-generation migrant to the United States, for the first time after the death of her mother, who had most vividly represented her Indian roots. Ruma has by now given up her Western education, a career in law, and the independence of her earlier years and assumed a role traditionally assigned to women in India. Her father, who comes across as a more westernized and visibly happier person, tries to give Ruma and her son a clue as to how to maneuver through the two cultures. Having been an avid gardener since his early days in America, “oblivious to her mother’s needs in other ways, he had toiled in unfriendly soil,

coaxing such things from the ground,” taking care of her neglected backyard and turning it into a beautiful garden. “It was a modest planting, some slow-growing myrtle and phlox under the trees, two azalea bushes, a row of hostas, a clematis to climb one of the posts of the porch, and in honor of his wife, a small hydrangea.” He also created a small plot for Ruma’s son, Akash. What is striking is the choice of things to plant. Into the ground went: a pink rubber ball, a few pieces of Lego stuck together, a wooden block etched with a star, and a plastic dinosaur. “Not too deep,” he instructed Akash. A motley assemblage of flowers, vegetables, and toys is a way of teaching Ruma and her son how to reconcile different cultures. An American-grown plant can resemble Ruma’s Indian mother, cultural hybridity thus growing in a new place. What is more, a hydrangea blooms in different hues: “The flowers will be pink or blue depending on the acidity of your soil,” he explained. Changing the environment thus produces a bigger variety of shades and colors; this is why the things that go into the ground should not be planted deeply, so the roots stay shallow and they can be moved more easily.

In *The Lowland*, the novel that follows *Unaccustomed Earth*, however, Lahiri switches her attention away from roots and the accompanying debate on hybridity and authenticity in favor of the stems of the plant, and especially the kind that grows without having one central root according to which others are situated in a hierarchical relation.

The image of spartina quoted above has another counterpart in the novel, the wall of the Tolly Club, which the boys climb in order to explore the hidden grounds of an exclusive golf club built for the Calcutta elite and the remaining British inhabitants of India. The wall is raised progressively higher as the poor community in the area grows with the coming of new waves of migrants and refugees after Partition: “arriving in waves, stripped of their ancestral land. A rapid trickle, then a flood… They were the reason for the club’s additional walls” (*L*, 5). In stark contrast to the grass wall, this one is artificially erected and its intention is to promulgate the division between the privileged and the poor. While the boys are climbing it to steal into the club they are caught by a police officer, who beats Subhash. The image of the punishment returns at the end of the novel, when the narrative is focalized by Udayan in the moment of his death from police gunshots resulting from his illegal revolutionary activity, creating a connection between this childhood experience and his adult choices, as well as highlighting the continuing exertion of power by the authorities. Thus while spartina gives nourishment and sustenance, the wall

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of the club denotes the opposite. Another difference between the two images is that while the barrier between the land and the sea is not solid and is prone to change, the construction of the wall is permanent and authoritarian, and it denotes strict hierarchical relations.

Another rhizomatic image Lahiri draws in the novel is a bridge in Rhode Island which represents, for Subhash, his connection to India: “[e]nd to end, he was told, the wires of all the suspended cables would span just over eight thousand miles. It was the distance between America and India; the distance that now separated him from his family” (L, 65). He is not homesick: about his new home he says: “[t]here are times I think I have discovered the most beautiful place on earth.” Then he admits that in America he “didn’t belong, but perhaps it didn’t matter …, he’d been waiting all his life to find Rhode Island …, it was here, in this majestic corner of the world, that he could breathe” (L, 65). Paradoxically, in Calcutta he feels out of place: “Though he looked like any other Bengali he felt an allegiance with the foreigners now. He shared with them a knowledge of elsewhere. Another life to go back to. An ability to leave” (L, 112). He thus appreciates what he has gained by moving and does not feel uprooted or melancholic, and neither does his wife, Gauri, previously the wife of his late brother, whom he had married to save her from the unglamorous life of an Indian widow, as Indian cultural tradition allows women to be degraded to the position of servants in the house of their in-laws after the death of their husbands. For Gauri, who in India has sunk in the family hierarchy and is reduced to consuming the remains of the meals she had to help prepare, moving to America provides a chance to lead a life she would otherwise have been unable to have as a result of the norms her society accepts uncritically and passes down the generations. Before Udayan dies, she asks Subhash for a book, Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, which deals precisely with the limits placed on human freedom in a society. In his introduction to the second edition of the book Douglas Kellner explains that for Marcuse,

> one-dimensional thought and action derive their standards and criteria from the existing society, eschewing transcendent standards and norms. Critical and dialectical thinking, by contrast, postulates norms of criticism, based on rational potentials for human happiness and freedom, which are used to negate existing states of affairs that oppress individuals and restrict human freedom and well-being. Dialectical thought thus posits the existence of another realm of ideas, images, and imagination that serves as a potential guide for a social transformation that would realize the unrealized potentialities for a better life.16

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Marcuse believes that these potentialities can be achieved in art and philosophy. “The philosopher,” Marcuse says, “is not a physician: his job is not to cure individuals but to comprehend the world in which they live—to understand it in terms of what it has done to man, and what it can do to man.”\footnote{Marcuse, \textit{One-Dimensional Man}, 188. Italics in the original.} He contrasts it with the Wittgensteinian notion of philosophy as the undertaking that “leaves everything as it is.” Likewise, art has the “ability to ‘project’ existence, to define yet unrealized possibilities \[which\] could then be envisaged as \textit{validated by and functioning in the scientific-technological transformation of the world.}” \footnote{Marcuse, \textit{One-Dimensional Man}, 243–44. Italics in the original.} He adds: “Rather than being the handmaiden of the established apparatus, beautifying its business and this misery, art would become a technique for destroying this system and misery.”\footnote{Marcuse, \textit{One-Dimensional Man}, 243–44. Italics in the original.}

Gauri is a student of philosophy, who has strived since her childhood to go beyond any confines. Her favorite place in the Calcutta apartment was a balcony from which she could observe the hustle and bustle of the city’s life and where her grandparents would frequently find her asleep in the mornings. She married Udayan in secrecy, going against tradition and family expectations, and subsequently assisted him in his illegal revolutionary activity. When Subhash offers to marry her and to take her abroad so that she can continue her studies, she once more defies her parents-in-laws’ expectations and plans for her. She muses: “In a way it had been another flaunting of convention, perhaps something Udayan might have admired. When she’d eloped with Udayan, she’d felt audacious. Agreeing to be Subhash’s wife, to flee to America with him, a decision at one calculated and impulsive, felt even more extreme” (\textit{L}, 127). During one of the philosophy classes she attends in America, she alludes to Marcuse’s book when the professor discusses Aristotle’s rules of formal logic, the syllogisms used to distinguish a valid thought from an invalid one. She asks the professor: “What about dialectical reasoning? One that acknowledges change and contradiction, as opposed to an established reality? Did Aristotle allow for that? He did. But no one paid much attention to those concepts until Hegel” (\textit{L}, 133). The professor accommodated this question into the remaining part of the lecture.

Dialectical reasoning, according to Marcuse, is absent from the current political systems. In \textit{One-Dimensional Man} he builds on Hegel’s definition of the term in order to depict a world in which the dialectical mode of thinking has been made nearly nonexistent as a result of the current political systems, either communist or capitalist, both of which diminish human freedom and critical or negative thought. The language of total administration, he writes,
“testifies to identification and unification, the systematic promotion of positive thinking and doing, to the concerted attack on transcendent critical notions. In the prevailing modes of speech, the contrast appears between two-dimensional, dialectical modes of thought and technological behavior or social ‘habits of thought.’”¹⁹ Both systems feature prominently in the novel in the shape of the Naxalite movement²⁰ in India, inspired by the Maoist revolution in China and by the environmental damage caused by technological developments and the promotion of a consumerist lifestyle, to which I will return in a later part of this paper.

Lahiri depicts the communist revolt that swept across Indian states in the late 1960s and early 1970s without sparing its atrocities:

The killings were sadistic, gruesome, intended to shock. The wife of the French consul was murdered in her sleep. They’d assassinated Gopal Sen, vice-chancellor of Jadavpur University. They’d killed him on campus while he was taking his evening walk. It was the day before he planned to retire. They’d bludgeoned him with steel bars, stabbing him four times. (L, 87)

Yet the propaganda they used to recruit young men was irresistible:

*By the year 2000 … the people of the whole world will be liberated from all kinds of exploitation of man by man and will celebrate the worldwide victory of Marxism, Leninism, Mao-Tse-tung’s thought.* Charu Majumdar wasn’t present at the rally. But Sanyal called for allegiance to him, comparing him to Mao in his wisdom, warning against those who challenged Majumdar’s doctrine. *We will certainly be able to make a new sun and a new moon shine in the sky of our great motherland, he said in words ringing out for miles.* (L, 33; italics in the original)

Even as a young boy, Udayan was devoted to improving other people’s lives: teaching poor children in the neighborhood to read and write, befriending them across caste and class differences, sharing his own meals with them. However, in his twenties, his revolutionary ideal degraded into mere terrorist activity and the movement he joined turned violent and became criminal-

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²⁰ In 1967 in India the Communist Party or CPI(M) split and the more radical CPI(ML) emerged, which attempted to reproduce Mao’s Chinese revolution in India. It was led by Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sangal, who prepared peasants for armed struggle against the illegal practices of the zamindars, or landowners. The revolt started in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari and then spread to other parts of India, mostly in the eastern and southern states. It was accompanied by student uprisings in Calcutta and soon turned into bloody guerilla warfare. It was curbed by the government in 1972.
ized and banned. Slowly the full story of its atrocities unfolded. Even though Udayan was sensitive to the economic imbalance in Indian society, he invested his energy in a misguided movement, and decided to fight poverty and injustice in an organized paramilitary way, causing, eventually, a series of losses: his parents’ life became irrevocably altered, his pregnant wife, Gauri, was not capable of loving either her child or Subhash, and other families lost their fathers and husbands in the guerrilla warfare. Udayan failed in his revolution because he was not able to think dialectically, to be critical of the ideology that was promoted. In other words, he did not question the foundation; he only replaced one authority for another, the Indian Communist Party, CPI(M), with a paramilitary organization, CPI(ML).

To understand the reason for this failure one may complement Marcuse’s philosophy with Deleuze and Guattari’s thought. At the core of their theory is an ongoing questioning of all received notions and the undermining of any authority, including one of territory and its borders. They propose a model of thinking which differs from classical or “state philosophy” in favor of “nomad thought.” The ideal of inhabiting space they propose resembles the way Greek shepherds in Homeric times grazed sheep—through nomadic division, that is, space is filled but not divided: it remains open, unlimited, without borders. This nomadic distribution, says Deleuze, is characteristic of demons rather than gods, those who remain outside of state authority, in the interstitial spaces: “such a distribution is demonic rather than divine, since it is a peculiarity of demons to operate in the intervals between the gods’ fields of action, as it is to leap over the barriers or the enclosures, thereby confounding the boundaries between properties.”21 The demons’ activity involves crossing borders and walls, overcoming closures, and the mixing of property. The center is entirely missing from this model; there is no possibility of hierarchical relations forming. The only unity is “the shapeless chaos,” and replacing one system with another (e.g., God and Man) does not lead to any real change, only an apparent change.22

Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between making a change in the world and leaving footprints behind. While the nomad moves over the smooth surface, that is, one that is not divided by walls, borders, closures, etc., his or her traces or footsteps are, likewise, erased as he or she progresses; they are not permanent.23 The idea of leaving traces behind is what differentiates the two brothers most prominently. Since childhood the two boys had displayed different temperaments: Subhash, the older one, was more reflective and less

22 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 203.
courageous than his brother, and his life was “hardly capable of leaving a trace” \((L, 251)\). Udayan, in contrast, has tended to break the rules since his early years. While “Subhash strove to minimize his existence, as other animals merged with bark or blades of grass,” Udayan “was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors” \((L, 11)\). The two brothers’ life stories are as different as the two types of barriers that I have presented: the spartina grass dividing the land and the sea, subject to natural phenomena, and the wall of the club, immovable and enduring. It resembles the footprints Udayan had left in the cement path leading to their house before it solidified, which, in the eyes of his parents, became “a mark of distinction about their home. Something visitors noticed, the first family anecdote that was told” \((L, 12)\). Subhash later reflects with bitterness: “Udayan had given his life to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage, that had already been dismantled. The only thing he’d altered was what their family had been” \((L, 115)\). Thus, unlike a nomad, he leaves permanent footprints behind, and not only in the cement path leading up to their house, and hardly for the better. The persistence and power of the loss following his death are mirrored in the image of a thick tree that has been blown over in a storm, its “tangled roots exposed, … the drenched ground that had given way. The tree seemed more overwhelming when it lay on the ground. Its proportions frightening, once it no longer lived” \((L, 198–99)\).

Subhash, in turn, is associated throughout with a nearly invisible existence. At first his parents ignore him as they are too preoccupied with the trouble his brother is getting into and, later, with Udayan’s death. Looking back at his life, he notices the different ways in which his footsteps were erased: for example, he draws the conclusion that until he left Calcutta “his life was barely capable of leaving a trace” \((L, 251)\) and he had no personal possessions in Calcutta; everything belonged to his parents. Then the house in which he lived during his first years in America was later turned into a tourist landmark. Taking a tour of it after a few decades, he experiences the way history erases individual human lives:

> the effect was disquieting. He felt his presence on earth being denied, even as he stood there. He was forbidden access: the past refused to admit him. It only reminded him that this arbitrary place, where he’d landed and made his life, was not his… Among its people, its trees, its particular geography he had studied and grown to love, he was still a visitor. \((L, 253)\)

He juxtaposes it with the “prosaic house” of his childhood that “no group would go out of its way to admire” \((L, 255)\) and whose inhabitants are possibly
ignorant of its history. Thus history does not accommodate individual lives like his own. Gauri, pregnant with Udayan’s child, looks back at the traces she and Subhash leave in the damp sand while walking along the coast of Rhode Island and notices that “unlike Udayan’s steps from childhood, which endured in the courtyard in Tollygunge, theirs were already vanishing, washed clean by the encroaching tide” (L, 137).

Traces in the novel are permanent for two major reasons: authoritarian practices connected with the communist movement in Bengal, but also as a result of human activity which is connected to capitalist progress, which is visible on both sides of the ocean. In India, it is most prominently shown in the image of the lowland and the two ponds, which are progressively plugged with waste, a practice encouraged by developers so that the land can be reclaimed and turned into a residential area. The brothers’ mother reminisces:

Long ago, when they had first come to Tollygunge, the water had been clean. Subhash and Udayan had cooled off in the ponds on hot days. Poor people had bathed. After the rains the floodwater turned the lowland into a pretty place filled with wading birds, clear enough to reflect moonlight. The water that remains has been reduced to a green well in the center, a dull green that reminds her of military vehicles. (L, 179)

This image, in fact, brings together environmental damage, consumerism encouraged by capitalism and the governmental activity that the color green now represents for Bijoli—of the truck and the officers who ruthlessly shot her son there. In the lowland, what used to be two bodies of water is now a depository for things of mostly western origin: “Old clothes, rags, newspapers. Empty packets of Mother Dairy Jars of Horlicks, tins of Bournvita and talcum powder. Purple foil from Cadbury chocolate. Broken clay cups in which roadside tea and sweetened yoghurt were once served” (L, 179). The swamp has become solid, and Bijoli sees whatever water is left “evaporating before her eyes, rising up like steam from the ground.” Marcuse, who already in One-Dimensional Man links the exploitation of humans with the exploitation of nature, develops this thought in his 1972 essay written shortly after witnessing student protests in the United States against the war in Vietnam. He makes a connection between the genocide of war with the “ecocide” which he blames on capitalism: “increasingly, the ecological struggle comes into conflict with the laws which govern the capitalistic system: the law of increased accumulation of capital, of the creation of sufficient surplus value, of profit, of the necessity of perpetuating alienating labor and exploitation.”24 The values inherent in nature have

always been irreconcilable with a market economy’s emphasis on profit and utility.\textsuperscript{25} The expanding exploitation of nature thus has both political and economic dimensions. He says: “the struggle for expansion of the world of beauty, nonviolence and serenity is a political struggle.”\textsuperscript{26} In contrast to the capitalist emphasis on efficiency and productivity, every morning, in a poignantly fruitless gesture, Bijoli visits the area of the pond where Udayan hid from the police and cleans up the rubbish that has accumulated overnight.

Just as irrevocably altered as the lowland in Tollygunge is the part of the ocean Subhash visits as part of his research near Rhode Island. He goes with a group of students and professors on a boat excursion to examine an oil spillage in the nearby bay. The vessel leaves impermanent trails in the water: “[a]s the ship pulled away, the water cleaved a foaming trail that vanished even as it was being formed” (L, 62). The fleetingness of the trail intensifies by contrast the effects of the contamination of the bay, which, he learned, “could persist indefinitely” (L, 62).

Of the two brothers, Subhash seems to be far nearer to embodying the nomadic sensibility. He opts for the uncertainty of migration to a country where “there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside” (L, 34). Each new day felt improvisational; “[h]ere, in this place surrounded by sea, he was drifting away from his point of origin. Here, detached from Udayan, he was ignorant of so many things” (L, 40). And yet he begins to seek similarities with his old home: he projects the geography of Calcutta onto the Rhode Island landscape and compares plants and animals, colors, and the dust. When summer turns into fall:

Once more the leaves of the trees lost their chlorophyll, replaced by the shades he had left behind: vivid hues of cayenne and turmeric and ginger pounded fresh every morning in the kitchen, to season the food his mother prepared. Once more these colors seemed to be transported across the world, appearing in the treetops that lined his path. (L, 82)

Not only does he seek similarities between the two countries, but he is also overcome by a need to settle down in Rhode Island.

Deleuze and Guattari explain that a nomadic mode of life does not lead to the re-creation of previously inhabited territory or the creation of a new one; it does not lead to a stable reterritorialization. They admit:


\textsuperscript{26} Marcuse, “Ecology and Revolution,” 11.
The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence …

The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory.27

What is characteristic for the nomad is movement and the state of being in progress. Subhash, then, does not fully embody a nomadic sensibility, as he keeps establishing connections to India and views it as his homeland: “It’s where I was made” (L, 67), viewing his identity as fixed, shaped by his Bengali upbringing. It is also visible in his approach to parenting. He demands that Gauri recreates the Indian model of a mother by staying at home with Bela and giving up her studies. He does not consider Gauri’s personality, ambitions, and needs, which are not uncommon among American women and rejects the alternative options, such as babycare. As a result, Gauri escapes to California to follow her academic pursuits and Bela grows up without a mother altogether. Subhash epitomizes what Deleuze and Guattari would call an immigrant, but not a nomad.

The nomadic sensibility is fully realized in Bela. She combines Subhash’s caring and selfless nature with Udayan’s revolutionary attitude and, while attending a small liberal arts school in the Midwest, one with an alternative curriculum, without exams or grades, enjoys the atypical method of studying. After she majors in Environmental Science, she roams the country taking a series of jobs, such as teaching teenagers how to plant a garden in city centers, or clearing out dilapidated playgrounds and converting them into vegetable beds. She lives in close quarters, often not paid wages but simply being given food and shelter. She lives with groups who pool their income, without insurance, without paying heed to her future, without a fixed address. “She’s used to making friends wherever she goes, then moving on, never seeing them again” (L, 257). There is a spirit of opposition to the things she does. Subhash concludes that “she had eschewed the stability he had worked to provide. She’d forged a rootless path” (L, 224–25). Her name, Bela, is a type of flower, also known as the Arabian jasmine. It generally does not produce seeds and the plant is reproduced solely by cuttings, layering, marcotting, and other kinds of asexual propagation. Like the flower, Bela does not grow up with her biological father and finds one in Subhash. Later, together with Subhash and the daughter

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27 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 380.
she gives birth to, she forms an alternative family, refusing to get married and yet providing a caring and loving environment for her child. She also makes hints at a possible reconciliation with Gauri, the mother who had abandoned her years back. Bela lives in what Deleuze and Guattari term a smooth space; her choices are independent and free, not subjected to norms and regulations, barriers or constrictions of any kind, political or economic. Her lifestyle is most sustaining for the natural world and creates a nourishing environment for her own daughter to grow and develop in.

The “smooth space” of the nomadic territory that Bela inhabits is reflected in the novel in the dissolution of borders. For example, it is often impossible to draw a line between land and water. Either one takes on the features of the other, or the two are literally intermingled. Rhode Island, where Subhash moves, used to be a glacier. The Tollygunge area, in turn, used to be covered by the sea, and the eponymous lowland, until it gets clogged with waste, is a piece of land flooded during the monsoon that remains a wetland for half a year. In Rhode Island, when Subhash walked on the grass of the campus, he “was covered now as if with a sea of rust, the dead leaves scuttling and heaving in the wind. He waded, ankle deep, through their bulk. The leaves sometimes rose around him, as if something living were submerged beneath them” (L, 44).

Likewise, when Bela returns from Calcutta to find the house deserted by her mother she saw that the grass had grown nearly to the height of her shoulders. She “plunged into the grass as if it were the sea, her body briefly disappearing. Pushing her way through it, her arms spread wide” (L, 210). It thus seems impossible to make a clear distinction between one and the other, to delineate the border, to draw the line.

The smooth space, not marked by lines, borders, or hierarchy, is also realized in the invention and spread of the internet. Gauri observes that it is a “Revolutionary concept, already taken for granted. Citizens of the internet dwell free from hierarchy. There is room for everyone, given that there are no spatial constraints. Udayan might have appreciated this” (L, 276). The smooth space is the result of the postcapitalist era. According to Paul Mason, the economics commentator, what lies at the core of the postcapitalist era is information technology, new ways of working, and the sharing economy. As one of the major reasons for the emergence of the new system he lists “the spontaneous rise of collaborative production: goods, services and organizations are appearing that no longer respond to the dictates of the market and the managerial hierarchy. The biggest information product in the world—Wikipedia—is made by volunteers for free, abolishing the encyclopedia business and depriving
the advertising industry of an estimated $3bn a year in revenue.” 28 The new economy is based on alternative systems and small initiatives such as squats, carpools, or free kindergartens which lie outside the mainstream economy.

There are thus numerous ways to inhabit the smooth space today. Interestingly, Jhumpa Lahiri finished writing The Lowland in Rome, where she moved with her family in 2012. This London-born author of Indian origin, raised in the United States, making frequent visits to India, and eventually moving to Rome and then commuting to Princeton, where she teaches creative writing, is herself living in the smooth space of the nomad, easily crossing borders, both geographical and linguistic, as her most recent published work includes a “linguistic autobiography,” 29 describing her self-imposed linguistic exile, In Altre Parole, 30 and an essay, “Teach Yourself Italian,” written in Italian and published in English translation in the New Yorker. 31 Of her experience she says: “I find it really liberating to be in a place where I am a foreigner in every way. I’ve lived with this all my life—this divide, this bifurcation. And in Italy I don’t feel it. There’s none of that tension.” 32 At the same time, she is aware that her nomadic lifestyle is not a norm among Bengali immigrants who do “all the grunt work.” 33 She admits that “These are sobering moments, and they make me realise what a privileged landing I’ve had here.” 34 Nevertheless, she keeps moving along her nomadic trajectory and encourages the reader to, likewise, always seek new ways of thinking with the world and inhabit it in a rhizomic way.

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Longing for Belonging into a Story: On Assimilation, Self-Invention, and Storytelling in *Syrian Yankee* and *I, the Divine*

**Zuzana Tabačková**

**ABSTRACT:** The article explores the notion of assimilation in the writing of Salom Rizk and Rabih Alameddine. While similar in many ways, each of these two Arab American storytellers tells a different story about his Lebanese and American self. While Rizk is often referred to as a strong proponent of assimilation to American culture, Alameddine’s fictional biographies could be viewed as clear demonstrations of his in-betweenness. Each of the two authors searches for his true homeland but while Rizk finds it in America, Alameddine’s home is neither in the United States, nor in Lebanon. The ability or the inability of the narrators of *Syrian Yankee* (1943) and *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001) to arrange their memories is reflected in the narrative strategies of their two memoirs.

**KEYWORDS:** Salom Rizk; Rabih Alameddine; assimilation; storytelling; Orientalism

**Introduction**

Shahrazad¹ (whose name in Persian means “City-Freer”)² told stories to survive. Her smooth movement from one tale to another enabled her to delay her own execution. The story was her only way to keep herself (or her self) alive. “To be” meant “to have a story.” As the etymology of her name suggests, by narrating her tales, Shahrazad was also “freeing her city” as her chained narratives rescued the lives of many other girls. The story could, thus, be considered a metaphor of both individual and collective survival; a metaphor of preserving the self which would not exist except by belonging to a narrative.

¹ In the article, I use the original Persian spelling of the name as opposed to Shahrizad (Arabic spelling) or Şehrazat (Turkish spelling).

The present article explores the notion of assimilation or, in other words—the story of the self in the face of the story of the other and its dilemma as to whether to reside in its original narrative or to move into a new one. I use the terms story and narrative since I explore the problem from a literary perspective. Assimilation—a broad and wide-ranging term—invites a plethora of interpretations stemming from various fields of study, including history, political science, sociology, etc. Exploring the notion of assimilation from the point of view of literary fiction, however, brings about a unique perspective since literature embeds assimilation within the framework of an individual story (or an individual’s story) and, thus, turns histories constructed from collective memories into “his-stories” built up from individual remembering. 

In his review of Edward Said’s notable memoir *Out of Place*, Stephen Howe reflects on the role of memory and narrative in the process of self-invention:

> We all tell stories about ourselves which involve elements of retrospective self-fashioning and cannot easily be disentangled from any “straight” recall of the past. Moreover, our families and communities, even nations, forge collective narratives into which they expect us to fit.⁴

The “self-fashioning,” as will be seen in the lines that follow, very often results in “self-invention.” In the past, the word “invention” often referred to a certain technological advance, such as the telegraph or the telephone. Gradually, as Werner Sollors argues, the word began to be used in new contexts, creating such expressions as “the invention of culture; of literary history; of narrative; of childhood as well as the loss of childhood; of adolescence; of motherhood; of kinship; of the self; of America.”⁵

The present article discusses the question of inventing and constructing the self which moves between the Arab (particularly Lebanese) and American culture; the self which struggles with the ontological anxiety of whether to give an affirmative or a negative answer to assimilation; the self which by means of a personal narrative tries to negotiate the Orientalist discourse based on the binary opposition between the advanced West and the backward East. Interconnecting the word “assimilation” with storytelling may at first sight seem rather unusual. But, since the present paper aims to discuss the question of

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assimilation through the perspectives of two authors, both of whom are labeled as Arab Americans, it is not illogical.

Storytelling has a long tradition in the Arab world and the motif of telling personal stories to reflect collective histories has also been a frequent motif in the writing of the authors of Arab descent who use English as their writing medium. Shahrazad is often referred to as one of the most prolific storytellers of the region. The origin of her tales, however, should be sought in the Indian or Persian traditions, and not only the Arab one. The art of storytelling in the Arab world should, in reality, be attributed to the profession of a hakawati (which translates as a storyteller). A hakawati would travel from place to place in search of a listener who would be willing to immerse themselves into his story or hikaya. Like the beautiful Shahrazad, hakawatis would continue to tell their stories for weeks or months in Arab cafés, stopping at the point of greatest suspense and, consequently, inducing their listeners to come back the following day. Since the word hakawati has its etymological roots in the Arabic verb haka, which translates as “to tell, to relate” but also “to speak, to talk,” Rabih Alameddine suggests that in Arabic, “the mere act of talking is storytelling,” or, in other words, speaking equals narrating a tale.

The communicative scheme of storytelling outlines the structure of the present paper, which first focuses on the two storytellers with similar memories who are telling (or trying to tell) their East-West story to their readers. Although they draw on similar memories, their two memoirs turn out to be very dissimilar. Hence, Syrian Yankee (1943) and I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters (2001) communicate different standpoints toward assimilation.

Salom Rizk and Rabih Alameddine, the two authors whose fictional pursuits are discussed in the present paper, are Arab American storytellers of different eras, telling their readers a story of their individual odysseys in search of their self, one half of which resides in Lebanon, while the other half sojourns

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6 In the paper, I use the expression “Arab American” as opposed to the hyphenated term “Arab-American.” The hyphenated expression is used only when I directly quote authors who used a hyphen when referring to American writers of Arab descent.
9 In the paper, I follow the transliteration system of WorldCat/OCLC in transliterating Arabic words into English. No diacritical marks are used except for ‘ (denoting ‘ayn) and ’ (denoting hamzah).
10 Hans Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (Beirut: Libraire du Liban, 1974), 694.
in the United States. One of the most notable Arab American literary scholars, Evelyn Shakir, differentiates three stages in the development of Arab American literature, “early, middle, and recent—each of them responsive to the political currents of the day.” According to her categorization, Rizk belongs to the middle stage, encompassing the authors whose first contact with Ellis Island dates back to the interwar period and who “consumed themselves as ‘regular Americans’ and hoped to pass.” To compare, Alameddine came to the United States after the civil rights movement and, thus, he lies within the third, post-modern, phase in the Arab American literary tradition—an era of diversity, embracing a myriad of writers from various ethnic and religious groups, and a wide range of political affiliations. What interlinks these writers is “their relationship to their readers [which] is mediated by the dominant discourse of Orientalism that defines them in their adoptive countries.” Edward Said argues that Orientalism was so influential, even authoritative, that “no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism.” The way Arab American writers tackle Orientalism also guides the attitude they take toward the question of their assimilation to American culture. Therefore, the Orientalist discourse will guide the reading of the two novels in question by focusing on the issue of whether the two authors show a certain center/periphery or Orient/Occident preference.

Despite belonging to different eras, the two authors discussed in the present paper have a lot of things in common. Both were born to Lebanese families and spent their childhood in the Middle East, eventually moving westward. Furthermore, both Rizk and Alameddine are first-generation immigrants of mixed background but the former negotiates Orientalism by giving an unequivocal affirmative answer to the West while completely denigrating the East; the latter, on the other hand, subverts and deconstructs the mere idea of this opposition. Moreover, both authors are concerned with the art of storytelling. Rizk’s Syrian Yankee is based on a circuit of speeches that Rizk was giving all around the United States so as to share his immigrant experience with his American audiences. Alameddine’s protagonist, Sarah Nour al-Din, strives hard to find

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a sujet for her violated fabula. Her constant attempts to begin again and again eventually turn her narration into a novel of approximately fifty first chapters. Through their narratives, both authors create a different self. While Rizk invents a self in the form of the oxymoron that a Syrian Yankee represents, the self of Alameddine's female protagonist is not invented but it is in a constant process of inventing and re-inventing. What the reader is left with in the end are two distinct narratives presented by their narrators as autobiographical memoirs, which, however, end up being the “Shahrazad-like” storytelling attempts of two multilayered “Arab American selves” longing to belong to a story (Arab or American) and, thus, longing to exist.

**Two Arab American Storytellers with Similar Memories**

The lexical compound of storytelling suggests that the two components necessary for the process of storytelling to succeed are the story and its teller (or narrator) who shares the narrative with a certain audience. Since Syrian Yankee is an autobiography, its storyteller is Salom Rizk himself telling the audience the story of his willing and gratuitous assimilation to American culture. Sarah Nour al-Din—the narrator of I, the Divine—is trying to arrange her memories so as to create a memoir, with the aim of finding out where she belongs. What induces the two narrators to take on the role of the storyteller is their contact with the American “other.” Through their narratives, they are trying to communicate their longing to belong to a story—either to a Lebanese or to an American one.

Salom and Sarah have a lot of things in common besides the initials of their first names. The first is their mixed parentage, as both of them were born half Lebanese and half American. Salom's American mother dies in childbirth in Lebanon and Salom is brought up by his grandmother who, in fear of losing her grandson, keeps his half-American origin (and consequently his eligibility for US citizenship) a secret. Similarly, Sarah's identity is split between her Lebanese father and her American mother, who is sent back to the United States for not giving her husband a male heir. Salom takes his mixed origin as a winning ticket to America, which he depicts as “the land of hope … the land of peace … the land of contentment … the land of liberty … the land of brotherhood … the land of plenty … where God has poured out wealth … where the dreams of men come true.”16 To compare, Sarah reflects on her background as a curse:

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16 Salom Rizk, *Syrian Yankee* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1943), 71. Hereafter cited in the text as SY.
I have been blessed with many curses in my life, not the least of which was being born half Lebanese and half American. Throughout my life, these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion. I shuffled ad nauseam between the need to assert my individuality and the need to belong to my clan, being terrified of loneliness and terrorized of losing myself in relationships.17

By referring to her split self as a curse, Sarah complicates her understanding of belonging or, rather, unbelonging, which creates “a space of negotiation that constantly revises traditional notions of diasporic identity.”18 The reader is the one to define which half is deemed by Sarah her real curse.

Second, Salom and Sarah share the influential storytelling figures in their families who, through their narratives, manipulate the roots of their grandchildren, eventually complicating their understanding of who they are. Kbashy the Magnificent, Salom’s Shahrazad-like grandmother, is a powerful storyteller whose stories serve as moral lessons for her grandson, very often by challenging the patriarchal values that exist in the Lebanese society of the time. Hassan argues that Kbashy might contradict “the stereotype of the downtrodden Arab woman but [she] reinforces others that emerge from the same discursive register.”19 By hiding away his true origin from her grandson, she delays his success so as to secure him for herself. Similarly, Sarah’s powerful storytelling grandfather manipulates her understanding of her identity even more, especially through his made-up narratives about her name. By misunderstanding her name, Sarah loses her ability to find an equilibrium point between her Lebanese and American halves. This is foregrounded in the opening “first” chapter of the book, where Sarah says:

My grandfather named me for the great Sarah Bernhardt. He considered having met her in person the most important event in his life. He talked about her endlessly. By the age of five, I was able to repeat each of his stories verbatim. And I did.
My grandfather was a simple man. (ID, 3)

It is only in the second half of the novel that the reader learns that this beginning, incipient chapter of the book is based on a lie invented by Sarah’s storytelling grandfather, who repeatedly feeds her up with the stories of his

17 Rabih Alameddine, I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters (New York: Norton, 2001), 229. Hereafter cited in the text as ID.
18 Carol Fadda-Conrey, “Transnational Diaspora and the Search for Home in Rabih Alameddine’s I, the Divine,” in Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature, ed. Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 174.
19 Hassan, Immigrant Narratives, 102.
love, as well as the tales of “The Divine Sarah.” Her manipulative grandfather’s true connection with the famous French stage and film icon is founded on the element of acting and pretending. In the same way as the actress pretends to be somebody else while on stage, Sarah’s grandfather pretends his true love for his granddaughter. It is much later in her life that Sarah learns that her grandfather’s “love” toward her stemmed from the fact that as the third girl in a row, she became a medium through which he could send her American mother back to the United States and find a proper, traditional, Druze20 wife for his son. This is confirmed by Sarah’s mother toward the end of the novel when she discloses to Sarah what her father-in-law told her after Sarah’s birth: “You know, Janet, I love this girl so much. Do you know why? … I love her so much because she’s the reason I am going to be able to return you to your fucking country” (ID, 295). By filling Sarah’s head with made-up stories about Sarah Bernhardt, her grandfather hides away from her a story about a strong female Druze woman named Sarah who became the leader and the founder of the Druze religion. As Sarah’s older sister Amal later tells her, their grandfather “preferred to fill [Sarah’s] head with stories of the Divine Sarah, but not the Druze Sarah” (ID, 289). Sarah, the Divine, should more appropriately be called “Sarah, the Divide” as her inability to see through her grandfather’s manipulative stories about her name and her roots makes her unable to arrange her manipulated and dispersed memories logically and, subsequently, build up her memoir. As Steven Salaita argues, in I, the Divine, “Alameddine comments on the murky nature of memory and the inability to understand the past without competing narratives.”21 It is through other stories of other hakawatis in her family that Sarah finally begins to find out where she belongs.

Third, Salom and Sarah share their harsh and violent experience in Lebanon, resulting from the political situation in the country. This experience challenges their negotiation of Orientalism, particularly their struggle of whether to identify with the East or the West. After his grandmother’s death, Salom leaves his village to search for his living relatives. He is homeless for some time, living at the mercy of local people. Later, in Beirut, he struggles to survive, constantly changing jobs while waiting for his ticket to America. What lies

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20 The Druzes are a religious sect, most of whose members live in the mountainous regions of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. Known for being close-knit and secretive about their faith, they form a very specific community which values the equality of men and women, as well as the abolition of slavery. One of the most significant pillars of their faith is their belief in reincarnation. Alameddine was born to Druze parents, although he considers himself an atheist. See Samy Swayd, Historical Dictionary of the Druzes (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

behind his poverty is the difficult political situation in Lebanon arising from Ottoman oppression. As Rebecca Layton points out, Arab American writers often resort to political discourse in their works so as to respond to the political events that their home and their adoptive country struggle with. If Rizk's criticism is aimed at the Ottoman rule, Alameddine's literary pursuits are embroidered on the linen of the Lebanese Civil War, which has become a recurrent motif in all his works. Referring to the war, in an interview with Kieron Devlin Alameddine asserts:

> It [the war] permeates every corner of my life. I can't seem to write about anything else. The war taught me how to deal with impermanence, how to sharpen my sense of the absurd, and how to function in a chaotic world. Wars and disease bring one closer to mortality. But whereas with disease, especially terminal illness, you can always delude yourself into believing the situation, your life, is controllable, it is impossible with war.

The war and its sectarian and “polyphonic nature” significantly influence Sarah’s polyphonic book of competing narratives. During the war, she loses her stepsister Rana, who is killed by a Syrian soldier who is infatuated with her. At the time of the bombings and the most violent skirmishes, the family would sit on the staircase of their apartment house witnessing the killings of their closest neighbors. What, however, proves to be the crucial war-induced moment, and which completely violates Sarah’s life, as well as her narrative, is the day when she is abducted and gang-raped—a point in her life which, as Salaita suggests, “arises from the breakdown of order that has resulted from the onset of the Lebanese Civil War.” In the same way as the civil war violates the macrocosm of the collective history of Lebanon, the rape violates the microcosm of Sarah’s personal history, as well as “her-story.”

As will be seen in the lines that follow, despite having similar memories, the two narrators negotiate the question of their assimilation to the US culture in

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22 See Rebecca Layton, Arab-American and Muslim Writers (New York: Infobase, 2010), 10.
23 The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), a long conflict arising from the sectarianism that existed in Lebanese society, which was divided between Maronite Christians, Muslims, and Druzes and further intensified by the presence of the Palestinian refugees in the country, as well as the Cold War, in which each superpower supported a different side. The fifteen-year conflict resulted in disrupted families and the mass exodus of the Lebanese population to other countries. See Salaita, Modern Arab American Fiction, 11–12.
26 Salaita, Modern Arab American Fiction, 52.
dissimilar ways, eventually creating dissimilar memoirs employing dissimilar narrative techniques.

**Two Dissimilar Arab American Memoirs**

The story of the Syrian Yankee’s journey to America (America both as a geographical location and as a collection of symbols it represents) is in many ways similar to the stories of hundreds of immigrants who managed to pass through the “checkpoints” located on Ellis Island. When “Syrians” — the first Arab immigrants to the United States — began (individually or in small groups) to leave to “Amrika,” they were filled with great expectations. America represented the fulfillment of their dreams of progress and success. As Alixa Naff points out, “From across the seas its [America’s] light appeared golden, its promise certain.” By adhering to the myths about the advanced West, the immigrants, however, very often failed to see a sense of insecurity burgeoning in American society as a result of the economic challenges sparked off by industrialization and urbanization. Moreover, at the time when Salom Rizk takes on the role of a “Yankee hakawati,” America is facing both the internal conflict resulting from the Great Depression and the external struggle to define itself in contact with European Fascism that led to US involvement in the war. Syrian immigrants, for whom the whole American world often turned into a peddling valise, were mostly concerned with their financial profit. Pack peddling, which Naff considers the “most fundamental factor in the assimilation of Syrians in America,” proved to be the most popular job among the immigrants of Arab heritage. Its interconnection with assimilation draws on the necessity to learn English, the principles of trade, and the nature of American customers so as to gain financial profit.

In addition to their material concerns, what the immigrants of Arab descent had to tackle upon their arrival in the United States was the problem of whether to adhere to the values of the American middle class or to consider “any departure from ‘tradition’ a disaster.” And it is at this point that the plot

27 “Syrians” is an umbrella name used to refer to the first generations of Arab immigrants to the United States. The majority of these first immigrants of Arab descent came from Greater Syria, which at the time included both Syria and Lebanon. See Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1985), 2.


of Salom Rizk’s story begins to differ from the storyline of his contemporaries. In his account of the Lebanese immigrant community in the United States, Khater states:

In short, then, between 1890 and 1914 the Lebanese immigrant community constructed a new set of relations that were neither “modern” nor “traditional,” neither “Eastern” nor “Western.” Rather these new identities were peculiar to their historical experience. And as much as “hybridity” differentiated them from middle-class “America” it would also come to distinguish them from peasant Lebanon.31

In contrast, Rizk becomes a ferocious proponent of “the modern” and “the Western” by completely denigrating “the traditional” and “the Eastern.” Carol Fadda-Conrey ranks Rizk’s autobiography among the texts of what she denotes the “assimilative bent”—the texts portraying the authors’ desire to assimilate and to be disconnected from their respective homelands. Similarly, Elmaz Abinader calls Rizk’s book “an immigrant story with the undertone of assimilation and acceptance.”33 Upon acquiring the necessary language skills, Rizk assumes the role of a storyteller, which the America of the time longs for. Contrary to Kahlil Gibran, who, two decades earlier, negotiated Orientalism by assuming the role of an Eastern prophet and who communicated the East as the land of spiritual wisdom,34 Rizk becomes the prophet of the West. For the “Syrian Yankee,” the East represents nothing but backwardness. America, on the other hand, is portrayed as “heaven” (SY, 77). Rizk idealizes it from the first moment that he learns about his American background. Sitting on a hilltop close to his Lebanese village, he naively wishes he could rub Aladdin’s lamp so as to “behold the wealth and splendor of that paradise, or maybe sail right into it on a magic carpet” (SY, 76).

Rizk’s self-identification with America is reflected at different points of his narrative. First, Rizk celebrates the American values of democracy, freedom of speech, and equality of opportunities. After his successful idea of repairing shoes for the unemployed for free, Rizk reflects on American values with awe and respect:

What will be the next miracle to come out of this America? Here am I, a humble, obscure shoemaker. I start an idea and it goes all over the country. That is one of the marvelous things about free America. Anybody—a carpenter, a butcher, a grocer, or a housewife—can originate a scheme for democratic improvement or service, and if it has value, it will catch on all over the country, become the property, the working capital, of all the people—and it doesn't need any push from the government. (SY, 215–16)

Kevin J. Hayes suggests that Rizk’s narrative conveys “a passion for American freedom, sometimes lost on those native born citizens who take their freedom for granted.” Consequently, not only does Rizk celebrate American democratic values, but through his narrative, he also tries to restore American faith in those values.

Second, Rizk denigrates and subverts the East, as represented by his homeland. When he visits Lebanon, he cannot comprehend his fellows on the ship who rejoice at the sight of Lebanese shores:

Other Syrian-Americans on the boat shouted blissfully, ecstatically, until they were hoarse, but I was as cold as fish. Don't think I didn't try to overcome my apathy. I tried hard to make my heart beat faster, tried to feel, “This is my own, native land.” But it was no use. I thought maybe I was abnormal or that Europe had cankered my sense of joy. (SY, 263)

Third, Rizk’s identification with the West is reflected in the language of his narrative, especially in the use of the first person plural pronouns “we” or “our.” While at the beginning of his memoir, Rizk uses these pronouns to refer to the Orient—“We people of the Orient” (SY, 75)—towards the end of his narrative, he employs them to refer to America, for example by referring to America as to “our beautiful heritage and marvelous resources” (SY, 309). By replacing “they” with “we,” Rizk clearly positions himself on the center-periphery opposition. In the modernist sense of searching for the center, Rizk finds it in the Occident by simultaneously denigrating the Orient as a periphery. To portray the East versus West opposition, Rizk uses a metaphor of narrative strategies and communicates the Orientals as “an imaginative people, a poetic people, a people of dreams, passions, wild fancies” (SY, 76). In contrast, Americans are depicted as “more prosaic” (SY, 75) and clinging to facts as opposed to feelings.

Rizk’s clear and unequivocal attitude toward America is reflected in the narrative strategies that he uses. In the same way as he is able to invent his self and position it smoothly on the American side of his descent, his chronologi-

cal narrative written in idiomatic and grammatically correct English suggests that he can control and arrange his memories. However, in the same way as his storytelling grandmother manipulates his understanding of his origin, Rizk manipulates the reader as he articulates his narrative within American discourses. Similarly to Gibran, who provided the spirituality of the Orient that the American reader in the 1920s requested, Rizk offers America the confidence that it has begun to lose and this is foregrounded in the closing words of the novel: “You can’t beat the people who built and are still building this America” (SY, 317). These pragmatic motives lying behind Rizk’s narrative are his way of dealing with Orientalism. By suppressing his Lebanese half at the expense of his American half and eventually becoming more Yankee than the Yankees, Rizk succeeds in finding a recipient willing to listen to his story—a story which is compliant with his reader’s tastes. However, through being guided by his pragmatic motives, Rizk fails to understand that inventing one’s self is not that straightforward. The verbal cluster of the “Syrian Yankee” proves to be a mere absurdity in itself. “Yankee” usually implies an American, particularly a northerner or New Englander. Hassan argues that the expression is “a bold assertion that a Syrian can be an American, the paradox being, of course, that it is only possible when he repudiates Syria.”36 By longing to belong to an American story and its discursive frameworks, as well as its readers, Rizk is willing to manipulate the story of his Lebanese self. He does so by adhering to the collective stories about his homeland that exist in American society and are induced by Orientalism. Through his narrative, Rizk invents an image of an immigrant who is willing to assimilate completely to America—subsequently stereotyping both the East and the West.

In Alameddine’s I, the Divine, Rizk’s chronological and straightforward self-invention is replaced with fragmentation and loss. Rizk’s story thus resembles what Cristina Garrigós calls the “narratives that try, in a modernist desire to look for a unified centre, to depict an essentialist approach to ethnicity,”37 while Sarah’s book complies with the postmodern aesthetics by resisting closure, reconstructing itself, and pointing to the multiplicity of selves within one protagonist. Sarah Nour al-Din (whose family name translates as “the light of religion”) also decides to write her own memoir so as to find out who she is. Although she is a successful abstract painter, her writing turns out to be a chain of failures as every “first chapter” that she completes is a wrong beginning,

36 Hassan, Immigrant Narratives, 110.
37 Cristina Garrigós, “The Dynamics of Intercultural Dislocation: Hybridity in Rabih Alameddine’s I, the Divine,” in Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature, ed. Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 189.
which prompts her to start again. Her inability to recollect her memories and give them a cause-and-effect, chronological structure makes her experiment with various linguistic registers, textual discourses, genres, and points of view.

For Sarah, the English language cannot fully put across her experience; hence some of her chapters are written in French, some are written in Lebanese dialect. The epistolary part of the narrative, containing the letters that her insane sister Lamia writes (but never sends) to their American mother, is written in weak and grammatically incorrect English in a stream-of-consciousness-like way—a textual register that foregrounds Lamia’s disrupted mental state which induces her to kill her hospital patients for bothering her during her night shifts. Lamia sometimes addresses her mother by her first name (ID, 162), sometimes with a formal “Dear Mother” (ID, 164), and at other times informally, with “Dear Mommy” (ID, 156). These desperate attempts to get closer to her mother point to her longing to find a connection to her roots.

Furthermore, the story, which demonstrates Sarah’s longing to belong, is a story of various genres. Sarah’s narrative is divided into five distinct parts. In the very first one—entitled “I, the Divine”—Sarah does not point to the genre she is writing. After the subsequent five chapters (all marked as “Chapter One”) she starts her book again. This time, she names it “Half and Half” and pinpoints that it is a memoir, dedicated to her childhood friend Dina. The third part of her story is again a “memoir” dedicated to Dina but now it is called “I, the Divine.” Sarah’s fourth fictional experiment is called “Around an Empty Grave,” which the author presents as “a novel.” The final, closing part of the book (containing a plethora of first chapters and an introduction at the very end) is named “The Fall.” This time, Sarah neither informs the reader about the genre that she is creating nor dedicates the book to a specific person. Instead, she quotes Patrick White, whose words give the reader a hint as to how to understand her narrative:

I don’t believe artists know half the time what they are creating. Oh yes, all the tralala, the technique—that’s another matter. But like ordinary people who get out of bed, wash their faces, comb their hair, cut the tops of [sic] their boiled eggs, they don’t act, they’re instruments which are played on, or vessels which are filled—in many cases only with longing. (ID, 205)

Sarah is unable to create a memoir because a memoir suggests an endeavor to remember, while Sarah is, in reality, striving hard to forget. The experience that she longs to erase from her memory (and which paradoxically permanently resonates in her self) is the rape. In her two memoir-storytelling attempts, Sarah repeatedly tries to communicate that she was raped but never succeeds.
In one brief chapter, she starts to describe that August evening when “[e]ven the air [was] filthy” \((ID, 113)\) but does not even get to her abduction and closes the chapter by describing the sea, “oblivious to the play of colors” \((ID, 114)\). It is significant that Sarah finally succeeds in communicating her violent experience in the fourth part of the book, which she classifies as a novel. First, in “Premier Chapitre,” Sarah tries to describe her abduction in French by referring to herself with the French personal pronoun elle, “she”—and she fails anew. In the subsequent Chapter One, entitled “Spilt Wine,” Sarah finally manages to narrate the story of her abduction and rape but she does so in the third person: “It was hot that day. Sarah wore her long black dress with a flower motif, tiny yellow-and-white daisies and red poppies. She loved the dress” \((ID, 193)\). This shift in the point of view from the first person to a third person omniscient narrator points to Sarah’s inability to include this experience in her memoir (it is significant that she depicts it in the part classified as a novel). “Spilt Wine,” used as the title of the chapter, echoes Sarah’s childhood memory of her father, who explained to her the difference between a girl’s and a boy’s sexuality by using the metaphor of linen:

> A boy’s sexuality is like a plastic tablecloth… If a carafe of wine is spilled on it, you can easily wipe it off. A girl’s sexuality, on the other hand, is like fine linen, much more valuable. If a carafe of wine is spilled on it, it will never come off. You can wash it and wash it, but it will never be the same. \((ID, 127)\)

Should wine be interpreted as a metaphor for rape, then the impossibility of washing it off a piece of linen could be understood as Sarah’s inability to erase her violent experience from her memory. Striving to forget by concurrently trying to impose a logical structure on her memories complicates Sarah’s search for identity. The rape becomes a point of rupture which stands behind Sarah’s two divorces and the broken relationship with her American lover, David. It also accounts for her restlessness and constant movement between America and Lebanon. She selects America for her homeland, where she hopes to find order and re-invent herself, but cannot resist the temptation to visit her Lebanese relatives again and again. Her constant shuttling between the United States and Lebanon, between what she calls “here” and “there” \((ID, 99)\), prompts her to ask: “Can there be any here? No. She understands there. Whenever she is in Beirut, home is New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is, but where she is not” \((ID, 99; italics in the original)\). Like Salom Rizk, Sarah longs to invent her self within the American narrative; she longs to belong to a new, American story. In this endeavor, she becomes a mirror image of her American mother, Janet. Janet wanted to
look Lebanese, while Sarah wants to look American. Both the mother and her daughter eventually fail. Once, as Janet examines the reflection of her new Lebanese appearance in the mirror, she has to admit that she “[does] not look Lebanese, yet [is] no longer American” (*ID*, 215) and considers herself “Shahrazad, a drunk Shahrazad, spinning tales” (*ID*, 215). The tales that she has in mind are the tales of the possibility of inventing her Lebanese self. This is predicted by a fortuneteller who forecasts her Lebanese fate, asserting that Janet will “no longer be able to be herself, she will become a part of a larger whole. She can’t move independently, she has to move with the family’s river” (*ID*, 225). Janet is advised to suppress her individuality, her personal story, for the sake of the collective, the story of her future family. This dichotomy between the individual as represented by the United States and the collective as represented by Lebanon is, in Sarah’s narrative, subverted and complicated even more in an epiphany mocking the idea of individuality:

I always tried to walk a path unbeaten by others, to touch the untouched. I moved from the land of conformism to the land of individualism. I moved from a country that ostracized its nonconformists to one more tolerant and more hypocritical. I moved from Lebanon to the United States. (*ID*, 227)

The notion of individuality, of the existence of an unstained and independent self, finally turns into a fictional story itself when Sarah says: “I wonder whether there is such a thing as a sense of individuality. Is it all the façade covering a deep need to belong? Are we simply pack animals desperately trying to pretend we are not?” (*ID*, 228). The analogy between individuality and a pack of animals proves significant since in her final chapter (referred to as “Introduction”), Sarah remembers watching a PBS nature documentary broadcasting a story about a pride of lions in which a new male lion becomes the dominant male of the pride, subsequently forcing the former leader to leave and killing his offspring, including a cute cub called Ginny. The film discloses Alameddine’s negotiation of Orientalism. Upon seeing the film, Sarah realizes why she could not tell her story. As she asserts, “[i]ndividuals came and went, but the pride was what survived” (*ID*, 308). She could understand the individual lion only if she looked at the entire pride. As she says:

I had tried to write my memoir by telling an imaginary reader to listen to my story. Come learn about me, I said. I have a great story to tell you because I have led an interesting life. Come meet me. But how can I expect readers to know who I am if I do not tell them about my family, my friends, the relationships in my life? (*ID*, 308)
The title of Alameddine’s novel—*I, the Divine*—turns out to be in sharp contrast with Sarah’s final call “Come meet my pride” (*ID*, 308). While the “I” in combination with the capitalized “Divine” symbolizes an independent self belonging to a “great story about an interesting life,” the pride stands for the whole into which the “I” is submerged. Thus, despite longing to belong to her individual story, Sarah’s narrative cannot survive without the stories of other people in her life. Like Shahrazad’s, Sarah’s self cannot exist within a framework of one single narrative but only a mixture of narratives that exist in her whole “pride.” Interestingly, the older form of the Persian name Shahrazad is Shirzad, which means “lion-born.” The analogy between the lion, whose existence depends on its pack, and Shahrazad, unable to survive without her stories, may serve as a mirror image of Sarah, unable to exist without belonging to the narratives of others—be they American or Lebanese—which proves to be significant for the position that Sarah takes toward assimilation and Orientalism. Garrigós suggests that “what we have in this novel is not an instance of assimilation but a cosmopolitan and post-ethnic perspective that privileges an antiessentialist attitude, rejecting a fiction of authenticity and cultural purity to embrace instead hybridity and cross-pollination.”

To conclude, a story, no matter if it is told or written, should be understood within the time frame in which it was created. *Syrian Yankee* is a product of the interwar era. As Lisa Suhair Majaj points out, during the second phase of Arab American literature, “most English-language texts revealed the pressure on authors to ignore or distance themselves from their Arab identity.” On one side, Rizk is attempting to rebuild American self-confidence at the time when it is challenged by economic, social, and political problems. Simultaneously, he is trying to challenge the stereotyped American attitudes of that time toward immigrants. However, he does so in a monolithic way which often results in his stereotyping the country in which he was born. *I, the Divine* is a product of the postmodern era. It employs postmodern techniques to convey belonging and dislocation. It is significant that the only thing that Sarah inherits from her American mother is a small kaleidoscope, which gives us a clue to understanding the notion of identity. In the same way as the kaleidoscope (which, by the way, means “beautiful forms to see”) consists of mirrors cre-

39 Garrigós, “The Dynamics of Intercultural Dislocation,” 188.
ating reflections and images that will never be exactly the same, the notion of identity is never permanent, never stable, and unchangeable. The overall picture is created through a mosaic of reflections in the same way as the story of one’s identity is a collection of individual stories containing all the narrative elements, characters, and plots with their complications and settings. And this is also Alameddine’s conclusion, which does not end with “and they lived happily ever after” but with “and”—Sarah cannot be solely absorbed in one culture as the image in her kaleidoscope is a combination of both her Lebanese and American reflections. For Sarah, identifying with either the West or with the East is neither good nor bad; it is simply impossible. The idea of her Divine “I” is subverted and mocked in the last part of her memoir, entitled “The Fall.” Sarah’s pride in her Divine, godlike, individual self finally descends to her Lebanese and American “pride.”

**Conclusion: Longing for a Reader**

Every *hakawati* needs both a story and a recipient for this story. Without the listener (or the reader) longing to belong to a story and to be submerged in its plot, the story would not be able to survive. Traditional *hakawatis* spent their lives traveling from place to place in search of someone to listen. The storyteller would tell a story in various settings, from coffeehouses and marketplaces to Bedouin tents. Very often, his audiences were directly involved in the story, showing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the way the plot proceeded. They would sometimes even bribe the storyteller into keeping a certain character alive or making him or her disappear from the tale. The narrated stories were in the constant process of change. Eveline van der Steen argues that “[t]he epic was reinvented every time it was told” and, therefore, it lacked any fixed form. Thus, the narrated story depended on the storyteller, the audiences, and the context in which it is told. Shahrazad’s listener was her despotic husband Shahryar, whose satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the story determined the storyteller’s fate. As was argued earlier, what most Arab American storytellers share is also the relationship with their recipients “mediated by the dominant discourse of Orientalism that defines them in their adoptive countries.”

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Rizk’s original recipient comes from the interwar era. This recipient knew the story of the mystic and backward East and the advanced West but the latter was gradually losing its former splendor in his eyes. Rizk, with his complete willingness to assimilate to American culture and belong to its story, framed his immigrant narrative so as to give the American recipient what he wanted. He gave him a story of America’s greatness by celebrating the values of democracy that it represented. However, he could not do so without simultaneously supporting the story of Eastern backwardness. Thus, not only did Rizk assimilate to American culture, but he also assimilated to his recipient’s expectations at the expense of stereotyping both his homeland and his adoptive country.

Alameddine’s recipient is the product of the postmodern era, characterized by what Maria Lauret calls “the subjective nature of belonging to any ethnic group,” which is never invented but is in a constant process of inventing and re-inventing. It is an era characterized by fragmentariness, hybridity, and the deconstruction of meanings, which resulted in the appearance of ethnic authors who address the question of belonging to America, “which is not the same as to say that they long to belong, but rather that they long to transform, from within, the very idea of what America is, was, or will be.” Alameddine’s kaleidoscopic portrayal of Sarah’s identity suggests that one’s self cannot be located within the boundaries of the West or those of the East. Hence, I, the Divine is also a story of subverting the idea of belonging and Orientalism. What the postmodern reader is left with is a chain of dispersed stories of dispersed memories. While Rizk gives his reader confidence through the story of American greatness, Alameddine assures his recipient that the possibility of assimilating or belonging solely to the East, to the West, to Lebanon, or to America is a fictional story itself since all these locations (as well as the symbols they represent) are epics reinvented every time they are told (and read).

46 However, an extended version of his autobiography was republished in 2000 under the title, America, More than a Country (Beverly Hills: Laredo, 2000).
47 Maria Lauret, introduction to Beginning Ethnic American Literatures, by Helena Grice et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 3.
48 Lauret, introduction to Beginning Ethnic American Literatures, 9.
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