

One

A Historical Opportunity



*Immigrants, Fusions, and the
Reconfiguration of American Culture*

The rat is dead, exterminated, in a nineteenth-century newspaper ad, by a pest-control product called “Rough on Rats.” For fifteen cents a box, the poisonous pellets also cleared out mice, bed bugs, flies, and roaches; nothing survived this pesticide except the Chinese coolie carefully caricatured just below the dead pest. In the ad the Chinese man relishes rats; he is about to pop a juicy specimen into his mouth, and when he finishes his appetizer he can reach for the main course, another fat rat suspended from his pants.

Above him is emblazoned an anti-immigrant slogan then popular throughout the nation: “They must go.” The Chinese need to leave because they are rough on rats and rougher on the white race threatened by the Chinese immigrants who, in 1886, provided almost 90 percent of California’s agricultural labor force.¹

The conundrum is a constant of U.S. history. Groups of immigrants do the nation’s dirty, dangerous, and demanding work. Then, when they prove to be “incapable of assimilation,” federal officials tell

them to disappear as quickly as the Chinese workers who were blown up creating tunnels for the transcontinental railroad.

Chinese immigrants also enjoy the distinction of being the first group legally barred from the United States. Congress initially forbade their entry in 1882. Ten years later Congress extended the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1917, in the midst of fighting what President Wilson called “the culminating and final war for human liberty,” Congress erased an entire continent. No Asians. No more.

Over time, Congress also slammed the door in the face of many southern Europeans. In the House of Representatives, members argued that the Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, and Spanish looked suspiciously like a cloud of “locusts.” During legislative hearings, Congressman Albert Johnson told his colleagues that the newcomer crept up one block at a time; they swarmed neighborhoods and threatened to contaminate, through intermarriage, the sacred core of American culture.

That core was supposedly made up of English, Irish, and Germans. But, since 1897, three times as many people (ten million) had immigrated from southern as from northern Europe. Representative William Vaile of Colorado played the role of Aesop when he told his colleagues a fable about alligators and cats: “The cat looked the alligator over the very moment the alligator was brought into the house. The alligator snapped at the cat frequently; and the alligator kept growing larger and larger. The cat did not grow. And, finally, one day the alligator killed the cat.”²

The cat was in danger because poverty had driven southern European alligators to America’s shores and because Congress then practiced a form of what today we call affirmative action. In the early twentieth century U.S. immigration laws offered ironclad preferences for the close relatives of new American citizens. Family reunification allowed one immigrant to easily multiply into three or even five. And, since the relatives also had relatives, the newcomers kept coming, threatening to overrun one neighborhood after another.

To safeguard what Samuel Huntington had recently called “Anglo-Protestant culture,” Congress passed laws in 1924 that institutionalized discrimination against prospective immigrants based on their eth-

nic origin. Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians were granted no immigration slots. As Congressman John Miller put it in December 1923, “we are fairly settled with the Chinese (and other Asians); they cannot come; they understand it; we understand it.”³

Congress devised an ingenious statistical formula to exclude the southern Europeans. Every European nation received the same hypothetical annual quota: 2 percent to England, 2 percent to Spain. This appeared to offer a real measure of equality, but Italians, Greeks, and other new-seed immigrants had only arrived in large numbers *after* 1890. Congress set 1890 as the dividing line for their computations. The 1924 law dictated that a nation was allocated its immigration slots based on 2 percent of that nation’s percentage of the American population *in 1890*. As a result, more than 60 percent of the slots went instantly to Britain, Ireland, and Germany, while the rest of Europe fought over the few remaining opportunities.⁴

Forty years later, President Johnson offered Congress this summary of the nation’s immigrant preferences. Out of 150,000 immigration slots in 1964, two nations—Great Britain and Ireland—received 83,000 openings, “more quota numbers than are authorized for the entire rest of the world.” Germany got 25,814 openings while the numbers for southern Europe included a mere 5,666 slots for Italy, 308 for Greece, 250 for Spain, and 438 for Portugal.⁵

In most years the three biggest recipients failed to exhaust their available slots; why would a multitude leave England or Ireland if positive social conditions prevailed? However, if you wanted a British or Irish maid, Congress acted quickly. Campaigning for LBJ’s reforms in 1965, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach told a San Francisco audience that “an American citizen with a mother in Greece must wait at least five years—‘and often longer’—to secure a visa which would allow her to join him here.” But, if you wanted a maid from England or Ireland she arrived in four to six weeks.⁶

From 1924 through 1964, the restrictions against Asians remained quite tight. When Congress finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, it set the new quota at 105 Chinese immigrants a year. Meanwhile, anyone from Korea, China, or Japan always tried to maneuver his or her way out of a prejudicial process known as the “Asia Pacific

Triangle”: If, for example, you lived in Peru and traced even part of your ancestry to any Asian nation, entry into the United States nevertheless counted against the already miniscule quotas offered to nations like Korea, China, or Japan.

As late as 1964, Congress remained very rough on Asians. Attorney General Robert Kennedy forcefully told Congress that “the national origins system contradicts our basic national philosophy and basic values . . . it judges men and women not on the basis of their worth but on their place of birth . . . this system is a standing affront to many Americans and to many countries.”⁷

The New Immigration Law: All People Are Created Equal

President John Kennedy wanted to do the right thing. Documents in the president’s library indicate that he and his advisers idealistically sought to end a policy of discrimination based on national origins. The existing laws were also such an easy target that our enemies constantly, and correctly, charged us with hypocrisy in the United Nations and other international forums.

Kennedy was also an astute politician, and he knew that even a failed attempt at reform would score political points. Among other southern European groups, Italians and Greeks endlessly lobbied for an end to the quotas, and they would certainly remember the Kennedy efforts when they pulled voting levers in 1964.

Congress initially resisted the administration’s efforts, but Kennedy’s assassination perversely catalyzed the need for change. With Lyndon Johnson assuming the presidency and the nation on fire for civil rights, legislators found it impossible to argue against changes that proposed to make all nations equal. The problem was still the 1924 law. Abolish it, of course, but replace it with what? To escape the worldwide opprobrium attached to the old law, the new one needed to avoid even a hint of bias against any continent, race, or ethnicity.

The solution Congress devised in 1964 still serves as the axis of U.S. immigration law: first come, first served. As White House official Nor-

bert Schlei put it in an oral interview from the Kennedy Presidential Library, “the idea that we came up with—and I think essentially this was my idea—we should start with first come first served because that’s an unanswerably fair kind of a basis.”⁸ Officials also agreed to maintain preferences for family members and to keep a separate line for immigrants with occupational skills needed by the American economy. But, essentially, Congress opened America’s airports to the entire world. After the bill passed in October 1965, the rule became “first to fly into New York, Chicago, Miami, or Los Angeles, first granted residency.”

Equality is a tough taskmaster. Theoretically, everyone gets a fair deal. Unfortunately, when the president’s advisers checked the waiting lines for admission to the United States, they discovered that the institutionalized prejudices of 1924 lingered. Norbert Schlei told the Senate’s Subcommittee on Immigration and Naturalization that “if first come first served were allowed to dictate the entire quota immigration policy, we would get ninety percent of our quota immigration from Italy, we would get about 8 percent from Greece, and we would get the other 2 percent from Poland and Portugal.”⁹

Malcom X’s warning was borne out; America’s chickens were coming home to roost. So, to ensure equal opportunity for everyone, Congress imposed maximum limits on the number of immigrants that could come from any single country. In practice, Congress said that if a country received 10 percent of America’s immigration slots, that was its maximum number. After reaching the limit, Congress required a new form of diversity; the rest of the slots were distributed to the world.

But not before Senator Sam Ervin (D-North Carolina) asked some controversial questions. Ervin liked the old rules so much that he still openly endorsed the system of national origin quotas. “I believe that we ought to give preference to those who have made contributions to America and not put them on exactly the same basis as people who have made little or no contribution to our population and no contribution to our development.”¹⁰ Among other things, Ervin was forgetting the Chinese contribution to the transcontinental railroad and

California agriculture. He also never asked how particular ethnic groups could contribute to America if, despite the melting pot ideology, no one ever allowed them into the pot.

Sam Ervin's arguments emphasized potential problems with assimilation. He believed that old-stock immigrants deserved affirmative action because of their contributions and because Greeks and Italians easily meshed into American society whereas Asian or African newcomers brought decidedly dangerous and dissonant beliefs, values, and ancestry.

Despite assurances from White House staff, Ervin argued that the new legislation threatened to introduce into American life the very people our ancestors so obviously despised. As early as 1790, U.S. immigration law had specified "free white persons" as the only group eligible for citizenship; after the Civil War, people of "African ancestry" also became acceptable, but bring in Indians and Asians and you once again opened the ancestry debate so forcefully silenced by the 1924 national origins legislation. For Ervin America only welcomed white people—that is, anyone from Europe, including (in 1965) the Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Because many other members of Congress shared Sam Ervin's reservations and prejudices, the White House took the offensive. The Johnson Presidential Library contains a copy of the document "The Road to Final Passage," distributed to all members of Congress; it reassured readers that people from southern Europe would be the "principal beneficiaries" of the new legislation. *De jure*, each nation did get an equal allotment of immigration slots; *de facto*, the new law somehow functioned like its prejudiced predecessor. Attorney General Katzenbach assured Congress that the "total" increase in immigration signaled no more than eighty thousand people a year, including Italians and Greeks who entered the United States in the name of family reunification.¹¹

But Sam Ervin remained skeptical. To his old and experienced eyes, only "a man with prophetic powers" made precise predictions about the consequences of the proposed legislation. No one knew what tomorrow promised except Norbert Schlei and his colleagues. With all the arrogance of the "best and the brightest" Schlei assured

Congress that reform would produce only small changes in the ethnic composition of the American people. Pushed by Ervin, Schlei did finally concede that “the prediction becomes less certain as you go into the future,”¹² but the administration’s statistical calculations were reassuring. Only southern Europeans meant to take advantage of the new law; Indians, Asians, and Latin Americans would return Uncle Sam’s immigration invitation like a misaddressed envelope.

In October 1965, the House of Representatives passed the new immigration legislation by a huge majority; the Senate approved it by a show of voices sufficed; as Schlei later boasted, “they didn’t even count because it was obvious that it had passed.”¹³

Twenty-Five Million Immigrants

Norbert Schlei and his colleagues made a computational error. The predictions offered by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations proved to be incredibly incorrect. Here are some recent numbers.

- In 1970, recent immigrants (i.e., the foreign-born population) represented 4.7 percent of the American people. By 2006, the figure was 12.4 percent, the highest percentage since Congress closed the doors to “nonwhite” immigration in 1924.¹⁴
- Previously, the highest percentage of foreign-born residents to be counted in America in a single year was 14.7 percent, in 1910.¹⁵
- Over 50 percent of the foreign-born population arrived since 1990. The 7.9 million (legal and illegal) immigrants who arrived between January 2000 and March 2005 make that the highest five-year period of immigration in American history.¹⁶
- The overwhelming majority of these new immigrants come from nations and continents *negatively targeted* by the 1924 national origin legislation. Almost 26 percent trace their roots to Asia, and more than 50 percent come from the Caribbean, Central America, and Latin America. Another 8.3 percent are from “other regions,” especially Arab and African countries. Only 14 percent of the newcomers hail from Europe.¹⁷

- Since 1970, the top ten nations sending immigrants include, from top to bottom, Mexico, China/Taiwan/Hong Kong, Philippines, India, Vietnam, El Salvador, Korea, Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Colombia.¹⁸
- One nation—Mexico—accounts for 27.7 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population.¹⁹
- In 2004, the nation’s quota limit on immigrants totaled 432,373. Nevertheless, the United States admitted 946,142 legal immigrants in 2004. Fully 80 percent of the one-half million immigrants who came over and above the quota received preference as “the immediate relatives of U.S. citizens.” Another 61,013 arrived as refugees (e.g., Cubans in Miami); refugees are not counted against annual quotas.²⁰
- As of March 2005, more than 11.1 million undocumented immigrants were living in the United States. The figure in 2000 was 8.4 million undocumented migrants. More than 78 percent come from Mexico (56 percent) and Latin America, a group that makes up a significant percentage (12–14 percent) of the workers in food manufacturing, farming, furniture manufacturing, construction, textiles, and food services.²¹
- Immigrants live disproportionately on the East and West Coasts. Almost 45 percent of all Asians and 41 percent of all Latinos live in the western states. Another 22 percent of Asians and 19 percent of Latinos live in the East. Meanwhile, America’s heartland contains relatively few immigrants.²²
- Immigrants make up 26 percent of the people in California, almost 20 percent of the population in New York, and 18.4 percent in Florida. By contrast, only 4.4 percent of Georgians are immigrants, 3.9 percent of Iowans, 2.2 percent of Maine’s residents, and a mere 0.95 percent of Mississippians.²³

Even if we stopped all immigration tomorrow, the makeup of the United States wouldn’t change, because the 1965 legislation irreversibly changed the ethnic composition of the American people. The future is here, and it is here to stay.

A Cuban's Critique of American Sociology

Desi Arnez's trademark call was a passionate Babalú! American television viewers of the 1950s never realized that they were welcoming an African god into their homes. Eating frozen Swanson dinners on plastic TV trays, Americans in the fifties were hearing an actor; Cubans were hearing pleas to Babalú-Ayé, the Nigerian orisha charged with causing and curing a multitude of human infirmities.

Babalú-Ayé retains his hold on the Cuban people. From Santiago to Havana, the artisan markets boast countless statues of Babalú and a spectacular array of other Nigerian orishas. However, Cuban culture deliberately hides the truth. Babalú pretends to be Saint Lazarus. Changó pretends to be Saint Barbara. And Yemayá is the Virgen de Regla, a dark-skinned Mother of God, holding, on the altar of her church, a light-skinned son, the baby Jesus.

Instead of assimilating into Cuban culture, the slaves in Cuba slowly reconfigured it, fusing Nigerian and Christian traditions into a religion called Santería. As of the summer of 2003, that religion was still adding new elements to its pantheon. On the outskirts of Havana, the altar of one Santera (priestess) boasted Christmas lights from Wal-Mart and, very prominently, a blond Barbie doll, in all her bleached beauty.

Desi Arnez came from a spectacular culture, a culture that offers fresh and important theoretical insights into the nature and consequences of immigration. According to Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, when masses of new immigrants entered the United States after 1890, social scientists continually focused on assimilation, on immigrants becoming *similar* to the already existing host culture. Assuming a perfect transition, the immigrants not only acquired a new culture but lost the old one. Italian, Greek, or Spanish traits “disappeared” so completely that immigrants and their children unconsciously melted into the American mainstream.

In the early twentieth century, assimilation became a moral imperative. Anxiety about the arrival of millions of southern European immigrants produced a movement to restrict immigration and a simultaneous movement to Americanize the new-seed immigrants. Theodore

Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson both preached Americanization with such passion that they used the stars and stripes to “swat,” like flies at a picnic, any immigrant who used a hyphen (e.g., Italian-American or Greek-American). Each president demanded a lusty embrace of the host culture, which *already* contained all the right ingredients. Immigrants entered the pot only when, through a transforming process resembling a baptism, they finally became real Americans.

Ortiz and Cuban scholars also debated the assimilation of newcomers to the Spanish Caribbean during these same years. However, instead of viewing assimilation as a moral imperative to join the existing culture, they found that many Cubans relished creative interactions with the Spanish, Africans, Portuguese, Americans, and, in the nineteenth century, more than 150,000 Chinese. The island today boasts nineteen different species of orange trees of Chinese origin, and a common saying of Cuban street vendors is “*naranja china dulce*” (sweet Chinese orange). Cubans also use musical instruments with deep roots in China.²⁴

Cuba acted like the cultural crossroads of the Americas. Students of its culture observed such rapid change that they devised a new term, *transculturation*, to describe it. Transculturation spotlights, as in the fusion of Nigerian and Christian religions, the process of cultural creativity that always occurs when different ethnic groups interact for significant periods of time. It treats people as imaginative forces in the reconfiguration of interacting cultures.

Because interacting ethnicities always produced cultural creativity, Fernando Ortiz argued that beyond the two phases of immigration highlighted by American social scientists—the disappearance of the old culture and assimilation into the new culture—immigration also and always produced a third phase. Overlook cultural creativity and you ignore the role of immigrants as consistently inventive forces in the reconfiguration of the host culture. Immigrants could change Cuban or American culture as much as it changed them.²⁵

Ortiz never made precise predictions about the inevitability of assimilation or of cultural reconfiguration. Instead, he lovingly focused on the transformations produced by Cuba’s incredible mix of immigrants. No one process necessarily dominated or eliminated the

other. But his critique raised important questions: if a culture closed the door to new-seed immigration—as the United States did in 1924—immigrants would likely assimilate more readily into the host culture. What is the alternative if fresh doses of old-world culture are impossible to obtain? Alternatively, when you open your door to the world, chances are that the host culture will witness a good degree of resistance to assimilation and experience instead varying degrees of cultural creativity.

Despite Ortiz's insights, American sociology often remains a prisoner of the assimilation norm. Even accomplished scholars like Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, while stressing that "rapid integration and acceptance into the American mainstream represent just one possible alternative," still use assimilation as the "master concept" and argue that alternative responses represent a "segmented" (partial) assimilation or, even worse, a dissonant assimilation. Like a fusion measuring itself against the white/black archetype, alternatives to assimilation are still regarded as jarring, inharmonious, or "dissonant."²⁶

Rooted in the work of Fernando Ortiz, this book argues that nothing is necessarily normal when it comes to the immigrant experience. Analysts must be prepared to see three general responses—loss of the original culture, assimilation, and transculturation—and understand that the likelihood of any one is relative to a variety of variables. Thus, the following table indicates the overarching variables that affect the probability of immigrant assimilation to, or immigrant reconfiguration of, the host culture. My umbrella argument is that the challenges posed by none-of-the-above immigrants and mixed-race Americans mesh—they enjoy a positive dialectical relationship—with a number of social conditions that also nurture and sustain transculturation, that is, the cultural creativity that always occurs when two or more cultures interact for significant periods.

Evidence of cultural reconfiguration is as easy to find as the local Burger King. In Albuquerque, a stop for a cup of coffee offered alternatives not available in Connecticut. The fellow in front ordered a Whopper with no sauce. He wanted green salsa instead, so the clerk matter-of-factly dipped into a waiting container and reconfigured, with Mexican fire, a previously all-American burger.

The ethnic food aisles of U.S. supermarkets also prominently demonstrate the impact of recent immigrants on American food habits. If you pass by the salad bar in a supermarket in Abilene, Kansas, as well as on both coasts, you may well see a sushi bar, raw ocean fish for dinner on two coasts and in the heartland.

New food preferences are an easy, obvious, and, in many instances, welcomed reconfiguration of U.S. culture. The city guides offered by most hotels break down restaurants by both price and ethnicity. Moreover, given the popularity of the Food Network channel on American TV, no viewer wants the “iron chefs” to assimilate into American culture. On the contrary, Americans have enthusiastically supported chefs who fuse the world’s most diverse ingredients into delicious and distinctly reconfigured dishes.

But, when we move from food to politics, not to mention race and ethnicity, the welcome mat often disappears. Instead of appetizing alternatives, Latinos, Indians, Asians, Arabs, and mixed-race Americans are regarded as threats that strike at the very core of America’s traditional wisdom. However, as the mixed-race population suggests, a challenge to U.S. culture is not only well under way, but it receives direct and indirect support from a series of seven contemporary social conditions, all conducive to a revolutionary reconfiguration of U.S. beliefs about race, ethnicity, and the consequences of immigration.

TABLE 1. Probability of Cultural Loss, Gain, and/or Creation

The probability of cultural reconfiguration substantially increases as a society moves from assimilation and its associated variables to multiculturalism and its associated variables.

Attitude of Host Society	World/Regional Attitude toward the Host Society	Prejudice against Immigrant Group	Preexisting Ethnic Community’s Attitude toward the Host Society	Interest and Efforts of the Immigrant’s Country of Origin
Assimilation	Positive	Low	Positive	Weak
Laissez-Faire	Neutral	Moderate	Neutral	Moderate
Multiculturalism	Critical	High	Negative	Strong

Note: The initial stimulus for this table came from my reading of Alejandro Portes and Rubén C. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), esp. 89; the table is also firmly rooted in the ideas of Fernando Ortiz, especially his discussion of transculturation.

In sharp contrast to the immigrant influx of the early twentieth century, post-1965 immigration occurs under social conditions that greatly facilitate not assimilation but the cultural creativity that Fernando Ortiz calls transculturation. These conditions will exist into the indefinite future. Thus, America can seize the moment as a historic opportunity; or, as the following chapters show, it can continue the series of divisive, parallel monologues that now dominate U.S. discussions of race, ethnicity, and the consequences of immigration.

New Conditions, Historic Opportunities

Condition number one is the great success of the multicultural movement; as sociologist Nathan Glazer wrote in 1997, we are all multiculturalists now. Glazier meant that long efforts by “minority” cultural groups to attain equal recognition had been so successful that even social conservatives “now accept a greater degree of attention to minorities and women and their role in American history and social studies and literature classes in high schools.” Glazer argued that the victory of multiculturalism was so complete that “those few who want to return American education to a period in which the various subcultures were ignored, and in which America was presented as the peak and end-product of civilization, cannot expect to make any progress in the schools.”²⁷

In January 2005, the Web page of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Board of Education defined multiculturalism as “education that recognizes values and affirms diversity in a pluralistic environment.” Continuing, the board encouraged an education that includes “respect for people of all cultures, plus the development of positive and productive interaction among people and experiences of diverse cultural groups.”²⁸ In 1916, schools preached and practiced a focus on 100 percent Americans. In 2005, we seek to respect all cultures and, at least theoretically, to learn from them as they learn from us.

Condition number two is the critical aspect of the multicultural movement; thus, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education empha-

sized that multiculturalism “demands an understanding of historical, political and economic bases of current inequities.” Students learn about the harmful as well as the positive “achievements of American culture.” Former heroes become villains; from a Latino perspective, the Spanish American War was the Cuban War for Independence, and the “rough riders,” instead of being liberators, were oppressive instruments of U.S. imperial policy.²⁹

The result of the critical impact of multiculturalism is that contemporary requests for assimilation occur when Western civilization in general and U.S. culture in particular experience constant criticisms from a variety of different directions. Being Eurocentric is a fault and, long before 9/11, American culture often acted as a magnet for critiques of Western imperialism, arrogance, and prejudice.

Historically, it was much easier for immigrants and their children to identify with U.S. culture. Especially in the Southwest, many Mexicans proudly embraced their Spanish heritage, calling themselves “Hispanos” in a deliberate effort to champion U.S. culture and its allegedly European biases. Well into the 1950s the Mexican-based organization League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) “insisted that Mexicans should be free from discrimination not because discrimination was wrong but because they were white.”

In 2006, Chicano studies students now learn about Aztlán, a “mythical” geographical area that “implies a new genealogy for the Chicanos, one in which their ancestors, commonly considered the descendants of Aztecs, are transformed into the Aztecs forebears.” In a very imaginative manifestation of cultural reconfiguration, the Chicanos (who were once white) now define themselves “as the primordial Americans” and “the original Mexicans.”³⁰

The now institutionalized antagonism to U.S. culture makes it harder to assimilate and much easier to engage in an ongoing process of cultural creativity. In *Brown Tide Rising*, Otto Santa Ana discusses a new social identity that has suddenly appeared in California. The identity is “Americano,” and the accent is on the “O.”

Condition number three is the number of “family-sponsored” immigrants who legally enter the United States. This figure started to grow

precipitously after 1965, and in 2004 fully 66 percent of the roughly one million legal immigrants arrived because of their family preferences. A full 406,074 of these family members were admitted over and above Congress's theoretical "annual numerical limitation," which was 432,373 in 2004.³¹

The large majority of these immigrants have new-seed origins, including the annual 55,000 diversity immigrants who sponsor family members from ethnicities "underrepresented" in the American immigrant pool. Eligible nations include, in Europe, Bulgaria and Turkmenistan; in South America, Suriname, Dominica, and Grenada; and, in Africa, Botswana and Senegal. Over time, these immigrants will increase the mix of nations that engender cultural creativity as they simultaneously add the immigrants who, as with Indians or Chinese, make it harder for sponsoring family members to assimilate into U.S. culture.

Family preference immigrants represent the language and culture left behind. By themselves, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters can be a significant impediment to the assimilation of the second and third generations. But, in 2007, these immigrants enter a multicultural society that criticizes U.S. culture as it simultaneously reexamines the history of America's treatment of Asians, Latinos, and Arabs. In a dialectical fashion, the social conditions fostering creativity nurture and sustain one another. At times, those who preach assimilation seem to be talking to the converted, not to the new immigrants and the long line of family-sponsored permanent residents.

Condition number four comprises the attitudes and efforts of the immigrant's country of origin. In recent years, a number of nations (e.g., Mexico, Brazil, Portugal, the Dominican Republic, and India) have significantly increased the variety of consular and other resources available to their expatriate communities. The programs range from dual citizenship with voting rights to special mortgages and housing for returning immigrants. Portugal "registers and attempts to maintain ties with nearly 4.3 million Portuguese and people with Portuguese ancestry living abroad." Meanwhile, the Dominican Republic established "Casas de Cultura" in all areas with

sizable Dominican populations. As the Dominican counsel in Boston boasted, “Since we arrived here one of our main tasks has been to penetrate the Hispanic community, especially the Dominican community . . . In all the Hispanic events that have been held in Massachusetts, the Dominican consulate is involved.”³²

In many instances, the motivation is the remittances sent by the immigrants; these funds now total 17 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in Haiti and 10 percent in the Dominican Republic. Whatever the government’s motivation, though, to the extent these programs are successful assimilation is less likely and so too the loss of everything from language to cultural customs.

Condition number five is as plain as the Statue of Liberty seen from the New York harbor: Many millions of new immigrants come from nations formerly forbidden entry into the United States. From 1920 to 1965, we excluded people from countries such as China, Japan, India, and Korea. As the Supreme Court told Takao Ozawa in 1922, a Japanese national could not be a U.S. citizen because “the appellant was clearly of a race which is not Caucasian and therefore belongs outside the zone (of acceptability) on the *negative* side” (emphasis added).³³

With Asian and other contradictions to the white/black dichotomy deliberately excluded from the United States, the culture never needed to change or challenge its grammar of racial conduct. We continued to think and talk in only two colors, and the forty-year contradiction is that, even though we legally abolished our ethnic origin prejudices in 1965, we continued to use—what choice was there?—the racial language that, by definition, depreciates the humanity of Asian and other none-of-the-above immigrants.

Remember that the words matter and that it is not a question of political correctness. The words matter because they deliver the beliefs and values that teach all Americans to place whites in the end zone and everyone else in a zone of racial negation. That is a problem for the millions of none-of-the-above immigrants who explode the parameters of the white/black dichotomy; and it is a continuing problem for many millions of accessible “white” and “black” Americans.

Emilie Hammerstein must listen to the perpetual question “What are you?” because many “white” and “black” Americans agree with her self-perception: She is a “walking contradiction” to American beliefs. However, for those of us willing or seeking to create a different culture, Emilie and none-of-the-above immigrants create a situation in which her question is simultaneously our own. Especially in a multicultural environment, whites and blacks can also grasp the handle that opens the door to cultural creativity, to a future that refuses to make white the default category of America’s racial life.³⁴

Condition number six is the harshly critical reaction of ethnic groups who once played a passive or offstage role in American society. The multicultural movement induces self-criticism of the United States; and then, as Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Korean Americans begin to reexamine the past, they discover a history that challenges the melting pot ideology. All over the United States, college students now take mandated diversity courses that examine ads like “Rough on Rats”; the justifiable anger that many of them feel then fuels further criticism of Eurocentrism. Yet again, one social condition acts back upon the other with such effectiveness that it is often impossible to separate the chicken and the egg.

In *Asian American Dreams*, Helen Zia talks about the “emergence of an American people.” Asians are emerging from a period of passivity, and, like the Chicanos, they are asking hard questions about a formerly hidden part of U.S. history. Zia, for example, reminds her readers that the Chinese helped build the transcontinental railroad, but when it came time for the completion ceremonies, no Chinese appeared on the podium. On the contrary, they walked back to San Francisco because Chinese people “were forbidden to ride on the railroad they built.”³⁵

Such memories and perceptions undermine respect, not to mention admiration, for U.S. culture. The critiques they produce stimulate not a desire for assimilation but, at times, a literal craving to re-examine and “right” *all* aspects of America’s past in a manner that transforms our image as “old stock” Americans and our appreciation for old and recent immigrants.

Condition number seven is another accident of history: the arrival of newcomers as the nation struggled to deal with the short- and long-term consequences of the civil rights movement. First African Americans and then Latinos, Asians, women, gays, the handicapped, and a variety of other groups sought to redress their grievances. Equal opportunity became everybody's right; simultaneously, the federal government made up for the past with a variety of affirmative action efforts. Agencies soon allocated federal funds based on the number of minority citizens in a particular locality. As a way of precisely measuring the population, the Nixon administration issued Statistical Policy Directive 15. Are you white, black, or do you need or want another box? In the seventies public and private organizations suddenly requested that employees and clients identify their racial and ethnic classification. Federal officials even invented something called "Hispanics." Yet we soon discovered a widening proliferation of other labels as some people rejected the imposed categories. Latinos told Washington exactly what it could do with the Hispanic label.

In the name of equality opportunity, Statistical Policy Directive 15 forcefully strengthened the divisive white/black dichotomy at the very time the nation welcomed immigrants who could never find the boxes they needed. Indians, Mexicans, and mixed-race Americans explode the nation's racial categories, yet we reaffirm their status as inconsequential "others" every time they fill out an employment or government form. As Soledad (from Colombia) puts it, "whoever did this made a lot of mistakes. Whoever did the census wasn't educated about race. Because how could someone who is really black but speaks Spanish write down that he's black. I kept wondering about that."³⁶

She is still wondering; so are the rest of us. In our collective confusion, we stumble from one pole to the other. At Tufts University, students are encouraged to choose two boxes from 27 different racial and ethnic options: the menu offers 351 possible combinations. Schools like Bard and Davidson College symbolize the other extreme: allowing students to fill in whatever they wish under the heading.³⁷

In an ideal world, self-definition would be the norm. In real life, we need to share the same or similar assumptions about one another. Without shared assumptions, Americans talk past rather than to one

another. So, keeping Tufts University's 351 possible combinations in mind, here is my conclusion. The seven social conditions I describe in this chapter mesh with the desires of mixed-race and none-of-the-above immigrants. The short-term result is a mutiny in action; the end result could be a voluntary and revolutionary reconfiguration of American culture.

Latino, Asian, Arab, and Indian Americans offer this country a unique, historic opportunity. They suggest that we need to seize the moment collectively because, for the first time in four hundred years, we can challenge the divisive legacy of slavery and create a New World dramatically different from the one envisioned by men like Columbus and Cortez.

The chapters that follow analyze the parallel monologues now occurring throughout the United States. Some are exciting; some divide us more than ever. My aim is to show how the monologues can be turned into dialogues and, in the final chapter, to show how we can transcend separateness by allowing three hundred million Americans to express their ethnic differences while embracing a definition of *American* that enthusiastically includes each of us, all the time.