

The Hyphenated American in Twentieth- and Twenty-first Century America

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Despite the efforts of multiculturalism to increase awareness and tolerance of racial and ethnic diversity, as well as hyphenated (implicit and explicit) identities, American national identity has always been fraught. If you are an American who identifies with a non-white race or ethnicity and who engages the languages, customs, and practices of multiple cultures, living on two sides of the hyphen is, indeed, a difficult dance. Do you recognize your religious or ethnic inheritance, or embrace your ancestral lands? If you do, does this mean that you are somehow indifferent or disloyal to your American identity? Does an acknowledgement or affinity for one's 'originary' culture suggest that difference is not possible without an imposed hierarchy?

Certainly, the American experience can be described as hybridized—rich with possibility, desire, anxiety, and complexity. Although cultural hybridity is most commonly referred to as “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft, et al. 118), quite a bit of the discourse around hybridity is ambivalent and contested, viewed both as a space of “loss” and “dilution,” where colonialist discourse gets reproduced, and as a space where the “mixture,” Paul Gilroy has said, “remains assertively and insubordinately a bastard” (117). There is also the suggestion that if engaged appropriately, hybridity “offers an opportunity to celebrate the vigorous cosmopolitanism endowed in modernity by transgressive and creative contacts with different people” (Gilroy 217). Many also draw on Homi K. Bhabha’s classic notion of cultural hybridity, in which he suggests that it is the process of mutuality between the colonizer and the colonized (the immigrant and the “parent” country) that results in the cultural creations or transformations taking place in the space “in between,” or what Bhabha calls the “Third Space of Enunciation” (Ashcroft 209).

But, “mutuality” typically requires those individuals seeking entry to a particular culture to adopt the customs, cultural practices, and values of that culture, while sacrificing some aspects of their own. Acculturation, particularly during politically inauspicious times, is often a hasty process for immigrants to the United States, many of whom have been compelled to abandon their native language, dress, and habits, in order that they might adapt to their new environs.

In the early twentieth century, before and during World War I, “hyphenated American” was a slang term typically viewed with suspicion. An ideologically charged marker, the hyphen (the adjectival phrase, the slash or the actual hyphen) continues to generate tension and challenge ideas about what it means to be American. Traditionally represented as one of shared social, cultural, and political ideals, American identity troubles or, in some instances, displaces the hyphen because there is a singularity, an exceptionalism that underpins American experience, suggesting that there is only *one* American identity. A common early view of core American identity precludes the hyphen. Differences had to be subsumed under this notion of singularity, making assimilation the touchstone of American experience. In fact, some early American leaders tried to erase the hyphen rhetorically, in order to create the idea of one America.

Early Constructions of American Identity

During the revolutionary period, Patrick Henry emphasized the US national motto *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one. In his address to the First Continental Congress, Henry advanced the idea of singular Americanness: “The distinctions between Virginians, Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers, and New Englanders are no more. I am not a Virginian, but an American” (Garraty 134). This idea of a singular American identity was at the core of the Founders’ conception of an American nation. Benjamin Franklin, concerned with America being overrun by “aliens,” expressed early views promoting America as an exclusively white, racially pure nation. In his 1755 “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind” Franklin states:

Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our language or customs, anymore than they can acquire our complexion? (Perea, et al. 104)

Colonial apprehension about the potential assimilation of Germans in Pennsylvania resonates with contemporary anxieties regarding recent immigrants. This apprehension is a hallmark of American history, and the American historical periods discussed below illustrate how this authentic brand of American apprehension serves to reinforce Americanism and label as threats those who are being excluded.

The 1890s through 1920s was a period of massive immigration to the United States. In the midst of strong suspicion of foreigners, many Native-born Americans were keen on fostering national citizenship. In his 1915 Columbus Day address to the Knights of Columbus, early Progressive Theodore Roosevelt said: “There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. A hyphenated American is not an American at all. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else” (Link 166). As political scientist Stanley Renshon suggests: American national identity had long been “synonymous with single white, male, middle-class culture—a collusion of race, gender, and class” (82). Assimilation, then the basis for citizenship, became the standard for joining the national family (Rodriguez). Various ethnic and racial groups voluntarily embraced mainstream values by assimilating culturally, through language, religion, and dress, and structurally, through political participation and employment. The diversity of American experiences was neutralized by one singular vision of Americanism—*whiteness*. In “Old Poison in New Bottles,” Joe Feagin illustrates the indifference that immigrants of darker complexion experience. His analysis highlights the “one-way assimilation” to Anglo-Protestant culture that has become a reality for recent immigrants (352).

While immigrant identity centered around the drive to adopt Anglo-American values and practices, and on occasion, to engage with other nonwhites, there was a degree of complexity and apprehension to the “inbetweenness” or liminal space that immigrants occupied. Since the nation’s founding, the normative framework for American citizenship has been whiteness. There has been a consistent progression of ethnic groups, from Greek Americans to Polish Americans, who shed their Otherness and moved across the hyphen to whiteness and full American citizenship. Indeed, these previously ethnic groups were readily accepted because they were not marked by color, and they could all be unified in their efforts to exclude African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and American Indians who could not easily traverse this racial divide. For example, “Polish workers may have developed their very self-image and honed their reputation in more or less conscious counterpoint to the stereotypical *niggerscab*” (Perea, et al. 511).

As depicted above, central to what it means to be American is, whiteness. Some groups were more easily transformed into the white norm than others. Assembling all of these attributes made it easier for new European immigrants to become white. In *Racing Justice*, John A. Powell offers an interesting discussion of whiteness as a new concept that came out of the New Deal, which he argues created new meaning, structure, and practices of whiteness once identity markers were traded in for white. He conceptualizes race as a verb, rather than how it is typically perceived—as a noun or adjective, a descriptor. So, people perform race, which means that groups formally construct their identities around the singularity of whiteness—every hyphenated difference is subsumed into the concept of one America. In all of the previous examples, “the Other” is never white. No longer Irish-American or Polish-American, once they became white, these groups characterized everyone else as “Other,” and fiercely embraced the singularity of American identity. This single story potentially excludes those who cannot perform this vision of Americanism.

The single story creates the tension surrounding definitions of American identity. Hyphenated American identity encompasses

the full complexities and nuance of identity; it explodes the narrow concept of an American identity rooted in a single culture. Historically, the tension between hyphenation and authenticity, then, is the result of a compelled choice between the multiplicities of diverse American identities—the “hyphen” and assimilation. American policy towards indigenous people graphically illustrates the tension between multiple identities and the compulsion of American identity.

The US treatment of American Indians evinces a cyclical posture that reinforces the conception of American singularity and exceptionalism. Federal policy towards Indians shifted from outright conquest and extermination in the name of expansion (1790–1834); to allotment policies designed to obliterate tribal lands through land redistribution (1870–1887); to numerous contrived attempts at preserving Indian sovereignty (1928–1945); to termination of American Indian sovereignty and coerced assimilation (1945–1961). The termination policy was abandoned in the 1960s and 70s, and the United States again embraced a policy of self-determination for Indian peoples. This brief history demonstrates the oppressive dominance of US Indian policies, which never gave American Indians any significant independence because to do so would mean relinquishing massive parcels of property acquired through the doctrines of discovery and conquest and acknowledging that American identity is multi-faceted.

Indeed, the United States adopted a uniform policy of exclusion, revealing racial bias dating back to the founding period up to the present. In *Opening the Floodgates: Why America Needs to Rethink Its Borders and Immigration Laws*, noted immigration and critical race theory scholar Kevin Johnson offers a critical overview of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), which barred all Chinese immigration, and an overview of the National Origins Quota Act (1924), which used the 1890s census to limit immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe on the grounds that these “immigrant others” were not assimilating as the Western Europeans had:

Before 1952, immigrants from Asia . . . still were barred from citizenship, refused full membership in U.S. society, and denied the right to vote. National identity was a primary justification for those measures, as the nation attempted to preserve its predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant roots. (Johnson 51)

The structure and underlying policies of immigration law perpetuate the categorization of “Otherness” by adapting the impact of the law to exclude or include depending on the expediency of the circumstances.

While racial and ethnic (group) identity continues to be a central element for many Americans, American identity, largely defined by cultural, social, and political locations, has shifted from a sense of common culture to shared values and continues to change over time. Wars and national crises also serve as catalysts for anti-hyphenation sentiment and collective national identity. For example, America’s entry into World War I heightened suspicion and fear of foreigners and radicals. This suspicion fueled the notion that there was *one* America and that any form of radicalism threatened American identity. Sentiment during World War II was no different.

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, there was a general feeling that Japan was the enemy. Therefore, Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans, seen as potential saboteurs, capable of engaging in espionage, were also proclaimed the enemy. Italians, the largest group of American immigrants, were also marked as “alien enemies” (Wucker 81). Yet notably, only those who held Italian citizenship were interned in camps, unlike those of Japanese ancestry—regardless of citizenship—who were all subject to removal. Thus, the Second World War was characterized by what Nelson Lichtenstein refers to as a period of “patriotic assimilation,” and historian Eric Foner describes as “pluralistic acceptance of cultural diversity as the only real source of harmony in a heterogenous society” (237). Foner goes on to say that by the end of World War II, “the new immigrant groups had been fully accepted as ethnic Americans, rather than members of distinct and inferior races” (237). Rather than the coercive rhetoric of the World War I