# 1

# A DIFFERENT MIRROR

## *The Making of Multicultural America*

I HAD FLOWN from San Francisco to Norfolk and was riding in a taxi. The driver and I chatted about the weather and the tourists. The sky was cloudy, and twenty minutes away was Virginia Beach, where I was scheduled to give a keynote address to hundreds of teachers and administrators at a conference on multicultural education. The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. "How long have you been in this country?" he asked. "All my life," I replied, wincing. His question was one I had been asked too many times, even by northerners with Ph.D.'s. "I was born in the United States," I added. He replied: "I was wondering because your English is excellent!" Then I explained: "My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years." He glanced at me in the mirror. To him, I did not look like an American.

Suddenly, we both became uncomfortably conscious of a divide between us. An awkward silence turned my gaze from the mirror to the passing scenery. Here, at the eastern edge of the continent, I mused, was the site of the beginning of multicultural America. Our highway crossed land that Sir Walter Raleigh had renamed "Virginia" in honor of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. Taking lands from the Indians, the English colonizers founded

Jamestown in 1607, and six years later they shipped the first four barrels of tobacco to London. Almost immediately, tobacco became an immensely profitable export crop, and the rise of the tobacco economy generated an insatiable demand for Indian land as well as for labor from England, Ireland, and Africa. In 1619, a year before the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, a Dutch slave ship landed the first twenty Africans at Jamestown. Indeed, history saturated the surrounding landscape.

Questions like the one that my taxi driver asked me are always jarring. But it was not his fault that he did not see me as a fellow citizen: what had he learned about Asian Americans in courses called "U.S. history"? He saw me through a *filter*—what I call the Master Narrative of American History. According to this powerful and popular but inaccurate story, our country was settled by European immigrants, and Americans are white. "Race," observed Toni Morrison, has functioned as a "metaphor" necessary to the "construction of Americanness": in the creation of our national identity, "American" has been defined as "white."[1] Not to be "white" is to be designated as the "Other"—different, inferior, and unassimilable.

The Master Narrative is deeply embedded in our mainstream culture and can be found in the scholarship of a long list of preeminent historians. The father of the Master Narrative was Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893, two years after the Census Bureau announced that Americans had settled the entire continent and that the frontier had come to an end, Turner gave a presentation at the meeting of the American Historical Association. Entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," his paper would make him famous. Turner would become the dean of American history, his influence spanning generations of historians to come.

In what would be hailed as the "frontier thesis," Turner declared that the end of the frontier marked "the closing of a great historic movement"—the colonization of the Great West. He explained that the frontier had been "the meeting point between savagery and civilization." At this intersection, the Europeans had been "Americanized" by the wilderness. Initially, "the wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in a birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization, and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois.... Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion." But "little by little he transforms the wilderness"; in "a series of Indian wars," the "stalwart and rugged" frontiersman takes land from the Indians for white settlement and the advance of "manufacturing civilization." "The outcome is not the Old Europe," Turner exclaimed. "The fact is that here is a new product that is American."[2]



In Turner's footsteps came Harvard historian Oscar Handlin. In his 1945 prizewinning study *The Uprooted*, Handlin presented—to use the book's subtitle—*The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*. In his introduction, Handlin wrote: "I once thought to write a history of immigrants in America. I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history."[3] However, Handlin studied only the migrations from Europe. His "epic story" overlooked the indigenous people of the continent and also the "uprooted" from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Contrary to the views of historians like Turner and Handlin, America is a nation peopled by the world, and we are all Americans.

The Master Narrative's narrow definition of who is an American reflects and reinforces a more general thinking that can be found in the curriculum, news and entertainment media, business practices, and public policies. Through this filter, interpretations of ourselves and the world have been constructed, leaving many of us feeling left out of history and America itself.

Today, our expanding racial diversity is challenging the Master Narrative. Demography is declaring: Not all of us came originally from Europe! Currently, one-third of the American people do not trace their ancestries to Europe; in California, minorities have become the majority. They already predominate in major cities across the country—Boston, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, Houston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Diversity is emerging as America's "manifest destiny."

Within the lifetime of young people today, Americans of European ancestry will become a minority. Indeed, we will all be minorities. How can we prepare ourselves for this future, when the Master Narrative is such a powerful force in our thinking about the past? Analyzing the problem, fourteen-year-old Nicholas Takaki reported that his American history course had taught him "next to nothing about the significance of Asian Americans. I believe our education system as a whole has not integrated the histories of *all* people into our education system, just the Eurocentric view of itself, and the White-centered view of African Americans, and even this is slim to nonexistent. What I find is that

most people don't know the fact that they don't know, because of the complete lack of information."[4]

Increasingly aware of this ignorance, educators everywhere have begun to recognize the need to recover the missing chapters of American history. In 1990, the Task Force on Minorities for New York stressed the importance of a culturally diverse education. "Essentially," the *New York Times* commented, "the issue is how to deal with both dimensions of the nation's motto: 'E pluribus unum'—'Out of many, one.'" Universities from New Hampshire to Berkeley have established American cultural diversity graduation requirements. "Every student needs to know," explained University of Wisconsin chancellor Donna Shalala, "much more about the origins and history of the particular cultures which, as Americans, we will encounter during our lives." Even the University of Minnesota, located in a state that is 98 percent white, requires its students to take ethnic-studies courses. Asked why multiculturalism is so important, Dean Fred Lukermann answered: As a national university, Minnesota has to offer a national curriculum—one that includes all of the peoples of America. He added that after graduation many students move to cities like Chicago and Los Angeles and thus need to know about racial diversity. Moreover, many educators stress, multiculturalism has an intellectual purpose: a more inclusive curriculum is also a more accurate one.[5]

Indeed, the study of diversity is essential for understanding *how* and *why* America became what Walt Whitman called a "teeming nation of nations."[6]

Multicultural scholarship, however, has usually focused on just one minority. Thus, Cornel West in *Race Matters* covers only African Americans, Dee Brown in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* only Native Americans, Irving Howe in *World of Our Fathers* only Jewish Americans, Mario Barrera in *Race and Class in the Southwest* only Mexican Americans, and even I myself in *Strangers from a Different Shore* only Asian Americans. While enriching and deepening our knowledge of a particular group, this approach examines a specific minority in isolation from the others and the whole. Missing is the bigger picture.

In our approach, we will instead study race and ethnicity inclusively and comparatively. While it would be impossible to cover all groups in one book, we will focus on several of them that illustrate and illuminate the landscape of our society's diversity—African Americans, Asian Americans, Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, Mexican Americans, Muslim Americans, and Native Americans.



African Americans have been the central minority throughout our country's history. Even fifty years after their first arrival in Virginia, Africans still represented only a tiny percentage of the colony's population. The planters preferred workers from their homeland, for they wanted their new society to be racially homogeneous. This thinking abruptly changed, however, in 1676, when the elite encountered an uprising of discontented and armed workers. After quelling the insurrection with reinforcements of British troops, the planters turned to Africa for their primary labor supply; the new workers would be enslaved and prohibited from owning arms. Subsequently, the African population spiked upward, and slavery spread across the South. African Americans would remain degraded as unpaid laborers and dehumanized as property until the Civil War. What President Abraham Lincoln called "this mighty scourge of war" finally ended "the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil." But a grim future awaited African Americans: Jim Crow segregation, lynchings, race riots, and what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the problem of the color line." Still, they insistently struggled for freedom. Joined by people of other races in the sixties, African Americans marched and sang, "We shall overcome," winning significant victories that changed society. Indeed, the history of African Americans has been stitched into the history of America itself. Martin Luther King, Jr., clearly understood this truth when he wrote from a jail cell: "We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny."[7]

Asian Americans began arriving in America long before many European immigrants. Seeking "Gold Mountain," the Chinese were among the Forty-Niners. Then they worked on the railroad, in the agricultural fields of the West Coast states, and in the factories of California and even Massachusetts. As "strangers" coming from a "different shore," they were stereotyped as "heathen" and unassimilable. Wanted as sojourning laborers, the Chinese were not welcomed as settlers. During an economic depression, Congress passed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act—the first law that prohibited the entry of immigrants on the basis of nationality. The Chinese condemned this restriction as racist and tyrannical. "They call us 'Chink,'" complained a Chinese immigrant, cursing the "white demons." "They think we no good! America cut us off. No more come now, too bad!" The Japanese also painfully discovered that their accomplishments in America did not lead to acceptance.

During World War II, the government interned a hundred twenty thousand Japanese Americans, two-thirds of them citizens by birth. "How could I as a six-month-old child born in this country," asked Congressman Robert Matsui years later, "be declared by my own Government to be an enemy alien?"[8] In 1975, after the collapse of Saigon, tens of thousands of refugees fled to America from the tempest of the Vietnam War. Today, Asian Americans represent one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in America, projected to represent 10 percent of the total U.S. population by 2050.

Initially, the Irish came here in the early seventeenth century. At that time, many of them were brought to Virginia involuntarily as captives of the English wars in Ireland and as indentured servants in the Irish "slave trade." During the nineteenth century, four million Irish emigrated to escape the hunger caused not only by the Potato Famine, but also by the rise of a ranching economy. In order to expand grazing lands, English landlords evicted Irish families from their farms. As beef exports from Ireland to England rose, so did the number of people leaving Ireland. In America, these immigrants became construction workers, maids, and factory workers in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. Representing a Catholic group seeking to settle in a fiercely Protestant society, the Irish became victims of nativist hostility. They came about the same time as the Chinese, but they had a distinct advantage: the Naturalization Law of 1790 had reserved citizenship for "whites" only. Consequently, the Irish became citizens, and, as voters, they pursued an "ethnic" strategy. They elected Irish to city councils and mayorships, and their elected officials made certain that Irish builders were given construction contracts and that Irish men were hired as firemen and policemen. By 1900, the Irish were entering the middle class.[9]

Fleeing pogroms in Russia, Jews were driven from what John Cuddihy described as the "Middle Ages into the Anglo-American world of the *goyim* 'beyond the pale.'" In America, they settled in the Lower East Side, a beehive of tenements and garment factories that exploited an army of Jewish women. To many Jews, America represented the Promised Land. This vision energized them to rise from "greenhorns" into middle-class Americans. Stressing the importance of education, they pooled family resources; the earnings of the daughters working in the sweatshops helped to support the education of their brothers in institutions like New York City College and Harvard. But as Jewish immigrants and their children were entering the mainstream, they found themselves facing the rise of Hitler and the horror of the ultimate pogrom. Safe in America, they asked themselves: What is our responsibility as Jews to Hitler's victims? What should we do to break America's "deafening silence" over the Holocaust? Demanding that America do everything it could to rescue people destined for the death camps, Jewish Americans encountered a tide of anti-Semitism and indifference. From the war emerged a Jewish-American activism for human rights and social justice. Jack Greenberg of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund recalled that Jews cheered when Jackie Robinson broke into the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. "He was adopted as the surrogate hero by many of us growing up at the time. He was the way we saw ourselves triumphing against the forces of bigotry and ignorance." Jews like Howard Zinn and Stanley Levison stood shoulder to shoulder with African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement.[10] During the 1964 Freedom Summer, over half of the white volunteers who went South were Jewish.



Mexican Americans were first incorporated into the United States by the 1846–48 war against Mexico. They did not come to America; instead, the border was moved when the United States annexed the Southwest. Most of the Mexican Americans today, however, have immigrant roots, having begun the trek to El Norte in the early twentieth century. "As I had heard a lot about the United States," Jesus Garza recalled, "it was my dream to come here." The Mexican-American experience has been different from that of other immigrants, for their homeland borders the United States—a proximity that has helped reinforce their language, identity, and culture. Today, Mexicans are still crossing the border, pushed by poverty from the south and pulled northward by employment opportunities. Most of the current twelve million "illegal immigrants" are from Mexico, and a burning public policy question is: What should the government do about them? One answer was given by *Time* magazine in its June 18, 2007, cover story: "Give them amnesty." The illegals are "by their sheer numbers undeportable. More important, they are too enmeshed in a healthy U.S. economy to be extracted." "Assimilation is slow, but inevitable." We must have "faith in America's undimmed ability to metabolize immigrants from around the world, to change them more than they change the U.S."[11] Indeed, like other immigrant groups, Mexican Americans have been learning English, applying for naturalized citizenship, voting, and becoming Americans.

Among Muslim Americans are the refugees from Afghanistan. After their country was invaded by the Russians in 1979, the United

States intervened, financing and arming the mujahideen—the anti-Soviet "freedom fighters." After the Russian defeat in 1989, civil war broke out, ending with the ascendancy of the religiously conservative and oppressive Taliban. Safe in America, the Afghan refugees were hardly noticed. On September 11, 2001, however, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon suddenly changed the lives of Afghans in America. The hijackers were traced to Al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization headed by Osama bin Laden and based in Afghanistan. On that unforgettable day, Nadeem Saaed was afraid that Afghan Americans would be attacked and arrested. "Being Afghan American is not what people think it was before; now it's what people want to know about you and who you really are inside, an American or a terrorist."[12] In 2002, Western powers led by the United States invaded Afghanistan, seeking to destroy Al-Qaeda. The Taliban was quickly routed, but not vanquished. Omar Nourzaie summed up the challenge facing Afghan Americans: "The refugees know that a return to Afghanistan is not in their near future. They will have to change and make do in America."[13]

Native Americans represent a significant contrast to all of the other groups, for theirs was not an immigrant experience. They were the original Americans, here for thousands of years before the voyage of Columbus. They were on the shores of Massachusetts and Virginia when the English arrived in 1607. Indians had been farming the land for centuries, but the English colonizers stereotyped them as "savages" and seized their lands by warfare. Westward would be the course of empire, across Indian lands all the way to the Pacific. Leaders of military campaigns against the native people were celebrated as heroes. One of them was the Indian fighter and architect of Indian removal, President Andrew Jackson. In a message to Congress, he declared: "Humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country, and Philanthropy has been long busily employed in devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared from the earth. To follow to the tomb the last of his race and tread on the graves of extinct nations excite melancholy reflections." But Indians had a different interpretation of what Jackson trumpeted as "progress." "The white man," Luther Standing Bear of the Sioux explained, "does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. And he still hates the man who questioned his path across the continent."[14]

The "path" was designed to create a white America. The revolutionaries of 1776 founded a white republic, a democracy that was not for all people. In 1787, the Constitution legalized the institution of slavery. One of its provisions stated that the number of representatives each state sent to Congress was to be determined by the number of "free persons" and "three fifths of all other persons," the code phrase for slaves. In 1801, shortly before negotiating the Louisiana Purchase, President Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison that he looked forward to distant times when the American continent would be covered with "a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws."[15]



As it turned out, the economy would set a different agenda for who would be the people covering the continent. The War for Independence had been a struggle not only for political freedom from England but also for market freedom—freedom to trade without regulations from the mother country, to manufacture goods without restrictions, and to settle the land beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Unleashed, the new republic entered the era of the Market Revolution that would pull to America what Whitman welcomed as a "vast, surging hopeful army of workers."[16]

In America's expanding industrial economy, workers were often swept into ethnic antagonisms. Irish immigrants found themselves viewed as ignorant and inferior, and were forced to occupy the bottom rungs of employment. In the South, they were even made to do the jobs considered too hazardous and dangerous to be done by slaves, who were regarded by their owners as valuable property. In the North, Irish competed with blacks for jobs as waiters and longshoremen. As they pushed blacks out of the labor market, many Irish promoted their whiteness. "In a country of the whites where [white workers] find it difficult to earn a subsistence," they asked, "what right has the negro either to preference or to equality, or to admission?" Complaining that blacks did not know their place, many of the Irish newcomers shouted: "Down with the Nagurs!" "Let them go back to Africa, where they belong." Born in America, blacks complained that the Irish were taking jobs from them. "These impoverished and destitute beings, transported from the trans-Atlantic shores," a black observed, "are crowding themselves into every place of business and labor, and driving the poor colored American citizen out."[17]

Despite antagonisms, minorities also had much in common: labor experiences, hopeful dreams, and, above all, values.

Dynamically tied together in a complex interregional economy, workers found themselves in a robust industrial labyrinth of

farms, factories, railroads, and mines stretching from Canada to Mexico and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In the South, African Americans were cultivating cotton, which was shipped to New England, where "Irish factory girls" were operating machines in the textile mills, while Jewish women were sewing clothes in the garment factories of the Lower East Side. In the "New South" after the Civil War, African Americans were working in the steel mills of Birmingham, Alabama, while in the copper mines of Arizona, Mexican Americans were extracting the "red metal" used to manufacture electrical wires that made possible the illumination of America. In California, Chinese and Japanese immigrants were growing an agricultural garden to feed an industrializing urban society. By 1900, the United States was manufacturing more goods than England and France combined.

The greatest achievement of industrializing America was the Transcontinental Railroad. Together, the Chinese of the Central Pacific and the Irish of the Union Pacific built the ribbon of steel that connected the two coasts, making possible the movements of people, raw materials, and goods throughout the entire country. The construction of the nation's elaborate national railroad system required the hard work of an immense variety of workers. Their songs told the story of common experiences. Laying railroad ties, black laborers sang:

*Down the railroad, um-huh*
*Well, raise the iron, um-huh*
*Raise the iron, um-huh.*

Irish railroad workers shouted as the sweat on their brows and backs glistened in the sun:

*Then drill, my Paddies, drill—*
*Drill, my heroes, drill,*
*Drill all day, no sugar in your tay*
*Workin' on the U.P. railway.*

Japanese laborers in the Northwest chorused as their bodies fought the fickle weather:

*A railroad worker—*
*That's me!*
*I am great.*



*Yes, I am a railroad worker.*
*Complaining:*
*"It is too hot!"*
*"It is too cold!"*
*"It rains too often!"*
*"It snows too much!"*
*They all ran off.*
*I alone remained.*
*I am a railroad worker!*

Mexican-American workers in the Southwest joined in as they swore at the punishing work:

*Some unloaded rails*
*Others unloaded ties,*
*And others of my companions*
*Threw out thousands of curses.*[18]

Shared class exploitation often led workers to struggle together. In 1870, Chinese immigrant laborers were transported to Massachusetts as scabs to break an Irish immigrant strike; in response, the Irish tried to organize a Chinese lodge of the Knights of St. Crispin, an Irish labor union. In 1903, Mexican and Japanese farm laborers went on strike together in California: their union officers had names like Yamaguchi and Lizarras, and strike meetings were conducted in Spanish and Japanese. The Mexican strikers declared that they were standing in solidarity with their "Japanese brothers."[19] In Hawaii, Japanese and Filipino laborers came together in "a solid body" during a 1920 strike. They had been pitted against each other by the planter class, but they realized they had a common class interest. To "effectively cope with the capitalists," the strikers declared, their "big, powerful union" had to bring together "laborers of all nationalities."[20] During its massive organizing drives in the 1930s, the Committee for Industrial Organization announced that its policy was "one of absolute racial equality in Union membership."[21] Describing a lesson learned by Mexican and Asian farm laborers in California, a Japanese immigrant conveyed in poetry the feeling of class connectedness across racial boundaries:

*People harvesting*
*work together unaware*
*Of racial problems.*[22]

Regardless of their different complexions and origins, immigrants embraced similar hopeful dreams. In Ireland, people received letters from friends in the United States that glowingly described riches growing like grass and the boundlessness of a country where there were no oppressive English landlords. "My dear Father," wrote an Irish immigrant woman from New York in 1850, "any man or woman without a family would be fools that would not venture and come to this plentiful Country where no man or woman ever hungered." A witness in China reported the excitement generated by the news of the gold rush: "Letters from Chinese in San Francisco and further in the country have been circulated through all this part of the province. The accounts of the successful adventurers who have returned would, had the inhabitants possessed the means of paying their way across, have gone far to depopulate considerable towns."[23] Facing high taxes and difficulties making ends meet, Japanese farmers were enticed eastward. Excitedly they exclaimed:

*Day of spacious dreams!*
*I sailed for America,*
*Overblown with hope.*

Fleeing from anti-Semitic persecution and violence in Russia, the cry "To America!" roared like "wild-fire" in Jewish communities. In the shtetls, a song floated in the air:

*As the Russians mercilessly*
*Took revenge on us,*
*There is a land, America,*
*Where everyone lives free.*

For Mexican immigrants crossing the border in the early twentieth century, El Norte became the stuff of fantasies:

*If only you could see how nice*
*the United States is;*
*that is why the Mexicans*
*are crazy about it.*[24]

Beyond their shared labor experiences and dreams, the diverse American people discovered a tie that binds—the Declaration of Independence, with equality as a principle for everyone, regardless of race or religion. Moreover, they were prepared to fight and even die for this "self-evident truth" in two of the nation's most horrendous conflicts—the Civil War and World War II.



The Civil War was initiated by the planter class of the South. Although they constituted only 5 percent of the southern white population, the slaveholders were dominant in politics. Defending their profitable "peculiar institution," this ruling elite took their states out of the Union in 1861. In his First Inaugural Address, President Lincoln declared: "One section of our country believes slavery is *right* and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is *wrong* and ought not to be extended." Southern secession, he argued, would mean anarchy. Lincoln sternly warned the South that he had taken a solemn oath to defend and preserve the Union. Americans were one people, he explained poetically, bound together by "the mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land." In the South, however, Lincoln's appeal for unity fell on deaf ears, and the war came.[25]

During the conflict, President Lincoln initially refused to allow the Union Army to enlist African Americans: he wanted to keep the border states in the Union and worried that whites would refuse to fight in an army that had black soldiers. In the spring of 1863, however, Lincoln faced a military crisis. "Manpower now posed a real problem," wrote historian David Herbert Donald. "There had been severe losses in a contest that had now lasted nearly two years. The terms for which many regiments had enlisted were about to expire, and soldiers wanted to go home. Thousands were absent without leave.... There were almost no new volunteers. It would be months before a new conscription act could bring in recruits."[26]

This shortage of military manpower meant that the North was on the terrifying edge of losing the war. At this critical point, Lincoln made a crucial decision. In a letter to the military governor of Tennessee, he wrote: "The colored population is the great available and yet unavailed of, force for restoring the Union. The bare sight of fifty thousand armed and drilled black soldiers on the banks of the Mississippi would end the rebellion at once." Lincoln gave his generals permission to enlist black men.[27] Tens of thousands of escaped slaves, desperate to liberate their families still in bondage, flocked to join the fight. "Now we sogers are men—men de first time in our lives," one of them declared. "Now we can look our old masters in de face. They used to sell and whip us, and we did

not dare say one word. Now we ain't afraid, if they meet us, to run the bayonet through them."[28] In the Mississippi Valley, General Lorenzo Thomas enrolled twenty regiments of African Americans.

Altogether, a hundred eighty-six thousand blacks served in the Union Army. "Without the physical force which the colored people now give, and promise us," Lincoln explained, "neither the present, nor any coming administration, can save the Union." Without them, "we would be compelled to abandon the war in three weeks."[29] The Union Army pursued the war to victory. By then, one-third of the black soldiers were listed as killed or missing in action. But their sacrifice had not been in vain: the men that Lincoln praised as "black warriors" had made the decisive difference in determining that our "government of the people, by the people, for the people" did "not perish from the earth." Significantly, in his famous Gettysburg Address, Lincoln declared that the nation had been founded, "dedicated" to the "proposition" that "all men are created equal."[30]

World War II was also a significant fight for equality. Franklin D. Roosevelt had refused to desegregate the U.S. Armed Forces; thus we fought the Nazis with a Jim Crow army. The defense industry employed only white men until A. Philip Randolph threatened a march on Washington and forced the president to issue an executive order opening jobs to everyone, regardless of race or gender. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and the explosion of anti-Japanese hysteria, Roosevelt authorized the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans. Facing Hitler's death factories, Jews in Europe frantically begged Roosevelt to let them seek refuge here; but heeding the polls showing widespread anti-Semitic opposition to the admission of Jews, Roosevelt refused to offer them sanctuary.

This contradiction between our professed principle of equality and our practice of prejudice was unshrouded by James G. Thompson in a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier,* published on January 31, 1942:

> Being an American of dark complexion and some 26 years, these questions flash through my mind: "Should I sacrifice my life to live half American? Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow? Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life? Is the kind of America I know worth defending? Will America be a true and pure democracy after the war? Will colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past? These and other questions need answering; I want to know, and I believe every colored American, who is thinking, wants to know.... The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery, and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory.[31]



Thompson enlisted and served in the U.S. Armed Forces. So did 33,000 Japanese Americans. Leaving their families behind in the internment camps, they fought in the all-Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team. By the end of the war in Europe, these soldiers had suffered 9,486 casualties, including 600 killed. The 442nd, military observers agreed, was "probably the most decorated unit in United States military history."[32] Welcoming home these Japanese-American soldiers after the war, President Harry Truman acknowledged the country's indebtedness to them: "You fought for the free nations of the world... you fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice—and you won."[33]

Actually, for Japanese Americans as well as other minorities, the fight against prejudice still had to be won. Out of the war came clamors for change. In 1952, under pressure from lobbying groups including Japanese-American veterans, Congress rescinded the "white"-only restriction of the 1790 Naturalization Law. A Japanese immigrant rejoiced in poetry:

> *Going steadily to study English,*
> *Even through the rain at night,*
> *I thus attain,*
> *Late in life,*
> *American citizenship.*[34]

Then came a casade of laws for social justice. At the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr., declared: "I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.'" A year later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which, in turn, opened the way to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, which finally allowed the entry of Asian immigrants again.[35]

Two years later came a change that had been initiated by two

ordinary individuals. Mildred and Richard Loving, an African-American woman and a white man, fell in love and married, but then they were arrested in Virginia for violating the state's anti-miscegenation law. They sued the state, and in 1967 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the laws banning racially mixed marriages: "Restricting the freedom to marry solely because of racial classification violates the central meaning of the equal protection clause."[36]

In 1988, Congress passed a bill providing for an apology and a payment of $20,000 to each of the Japanese-American survivors of the World War II internment camps. When President Ronald Reagan signed the bill, he admitted that the United States had committed "a grave wrong." The nation needed, the president acknowledged, to end "a sad chapter in American history."[37]

Other chapters in history, both sad and joyful, hunger to be told. "It is very natural that the history written by the victim," said a Mexican in 1874, "does not altogether chime with the story of the victor." Sometimes the people of multicultural America have been hesitant to speak, thinking they were only "little people." "I don't know why anybody wants to hear my history," an Irish maid said apologetically in 1900. "Nothing ever happened to me worth the tellin'."[38]

But their stories are worthy. Native-American writer Leslie Marmon Silko explained why:

> *I will tell you something about stories...*
> *They aren't just entertainment.*
> *Don't be fooled.*

Indeed, the accounts given by the people in this book vibrantly re-create moments in history, capturing the complexities of human emotions and thoughts. They also provide the authenticity of experience. After she escaped from slavery, Harriet Jacobs wrote in her autobiography: "[My purpose] is not to tell you what I have heard but what I have seen—and what I have suffered."[39]

Their stories burst in the telling. "I hope this survey do a lot of good for Chinese people," an immigrant told an interviewer from Stanford University in the 1920s. "Make American people realize that Chinese people are humans. I think very few American people really know anything about Chinese." But the remembering is also for the sake of the children. "This story is dedicated to the descendants of Lazar and Goldie Glauberman," Jewish immigrant



Minnie Miller wrote in her autobiography. "My history is bound up in their history and the generations that follow should know where they came from to know better who they are." Similarly, Tomo Shoji, an elderly Japanese-American woman, urged Asian Americans to learn more about their roots: "We got such good, fantastic stories to tell. All our stories are different." Seeking to know how they fit into America, many young people want to hear the stories of their ancestors, unwilling to remain ignorant or ashamed of their identity and roots. One of them vowed to remember:

> *The story of your fight,*
> *Though not recorded*
> *In any history book,*
> *Yet lives engraved on my heart.*[40]

But what happens when historians do not "record" their stories, leaving out many of America's peoples? What happens, to borrow the words of Adrienne Rich, "when someone with the authority of a teacher" describes our society, and "you are not in it"? Such an experience can be disorienting—"a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." What should we do about our invisibility? Poet Audre Lorde answered:

> *It is a waste of time hating a mirror*
> *or its reflection*
> *instead of stopping the hand*
> *that makes glass with distortions.*[41]

Reflected in a mirror without distortions, the people of multicultural America belong to what Ishmael Reed described as a society "unique" in the world because "the world is here"—a place "where the cultures of the world crisscross."[42] Out of this intermingling arose a poem by Langston Hughes. So succinctly, so sonorously, the black poet laureate captured our multicultural memory:

> *Let America be America again,*
> *Let America be the dream the dreamers*
> *dreamed,*
> *Say who are you that mumbles in the dark?*
> *I am the poor white, fooled and pushed*
> *apart,*

*I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars,*
*I am the red man driven from the land,*
*I am the immigrant clutching the hope*
*I seek,*
*O, let my land be a land where,*
*Equality is in the air we breathe.*[43]

The struggle to "let America be America" has been America's epic story. In the making of multicultural America, the continent's original inhabitants were joined by people pushed from their homelands by poverty and persecution in Asia, Latin America, and Europe, and pulled here by extravagant dreams. Others came here in chains from Africa, and still others fled here as refugees from countries like Vietnam and Afghanistan. And all of them belonged to "the great migrations that made the American people."

The men and women in this study might not have read John Locke, but they came to believe that "in the beginning, all the world was America." Like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Dutch sailors in the seventeenth century, they held their breath in the presence of this "fresh, green breast of the new world." They envisioned the emerging country as a place for a bold new start. Crossing borders not delineated by space, they broke the "cake of custom" as they transcended traditional fixed points of classification. Marginalized and degraded as the "Other," minorities came to believe even more fiercely and fervently than did the Founding Fathers in the "self-evident truths" that "all men are created equal," entitled to the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."[44]

Together, "We the" diverse "people of the United States" transformed America into a mighty economy and an amazingly unique society of varied races, ethnicities, and religions. In the process, we transformed ourselves into Americans. Together, we composed "E pluribus unum"—a reality discerned by Herman Melville over one hundred years ago. Our country was settled by "the people of all nations," he wrote. "All nations may claim her for their own. You can not spill a drop of American blood, without spilling the blood of the whole world." Americans are "not a narrow tribe."[45]

This truth is reflected in "a different mirror." Remembered more inclusively, history offers all of us hopeful ties that bind—what Lincoln cherished as our "mystic chords of memory."

# PART ONE

## *Foundations*