Chapter 2

Ethnicity and immigration

Between many worlds

ETHNIC AMERICA: 'A VAST INGATHERING'[1]

The ethnic mix of America is complex, consisting of indigenous peoples as well as voluntary and involuntary immigrants around whom revolve questions of religion, allegiance and national pride.[2] Tension and ambivalence surround the whole idea of ethnicity in America, indeed some would argue that 'our grandparents were ethnic, not us' (Singh *et al.* 1994: 5), preferring to believe in the possibility of 'one homogeneous "American" community' (ibid.). However, the concept of assimilation asserted that all ethnic groups could be incorporated in a new American national identity, with specific shared beliefs and values, and that this would take preference over any previously held system of traditions. Assimilation stressed the denial of ethnic difference and the forgetting of cultural practices in favour of Americanisation which emphasised that one language should dominate as a guard against diverse groups falling outside the social concerns and ideological underpinnings of American society. Native Americans and African Americans, as well as immigrants from Europe and elsewhere, were seen as a threat until they were brought within the acceptable definitions of 'Americanness' or excluded from it entirely. These versions of assimilation focused on conformity and homogeneity as the way of guaranteeing democracy and equality for all in America. In the case of Native Americans, as we shall examine, the differences between tribal and white culture appeared too great for a satisfactory assimilation and the reservation system was employed instead (the case of African Americans is examined in Chapter 3).

Arguments about ethnicity in recent years, influenced by the post-1960s' interest in multiculturalism, have moved away from the pressures to one central, uniform idea of America as the only definition of nationhood and towards cultural pluralism. This still allows for diverse ethnic groups to still share common connections as Americans without losing their links to older allegiances and identities. The civil rights movement helped to cement interests in ethnic pride and cultural diversity as strengths,

asserting the possibility for self-definition and cultural autonomy rather than consensual conformity.[3] The tensions between the call to ethnic assimilation through the abandonment of old values and the pull towards a new sense of plural, multicultural society have, however, remained persistent, and are very much the concerns of the ethnic cultural forms that this chapter will examine. In 1988 Peter Marin wrote of 'the generational legacy of every family, a certain residue, a kind of ash, what I would call "ghost-values" . . .' (Singh *et al.* 1994: 8) which he sees as 'shreds and echoes' of the past. It is, however, these 'ghost-values' that have become of greater and greater significance in the development of ethnic identities in America. No longer viewed as something to be denied, they are instead the sources of cultural strength and assertion. Through them many Americans have found a positive and empowering means to achieve a productive plural identity, as ethnic *and* American, allowing them to belong to different sets of values rather than be assimilated into only one. Not subjected to one version of identity, these Americans move between two (or more), with different languages, customs, traditions and values. This hybrid view of ethnicity runs through many of the texts we will examine in this chapter, from Native Americans to Jewish Americans, who have in different ways struggled with their own positions and identities within the nation.

For example, in Philip Roth's novel *The Counterlife* (1986), the central character, Nathan Zuckerman, on a visit to Israel finds himself defending his identity as an American Jew against the claims of an ageing Zionist who insists that there is no country for a Jew but Israel. 'I could not think of any historical society,' Zuckerman narrates, 'that had achieved the level of tolerance institutionalised in America or that had placed pluralism smack at the center of its publicly advised dream of itself' (Roth 1987: 58). America was 'a country that did not have at its center the idea of exclusion' (ibid.). Zuckerman's American idealism, however much a performance it may be in the context of the novel, touches a central theme in the debates held about the relationship between ethnic identity and wider national values. From the beginnings of American society, as we discussed in the Introduction, a central question has been whether or not there is a distinctive American identity. Is there such a thing as a national character and how does that character relate to the importance of ethnicity in American culture?

The social historian, Oscar Handlin, in one of the most well-known of all works on American immigration, *The Uprooted*, declared 'Once I thought to write a history of immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history' (Handlin 1951: 3). What he clearly excludes from this 'history' is the importance of Native Americans in this process of identity formation since they were not immigrants in Handlin's sense. They exist only, it would seem, as Others to be conquered,

destroyed and pitied by the immigrants that Handlin viewed as true Americans.

Earlier, Crevecoeur, in his survey of late eighteenth-century America, *Letters From an American Farmer* (1782), also concentrated on the influx of Europeans as the starting-point for his vision of the New World. He noted its promiscuous social mix where Europeans intermarried in a way that was impossible in any other country. What was more, this process of intermingling made the American into a man who:

> leaving behind him all ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds ... In America individuals are melted into a new race of men.
>
> (Crevecoeur 1957: 39)

For Crevecoeur America was the place where migrants would slough off the burdens of their inherited pasts and create themselves anew in the liberating conditions of American life. In the United States rights belonged to the individual rather than to social or ethnic groups; the openness and mobility of American society would encourage personal transformation rather than the reassertion of traditional beliefs and values. Amid all Crevecoeur's optimism he notes that the 'Indian' falls outside this process of 'melting' preferring 'his native woods' over the 'best education', 'bounty' and 'riches' offered by Europeans. He admits an admiration for 'their social bond' over the individualism of Europeans and comments that 'thousands of Europeans are Indians [but] we have no examples of even one of those aborigines having from choice become Europeans!' (ibid.: 42). This suggests the peculiar tensions of ethnic difference and in particular the pull between worlds, traditions and values. In the case of the Native Americans, assimilation, as Crevecoeur testifies, seemed impossible, and with all groups it became a dominant feature of American social development and nation-building. A consideration of ethnicity might, therefore, begin with the particular situation of the Native Americans and their relationship to the wider issues of America as a nation, before moving on to consider other groups and their responses to the centralising demands on identity.

NATIVE AMERICANS: ASSIMILATION AND RESISTANCE

Turner's 'Frontier thesis' (1893) (Milner 1989) saw the Native American as a line of 'savagery' against which 'civilisation' had collided, an obstacle in the way of America's 'composite nationality' (ibid.: 16), whose 'primitive Indian life had passed away' in favour of a 'richer tide' (Milner 1989: 8). Assimilation could not, according to this logic, cope with the presence of

the Native Americans whose customs and traditions were too alien, too different to become merged into the new American self. Thus, the struggle against the Native American was a fight over ideological differences based on the idea of 'egocentrism, in the identification of our own values with values in general, of our *I* with the universe – in the conviction that the world is one' (Todorov 1987: 42–3). Americanisation, in this context, was an imperialist imposition of values, seeking in different ways to assert particular, narrow definitions of what it might mean to be American.

White Americans in positions of cultural power defined Native Americans as racially inferior, savage, child-like, and in need of radical readjustment to the 'better' life of the dominant culture. These stereotypes formed a way of seeing and speaking about Native Americans, a discourse, that contributed greatly to the consensus for their destruction. James Hall wrote in 1834–5 that Native Americans showed 'systematic anarchy' in their tribal organisations, preferring 'a restless wandering' to settlement and government. To combat this 'un-American' activity they should be controlled by being rounded up and domesticated, since 'an Indian, like a wolf, is always hungry, and of course always ferocious. In order to tame him, the pressure of hunger must be removed' (Drinnon 1990: 208). Similarly, Elwell S. Otis wrote in 1878 that the Native American lacked 'moral qualities ... goodness ... virtues' and shows 'not the slightest conception of definite law as a rule of action. He is guided by his animal desires ... takes little thought except for the present, knows nothing of property ... and has not ... any incentive to labor' (Robertson 1980: 108–9). All these 'lacks' are linked to the 'spirit of communism which is prevalent among all tribes' (ibid.) and so seen as opposite to the traits that Turner saw as being created in the 'new product', the American, on the frontier. Native-American culture represented a challenge to the emergent national identity; it was already 'un-American', believing in communal lands, tribalism, sacredness of the earth, and being suspicious of private property.

The reservation policy aimed to ensure that Native Americans would be systematically educated and 'civilised' into the American way of life. Social planner Francis Amasa Walker equated the Native American with the madman or the criminal and imagined the reservation as a kind of asylum or prison. Secluded and separated from the mainstream they could be watched over, ordered and trained into habits of respectability, ownership, self-reliance and other similarly authorised values. The reservation was to be 'a rigid reformatory discipline' (Takaki 1980: 186) in which an ideological homogeneity could be instilled in the wayward Indian, just like upon the insane in Foucault's discussion of the asylum where 'a system of responsibilities' (Foucault 1977: 247) became the norm, involving work and education. On the reservation, as in the asylum, the inmates are 'transformed into minors ... a new system of education must be applied,

a new direction given to their ideas; they must first be subjugated, then encouraged, then applied to work' (ibid.: 252). 'Ethical uniformity' (ibid.: 257) was the underlying intention of the reservation system and the establishment of Indian schools, like the Carlisle School started in 1879 with a philosophy of 'Kill the Indian and save the man'. Both worked towards de-Indianisation and the ideology 'one country, one language, and one flag' (Adams 1991: 39).

With the massacre of the Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890 the 'primary resistance' of 'literally fighting against outside intrusion' (Said 1994: 252), came to a close. However, the Native-American 'ideological resistance' aimed at reconstituting 'a shattered community, to save and restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system' (Said 1994: 252–3) has never ceased its actions. Louis Owens has written of the 'recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community' (Owens 1992: 5), through Native-American narrative in the twentieth century. The attack on tribalism was an assault upon the culture and tradition of the Native Americans, and as such at its history and its beliefs. The need to rediscover self-belief, or what in the 1960s was known as 'Red Power', has been crucial to the growing authority of the Native-American. As Said has written,

> To achieve recognition is to chart and then to occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior Other.
>
> (Said 1993: 253)

The Native Americans, like other marginalised ethnic groups in America, had to decolonise language for their own uses, through what Said calls 'reinscription'. The task for writers was to 'reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land' (ibid.: 273) both literally and metaphorically.

REINSCRIBING THE TRIBE: WRITING ETHNICITY

One of the functions of stories in the Native-American tradition has always been to unify the tribe and endow it with a communality and continuity. For so long these were attributes diminished by the Indian policies of the successive administrations. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Native-American storyteller, explains that telling stories is an essential component of her life since 'one story is only the beginning of many stories, and the sense that stories never truly end' (Mariani 1991: 84) is a reminder of the survivalist character of the people. For her, 'storytelling continues from generation to generation' (ibid.: 84) and 'cannot be separated from . . . geographical

Plate 3 Native-American histories: Newspaper Rock, Canyonlands National Park, Utah
Source: Neil Campbell, 1995

(ibid.: 92) because in them the present and living are connected to the past and the dead. For in the telling of the story, in its coherence, 'we are still all in this place, and language . . . is our way of passing through or being with them, of being together again' (ibid.: 92). In the 1890s the Ghost Dance Religion was an attempt to reconnect the living with a vision of the next world in which the whites would disappear and all the dead Native Americans would rise up, with the buffalo, to live again in a Utopia. Stories perform a similar function, a circulation of the tribal life-blood through the act of telling and much Native-American written narrative assumes this purpose too.

By the 1960s 'those inner colonized of the First World – "minorities", marginals, women' all began to find 'the right to speak in a new collective voice' and the 'hierarchical positions of Self and Other, Center and Margin [were] forcibly reversed' (Jameson 1984: 181, 188). Alongside the struggle of African Americans within the dominant white culture during the 1960s, there was also a resurgence in many ethnic literatures – Native-American and Chicano in particular. The 'Declaration of Indian Purpose' (1961) spoke of being 'absorbed' by American society and called for 'a better life educationally, economically, and spiritually' (Josephy 1985: 37) through

self-determination, the protection of existing lands, and continued federal aid. Activist 1960s, including the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) and the American Indian Movement (AIM), challenged further diminution of Indian rights. President of NIYC, Melvin Thom, said in 1964: 'We do not want to be pushed into the mainstream of American life . . . Any real help for Indian people must take cultural values into consideration' (ibid.: 55–6).

By 1969 'the normal expectation on the reservation is that the Indians may not do anything unless it is specifically permitted by the government' (ibid.: 99). Increasingly direct actions, such as 'fish-ins' protesting against the loss of land rights, the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 to reclaim land, and the confrontations at Wounded Knee in 1973 and Oglala in 1975 showed the growing resistance and anger amongst the Native Americans. Above all, these protests asserted that 'Indian voices are not lost' in the 'bureaucratic and political maze in which Indians [were] trapped' (ibid.: 135). Alongside political resistance, both passive and active, there grew an ever-more persistent assertion of 'Indian voices' through imaginative and polemical literature. Gerald Vizenor argues that these are 'postindian warriors' in that they have come through the 'Indian' phase of being spoken for and controlled by others, and now 'encounter their enemies with the same courage in literature as their ancestors once evinced on horses, and they create their stories with a new sense of survivance and counter the manifest manners of domination' (Vizenor 1994: 4). Vizenor's work weaves a linguistic spell 'to create a new tribal presence in stories', 'surmount the scriptures of manifest manners . . . [and] counter the surveillance and literature of dominance' (ibid.: 5, 12). His ethnic stories counter those perpetuated by others like Ronald Reagan, whom Vizenor calls the 'master of . . . manifest manners' (Kroeber 1994: 232), who spoke in 1988 of how 'we', that is the dominant white culture, had 'humored' the Indian who 'want[ed] to stay in that primitive life style', but should have been encouraged to 'be citizens along with the rest of us' (Drinnon 1990: xiii). Vizenor writes of 'tragic wisdom' born out of tribal power, as 'a pronative voice of liberation and survivance, a condition in native stories and literature that denies victimization' (Vizenor 1994: 6).

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) epitomises such wisdom, beginning with the reminder that stories 'are all we have' and that to 'destroy the stories' is to make Native Americans 'defenseless' (Silko 1977, no page numbers). Yet as long as the stories survive and are passed on, the native peoples retain their traditions, history and identity, reminding them of their roots in the land, which in turn constitutes their sense of self. Tayo, the central character, broken by war and 'trained' in the Indian school to take on the white ways, journeys to a new point of recognition about his construction in the white world so that he might be healed. He remembers his school where science books explained the world to him and contradicted the stories of the tribe and yet 'he still felt it was true, despite all they had taught him in school' since, 'everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them' (Silko 1977: 95). Tayo must re-learn and be healed in the tribe, and be able to see 'beyond the lie' of a 'nation built on stolen land' (ibid.: 191).

Similarly, in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), we find the 'tribe unravelled like a coarse rope' (Erdrich 1988: 2), losing its land to corporate America and government taxes, and consequently losing its traditions and its grip on history. 'Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier' (ibid.: 33). Dollar bills cause the memory to vanish (ibid.: 174), Nanapush, one of the narrators, says at one point. Erdrich's concern is that the collective, cultural memory survives, for it provides the strength of what Vizenor calls survivance and tragic wisdom. Echoing a phrase in *Ceremony* – 'vitality locked deep in blood memory' (Silko 1977: 220) – Erdrich writes that 'Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth . . . The blood draws us back, as if it runs through a vein of earth' (Erdrich 1988: 31). The task of Nanapush's story-telling is to instruct his granddaughter, Lulu, in the history of her family, the tribe and the land. She has been educated off the reservation in the government school and must be re-educated, like Tayo, by the stories. Nanapush says he has 'so many stories . . . They're all attached, and once I start there is no end to telling' (ibid.: 46). This is not an unqualified positive novel, but it presents a strong image, like Silko's *Ceremony*, of solidarity and ethnic survival through the persistence of tradition, the 'blood memory' of history, and the power of a forward-looking community.

In these patterns of denial and resistance we can learn much about the experience of ethnic Americans who, in different ways, have had to confront the pressures to assimilate and diminish their former traditions. Native Americans faced near genocide in the face of 'nation-building', but have survived to rearticulate and promote their cultures within the United States. Although always an uneasy and ambivalent position, their ethnic identity has not been made invisible and their culture and history still inform each generation.

IMMIGRATION AND AMERICANISATION

The experience of Native Americans demonstrates the extreme workings of assimilation theory, or the 'melting pot', and how in many cases it meant 'renouncing – often in clearly public ways – one's subjectivity, who one literally was: in name, in culture, and, as far as possible, in color' (Goldberg 1995: 5). It also shows how ethnic identity can be preserved as an active coexistent element even within the larger 'nation'. Native Americans were

seen as beyond assimilation because their ethnicity was too dissimilar to the traditions of Northern European American culture. It was, therefore, to the immigrants that attention turned and the efforts to integrate them into the existent culture of America.

The assimilationist metaphor of melting down emerged in a play entitled *The Melting Pot* by an English Jew, Israel Zangwill in 1908. The play celebrates the possibility of different backgrounds and religions being united in the 'American crucible'. The original set contained a view of Lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty outlined against a setting sun, literally an image of the golden land:

> DAVID (*Prophetically exalted by the spectacle.*): It is the fires of God around His Crucible. (*He drops her hand and points downward.*) There she lies, the great Melting Pot – listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There she gapes her mouth (*He points east.*) – the harbour where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to put in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, – black and yellow –
> VERA (*Softly nestling to him.*): Jew and Gentile –
> DAVID: ... Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God ... what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem ... compared with glory of America, where all races come to labour and look forward!
>
> (Zangwill 1908: 184–5)

Zangwill's play was first produced in Washington, DC in 1908 at a critical moment in the history of American immigration. The period since the 1880s had witnessed both a massive expansion in the numbers of those leaving Europe and other parts of the world for the United States and as a shift in their countries of origin. The net migration to the USA between 1881 and 1890 was 4.966 million, between 1891 and 1900 it rose to 3.711 million, and between 1901 and 1910 to 6.294 million. Increasingly migrants from such well established regions as the United Kingdom, Germany and Scandinavia were being joined by citizens from the many different provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy and Russia. The apparent change in the nature of migrants pouring into the country gave rise to a major debate about the the effect they would have on American society and values. Some argued that these 'new' immigrants brought with them cultural, social and political practices which made them far more difficult to assimilate into American life than immigrants of the old-stock who largely came from Northern and Western Europe. This concept of the threat of the 'new' was documented in the forty-one volume Dillingham Commission Report (1911) which investigated the impact of unrestricted immigration on the United States. The report claimed that the 'old' immigrant values and institutions went back to the origins of the Republic, whilst the 'new' brought with them what appeared to be a challenge to the dominant Anglo-Saxon tradition. Increasingly, the case for restriction took on an explicitly racialist tone. It was not just that new immigrants, in the words of the poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich writing in 1892, were 'a wild and motley throng' carrying to America 'unknown Gods and rites ... tiger passions ... strange tongues' and 'accounts of menace alien to our air', but also that they seemed to threaten American racial homogeneity. 'O liberty, white Goddess!' asked Aldrich, 'Is it well to leave the gates unguarded?' (Fuchs 1990: 57). His question was increasingly argued in the negative in the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the early 1920s. Many felt that America's racial as well as her cultural identity was threatened by unrestricted immigration and 'mongrelisation' just as it had been by Native-American tribes. Such a hierarchical view of white Anglo-Saxon racial superiority ran counter to Zangwill's assumptions that 'all nations and races' were welcome in 'the glory of America', but in the end it prevailed, encouraged by fears of business and labour leaders that unrestricted immigration threatened economic stability, and further enhanced by the debate over national identity which broke out with American involvement in the First World War in 1917. The results were the Immigration Restriction Act of 1921 and the National Quota Act of 1924, which explicitly sought to protect the Anglo-Saxon element in the American population against further encroachment by undesirable groups from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia. The Immigration Acts of the 1920s contained within them, therefore, assumptions about the desirable national racial mix, and the terms on which immigrants, both past and present, would be expected to adapt to the majority culture.

'Americanisation' and the forging of a 'true' American identity demanded strict adherence to the values of the cultural majority in such key areas as language, religion and manners. The New York Kindergarten Association in a 1919 survey of educational provision in Manhattan, found that, in one small area, 309 out of 310 children were of foreign parentage and English was rarely to be heard. What could there be of 'an American atmosphere in such homes? What did such children know about the Fourth of July or the Spirit of 76 or Washington or Lincoln?' Taking such children away from the potentially harmful influences of immigrant families and friends and placing them in more secure and controlled environments would 'make Americans of them'. Kindergartens, for instance, could provide in their games, 'wholesome lessons in Americanism' by encouraging immigrant children 'to feel that there is such a country as America and that they are part of it'. There is a curious similarity between this logic and that which created reservations to re-educate and Americanise Native Americans.

The model of the melting pot assumed that everyone could better themselves in American society, despite any ethnic distinctiveness, and

improve their position through economic opportunity. There might have been disagreements about how best to maximise that opportunity, but whether it was realised through free market forces or through federal intervention and social reform, the result would be the same: old ethnic loyalties would diminish in the face of an inexorable process which emphasised those values that Americans held in common rather than those which kept them apart.

One prominent area which has aroused considerable disagreement has been the issue of language. In the period immediately before the Immigration Acts of the 1920s, it was generally assumed that while linguistic diversity might continue at a local level, English would be maintained as the language of the public culture. In the nineteenth century across the country a number of states, counties and local school districts allowed at least some educational provision in languages other than English, but this tended to die out as the campaign for immigration restriction developed in the early twentieth century. In its place came a much greater insistence that English was the necessary basis of a unified culture. This was regularly enforced by both private industry and city and state governments, in a way which reveals the close links between language and expected patterns of social and political behaviour. The International Harvester Corporation, for instance, promulgated English 'Lesson One' for its largely Polish workforce as follows:

> I hear the whistle. I must hurry . . .
> It is time to go into the shop . . .
> I change my clothes and get ready to work.
> The starting whistle blows.
> I eat my lunch.
> It is forbidden to eat until then . . .
> I wait until the whistle blows to quit.
> I leave my place nice and clean.
> I put all my clothes in the locker.
> I must go home.

Similarly, the Detroit Board of Education, in 1915, launched a cooperative programme with local industry to transform Detroit from a place in which about three-quarters of the population was foreign-born, of foreign parentage and largely foreign-speaking, into an English-speaking city within two years. Adopted policies included making night school attendance for non-English-speaking workers a condition of employment; preferential employment strategies in which workers who were trying to learn English would be the first to be promoted, the last to be laid off, and the first to be taken back; and incentive schemes whereby non-English-speakers who attended night school would receive a bonus in their wages. State governments in the same period emphasised the role of the public

school system in the safeguarding of a distinct national linguistic identity. The Americanisation Department of Connecticut, for instance, argued in 1919 that 'America was in danger of being not a unified America, but a polyglot boarding house'. One solution was to promote

> the school [as] the melting pot of the nation,
> where Americanism is molded and formed, the
> great factor of our national life. Our whole fabric
> and national ideal is here inculcated in the heart
> and mind of young America, its history, customs,
> its laws and language.
>
> (Circular Letter No. 5, October 1918)

By the 1970s, however, it was clear that the battle for an unquestioned national linguistic identity was far from over. Encouraged by the attempts of African Americans to first recover and then reassert the importance of a black culture, other minority groups sought to articulate their own sense of marginalisation in an English-speaking world by emphasising the continuing vitality of their linguistic inheritance. This process has been affected by further changes in the main sources of immigration to the United States. Since the Second World War, and more particularly since the Immigration Act of 1965, Europe's role as the main supplier of migrants has been taken over by the Americas and Asia. By the 1980s, over three-quarters of American immigrants were of Latin-American or Asian origin. By 1990, about 20 million people of Latin-American background lived in the United States, 7 million of whom had come to America between 1980 and 1990. Many government agencies, both at a national and a local level, now existed to help immigrants adjust to American society and were more sympathetic to ethnic ties in aiding the process of adjustment. Becoming American, it was officially argued, need not be at the expense of older ethnic cultural traditions. But, just as this new sensitivity to minority concerns was encouraged by the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, so the ebbing of enthusiasm for civil rights in the 1970s and 1980s often brought with it hostility to such programmes. In 1981, for instance, Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming articulated his own fears about the massive rise in the Hispanic population in words which were strongly reminiscent of the language used by campaigners in the early twentieth century:

> A substantial proportion of these new persons and their descendants do not assimilate into our society . . . If language and cultural separation rise above a certain level, the unity and political stability of our nation will – in time – be seriously eroded.
>
> (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1982: 273)

Simpson's concerns were reflected in the attempts of a number of states to declare English their official language, an issue which became most significant in 1986 in California where voters decided to adopt such a measure, much to the dismay of its large numbers of Asian and Mexican inhabitants. What this meant in practice was less clear, particularly in places like Los Angeles, where education officials had to manage a school population of over 600,000 of whom perhaps as many as 170,000 had, at best, only a limited grasp of English. What the continuing controversy over language emphasised, however, was that recurring tension between the acknowledgement of diversity and concerns for unified national identity which had so marked earlier debates over the role of ethnicity in American life.

THE CRUCIBLE OF DIFFERENCE

Ethnicity in contemporary America is a 'pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self' in which 'one can be many different things, and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism' (Fischer 1986: 196). Fischer's language harks back to the earlier idea of the 'crucible' in which Americans were forged, melted down from their various ethnicities into a new nation, but alters it with his sense of a crucible for difference and pluralism in which class, race, religion and gender are all inter-connected with ethnicity. At a base level, 'ethnicity is a process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions' (ibid.: 201) and it is this rich 'reservoir that sustains and renews humane attitudes' (ibid.: 230). Cohering with Werner Sollors's famous comment that ethnic literature is 'prototypically American literature' (Sollors 1986: 8), Fischer goes on to declare the potentiality for 'reinvigoration and reinspiration' at work in the mingling of different ethnicities, with their own traditions, cultural practices and expressions. Rather than a retreat into the past or a separatist mentality, he sees the 'textured sense of being American' (ibid.: 230) as the process through which 'a dialogue generating new perspectives for the present and future' (ibid.: 231) is created. For example, the works of Jewish Americans like Roth, Bellow and Malamud act as an 'interference' between the Jewish and the American, preserving, reworking and creating through their language some new considerations, and at the same time, they are 'inter-referencing' between different cultural traditions, mingling and connecting, questioning and accepting. The point here is that ethnic literatures are dynamic and mobile, born out of the traditions of immigration and migration, and they are also the products of tradition and continuity. This duality is productive and enables a richness and diversity in their interactions within American life. As Bodnar has written,

> The point is that instead of linear progression, immigrants faced a continual dynamic between economy and society, between class and culture. It was in the swirl of this interaction and competition that ordinary individuals had to sort out options, listen to all the prophets, and arrive at decisions of their own . . . Inevitably the results were mixed.
>
> (Bodnar 1985: xx)

Such an atmosphere is apparent in the stories of immigrants, both first-hand and fictional, and in the work of subsequent generations still haunted by these tensions. As Madan Sarup has put it, 'When migrants cross a boundary line there is hostility *and* welcome. [They] are included and excluded in different ways' (Sarup 1994: 95). These are recurrent and potent themes in immigrant and ethnic literature, raising thoughts of home, belonging, memory and forgetting, old and new traditions; and every crossed borderline, real or imagined, brings these questions to mind. Like the migrant person, 'the borderline is always ambivalent' (ibid.: 99), marking the transformative movement between worlds of desire and trepidation, hope and fear. 'In the transformation every step forward can also be a step back: the migrant is here and there' and it is for these reasons of ambivalence that to understand America, in particular, one must wrestle with the migrant experience, for it asserts above all that 'identity is not to do with being but with becoming' (ibid.: 98).

Traditional imaginings of America were of the promised land where the newcomer could undo the sufferings of the Old World. Louis Adamic expressed it as: 'it was a grand, amazing, somewhat fantastic place – the Golden Country – a sort of Paradise – the Land of promise in more ways than one – huge beyond conception . . . untellingly exciting, explosive, quite incomparable' (King *et al.* 1995: 164). Immigrant stories, both 'old' and 'new', respond to and engage with the tensions that arise from such myths in order to demonstrate how ethnic Americans cope with something 'beyond conception'. Myths are present in Jewish-American texts, as we shall see, and equally in the work of Chinese Americans, like Maxine Hong Kingston, whose characters leave China in search of 'Gold Mountain' (Kingston 1981: 45) which they 'invented and discovered' on every journey (ibid.).

IMMIGRANT STORIES: JEWISH AMERICANS

> You are the promise of the centuries to come. You are the heart, the creative pulse of America to be.
>
> (Yezierska 1987: 137)

A prominent group within patterns of American immigration have been the Jews, who arrived in the country from Eastern Europe as a result of

the prejudicial laws and pogroms after 1880. Imagining America as a place where they might be free from persecution and able to practise their religion unhindered, the New World echoed Jewish beliefs about a promised land and seemed to fulfil their greatest dreams. For this reason, much Jewish writing articulates mythic notions of America, typified by stories of hard work, suffering, promise and achievement. Early immigrant accounts and autobiographies like Mary Antin's book *The Promised Land* (1912) typify a celebratory representation of America:

> So there was our promised land, and many faces were turned towards the West. And if the waters of the Atlantic did not part for them, the wanderers rode its bitter flood by a miracle as great as any the rod of Moses ever wrought.
>
> (Antin 1912: 364)

She links the religious dreams of redemption and hope with the possibilities of America as a 'second birth' allowing her a creative mixture of two worlds: 'Mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future' (ibid.: 364). For her, tensions between the old and new, past and future were interpreted as an advantage and a source of possibility, whereas for others, it became the emblem of immigrant dilemmas. How was one to be an American while tied to the Old World through customs, religion and family? Unlike Antin, who found education and the process of 'Americanisation' a source of reinvigoration, many found America a destabilising place without the security of the village and their ancestral past. Handlin calls the village and land the 'pivot of a complex circle of relationships, the primary index of . . . status' (Handlin 1951: 20). Losing this secure base in America and taking up a new life in the city, 'was like a man without legs who crawls about and cannot get anywhere' (ibid.). For some, the rootedness of ancient community was threatened by the wrench into the New World and the mixing with others from outside the village. Anzia Yezierska describes it as like 'getting ready to tear my life from my body' (Yezierska 1987: 124). However disorientating this experience was for some, for others it marked their freedom and was viewed as a liberating possibility for building a new identity in America. Outside the controls of the village were different challenges which became synonymous with the American Dream of achievement through struggle and industriousness: 'Though a man's life may be sown with labor, with hardship, with blood, a crop will come of it, a harvest be reaped' (Handlin 1951: 102). The immigrant experience thus confirmed and reinforced certain dominant stories of America, an argument asserted in Handlin's grandiloquence: 'The new was not the old. Yet the new and the old are related . . . by the death of the old which was necessary for the birth of the new' (ibid.: 101–2).

For Handlin, America is a place 'in motion', constructed by 'the values of flight' and rooted in the 'experience of being rootless, adrift' (ibid.: 307), and this is vital to the belief, now current in critical thinking, that identity is neither fixed, nor unitary, but fluid and multiple, conditioned and constructed in a variety of changing situations. Thus Carole Boyce-Davies argues that she, as a 'migratory subjectivity', has learned that 'the renegotiating of identities is fundamental to migration . . . It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures' (Boyce-Davies 1994: 3). Immigrant stories of Jews and others do not together create a harmonised, orchestrated version of America as 'one voice', but instead stress dissonance and variation: a 'dissensus' (Ferraro 1993: 6). In early immigrant voices, with their tense negotiations over old and new, self and other, past and future, America debated its identities and established the cultural contest over the centre and the margin that has characterised so much of its later history. The centre here is the pull to assimilation and acculturation, that is, the Antin school of immigrant culture that veers towards the embrace of an acceptance of Americanisation above the pull back to traditions from the Old World. At the margins are the less settled, migratory forces that feel uneasy in accepting such a positioning and would rather continue to question and contest the cultural meanings provided from the centre. Amid such collisions, 'The migrant voice tells us what it is like to feel a stranger and yet at home, to live simultaneously inside and outside one's immediate situation' (King 1995: xv).

One can see many of these tensions, negotiations and meanings played out in the films of Woody Allen. In particular, *Radio Days* (1986) articulates the immigrant community as settled and yet still in turmoil, working through its inter-generational desires for different and better lives in America. The family are introduced to the audience through the narrative voice of the main character, remembering his boyhood in Rockaway. He is shown torn between the pull of the radio with its unifying 'American' adventure stories of the 'Masked Avenger' who can magically restore order and put the world to rights, and the 'real' issues presented through Hebrew School and the rabbi as he is encouraged to collect for 'the Jewish homeland in Palestine'. To the boy this means nothing except 'some place near Egypt' and he would rather use the collection to buy the 'Masked Avenger secret compartment ring' – his own object of desire. When found out, the boy is brought before the rabbi in a scene that suggests comically the confusions of the two worlds: the dark, forbidding world of the rabbi in contrast to the brash excitements of the radio adventure; the call for 'discipline' in contrast to the apparent laxity of mainstream America. The boy is literally caught between the parental punishment and that of the rabbi, whom the boy has unknowingly insulted by calling him his 'trusty Indian companion' (in a reference to the Lone Ranger). The rich comic effects do, however, leave us with a sense of cultural tension, especially

for the boy for whom America signifies not the disciplined faith, nor the dreamy hopes of his parents, but a radio adventure and the romance of New York.

The tensions of immigrant experience are expressed well in the work of Anzia Yezierska, who portrays a woman's struggle between the dreams of 'the new golden country' (Yezierska 1975: 9) and the 'shut-in-ness' (Yezierska 1987: 170) of the ghetto. In her work the Old World is related to the further restrictions of gender and thus is associated with the twin powers of father and Torah (Jewish religious law). For her, the escape to America is also the possibility of escaping these limitations on her self-definition. In some respects, her largely autobiographical stories embrace America through linking themes such as education (as Mary Antin had too), marriage (into non-Jewish life) and success, but not without careful interrogations of the idealisations of America through immigrant eyes. As a later writer, Bernard Malamud, has Bober say in *The Assistant* (1957), 'Without education you are lost' (Malamud 1975: 77). Education is represented as a key to the creation of a new life. In one of Yezierska's stories she quotes Waldo Frank: 'We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her. In the quality of our search shall be the nature of the America that we create' (Yezierska 1987: 297). This suggests the twin factors of search and creation that figure in her stories of immigrant life, with her characters longing for America initially through dreams and then tempered by lived experience. It is a 'hunger' to possess the dream, to be taken up by America – often imaged as a lover – and yet Yezierska's stories are not lost in sentiment, for they also reflect the processes of immigrant struggle and de-idealisation. As if deliberately countering Emma Lazarus's words on the Statue of Liberty to 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free', Yezierska's immigrants are trapped in the ghettos of the New World, choking and restricted, struggling to better themselves through education and hard work. However, Yezierska suggests that America can be re-made constantly through the additions and mixtures provided by new groups. Rather than the 'dead grooves' (ibid.: 140) of homogeneity, she proposes the 'power to fly' (ibid.: 137), to resist incorporation into a ready-made America and make it yourself; for as Frank wrote, it is in the seeking that we make her. The 'unused gifts' (ibid.: 283) of ethnic Americans had to be realised in order for the whole nation to benefit, argues Yezierska, and yet the prejudices constantly keep the worlds apart. In one of her best stories, 'Soap and Water', she identifies mainstream American society as the 'laundered world' that she keeps clean as a worker in the laundry itself: 'I, the unclean one, am actually fashioning the pedestal of their cleanliness' (ibid.: 167). Again trapped by economics, class and a lack of power, her character seems hopeless, but education offers her a way out. It is the 'voice', 'the birth of a new religion in my soul' (ibid.: 168), that education might

provide that could enable and empower her to resist those 'agents of clean society' who withheld positions and judged her from the outside only. Unwilling to remain strangled and 'unlived' (ibid.: 173), Yezierska links personal fulfilment and education with the wider possibilities of social change. The individual, improved by work and education, can, in her vision of America, alter the public sphere; as she puts it, 'I was changed and the world was changed' (ibid.: 177).

Such belief in the vitality of ethnic Americans was echoed in the work of Randolph Bourne, whose essay 'Trans-National America' (1916) was published before Yezierska's work, but was connected to her through his mentor John Dewey, who had a brief relationship with Yezierska. Bourne's essay questions the 'melting pot' theory of immigration and the process of assimilation that it presumed, and like Yezierska felt 'that America shall be what the immigrant will have a hand in making it, and not what a ruling class . . . decide that America shall be made' (Lauter *et al.* 1994: 1733). Bourne argues that Americanisation must not mean that 'these distinctive qualities should be washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity' (ibid.: 1736), for such a loss would weaken and deprive the nation as a whole. Assimilation that was akin to uniformity produced an 'elementary grasping animal' without connection to a strong tradition and was rather part of the 'cultural wreckage of our time' (ibid.: 1736–7). For Bourne, America is summed up in his slogan: 'They merge but they do not fuse' (ibid.). Americans must, he argued, re-write 'the weary old nationalism' (ibid.) that was tearing Europe apart in 1916, reject the uniform ideology of the 'melting-pot' and reach towards 'a new key' (ibid.: 1738) to unlock the future – a future in which 'America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors' (ibid.: 1742). The effect of such an approach for Bourne was to enliven America, rather than flatten it into uniformity through melting down existing differences, and so 'liberate and harmonize the creative power of all these peoples and give them the new spiritual citizenship' (ibid.) and a real investment in 'the Beloved Community' (ibid.: 1743).

Bourne's American 'Beloved Community' enriched by ethnicity and Yezierska's belief in personal achievement as an emblem of collective social betterment were not persuasive visions for all immigrants, many of whom questioned the possibility of changing anything, especially as individuals. The mistrust of immigrants was a reason for this doubt and especially in the strong nativist feelings expressed by the likes of Madison Grant in the same year as Bourne's essay. He wrote of the 'mongrelisation' of America in his *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), and claimed that immigrants 'adopt the language of the native American [that is the white American], they wear his clothes, they steal his name and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or his

ideals' (Horowitz *et al.* 1990: 11). This kind of racism had been used against the Native Americans too and one of the great perpetuators of this pseudo-science was Theodore Roosevelt who worried about the 'deterioration in the English-speaking peoples' (ibid.). To counter such views and gain some power, many immigrants became involved in political activism and union movements in attempts to secure collective, organised social change. For example, rather than follow the beliefs of their immigrant parents, awaiting the Messiah, many Jews sought a political 'messiah' in Communism and Socialism condemning the capitalist system that created exploitation and poverty and rewarding the struggling working people. Writer–activists like Michael Gold who edited the radical paper *The Liberator* in the 1920s and helped to found 'The New Masses' which specifically published left-wing writers, spoke from a Jewish immigrant background, but with the purpose of precise social protest. Gold's major work, *Jews Without Money* (1930), is a hard-hitting description of ghetto life and suffering and a vehement attack on capitalism as a root cause of the difference in class and status. It is full of questions, anger and exclamatory prose and in Gold's novel, the promised land is 'O golden dyspeptic God of America' (Lauter *et al.* 1994: 1759), a place of destruction that has 'taught the sons of tubercular Jewish tailors how to kill' (Gold 1965: 23). In one scene, Gold emphasises the clash of old and new cultures as the Father extols the importance of the Talmud to Jewish faith and life and the son is asked to recite his hymn to Americanisation learned in the public school: 'I love the name of Washington/ I love my country too,/ I love the flag, the dear old flag,/The red, white and blue' (ibid.: 80). Gold wants to surmount these simple myths of belief and strike out for political change, from a learning rooted not in dreams, but the harsh experience of ghetto life. As the autobiographical novel says, 'It is all useless. A curse on Columbus! A Curse on America, the thief! It is a land where the lice make fortunes, and the good men starve!' (ibid.: 79).

Philip Roth's work represents a more cynical view of ethnic life in America and his own position is more fluid and less fixed on the issues of ethnicity and community. Using an essay by the critic Philip Rahv which had discussed America as a nation divided between 'Redskins' and 'Palefaces', and hence split along lines of ethnic ancestry and beliefs, Roth argued that he felt himself to be a 'redface' who 'sympathises equally with both parties in their disdain for the other' (Roth 1977: 76–7). His work explores this position and the confusions of ethnic identities in contemporary America:

> All this talk about 'identities' – your 'identity' is just where you decide to stop thinking, as far as I can see. I think all these ethnic groups . . . simply make life more difficult in a society where we're trying to just live amicably.
>
> (Roth 1987: 305)

This suggests some of the problems in over-emphasising ethnic differences at the cost of living amicably in a community. His work often presents ongoing ethnic divisions and is well demonstrated in a novella that, in part, echoes Michael Gold's curse on Columbus, in its title *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). His young Jewish protagonist Klugman's name means both 'clever' and 'curse' as if to signal again the kind of in-betweenness that interests Roth. He is between two cultures, the old Newark Jews of his childhood and the upwardly mobile Jews of Short Hills. The use of place in the novella articulates the kind of communal tensions over identity and belonging that are explored in the work as a whole. Neil Klugman, existential migrant, crosses a borderline within the Jewish community, proving, as Roth is keen to do, that difference marks all people and there is no identifiable, single Jewish American. 'It was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven, for the sun itself became bigger, lower, and rounder' (Roth 1964: 14). This environment, with 'regulated . . . moisture' from garden hoses, 'planned . . . destinies of the sons of its citizens' and streets with the names of eastern colleges contrasts with the old community down below 'in the cindery darkness of the alley' and the sweet 'promise of afterlife' (ibid.: 14). Klugman belongs in neither and his life is defined only by 'edginess' because that is where he is positioned, on the edge, between the offered communities. Roth links Klugman to a black child who visits the library where he works and becomes enthralled by the worlds projected in the paintings of Gauguin. It is as if both ethnic Americans long for something other than the lives they have, but their dreams are as unreal as the Polynesian images in the paintings, distant and out of reach. Roth is also reminding us of the immense difference within ethnic groups and how there can be no single community or determined sense of identity, all is flux and division. Even the assimilation of the Short Hills' Jews does not mean uniformity, but only more division. As Mrs Patimkin asks Klugman, 'are you orthodox or conservative?' to which he naïvely replies, 'I'm just Jewish' (ibid: 87). Roth's comic but sensitive awareness of the mixture of American identities reminds us of the current debates about identity as problematic because of the multicultural, hybridised nature of contemporary America. At the end of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Klugman, troubled by his own sense of self and identity, gazes at himself in the library window. What is reflected back is not a single, neat vision of a whole individualised self, but 'a broken wall of books, imperfectedly shelved' (ibid.: 131), suggesting the multi-faceted

imperfections of the postmodern American identity constituted not by simple ethnic regulations but by difference and contest. He is a reflection of the multiple stories contained in those haphazard books, and not a single self. In this he is like America, constructed of many dissimilar, ill-fitting pieces all of which can co-exist and can function together. This moment brings to mind a comment from a character in a later Roth book who asks, 'What's so intolerable about tolerating a few differences?' (Roth 1987: 305).

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE MIXTURE:[4] MELTING POT, MOSAIC OR HYBRID?

Stuart Hall has written of the fact that 'we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position' and goes on to stress that 'our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are'. Yet such a location is not necessarily based upon exclusivity or 'marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities', as older imperialisms had been. Instead, argues Hall, we can achieve a 'politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity' (Morley and Chen 1996: 447). This is a cultural approach that has emerged in America as a result of multiculturalism and 'ethnocriticism', a method that 'engages otherness and difference in such a way as to provoke an interrogation of and a challenge to what we ordinarily take as familiar and our own' (Krupat 1992: 3). Immigrant and ethnic voices are central to this approach, contributing hugely to the 'polyvocality' (many-voicedness) that Krupat sees as the appropriate term to describe a cosmopolitan, multicultural America. Thus culture is seen like language, hybrid, 'an encounter' (Bakhtin 1990: 358) that can be both familiar and new, different and the same within itself. This possibility recognised in language has a useful parallel in the study of ethnic America, which, as we have suggested, is a culture of encounter, of boundary crossings, and so a place of merging, of tension and contest, in which differences co-exist. Bakhtin, exploring novelistic language, wrote of the 'dialogic . . . [where] Two points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically' (ibid.: 360). This resembles America, where the impetus to forge a single, American self, a national identity, out of difference, has always existed in special tension with a counter-impetus towards separation, distinct communities of interest, religion, race and ethnicity. Bakhtin, however, argues that a certain type of hybridity 'sets different points of view against each other in a conflictual structure, which retains "a certain elemental, organic energy and openendedness"' (Young, quoting Bakhtin, 1995: 22). Thus in Bakhtin's use of the word, hybridity connotes 'an antithetical movement of *coalescence and antagonism* . . . that both brings together, fuses, but

also maintains separation' (ibid.: 22, our emphasis). Ethnicity in America is precisely this blend of antagonism and coalescence, a mix of different voices struggling to be heard, some restricted and silenced, whilst others dominate, and yet always with the possibility of finding expression and authority.

Homi Bhabha has taken these linguistic ideas and extended them to examine relations of power within the colonial situation, and his conclusions too are relevant to the American experience. He argues that hybridity allows the voice of the other, the marginalised, and the dominated to exist within the language of the dominant group whose voice is never totally in control. As Young puts it,

> hybridity begins to become the form of cultural difference itself, the jarrings of a differentiated culture whose 'hybrid counter-energies' in Said's phrase, challenge the centred, dominant cultural norms with their unsettling perplexities generated out of their 'disjunctive, liminal space'.
> (Young 1995: 23)

This is an interesting way of seeing America; hybrid in the sense of permitting challenge, 'counter-energies' and 'unsettling perplexities' to exist in constant dialogue with the dominant norms of established mainstream culture. Hybridity is once again viewed as merger and 'a dialectical articulation' (ibid.: 23), characteristic of post-colonial, syncretic cultures which are blends and co-minglings of different voices and traditions; for example, Native-American with the mainstream. In this respect, America has to be seen as 'post-colonial', with its range of other voices, the 'inner colonized' (Jameson 1984: 181), interrogating the dominant discourses of power with gestures of fusing and of countering – always the double-action of hybridity.

> Hybridization as creolization involves fusion, the creation of a new form, which can then be set against the old form, of which it is partly made up . . . as 'raceless chaos' by contrast, [it] produces no stable new form but rather something closer to Bhabha's restless, uneasy, interstitial hybridity: a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms.
> (Young 1995: 25)

If the old metaphors for American ethnicity no longer ring true; 'melting pot', 'mosaic', 'salad bowl', then a more fluid representative accumulation of tensions may be found in the ideas of hybridity, which are ambiguous, contrary and processive. Hybridity pulls towards sameness and fusion whilst also allowing for the importance of difference as a creative, new energy brought to the mix.

What hybridity cannot do is to resolve the differences and tensions between groups or ideologies, but instead it establishes a problematic in

which 'other "denied" knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority' (ibid.: 114). The emergent histories of ethnic groups within American culture serve to articulate and re-articulate hidden pasts and excluded voices in the 'production of "partial" knowledges and positionalities' (ibid.: 119) that provide a heterogeneous, multiplicitous re-mapping of American culture and identity. In looking at America this way, one might see its complex construction as a culture, 're-vision' it, to use Adrienne Rich's word, and recognise all its facets working to create many textures. As a place of encounter, migration, mixing, settlement, colonialism, exploitation, resistance, dream, denial and other forces, America has to be viewed 'as a series of cultural and political transactions, not all-or-nothing conversions or resistances' (Clifford 1988: 342) and its identity as 'a nexus of relations and transactions' (ibid.: 344).

It is for these reasons that to re-view America from its ethnic 'borderlands', employing approaches utilised by marginalised groups, is productive and interesting, for it offers positions that force a reconsideration of the norms of American history and its representations. For example, Gloria Anzaldua, Chicana, lesbian, living on the borderlines, in every sense of the phrase, sees America as 'a place of contradictions' and she is 'at the juncture of cultures' which is 'not a comfortable place to be'. Yet it is still a place of possibility, where 'languages cross-pollinate and are re-vitalized; they die and are born' (Anzaldua 1987: Preface). Like America itself, the borderlands, unfixed and fluid, permit 'one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity . . . to swim in a new element' (ibid.). Here exists a hybrid place, for the 'new mestiza', as she terms it, where multiplicity is encouraged, rather than curtailed, in the creation of a collage-like new subjectivity.

The possibilities of a hybrid America may, however, only be another version of the old migrant dream. The journalist and poet Reuben Martinez writes of his hope that 'the many selves can find some kind of form together without annihilating one another' and that the warring selves within himself might 'sign treaties' (Martinez 1992: 2). And yet, he recognises the reality of contemporary America resists such a coming together, replacing it with something 'like a crucifixion – each encounter signifies a contradiction, a cross: the contrary signs battle each other without end' (ibid.). This is 'anything but a multicultural paradise' (ibid.) with cultures in cities like Los Angeles in violent struggle, but he still longs for some sense of 'new subjectivity', like Anzaldua. For him, it is signified in the search for 'the home' and for 'a one that is much more than two . . . North and South in the North and in the South' (ibid.: 2–3). Ultimately, in his migratory American life there can be no idealised, fixed, promised land, but instead an ambivalent 'jumble of objects is as close as I get to "home"' (ibid.: 166).

CONCLUSION

'Where do you come from?'
'What's the difference, I'm here now.'
(woman in Louis Malle's *And the Pursuit of Happiness*, 1986)

Louis Malle, the French film director, made a fictional film in 1985, *Alamo Bay*, about a Galveston Bay fishing community beset by migrant Vietnamese who had fled their war-ravaged country to live in the USA.[5] The film dramatises the problems of new ethnic groups in America and brings out many of the nativist fears that have recurred throughout the nation's history. The white community feel threatened by the competition of Vietnamese fishermen and by the new faces and practices entering their neighbourhood, heightened by the confused aftermath of the Vietnam War. The involvement of the Ku Klux Klan further connects these contemporary events with earlier ethnic and racial conflicts in America and suggests the persistence of deep-seated fears of the outsider and the alien in American life. A year later, Malle made a complementary documentary about new immigration to America called *And the Pursuit of Happiness* in which he emphasised the persistence of the immigrant dream. The film ranges across myriad ethnic groups who straddle various cultures and demonstrates through interviews and reportage their aspirations and their doubts about the country. In one scene, Malle, himself a migrant, meets a group of mixed immigrants who have established their own company in Dallas, Texas. Appropriately the firm is the 'Liberty Cab Company', with drivers from Kurdistan and Ethiopia, and a manager from Ghana, who had established a democratic cooperative with share-ownership amongst the 130 drivers. Contained in this scene are the persistent signs of the immigrant dream of America as a place of possibility, a vision, it would appear, undeterred by the experiences of others before them who may not have succeeded. Although Malle's film is far from celebratory, it does, however, suggest the resilience of the beliefs that pulled people to America from its very beginnings.

In an equally revealing moment in the film, an Asian family are shown with a Hindu temple and a barbecue pit alongside each other in their home, as if to present visually what the father explains on camera, that they 'have two cultures and . . . can choose the best from it' in order to create their new and better lives. Another Asian American, the writer Bharati Mukherjee has made a similar point, arguing that America is a place where she could choose 'to discard that part of my history that I want, and invent a whole new history for myself' (Lauter *et al.* 1994: 3103).

Perhaps such comments reveal little except the power of myths to remain in the human consciousness, or perhaps they offer proof that America is, and always has been, an impossible place to define, its many

peoples recognising or imagining it in their own ways and for their own desires. All this seems to confirm that 'cultural identity ... has always been an amalgam of disparate and heterogeneous parts, the plural traditions of different peoples and groups whose complex and shifting interactions make up the actual shape of what we then imagine as a nation' (Bammer 1994: xv). In America this has been a more heightened mix, coming together over a briefer span of history and under constant scrutiny with some still asserting that the reassertion of group identity and 'difference' threatens the national project of *e pluribus unum* as a source of national stability and progress. Such a 'threat' was the 1990 report by a task force set up by the New York Commissioner of Education on 'Minorities: Equity and Excellence', which argued that African Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos were victims of an intellectual and educational oppression with damaging psychological and social consequences. Its response was to call for a culturally diverse education in which due attention was paid to the experiences of those who have tended to be left out of the main narrative of American history. Such opposing views once again call attention to the way in which attempts to come to terms with definitions of America have to steer a path between the concept of 'one' and the concept of 'many'. Does the renewed attention to ethnic diversity threaten the balkanisation of the United States, by damaging the 'brittle bonds of national identity that hold ... society together'? (Takaki 1994: 298). Or does the call for a reassertion of older concepts of national identity only encourage those politicians of the 1990s like Pat Buchanan who talk about reclaiming 'our country' and 'our culture' from the forces which threaten it? What may be necessary here is to devise a framework for exploring questions of national identity which acknowledges that, whatever their differences, the citizens of the United States are all Americans, but at the same time is prepared to acknowledge both that there are many justifiable approaches to explorations of ethnic pasts and presents, and that these pasts must be explored in relation to each other within the context of the history of the nation. As a recent study of ethnicity in America put it:

> A newly emergent American identity must acknowledge and empower difference without breaking under its weight. In rethinking our complex multicultural past, we need to address issues of distortion and erasure, of shared myths and attitudes, even as they are interrogated, separately and together, by race, immigration, and ethnicity.
>
> (Singh *et al.* 1994: 25)

Ultimately, however, America will continue to be a place to which people migrate, both legally and illegally, and therefore will remain in a constant

balance between assimilation and pluralism, with these newcomers learning that to be American is, above all, to be 'an incomplete identity' (Shenton 1990: 266).

NOTES

1 From J.P. Shenton, 'Ethnicity and Immigration', in Foner (1990: 251).
2 Issues which are raised in this chapter are also relevant to our discussions about ethnic relations in Chapter 3 on African Americans.
3 It has been suggested that ethnic Americans can be seen as belonging to one of four groups:

(a) 'total identifers' to an ethnic group;
(b) partial identifiers who select their connections to the ethnic group;
(c) 'disaffiliates' who have broken away from their ethnic roots; or
(d) 'hybrids' who are mixed or blended between worlds. (Mann 1992: 89–90)

Although these categories are limited, they do show the importance of the position of immigrant groups within larger arguments about the nature and construction of American identity.

4 This phrase is taken from Sollors (1989: xvii) in a discussion of the work of Virgil Elizondo.
5 The increasing number of Vietnamese entered America under the Orderly Departure Program, a 1979 agreement between the USA and Vietnam, which allowed 20,000 family members to enter annually. See T. Dublin (1993) *Immigrant Voices*, Chapter 10 for a Vietnamese immigrant story.

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FOLLOW-UP WORK

1 Consider the work of the film-maker Joan Micklin Silver. *Hester Street* and *Crossing Delancey* are both different types of film that address issues and tensions involved in the historical and contemporary processes of assimilation. Discuss the ways in which the films concentrate on the old and the new, ideas about 'American' values, marriage and gender.

Assignments and areas of study

2 (a) How helpful is the distinction between 'old' and 'new' immigrants in explaining the history of American immigration?
(b) Examine, through the use of different Native-American texts, how the importance of story-telling is related to ethnic identity and continuity.
(c) Examine the distinctive features of community life in the Jewish ghettos of American cities in the early twentieth century. (You may, if you wish, substitute another immigrant group for the Jews, for example, Chicanos.)
(d) Examine the origins, aims and policies of the 'Americanisation' movement in twentieth-century America.
(e) Examine the experience of any one significant group of contemporary immigrants in the US as represented in both first-hand accounts and how these have been represented in film. See T. Dublin (1993) as a source, alongside films such as *Alamo Bay, Avalon, East L.A., Mississippi Masala.*