Roundtable: The National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity

Sheldon Hackney, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and a historian of the United States, launched “The National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity” in 1993, shortly after his appointment by President Clinton. It could be said that life in the United States has always had as a central theme an unofficial conversation about who “we” are as a people and as a nation. Historians who reconstruct that conversation have become increasingly critical of it, for to the modern ear the advocates and supporters of unum in our national past have too often seemed to sing an exclusionary song. It took some courage for historian Hackney to sponsor an NEH-led reinvigoration of the debate about the balance we should strike between pluralism and unity. He was moved to propose this National Conversation by rancorous disputes in the 1990s over multiculturalism and bilingual education, by the battles over the image of our past as expressed in the aborted Enola Gay exhibit, the proposed National History Standards, and “the long list of public-policy issues whose resolutions will be driven by notions of national identity”: race-conscious congressional districting, affirmative action, immigration. “It is time to look again into the national mirror,” he concluded, at a time when many sense a crisis in the civic conception of American identity in a nation experiencing the highest levels of immigration in almost a century. Can we still be confident of the cohesive power of the unum in our national motto, E Pluribus Unum?

Hackney reports on the results of the National Conversation in the essay that follows, a version of an address he has presented around the country since late 1995. (This particular version of the address was delivered at Texas Christian University on April 10, 1996.) Discussions over what Americans have in common led inevitably to historical themes, to our inheritance of forming a nation of diverse elements often in conflict. In a packet prepared to assist group discussion, participants were invited to think again about the insights into American identity of George Washington and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, of Mary Antin and W. E. B. DuBois, and were asked to clarify the meanings of pluralism and multiculturalism and the space they left for unum.

Whatever future historians think of our own era, Hackney concludes from the NEH Conversation that there is in the American society a broadly
shared conception of "an inclusive historical narrative, ... a common story" retaining the power to sustain national cohesion.

The tensions between the surging, fragmenting stories of America's pluribus and the public desire for a larger, unifying narrative have had special impact on historians active in the public realm, particularly those working in museums, historical societies, and historic sites. The Public Historian has invited several historians engaged with public audiences to respond to and comment on Hackney's summation of this important NEH initiative.

—THE EDITORS

The American Identity

SHELTON HACKNEY

Speaking at the University of Texas on October 16, 1995 in the wake of the racially disparate reaction to the jury verdict in the O. J. Simpson murder trial, and on the same day as the Million Man March in Washington by black men for "atonement and reconciliation," President Clinton called upon Americans of all races "to clean our house of racism." "We must be one," he asserted, "... all of us, no matter how different, who share basic American values and are willing to live by them." Then, recalling the moments of crises from America's past, when the nation "had the courage to face the truth about our failure to live up to our own best ideals," the president said the country became stronger by becoming more inclusive. "At each of these moments, we looked in the national mirror and were brave enough to say, 'this is not who we are; we're better than that.'"

"This is not who we are." Well, who are we? That is the question, and it is a crucial question. Who we think we are shapes what we do. Archibald MacLeish, in an essay published in 1949, wrote, "The soul of a people is the image it cherishes of itself; the aspect in which it sees itself against its past; the attributes to which its future conduct must respond. To destroy that image is to destroy, in a very real sense, the identity of the nation, for to destroy the image is to destroy the means by which the nation recognizes what it is and what it has to do."

Small wonder, then, that in recent months we have witnessed rancorous public disputes about the image of our past: the aborted Enola Gay exhibit, the canceled American history theme park by Disney near Manassas, the proposed National History Standards, and perhaps the attempted abolition of the National Endowment for the Humanities itself. The question posed

SHELTON HACKNEY is chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities. This version of "The American Identity" was delivered at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas, on April 10, 1996.
by those disputes is, “Who owns history?” Who controls our collective image of ourselves? Who is authorized to tell the country “what it has to do” by holding up the national mirror?

By now we can all recite the litany of domestic social ills threatening our sense of well-being: we are also feeling the anxieties of an ill-defined “new world order” that have replaced the ironically comfortable certainties of the Cold War; we are painfully aware of the deprivations the global market place is visiting upon the domestic economy; we have seen the polls indicating that most Americans (70 percent in an April 1996 survey) think the country is “on the wrong track,” that the younger generation will have a much more difficult time realizing “the American dream” than their parents, that the members of each racial group in distressingly high percentages hold negative stereotypes of the members of each of the other racial groups in the American population; and we have heard critics as diverse as Cornel West and William Bennett declare that America is in a spiritual crisis.

Furthermore, there is a long list of public-policy issues whose resolutions will be driven by notions of the American identity: race-conscious congressional districting, affirmative action, immigration, bilingual education, English as the official language, Afrocentric curriculums, teaching values in schools, and perhaps such indirect matters as welfare policy, urban policy, and public education itself. It is time to look again into the national mirror. The National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity, a project of the National Endowment for the Humanities, does just that. It invites diverse groups of Americans to come together—by teleconference, on the internet, through the radio, in face-to-face discussion groups—to talk and to listen to each other about what holds us together as a country, about shared values in a heterogeneous society, about common commitments in a society that contains all the divisions of race, ethnic identity, and religion that are the source of sectarian violence in almost every other quarter of the globe, about the unum in our national motto, E Pluribus Unum.

The National Conversation has been underway for only a few months, so the projects are still in their early stages. On the other hand, the Conversation was two years in the making, and I have traveled all over the country talking about it, conducting trial conversations, seeking advice, and listening to Americans respond. There are already lessons that can be drawn from it. This, then, is an interim report.

The first thing to be said is that Americans are eager for the National Conversation. They may be a little puzzled at first if the subject is defined in its most abstract form, but the feeling of social fragmentation, of people drifting apart from one another, is very much on their minds, so they recognize the topic and understand its purpose. In addition to describing the project to dozens of audiences and seeking the advice of a score or more of interested groups, I conducted six “pilot conversations” in communities that differed in geography, ethnic composition, and economic base. The groups were composed of diverse cross-sections of their communities and of people who had not known each other previously. In each case, the groups spontaneously asked at the end of the evening if there was a way they could come back together to continue the discussion. This was a testament to the recognition of the importance of the topic, its protean nature, and also to the reality that it takes some time before participants begin to trust each other enough to express something of their deeper feelings, fears, and dreams.

There are, of course, flash points and dead ends to worry about in these discussions, but the conversation has an integrity and a currency that draws people along with it across the tiger pits of discord and suspicion. Perhaps a few vignettes from some of the discussions I have led will hint at the rewards and lessons of the conversation.

I went for my first “pilot conversation” to Garden City, Kansas, a remote “meat factory” town in the middle of the prairie. There, physically tough, low-wage jobs in the slaughter houses have attracted recent Hispanic and Asian immigrants, making the small town quite diverse. The group that gathered at the public library was as diverse as the town, but the conversation went smoothly. They talked of tolerance, the rewards of pluralism, the challenge of equal opportunity, and the ideal of democracy. There were very few points at which tensions could be observed. At the conclusion, after the

1. The NEH has awarded $1.75 million for 38 projects through the special grant competition, and $5.4 million for 37 additional projects that competed in our regular programs but are substantially related to the theme of the National Conversation. A film that is still in preparation and a small amount of extra funding for the state humanities councils are extending the conversation even more broadly. The cumulative total of projects funded through November 1995 is 1,540 “conversations” in 224 cities and towns in 41 states.

2. There are certain criticisms that the National Conversation has had to face. Critics on the Right accused it of being a covert effort to impose a multicultural ideology on a naïve public. Critics on the Left suspected that it was a camouflaged attempt to reimpose a pre-1960s Anglo-American version of the American identity. Some said there is no real problem in the United States, so why talk? Others insisted that the nation state is archaic and the source of much human misery, so we should be talking about cosmopolitanism. The search for cohesion is fundamentally misguided, another argument insisted, because it would deprive “the Other” of the right to a nonconforming identity. If the conversation is in English, isn’t that already an oppressive statement? Talk is like embrazas and doesn’t need subordinating, ran one line of criticism, missing the distinction between idle chatter and a purposeful humanities conversation based on a text. What will you do, asked journalists circling like vultures over the cultural battlefield, when people start shouting at each other rather than talking to each other? Indeed, was not the subject so charged with emotion that talking about it might make it worse? Despite these attempts to make the National Conversation seem controversial, it has enjoyed an enthusiastic reception by humanities and public-interest groups and by the general public.

3. With financial and logistical assistance from the MacArthur Foundation, we brought together in Chicago a group of scholars to help us sharpen our focus, define our questions, and explore the subject. They were enormously helpful. They were: William Galston, Henry Louis Gates, Nathan Glazer, Amy Gutmann, Bennett Jules-Rosette, Stanley Katz, Martin Marty, Martha Minow, Martha Nussbaum, Diane Ravitch, Renato Rosaldo, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Richard Sennett, Catherine Stimpson, Remond Strickland, Ronald Takaki, Michael Walzer, Iris Marion Young, and Jamil Zainaldin. James Q. Wilson could not attend that meeting but participated in other ways and provided a short essay for the resource kit. The resource kit is available from the NEH, phone 1-800-NEH-1121.
discussants had all left, I asked the host if I had heard an honest discussion. "Yes," he said, "but at its most polite level." I had, he thought, heard what the group thought would make their community look good in the eyes of a visitor, especially a visitor from Washington. I was disappointed. Crushed might be a more accurate word. My long years of experience as a teacher had failed me.

On the way home on the plane, however, I began to think of the conversation in a slightly more positive way. This diverse group, after all, when it wanted to present itself in the best possible light, had reverted to a set of civic values that the town may not have lived by but which they recognized as shared ideals—"our own best ideals," as the president said. True, they had not been able to talk candidly in front of a stranger about how they fell short of their ideal, but they held in common a notion of civic virtue that was inclusive and tolerant and based on equal access to justice and opportunity. I felt a little better, demonstrating perhaps the power of rationalization.

I traveled not long after that to Detroit and spent a wonderful evening talking about America with a group that was racially and ethnically very diverse, but was generally well educated and prosperous. The group was not shy, but it found itself agreeing in short order with a particularly articulate Euro-American man who argued that the essence of Americanism was a reliance on the Constitution and the political system it defined, along with a commitment to equal individual opportunity, self-reliance, and maximum individual freedom. When it became clear that a surprising agreement had been reached, one of the group looked around and said, "I wonder if the underclass would agree with us?" The ways in which opportunity is structured by class almost always came up in these discussions, along with other social-justice issues.

In Boston, I found myself engaged with a group that was not designed to be a pilot conversation but nonetheless fell naturally into a feisty discussion of the American identity. After that discussion had been boiling along for a while, a young Latino activist was recognized, looked steadily around the big table, and said in a voice full of challenge, "I am not an American. There is nothing about me that is American. I don't want to be American, and I have just as much right to be here as any of you." What an American thing to say—squarely in the great tradition of American dissent. He was affirming his American identity even as he was denying it. I think he was also launching a preemptive strike against the threat of exclusion by declaring that he did not want to be included, and he was announcing that his pre-American identity was very important to him and he did not want America to deprive him of it.

I was conversing in Oklahoma City long before it became a national symbol for both the cynicism that is corroding American democracy and for the kind of communal solidarity in the face of catastrophe that is the antidote to our cynicism.

In Oklahoma City, after much talk of grievances held by various American groups, as well as about the ideals of equal opportunity and equal justice, a Chinese-American man told his story. He had been born and raised in China and had been fortunate enough to have been sent by the government to the United States to get his Ph.D. Like a lot of his compatriots in that first wave of Chinese students, he defected. He stayed in America and now is a college teacher. For a long time, he said, he thought that for him the appeal of the United States was the higher standard of living, the material comforts it afforded. Then, he told us, he began to realize that what he valued most in his new American identity was freedom. "Here," he said, "no one tells me where I must live, what job I can have, what I can read, what I must think, what I can say, how many children I can have."

Houston is an interesting city because it does not have a racial majority. It is about a third Anglo American, a third African American, and a third Hispanic. The group that came together to discuss the meaning of being American represented those major communities plus the smaller Asian-American portion of the population. At one point, after the group had been discussing family and how America viewed older people, a Vietnamese American made a powerful point through a poignant autobiographical statement. In all cultures influenced by Confucian thought, he said, family is the highest value, and older people are revered as being wise and deserving honor.

He had thus devoted his life to his family. He had risked everything to escape Vietnam, and he had managed against great odds to get his family to the United States. Once in Houston, he had worked very hard to earn a living in a strange land. He was now teaching English as a second language to mostly Chicano young people (prompting me, from Yogi Berra's famous response to the news that a Jew had been elected Mayor of Dubon, "Only in America"), and he devoted all his resources to his family. By working very hard and saving, he had managed to provide a good education for his two daughters. They had just graduated from college and had gotten good jobs, but, he said with resignation more than anger in his voice, "They do not bring their money home!" That is, they were not pooling their money with his as if they were part of the family unit. What he was really saying, of course, was that his daughters had become individualistic Americans while he was still culturally Vietnamese.

In Lawrence, Massachusetts, a Cambodian American and a Vietnamese American argued over the value and wisdom of bilingual education. The Cambodian American took his daughter out of the program after the second year because, according to him, she could read neither Cambodian nor English. One inferred from all he said, however, that he was very intent on blending into his new surroundings. On the other hand, the Vietnamese American was pleased with the same program because he thought it was very important for his children to maintain their cultural identity. Among the other reasons he cited for this was the fact that he had gotten an
enormous amount of help from the Vietnamese community in getting started after his immigration. The ethnic community as a support group is an old story in America.

Out of all these conversations comes my sense that almost all Americans have an answer to the question of what it means to be an American, even though it may be somewhat inchoate until it is summoned up into full consciousness and tested. When examined, the question "Who are we?" turns out to be three related questions: (1) what principles of governance for our common life should we hold dear, (2) what widespread traits of character or typical behavior give evidence that we share ideals of admired behavior and definitions of unacceptable behavior, and (3) how do we think about or describe the whole, the "ONE," and what does that imply about who is really included in the nation. "How wide the circle of we?"

The answer to the question of what it means to be an American usually begins with a belief in the universal values expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, a belief that what keeps our differences from developing into major conflict is a shared commitment to the idea of democracy, an agreement about how to resolve our disagreements. "Civic nationalism," this is usually called, and it is the foundation of almost all popular conceptions of the American identity. The ever-changing size and shape of the gap between aspiration and achievement is a central theme of American history.

There are dilemmas, to be sure. For instance, Liberty and Equality sometimes pull in opposite directions, yet we are committed to both. For another instance, participants almost invariably expressed a desire to be tolerant of differences growing out of the cultural traditions or beliefs of another group; but some different practices are apparently too much to tolerate. The more obvious examples of this are polygamy, female genital mutilation, ritual drug use, the subordination of women, putting the health of children at risk because of a religiously based refusal to use modern medicine, and so forth. The problem comes when trying to define what class of things must conform to the moral judgment of the majority of citizens and what class of things can be allowed to be different. Cultures may be equally legitimate, but they are not equally admirable in every feature.

Assuming that this dilemma can be managed without rupturing the social bonds, the question then becomes, "Is civic nationalism enough to hold us together?" Most Americans with whom I have talked so far think that it is not, but they also believe that there is an American culture—"conventional ways of believing and behaving"—that is shared across regional, religious, ethnic, and racial lines. The problem is that for almost every trait one can cite as being characteristically American, there is its opposite as well. One can construct a veritable Yin and Yang of American culture.

Americans believe in equality and are instinctively suspicious of people who "put on airs." Yet Americans are also fascinated by celebrities. We love to see exceptional people do exceptional things, and we are just as eager to see them crash after attaining exalted heights. Icarus could be a naturalized American.

Americans proclaim that hard work is its own reward, but we are also constantly on the lookout for get-rich-quick schemes. From the gold rush to the land rush to their modern-day equivalents in Wall Street and Las Vegas, we think there must be a way to get rich without having to sweat. The lottery is a poor man's investment in the American Dream.

Americans thus may be motivated by greed, but we are also the most philanthropic people on the face of the globe. We are materialistic, but we have the highest percentage of church members among the developed industrial nations. New Age cults and mysticism thrive amongst people who are pursuing the main chance.

We are heterogeneous in almost every imaginable way, and tolerance of difference is thought to be a virtue; but we have sprouted the Ku Klux Klan, the Nation of Islam, Know Nothings, Anti-Masons, Militias, and assorted nativist groups.

Ninety percent of Americans describe themselves as middle class, and middle-class virtues are enshrined in our Puritan heritage. Yet we are also the land of instant gratification, of minute rice and fast food, of hot tubs and easy credit, of Hollywood escapism and theme-park fantasies.

We think of ourselves as practical and self-reliant people, but we have been host to more utopian experiments in communal living than any other nation on earth. That is what the Branch Davidians were doing in Waco, for instance.

Competition is such a natural thing to Americans that almost every activity is organized into a contest so that we can find out who is the best at it. On the other hand, our national imagination is full of the icons of cooperation: barn raisings and corn huskings, wagon trains going west and communities rallying in selfless solidarity after a hurricane or flood or terrorist's bomb.

Individualism is an American fetish, but our real genius is for large-scale organization—witness the transcontinental railroad and telegraph, corporate giants like IBM and GM, the winning of World War II, putting a man on the moon, and our devotion to team sports.

President Clinton in his Austin speech mentioned optimism as a traditional American trait, and he is certainly right, but there is also a long and honored tradition in Puritan America of the Jeremiad. Cassandra is frequently found as the author of a book on the best-seller list.

I believe that it is virtually impossible to tell which one or the other member of these antipodal pairs is more typical than the other. The pairs indicate fault lines in the culture, locations where there is active stress. They are interesting for that reason.

Bearing in mind the questionable claim of such cultural traits to being
useful in distinguishing Americans from others, it is nonetheless interesting to know how Americans think of themselves. Participants in the National Conversation mentioned not only the foregoing traits but a number of other characteristics they thought were especially American: a high value placed upon free speech and the other individual freedoms protected by the Bill of Rights; a tendency to favor the underdog; a belief that people should have a second chance and that social mobility is a good thing; the expectation of progress and that "things should work"; the belief that striving for success is the normal condition of life, and that individuals are obliged to attempt to improve themselves and their circumstances; that choices should be available; that education is a ladder for social mobility; and that individuals have a duty to contribute to their communities.

When one moves from individual traits to the task of imagining the group, one discovers three conventional categories in use. Most writers agree that the dominant cultural style at least until the 1960s was Anglo American (growing out of British and later out of more general European heritage), and that members of other groups were expected to conform to it.

The social revolution of the sixties not only opened up the mainstream of opportunity to members of ethnic and racial minorities, but it replaced the notion of a single acceptable cultural style with a multiplicity of equally legitimate cultural heritages, an orientation known as pluralism. By then the theory of pluralism, rooted in the work of Horace Kallen and popularized first by Randolph Bourne, was half a century old.

The idea of America being a melting pot has existed since Hector St. John de Crevecoeur defined "this new man, this American" during the Revolutionary struggle, but it did not become popular as a goal of social policy until Israel Zangwill's play in 1908 struck a responsive chord amidst the anxieties about the lack of social cohesion resulting from the flood of immigration from eastern and southern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Anglo conformity does not work as a model because it does not allow the sort of dual and mixed identities that many Americans want, and because it denigrates the non-European heritages of many Americans. The melting-pot metaphor provides for the huge amount of assimilation that has actually gone on in the United States, but it does not accommodate itself to the huge amount of persistence of pre-American cultural identities that is also part of our reality. Not only do these pre-American cultural identities persist, but Americans want to maintain them and will resist any notion of Americanism that requires the obliteration of these identities of descent.

Cultural pluralism, on the other hand, comes in many forms, but in its most egalitarian form it does not recognize the historical fact of the primacy of British, European, and Western Civilization's cultural parentage. All heritages are equally legitimate, but all were not equally influential. Furthermore, there is a separatist version of pluralism that views the United States as simply a holding company for a collection of nations, an umbrella organization for diasporic national fragments whose members get their identities from, and owe their loyalties to, non-American states. Such a vision of America is seen as a worrisome deviation by most Americans. Even more important, pluralism in any of its current guises does not provide for a shared American culture, an identity that all citizens have equal access to, an identity that actually exists and that most Americans want. For these reasons, existing forms of pluralism are inadequate. Americans seem to want a way to think about diversity that is not provided by any of these existing models but goes beyond them.

There is a new conception of the American identity that one can assemble out of the talk created by the National Conversation and out of recent scholarship. First, the new conception is rooted in "civic nationalism," a shared belief in our democratic governance system and the universalistic values to which we committed ourselves in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Second, there is a sense that out of our history has come a set of meanings and attitudes and preferences and typical behaviors and tastes that amount to a national character. However difficult it is to specify it with accuracy, it is nonetheless real, and it is recognized by other Americans, and especially by foreigners encountering Americans.

Third, the new way of thinking about the American collectivity allows for both a common American identity and an identity of descent, and even a mixed or multiple identity of descent. It accommodates itself to the American devotion to mobility, both geographic and social. It permits change over time—change in the boundaries of identities and in the meaning of identities.
ties, as well as permitting the creation and demise of identities. It accounts for both assimilation and for the persistence of pre-American identities. Most important, it recognizes the hybridity of American culture. That is, it reflects the understanding that when various world cultures encountered each other in North America over long periods of time, the relationships were not simply those of dominance and submission but of mutual influence. The resulting American culture therefore may be built on a British and European base, but it is more accurately understood as a hybrid of many cultures, and that it is not identical to any of its root cultures.

The National Conversation about American Pluralism and Identity is roaring along now, so I invite you to join in. There is no more important topic before the public at this time. You may draw your own conclusions from the conversation, of course. The National Endowment for the Humanities only provides questions and stimulating reading lists. You provide your own answer.

My own belief is that there is a national identity that we can share in a way that brings us together so that we can more easily solve our common problems but that also honors our differences. Based in democracy, this identity guards individual rights but recognizes the need for a sense of duty to the community. I worry that rights-based individualism on the Left, and market-driven libertarianism on the Right, will leave insufficient room for a common vision for the common good. The question absent from our national catechism is, “What do I owe to my fellow citizens?”

I believe, further, that there is an inclusive historical narrative in which we all recognize not only the stories of our kith and kin but in which we acknowledge that we all are playing roles in a common story, in which we are all linked to each other across barriers of time and boundaries of race, in which we share the shame of our mistakes and the glory of our achievements, in which the meaning of America is to be found in the common ground of its aspirations of liberty and justice for all.

5. As David Hollinger writes in Postethnic America, “Postethnicity prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the normal life of a democratic society” (p. 116).

Postethnic Nationality and the Separatism of the Rich: A Response to Sheldon Hackney

DAVID A. HOLLINGER

SHELDON HACKNEY IS RIGHT to complain that too few Americans of today ask, “What do I owe to my fellow citizens?” The nation-state with the lowest taxation rate in the industrialized world is flooded with initiatives designed to make it even easier for relatively well-off Americans to diminish their commitment to the rest of the population. This “separatism of the rich,” as it might well be called, is a graver danger to national unity than is the cultural separatism advanced in the name of several ethno-racial communities. The latter dominates today’s talk about the pluribus and the unum, but the more subtle, economically defined separatism is displayed in a variety of settings. The downsizing of the federal welfare state by Congress is one; another is the rapid increase of walled-in and privately policed residential communities. Yet another is the recently publicized efforts of San Fernando Valley parents (largely white) to secede from the school district of Los Angeles in order that their taxes not be used to help finance schools in the southern portion of their own city (serving poor, largely black and brown children).

Hackney’s willingness to confront the economic matrix of the NEH’s National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity is altogether

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admirable, and sets Hackney apart from many widely quoted commentators on the cultural politics of the United States. Listening carefully to the talk of ordinary Americans in meetings he convened all around the country, rather than only to the familiar routines of the multiculturalists and their critics, Hackney found that one thing ‘almost always came up’: the role of ‘class’ in structuring the opportunities of individuals. We Americans are ‘increasingly aware,’ Hackney observes, that ‘people with more economic resources’ have ‘much more power’ than others to influence the course of a democracy designed to distribute power widely.

Hackney is correct, also, to regard as endemic to American politics a tension between our commitments to ‘liberty’ (which cannot help but allow the growth of inequalities) and ‘equality’ (which cannot help but impose some restrictions on liberty). It is in reference to liberty that the rich justify their separatism, whereas it is the interest of equality that their separatism can be restrained by the national community. And it is exactly at the point of negotiating the relationships between liberty and equality that ideas of national identity achieve their greatest political significance. Culture is a vital adhesive of the body politic.

Hackney’s recognition of the political and economic setting of the question of national culture makes me feel all the more honored that he counts me as one of the company of American intellectuals now formulating fresh ideas about American national identity. My book, Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (New York: Basic Books, 1995), did defend a vision of American national identity distinct from the three popular notions Hackney criticizes: Anglo-Conformity, Pluralism, and Assimilationism. I sought to develop a ‘postethnic’ perspective that would promote national solidarity while encouraging a variety of subnational and transnational affiliations. Given the widespread use of Postethnic America in workshops organized in connection to the National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity, I want to take this opportunity to sharpen some of the points I made in that book, hoping thereby to facilitate discussion.

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Debates about identity need a revised vocabulary so that participants can more easily clarify the issues. The multiculturalist movement is rent by an increasingly acute but rarely acknowledged conflict between ‘pluralist’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ defenses of cultural diversity, with the result that neither the speakers nor their audiences are always sure what policy is being advanced. Pluralism is more concerned to protect and perpetuate the cultures of established communities of descent, whereas cosmopolitanism encourages the voluntary formation of new communities of wider scope. Pluralism is more conservative in style: it is oriented to the pre-existing group and is likely to identify each individual with one ethnically defined community. Cosmopolitanism is more liberal in style: it is oriented to the individual, and expects individuals to be simultaneously and importantly affiliated on a voluntary basis with a number of groups (including civic and religious, as well as ethnoretical). Whereas pluralism and cosmopolitanism share a revulsion at the narrowness of Anglo-conformity, the two represent divergent responses masked by the vague term, ‘multiculturalism.’ The term ‘postethnic’ is more specific, and serves to flag the application of postethnic ideals in a specific historical context: the past generation’s greater appreciation for the value of ethnic connectedness. Postethnicity builds critically upon ethnicity, just as post-Marxism builds upon Marxism. Cosmopolitanism has sometimes been taken to imply a state of rootlessness, but the notion of postethnicity can convey the rooted cosmopolitanism now being advanced by many of today’s defenders of cultural diversity.

Active affiliation with communities of descent should be subject to revokable consent. This is to say that ethnoretical identity ought to be much more voluntary in the United States than most people now assume it to be. The point of this quintessentially postethnic sentiment is not to diminish those ethnoretical communities truly valued by their members, but to promote the perpetuation and critical renewal of exactly those communities of descent whose progeny choose to devote their energies to these communities even after having had opportunities to affiliate with other kinds of people. The principle of affiliation by revocable consent is a modest, choice-maximizing principle that sharpens the traditional, but often violated, American ideal that individuals are to be as free as possible from the negative consequences of ascribed social distinctions. Persons uncomfortable with communities of consent can be encouraged to think out and articulate the basis for their discomfort: do they really think that communities created by ‘blood and history’ are more authentic, and more worthy of defense, than are communities based on the will of their members?

The cultural diversity of the United States has been ironically obscured by the common, multiculturalist practice of limiting cultures to ethnoretical categories. Religiously defined cultures, for example, are a vital part of the cultural diversity of the United States, but religion has been almost entirely avoided by spokespersons for multiculturalism. The culture that has developed in relation to the American civic nation has also been given short shrift by a multiculturalist movement inclined to regard ‘culture’ as a synonym for race and ethnicity. The very notion of an American ‘national culture’ is too often dismissed as a racist conceit of European-Americans. Pluralism, as defined above, is inclined to see a national culture as a threat to the integrity of ethnoretically defined cultures, whereas cosmopolitanism more easily accepts the national community as one of several cultural units inspiring an individual’s engagement.

The role appropriate for ethnoretically defined communities in the United States might be clarified by exploring an analogy between these communities and religiously defined communities. The tendency to see ethnoretical groups in cultural terms creates the possibility for religious groups to claim
protections in the name of cultural diversity. The Amish already have such protections, and some evangelical Protestant voices have suggested that the church-state barrier should not be allowed to prevent tax-supported religious enclaving through schools. In this view, the blurring of the distinction between religious and ethnoracial cultures serves to make religious groups over in the contemporary image of ethnoracial minorities. But one can reason in the opposite direction, and apply to ethnoracial groups a religious paradigm in the context of the principle of the separation of church and state. Ethnoracial groups have come to play a role similar to that played by religious affiliations at the time of the founding of the republic and throughout most of American history; it follows, then, that some of the traditional, guarded-but-respectful attitude toward religious cultures might now be directed toward ethnoracial groups in their capacity as vehicles for culture. Ethnoracially defined cultures ought then to look after themselves much the way religiously defined cultures have been expected to do. Both can be construed as voluntary affiliations partaking more of the private than the public sphere, and ineligible to be beneficiaries of outright government subsidies. In the meantime, antidiscrimination remedies, including, perhaps, affirmative action, can continue to respond to the physical characteristics that identify potential victims of discrimination. A virtue of applying the religious paradigm to ethnoracially defined cultures is that a principle is created by which limits can be placed on the public sanctioning of ethnoracial cultural identity.

Even when ethnoracially defined cultures are discussed, today's basic categories derive from color, not culture, and serve to limit drastically the cultural diversity present in American ethnoracial communities. Americans of Japanese, Korean, or Bengali descent can all claim a more particular cultural inheritance than is conveyed by the label, "Asian-American." Distinctions of the same sort can be made within the European-American (Irish? Polish? Jewish?), Indigenous (Navajo? Sioux?), Latino (Cuban? Mexican?), and to some extent African-American (Caribbean?) blocs of the remarkable five-part demographic construct that dominates public discussion of diversity. There is plenty of culture within all parts of this "ethnoracial pentagon," much of it created under racist conditions, but the lines dividing the five blocs are not designed to recognize coherent cultures. These are the lines along which prejudicial treatment has traditionally taken place; Americans are encouraged to identify themselves with one or the other of the five standardized groups in order to facilitate antidiscrimination remedies. Multiculturalism has too often used the ethnoracial pentagon as a basis for organizing the defense of cultural diversity, with the result that the country has become saddled with a sense of diversity based not on any analysis of actual cultural difference, but on a history of victimization produced largely by what we now recognize to be biologically superficial differentiators of human groups. Hence the irony is that an ostensibly antiracist movement, multiculturalism, has reinforced in cultural terms the most gross and invidious of popular images of what makes human beings distinct from one another. The ethnoracial pentagon replicates the classic color codes—black, brown, red, white, and yellow. Multiculturalism has proved to be a deeply conservative movement in that it has failed to fight against the authority that physical characteristics have been allowed by society to exercise over culture.

Multiple identities and affiliation by revocable consent are being made more possible by the striking increase and visibility of Americans of mixed descent. A society greatly skilled at the denial of racial mixture now confronts it on a scale that threatens to diminish the strength of the five color-coded categories that make up the ethnoracial pentagon. The most notorious denial of racial mixture is the so-called one drop rule, according to which the slightest visible fraction of blackness is sufficient to cause an individual to be classified as an African American. This method for deciding who is black was developed and perpetuated by slaveholders and segregationists concerned to maximize their own power and to obscure from public recognition the sexual exploitation of black females by white men. Although the old rule is now defended by some persons advancing the welfare of African Americans, it has been brought under unprecedented critical scrutiny in the 1990s by writers of several colors. But the other five categories also serve to obscure the reality of mixed descent. Some Indian tribes require only a tiny fraction of "blood quantum" for membership. The demographic foundation of the Latino group is divided among people from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, and a variety of other Latin American locations, apart from the mixture of indigenous and Spanish ancestry that has also contributed to the instability of the Latino category. "Asian-American" is also a highly diverse category, within which some subgroups—especially Japanese Americans—now show an extremely high rate of out-marriage. What counts as "mixture" changes with time, as what were once "mixed marriages" involving Irish, Jewish, Polish, and other "European-American" ethnic groups are no longer so regarded, whereas marriages across the standard color lines continue to invite this label. To the extent that the ethnoracial pentagon diminishes its control over the self-image of Americans, the prospect of both national solidarity and a multitude of more genuinely voluntary cultural affiliations will increase.

The separatism of the rich and the separatism of diasporic ethnoracial groups reinforce one another, serving to make the proponents of each feel all the more distant from the other and more contemptuous of a nation-state that fails to call the other to account. The Latino activist quoted by Hackney as saying that he did not "want to be American" while asserting that he had as much "right to be here" as those who did feed this dynamic, as do the tax-cut activists who seek to curtail public services that provide the overwhelmingly nonwhite urban poor with a better chance at upward social mobility. The American nation-state is the ideal political agent of the American people as a whole, but it confronts a crisis created by two polar constituen-
African-American Museums and the National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity

JOCelyn Robinson-Hubbuch

African-American museums have been engaged in a lively conversation on the topic of pluralism for decades. Since at least the 1960s, these institutions have existed both as cultural touchstones for their communities and as museums in the more traditional sense. They have always held a dual responsibility to tell the African-American story while at the same time telling a broader American story.

At the core of every black museum is the preservation, interpretation, and celebration of African-American history and culture. But “American” cannot be removed from the context without changing it entirely. African-American museums—and other ethnic-specific institutions—provide opportunities for addressing this dual identity, an issue discussed at length in black American literature, philosophy, and scholarship.

Our ability to engage in any dialogue on the subject of American identity is tempered by our need first to know our “pre-American” identity. People

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stolen from their culture—or who have had their culture stolen from them, as in the case of Native Americans—are not always prepared to answer the larger question, who are we as Americans?

Shared values—nurturing and protecting our young ones, venerating our old ones for their wisdom and guidance, and through our traditions, learning, using, then passing on what we need to know—are the basic elements of the human condition that bind us one to the other. But what if my traditions are stripped or stolen? How can I participate in the conversation without them? What makes me an American when I didn’t ask to be an American? How do I embrace an American identity when I’m unsure what my own identity is? How do I know who I am?

African-American museums help to take the conversation out of the context of intellectual discourse and place it in an arena that engages the individual unprepared for thoughtfully posed questions and directed dialogue. And, as evidenced by the surge of interest in African-American tourism throughout this country, black people are actively seeking answers to the above questions and jumping into the conversation themselves.

How do we learn about who we are? Where does one learn that black cowboys provided a third of the labor force that drove the westward expansion? Certainly not from popular American culture. Try the Black American West Museum in Denver. What about the roles of African Americans in the labor disputes of coal-mining Appalachia? The African American Heritage Family Tree Museum in Ansted, West Virginia is a better source than history books. Did you know that early black entrepreneurs built stately homes and led lives of ease and repose? The Herndon Home in Atlanta is an eye opener for anyone whose image of Southern blacks consists solely of poor sharecroppers.

The black museum has become, in addition, a public forum for addressing that which is least comfortable about our collective past. Slavery, although a shared heritage, was not experienced in the same way by whites as by blacks. Nor was the Civil Rights Movement. Yet these subjects allow us to stimulate reconciliation and healing as well as self-knowledge, for black Americans and others who are touched by the common experience. Visit the River Road African American Museum in Gonzales, Louisiana, where you can contrast the lives of the plantation owners and of the slaves who were their “property.” The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute has become a mecca for all citizens of that city, and for others who travel there to remember, pay homage, and then move on.

The founding fathers who provided the framework for our democracy were slaveholders, and they never intended *E Pluribus Unum* to be inclusive of groups other than themselves; they certainly did not have in mind the racially and ethnically diverse nation we are today. That very democracy that created and continues to protect our individual freedoms was the historical basis for enslavement and exploitation. Assimilation has diminished the vibrant, self-reliant black communities of pre-integrated America. The Melting Pot, when the fire gets too hot, boils over into riot and civil unrest. Pluralism is at best a remedial tool that encourages a rediscovery of roots yet limits our ability to stand on common ground.

Thus the dialogue must continue in whatever form it takes, although it is as much an inner debate as anything else. Rather than consensus on what it is that makes each of us an American, we may find that it is our constant need for discourse that truly sets us apart from other nations. Talk may be cheap, but isolation and ignorance are far more costly than anyone can imagine.
Historical Records and the American Narrative

JOHN A. FLECKNER

Sheldon Hackney’s program for a national conversation about American identity and his own notions about the nature of that identity offer public history practitioners rich opportunities for reflection and participation. My comments—from the perspective of an archivist working in a museum setting—begin with the idea of shared authority for interpreting the past which undergirds the Conversation concept. They also address the role of the historical record (and its faithful administration) within the notion of “civic nationalism” and other aspects of Hackney’s formulations of an American national identity.

Hackney’s choice of “conversation” as a defining metaphor for the process of considering the troublesome topic of an American national identity is inspired. A familiar term from everyday speech, “conversation” implies the values of sharing, equality among participants, search for agreement, openness to and validity for varying points of view, and an open-ended, ongoing process. How different this is from “debate,” or even “discussion,” with their overtones of fixed positions, correct and incorrect answers, winners and losers, and fixed outcomes. And how different, too, this is from most historical presentation in which a disembodied author, curator, or voice-over narrator presents finely honed, inescapable conclusions from carefully selected supporting evidence.

Sheldon Hackney’s National Conversation, most literally, is an invitation for Americans to join one another in person-to-person conversation. But it

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also is an invitation for Americans to engage in a conversation with their past. Indeed, Hackney concludes his paper, and his case for a new conception of a national identity, by affirming his belief

that there is an inclusive historical narrative in which we all recognize not only the stories of our kith and kin but in which we acknowledge that we all are playing roles in a common story, in which we are all linked to each other across barriers of time and boundaries of race, in which we share the shame of our mistakes and the glory of our achievements, in which the meaning of America is to be found in the common ground of its aspirations of liberty and justice for all.

Hackney’s vision, to the degree that it inspires us, also is a profound challenge. As historians, of course, we must contribute to the creation and dissemination of that narrative, through scholarly work and in public presentation. The validity of our narrative will rely, in part, on its truthfulness to the historical record but also on the diversity of the record from which we draw our truths. As archivists, our task is to assemble a record that will speak to the diversity and “hybridity” of the historical experience in America.

A further challenge is implied in Hackney’s affirmation. Whereas professional historians, public and academic, will contribute much to this inclusive narrative, in the end Americans must create and internalize their own narratives. In this regard, our role as public historians is as much to enable and to encourage our audiences to undertake this history-making task as to do it for them.

This is not entirely unfamiliar ground for us, although frequently we are unreflective about these tasks. As archivists, we do teach formally the basics of documentary research and interpretation to students, genealogists, hobbyists, and a host of other researchers without (and sometimes with) formal training in historical methods. As oral historians we collaborate with historical actors in creating a record for the future. As museum curators we are bringing our audiences more actively into the process of creating exhibitions. We also are creating exhibitions, like the forthcoming (1998) introductory exhibit at the National Museum of American History, that will deal explicitly with topics of historical evidence, argument, and interpretation.

There are further implications for archivists in Hackney’s formulation of a concept of national identity which rests heavily on civic nationalism and on the acknowledgement of cultural diversity and hybridity.

First, we should recognize that among the civic values Americans widely share—if infrequently acknowledge—is a high respect for the integrity of the historical record. For the most part, Americans have confidence in the management of our archives, libraries, and museums (at least in their custodial roles). And although Americans may sometimes be stingy in their support of these institutions, generally the institutions have been kept free from the intense political and cultural partisanship and partisan interference that have undermined confidence in other American institutions. As keepers of the historical record in its many forms, we must continue not only to hone our technical skills but to maintain the highest ethical standards and to recognize the critical public role we are expected to fulfill. As we participate in the National Conversation, we also must continue to explore the meaning of the historical record not only to scholarship but to broader issues of national identity.

Second, archivists should welcome, encourage, and initiate efforts to document diverse aspects of the American past. We should recall that throughout the American experience, committed individuals and groups—based on locality, culture, economic and professional affiliation, and other factors—have invested in the preservation of their heritage in archives, museums, and other historical programs. If Americans are to develop a broad sense of national identity—like the one Hackney proposes—these institutions are the repositories of the raw materials from which “an inclusive historical narrative” will be derived.

Finally, a few words of personal response. Like many Americans who came to adulthood in the 1960s, I instinctively shun discussions of “national identity,” despite a lifelong professional career in American history. In part this has been in reaction to right-wing political forces who have wrapped themselves in “Americanism” and patriotism on behalf of such causes as the war in Vietnam, racial segregation, and English as an official language. Equally, it is a rejection of both the sound-bite political demagoguery of nationalism and its commercial appropriation. (Are Chevrolet trucks truly “the heartbeat of America”?) Sheldon Hackney makes a compelling case for overcoming this reluctance, or this self-indulgent abstention, to consider what it means to be American. He does so, in part, by demonstrating the significance of the issue to current public-policy debates. But he also does so by creating the framework of a “conversation” bounded by values of civility, inclusiveness, acceptance of tentative answers, and openness to exploration. Here I can feel comfortable with my own typically American “antipodal pairs” of ethnic and mainstream identifications, mainstream and fringe political beliefs, and the like. In sum, the national conversation is an opportunity and invitation to join our professional and private lives in an undertaking of truly lasting national significance.
Historical Interpretation, Popular Histories, and the National Conversation

WALTER W. WOODWARD

Although public history has a central role to play in helping locate the common ground underlying our country’s current cultural battle fields, engaging museum visitors in historically focused public discussion faces formidable challenges. The National Conversation themes of American pluralism and identity are complex. Many visitors are initially reluctant to express personal opinions before strangers, and—probably the most important issue for public historians—most are inclined to “historical difference.” Unsure of his or her own historical knowledge, the average person tends to refrain from making historical comparisons for fear of saying something inaccurate.

Colonial Williamsburg’s contribution to the National Conversation successfully addressed these challenges by presenting history in a medium familiar to most Americans—one that inherently encouraged group participation while providing clearly understood expectations of the audience’s performative role. The Prime Time History Hour simulated a live television talk show, complete with warm-ups, stage managers, host, commercial breaks, and spirited audience response. The program’s guests, however, were unique: colonial Virginians (portrayed by character-interpreters)

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whose eighteenth-century conflicts and interactions (revealed through documentary research by Colonial Williamsburg historians) provided thought-provoking comparisons to contemporary social issues. The themes of their colonial conflicts underscores—social equality, individual opportunity; personal freedom and responsibility; and family structure and values—were selected because they were considered gateways to the National Conversation's goal of finding the unum in the American pluribus.

The program drew audience members into conversation through a three-stage process. First, the host interviewed the colonial guests, to reveal their historical background and conflicts. Then the audience questioned the guests, to probe their positions and challenge their viewpoints. Finally, the eighteenth-century guests were excused from the stage, and the host facilitated an audience discussion of what the historical presentation revealed about contemporary society and national identity.

In forty performances, the *Prime Time History Hour* played to nearly 9,000 visitors. They were a predominantly well-educated, predictably middle-class museum-going population, but regionally, chronologically, racially, and politically, they were quite diverse. Their enthusiasm for the program confirms Hackney's observation that Americans are eager for the National Conversation. Although—or perhaps because—these Americans seemed to have wavered confidence in the current ability of our national institutions to unite us as a people, participants willingly, often eagerly, joined in the quest to reveal the foundational values that Americans share.

The way in which our audiences employed history in their analyses is revealing, slightly disturbing, and, for the public historian, rich with opportunity. The teleological public interpretation of American history ("how America got to be the greatest nation on earth!") remains strong, especially among the generations of Americans who were alive at the end of World War II and who were adults when Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon. But that interpretive stance is challenged by a tautological, nearly ahistorical outlook, more prevalent among a younger generation of visitors. In this view, history reflects merely endless repetition of present problems. ("Nothing really changes. "It's the same now as it was then," "History just keeps repeating itself.") In applying historical analysis to present issues, many program participants reacted only to the continuities between past and present, glossing over profound differences that could be—should have been—the most revealing.

This self-reflexive contemporary disengagement with historical difference in favor of an "eternal present"—this view of the past as an inverted rerun of today—may help explain the intensity of the current national angst. It is something public historians should, I think, actively work to dispel. The problems we wrestle with as a nation may be chronic, but the state of those problems is dynamic.

The best service we may be able to provide the National Conversation, and the nation, is to consciously and clearly make comparisons between the present and the past, underscoring the differences embedded in the apparent continuities, and invite visitor participation in assessing how those changes affect public expectation for the future.

From there, a clearer picture of what truly unites us as a nation may emerge.

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1. The program discussing social equality, for example, had as guests Thomas Jefferson, one of Virginia's largest slaveowners; Samuel Howell, a runaway slave whose suit for freedom Jefferson had tried pro bono (and lost); William Pittman, a small farmer headed for the gallows for beating his slave to death; and Ann Wager, a widow who had acquired certain rights and privileges following her husband's death that were denied her when married.
Now That We Know
Who We Are

DARLENE CLARK HINE

I WELCOME THE OPPORTUNITY to commend Sheldon Hackney for his important work as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities during what appears to be a particularly cynical and reactionary period in our nation's history. His timely call for a National Conversation on the meaning of American identity has generated much-needed reflection on the kind of society in which we would like to live. I am encouraged that so many citizens took advantage of this unique opportunity to speak, and more significantly, to be heard by our political, educational, and cultural leaders. For too long those in positions of power and trust have operated under perceptions and ideals framed within their own limited hierarchical locations. This National Conversation rightly deserves to be heralded as a significant contribution to the ongoing democratization of America. The inclusive nature of this conversation exemplifies the ideas inherent in the founding documents of our civilization—the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. I am certain that all would agree that the national dialogue provided a healing alternative to the divisiveness rampant in our society. If nothing more, the National Conversation reaffirms our collective commitment to the relentless search for social justice and our faith in the principle of equality of opportunity. I applaud Chairman Hackney for creating a space in which we could celebrate the distinctive contributions and opinions of all who have made America what it is today.

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Now that I have underscored the importance of Hackney’s National Conversation, permit me to reflect on my decade-long conversation with African-American women in the Middle West. I write from the perspective of a black woman historian who has enjoyed a long and productive relationship with the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 1981 the NEH awarded me a generous $150,000 grant to launch the Black Women in the Middle West Project. This project created a Black Women’s History Archive and amassed over 300 collections of manuscripts and documents pertaining to the lives of ordinary black women in the region. The results of this collection are housed in the Chicago Historical Society and in the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis. Over a period of eighteen months I traveled throughout Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin, speaking to over 1,500 men and women from every stratum in our society. But it was the black women who spoke most eloquently and passionately about the importance of history and the necessity to construct individual and group identities as citizens of specific states as well as American citizens.

For eighteen months fellow historian Patrick Biddleman and I arranged dozens of workshops that featured several local black community women whom we called our “voices of experience.” What I learned from listening to the stories of their lives and struggles shaped an understanding of how they defined themselves as Americans and why they considered the reconstruction of American history along more inclusive lines to have such urgency. The black women wanted it to be known that they had provided care and resources to those less fortunate than themselves. They wanted historical records to reflect that they had created and sustained important community institutions, including churches, day nursery associations, tuberculosis convalescent camps, boarding homes for girls, homes for the aged, and orphanages. They had sponsored lectures by noted black speakers and provided scholarships to encourage young black girls and boys to pursue college educations.

Thus, at a time when African Americans endured a strict, racially segregated social order, black women with limited power but abundant social skills and significant spiritual resources had, through persistent efforts, raised funds, supported causes, founded key institutions, and promoted the physical, mental, and social health of an oppressed people. Many of the earlier generation of community women could neither read nor write, but they, along with their more educated sisters, were determined to make life a little better simply because they cared. Some of the institutions founded at the turn of the century are still a treasured and integral part of our communities.

After years of reflection on this unique project and the priceless opportunity afforded to talk and work so intimately with thousands of ordinary Americans, I am even more grateful to the NEH. The project garnered a great deal of support, most notably from Indiana Senator Richard Lugar. Senator Lugar entered a statement into the Congressional Record on March 19, 1985, declaring that “black women have been the backbone of our society in so many ways, which will now be known.” I am left with the thought that African Americans are truly a historical people and that the romance of their history forms a vital part of the epic of America, an epic of endurance, of indomitable tenacity, and of triumph and survival over virtually insurmountable odds. I regret that so few African-American voices are heard in Sheldon Hackney’s recounting of national conversations with Americans.

Finally, the identity movements of the past two decades have given us a clearer picture of who we are and where we have come from, and a deeper appreciation of all our contributions to American society. Now that we know what we have collectively and individually placed on the table, it is time to decide the future of America grounded in large part on our commonalities and less upon the differences that divide us.
Immigrants in America

RUTH J. ABRAM

In looking for a thread strong enough to weave an unum out of the American pluribus, we need look no further than the experience of immigration. No matter how long rooted now, at some point in their past, the great majority of American families arrived here from some other country. Indeed, even Native Americans are now believed to have immigrated to this continent from Asia. Thus, the dislocation and disorientation associated with being a stranger in a new land is so imbedded in the collective American memory that it lends itself as a near perfect foundation upon which to establish our common ground. Further, if we act on our famed commitment to “rugged individualism” and express peculiar ideas or adapt idiosyncratic styles, we risk being relegated to the position of resident alien in our own communities.

In “Around the Kitchen Table,” the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s National Conversation Project, immigrants and migrants from nine nations gathered to consider what it means to be an American and further to consider their connection to earlier generations of immigrants to the Lower East Side of New York City. A video based on this dialogue will serve as the conversation starter for similar discussions in the neighborhood and at the museum among visitors.

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Participants in the conversation ranged in age from seventeen to ninety-two and traced their roots to North Carolina, the Dominican Republic, Greece, Hong Kong, Ireland, Mexico, the People's Republic of China, the former Soviet Union, and St. Lucia. Their dialogue began with a tour of the museum's nineteenth-century tenement building where they “met” immigrant families who resided there between 1863 and 1935. In the 1870s apartment, participants encountered the German Jewish Gumpritz family. In the Depression of 1875, Julius Gumpritz, a shoemaker, disappeared, leaving his wife to support their four young children. In the front parlor, the sewing machine, patterns, fabric, and work space for the daughters hint at how the Gumpritzes survived. In the Baldiszi family apartment, participants contemplated the cheese boxes that Sicilian-born carpenter Aldoph Baldiszi converted to planters for Morning Glories. According to Josephine Baldiszi Esposito, those boxes were furnished by Home Relief, which was initiated during the Great Depression. That fact prompted Lisa Cheng (Hong Kong, 1978) to recall the critical role Medicaid played in her family when her father became ill. Brendan Fay (Ireland, 1984), whose passport is stamped “resident alien,” identified with the Baldiszis’ love of the Italian music programs on the radio. “When I arrived, I used to tune in . . . to an Irish program every Saturday and Sunday that would provide advice on how to survive here. When I felt I had nobody, . . . I could sit and listen.” For Christine Li (China, 1993), it wasn’t the radio, but her high school’s Chinese Culture Club. Just as a German Jewish society had aided the Gumpritz family, this club offered Christine support in making the transition from Chinese to American culture, giving her “the confidence to continue to live in this country.” Solomon Kofinas (Greece, 1955) pointed to “fellow Greeks [who] put me in a rooming house and started looking for a job for me . . . in a restaurant washing dishes at night.” Lisa’s great uncle helped her family settle in Chinatown, finding a job for her father in a Chinese restaurant; her great aunt’s place in a garment factory for her mother. Susan Blanchard (St. Lucia, 1923) turned to an uncle and some of his friends from St. Lucia for her first job, in an embroidery factory. This and subsequent jobs in the garment industry, where she endured dreadful working conditions, turned Susan into an active union organizer. Rafael Guzman (Dominican Republic, 1965) reported a “very emotional” reaction to the tour of the historic tenement apartments, which reminded him of his first American abode. “My uncle and his wife lived in one apartment with five children. I could not understand where I had to sleep in the living room . . . on two chairs put together.” Rafael concluded, “The [earlier] immigrants had the same concerns, the same problems. It was very touching.”

Everyone had stories of initial disappointments, even though the expectations that the “streets are paved with gold,” had, as Maxim Dolgi (Moscow, 1991) explained, become just a metaphor for these media-wise immigrants. On the other hand, it was the media image of New York apartments which contributed to the difficulty of Lisa’s adjustment. In Hong Kong, the family had endured one-room living. Their New York tenement apartment was slightly larger, but the wiring was so outdated that it could not support a refrigerator or fan, much less a television. Yet Lisa, now a social worker, maintained that “if you work hard, there are lots of opportunities out there for you.”

Survival required surmounting the disappointments. That, in turn, required focus, keeping an eye on the main goals. To Brendan, Catholic and gay, America represented “a place where I could . . . breathe. It represented freedom and space, a place of innovation and change, new ideas and creativity.” For Maria Fierro (Mexico, 1980) and her parents, it was “a better life, better schools.” For José Gil (Dominican Republic, 1963), the golden apple was a professional education. For Maxim, America meant “freedom of expression, freedom to be all things at once and nothing at the same time.”

Many participants had been the object of prejudice and discrimination at home. Maxim’s Ukrainian heritage consigned him to a lonely childhood in Moscow among people who seemed angry at him “just for being.” Deriding him as a “Dominican York,” the Dominican government rejected José’s offer of his hard-won architectural skills. In Greece, upon discovering Solomon was Jewish, his employer dismissed him.

But it was the prejudice many participants had experienced in America that galled them most. Their image of America simply did not include discrimination. Solomon pointed out that so many had come to America precisely to escape prejudice and the limitations that imposed on their possibilities. So here, “we shouldn’t have to face discrimination again.” Rafael Guzman added, “If we don’t find a way to stop it, we will destroy ourselves.” Susan Blanchard, who could remember organizing for the passage of anti-lynching legislation, concluded that the experience of being the object of prejudice was common “whether you’re black, white, pink or whatever.” “And that,” she declared “we can not tolerate. We have to fight. Don’t compromise. Keep fighting. Keep on keeping on.”

Everyone had advice for the prospective immigrant. Education and English were at the top of the list. “The opportunity to study in this nation has no comparison,” Rafael declared, urging newcomers to “take advantage of the system in a positive way.” José advised becoming “a full participant. Don’t cordon yourself off in a ghetto.” Brendan despaired of some Irish immigrants he knows who “will never leave the little Irish enclave.” Lisa spoke sadly of a relative who “doesn’t speak the language and can’t understand certain things [his son] does,” like wearing an earring. Because this relative was not “open to the American culture and language,” Lisa despaired of his ever adjusting.

As to the value of the dialogue itself, Rafael was certain, saying, “If we only would come to the table like this and understand each other. My value
might be totally different, but that doesn't mean it's bad or good. Just different. If we only could understand, all this fighting... could really stop."

"A dialogue like this," added Loraine, "is what it takes. Prejudice comes from fear. And when you understand a person and know more about him, [you know you have] nothing to fear from him. This type of thing has to happen more in this country."

The discussion of identity prompted Lisa to announce that she loved calling herself Chinese American. "It tells me I am an American, but yet, I still have my Chinese roots and I keep my culture. I have been educated in America, ... learn[ed] American values, and I strive for the American dream." Though born in North Carolina, Loraine Allbritton felt connected to the others' stories. The segregated south was "a different world altogether," Loraine said. "[Although I was born in the United States, I had that feeling of not really belonging because I did not know about my roots, my past, my language. We have been known as colored, Afro-Americans, Black, and Negro. When we became known as African Americans, I finally arrived. That gives me pride. It gives me background. The more I learn about my native land, the more I feel as if I am an American."

Lisa offered a particularly illuminating idea about what it means to be American. Known as Ying Fong in China and among her family, she is Lisa to Americans, who seem to have trouble remembering her Chinese name. Ying Fong and Lisa exist together, in the same young woman. "I don't find myself giving up anything to be an American. I just add."

The Tenement Museum staff involved in the "Kitchen" have led hundreds of American visitors through the historic immigrant apartments. Rarely does a tour conclude without visitors marveling aloud at the grit and determination of the earlier immigrants and expressing doubt over whether they possess the same fortitude themselves. In this dialogue, we were privileged to meet the nation's newest arrivals who exude that very same determination. When invited to make a closing remark, seventeen-year-old Christine Li, daughter of peasant farmers, looked directly at the camera and said, "I would like to thank my parents for [brining] me here. I would like to continue my education and enjoy my life in the United States and do my best and make myself successful." In America, she believes this is possible.

Horatio Alger Meets Paco

THOMAS E. CHÁVEZ

THE QUESTION OF WHAT WE citizens of the United States have in common begs us to understand our differences, for in our commonality we gloss over differences and even become condescending to parts of the whole. For example, we call ourselves "American" but chauvinistically assume that the term means that we are from, or citizens of, the United States. A more obvious but less understood implication of the term is that we are different from our European forebears, primarily the English, whose land is considered our "mother country."

Yet in the Hispanic world, America is a name for one continent that includes North and South America. American is a term that generally applies to those people who live on the continent, especially since the Europeans arrived. Descendants of Europeans, because of their New-World experience, historically have used the term to delineate their difference from Europeans.

But American also refers to those people who were here earlier, as in Native Americans (replacing Indians). After the European encounter, these people became as different from their ancestors as their New-World European contemporaries did from earlier Europeans. American also includes the various mixtures of Europeans and Indians, including the generous addition of many African people and cultures. Americans are, in short, New-World peoples. They are something different from the old worlds they left behind.

The so-called American Southwest, and especially the state of New...
Mexico, offers an interesting example of the differences within our commonality. From Mexico’s point of view, this geographic area remains northern Mexico or la frontera, a concept which, to Mexicans, does not refer to the frontier or border but more to a place with a familiar history and culture.

Native Americans have been migrating into the area for over twelve thousand years; some groups have arrived as recently as 200 years ago. Other people of European, Indian, and African descent have been moving into the area from the south, beginning four centuries ago. North was to these people what west became to the United States. Thus these societies met in the present Southwest of the United States, carrying with them many remnants of the religious, social, as well as military rivalries of England and Spain that were so fierce in the sixteenth century. A sort of apex of their encounter came with what American history texts call the Mexican War (1846–1848), the result of which left most of the northern half of Mexico in the United States’ possession.

The military winners on this occasion were to continue a strong sense of social superiority that had roots far back in English history. Famous Civil War General William T. Sherman spoke out of this context when he addressed the citizens of Santa Fe, New Mexico with the following words in 1880: “I hope and pray that the next time I come here I shall surely find the old face of Mexicans ... improved—brought to a higher degree of improvement and cultivation.” He continued a tradition in which historian Francis Parkman had spoken of “the inexorable bigotry of Madrid . . . ever in advance of Rome,” and described Spain as “the incubus of Europe” that was “gloomy and portentous” and “the citadel of darkness.” The outlook stretched forward to historian Walter Prescott Webb, who wrote in 1931 that Spanish New Mexican colonial soldiers “came largely from Pueblo or sedentary Indian stock, whose blood when compared with that of the Plains Indians was as ditch water.” He went on to claim that “Mexican nature” had “a cruel streak” that, in part, was due to “the Spanish of the Inquisition [and] partly to Indian blood.” Within the last three decades Paul Horgan wrote in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book that prior to the American arrival in New Mexico, the area was “a land which for so long had lived on hearsay, with all its irreasolments.” Some American politicians echoed these same old sentiments in the recent, even current, debates about the North American Free Trade Agreement and immigration from Latin America.

Yet there was always another view of the Spanish inheritance that had come north to mix with the mostly English culture coming westward. The poet Walt Whitman wrote in 1853 that “no stock shows a grander historic retrospect [than the Spanish]—grander in religiousness and loyalty, patriotism, courage, decorum, gravity and honor.” Whether negative or positive toward the southern legacy, all of these attitudes express a view of our differences. We live at a geographic crossroads where many worldwide cultures converge, and we share a commonality as a people that is still developing. We are a people optimistic in a still new country, living under a system that continues to be experimental but that offers an alternative to the kinds of intolerance prevalent in yesteryear and still obvious throughout the present world. We share our newness in a continent that we like to call the New World to differentiate ourselves from the Old (other) Worlds, and we call ourselves American to stress that difference. We share the ideal of a new life, the otherness that is better. We believe in the “city on the hill,” which is an ideal not limited to New England but embedded as well in the neo-Aztecism of other regions of America.

We are a people who believe in education and have much to learn. Otherwise the State of New Mexico would not need to put “U.S.A.” on its license plates so that the rest of the country will understand that we are a part of them.

6. Walt Whitman to Messrs. Griffen, Martinez, Prince and other gentlemen at Santa Fe, 1881, as printed in the Santa Fe New Mexican, September 7, 1918 and in El Palacio Magazine, 5, no. 10 (September 1918), p. 164.

1. The Santa Fe New Mexican, October 28, 1880.