

The background of the cover is a collage of American cultural symbols. At the top, there is a close-up of a red Pepsi logo. Below it, a large, dark, curved shape, possibly a shadow or a stylized element, is visible. At the bottom, there is a close-up of a Liberty Bell with the word "LIBERTY" embossed on it.

Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean

# AMERICAN CULTURAL STUDIES

An Introduction to American Culture



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## American Cultural Studies

The question of American national identity has been a key theme in the culture and history of the United States. *American Cultural Studies* by Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean offers an introduction to American culture for students through interdisciplinary study. The authors examine the tensions that exist within the multi-faceted and multi-cultural mix of American life and explore a range of approaches to key themes and topics.

Organised around central issues in the development of modern America, *American Cultural Studies* includes specific considerations of issues such as gender, sexuality, youth, race and religion. Each of these topics is approached from a range of critical perspectives. By exploring art, literature, film, architecture and music, the book employs techniques and arguments from traditional analysis and from the field of cultural studies. Chapters on the American city, the regions of the South and West and consideration of foreign policy emphasise the value of using interdisciplinary methodologies to understand key areas of American life. In this way, the book also provides discussions of a variety of approaches to study and encourages students to develop fresh ways of understanding American culture.

By examining forms of cultural expression in relation to their historical and political context, the authors apply cultural studies approaches to events and debates in American life. *American Cultural Studies* offers a variety of case studies and suggestions for further research for all those interested in American Studies, culture and history.

**Neil Campbell** and **Alasdair Kean** teach American Studies at the University of Derby.

# American Cultural Studies

An introduction to American culture

Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean



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To borrow a particular quotation from Deleuze and Guattari seems appropriate for this book: ‘The two of us wrote [the book]. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd’ (G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, 1992 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: The Athlone Press).

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# Introduction

Extend the dialogue. Deepen the definitions—for the sake of our sanity. Let your new insight become. A social science concerned with the whole of society would have to be historical, environmental, multivocal, as well as philosophical.

(Harding 1988:81–2)

In this book we aim to explore modern American culture from an ‘American Studies’ position, which espouses an interdisciplinary approach to our chosen themes. We will explore a range of potential ways to study American culture, in order to encourage students, who may have little experience either of America or interdisciplinary work, to develop their engagement with both of these in tandem. Our focus is largely on the twentieth-century experience, but where appropriate, for instance, in the chapter on regions or on African Americans, we have included material from earlier periods in order to provide an important context or sense of continuity.

## AN EXCEPTIONAL PLACE OR WHAT IS AMERICA?

American Studies, as an approach to the study of the culture and history of the United States, has, since its inception in the 1930s, been preoccupied with two key themes. The first is what Michael Denning has described as the founding question of the subject area, ‘What is American?’ (Denning 1986:360). This question has been phrased in different ways, but whatever its wording, it has been concerned with the meaning of American national identity, and the ways in which America might be distinguished from other nations. In its strongest form this has involved the effort to establish what has been unique about the American experience. The second is what Linda Kerber has described as an impatience with disciplinary boundaries, and an openness to experimentation in academic inquiry (Kerber 1989:416). American Studies from the beginning has been concerned to explore the possibilities of cooperation between practitioners from different disciplines, and even to develop an interdisciplinary methodology, with its own distinctive working practices. In this introduction, we want to discuss a

range of implications which follow from these two themes in a way which will prove helpful to students who are embarking on the study of American culture and at the same time are beginning the difficult but always rewarding process of moving beyond conventional approaches.

Gauging the Americanness of the United States is, as J.G.Blair has noted, a venerable goal for American Studies (Blair 1988). Its importance as a central concern within American Studies, of course, has deep roots within American history itself. J.H.St John de Crevecoeur's famous question, 'What, then, is the American, this new man?', first posed in 1782, has echoed down subsequent generations of social and political commentary by both Americans and foreigners addressing the question of American identity. From Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and 1840s through the founding fathers of American history like Frederick Jackson Turner, to post-Second World War cultural critics like David Riesman and Christopher Lasch, a considerable literature has built up dedicated to defining American character. American Studies, therefore, as the search for 'American exceptionalism', for some sense of the differences between American culture and other cultures, has come out of a deep-seated preoccupation with national self-definition. Even if American culture, on analysis, may turn out to be less distinctive from other modern societies than was once thought, one feature of it remains the durability of questions about a national identity. Indeed, as some commentators have argued, the centrality of the debate about American distinctiveness in America may in itself be a key component of American identity: The search for an American character is part of that character' (Wilkinson 1988:2).

However, in recent years, the quest for a distinctive national character has come under increasing criticism. Analyses of 'American exceptionalism', it is argued, 'are less credible than ever in the 1990s' (Lipsitz 1990: 616). Criticisms of this kind have tended to focus on two central weaknesses in many earlier attempts to define national difference. There is, first, the tendency to reduce questions of national identity to some essential singularity and in doing so to give undue weight to the experience of specific groups and traditions in explaining America, at the expense of other groups whose experience is, as a result, forgotten or marginalised. Second, there has been a tendency to study American society in isolation, and in so doing to downplay those experiences which the United States might have in common with other societies.

If we turn to the first major criticism, then the difficulties of generalising about national identity become evident. Americans, it has been overwhelmingly argued over the last thirty years, have been marked by division and opposition, rather than by agreement and consensus. Traditional conceptions of a unified American culture when examined turn out to be partial and selective views of what America has been or ought to be, grounded in the privileged status accorded to a white, male, middle-class perspective. America could be presented as a classless society, marked by a powerful degree of consensus and a low level of conflict only because historians and cultural critics had tended not to

emphasise those factors which indicated deep-seated divisions in American life, such as class, ethnicity, race and gender. Once these factors have been duly acknowledged, then, at the very least, it becomes much more difficult to accommodate them adequately within traditional notions of national identity. Americans, it is argued, are in the end divided as much as they are united. Where unity is apparent, this is only possible because difference has been hidden by the practice of power. The dominance of specific groups and perspectives in American life has obscured the fact that other groups were subordinate, and played little part in creating an American identity. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese wrote, ‘the last two decades have...witnessed a growing restiveness with any complacent assumptions that the culture of a privileged few could adequately represent the specific beliefs and practices of the many varieties of Americans’ (Fox-Genovese 1990:7). The construction of an American identity could thus no longer rely on a few privileged categories; Americans were ‘female as well as male, black as well as white, poor as well as affluent, Catholic or Jewish as well as Protestant, and of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds’ (ibid.).

A second major source of criticism has focused on a tendency in American Studies to examine American culture on its own without very much attention to cross-cultural comparison.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis here tended to be on what set the United States apart from other cultures rather than what it might share with them. This approach, in turn, both fed off and encouraged that long-held belief in American history that the country had a special mission to fulfil, a mission which in the past had a strong religious, economic or racial gloss, but was now given renewed vigour by America’s ideological role as the leader of the free world in the Cold War. There are links between this argument and the tendency to underplay conflict in the American past for, as Giles Gunn has commented, ‘wherever concern for American uniqueness was seen to wax, critical comprehension of its own inner divisions as well as its cultural complexity and contextual relations seemed to wane’ (Gunn 1987:151). Again, this tendency drew on an understandable strain in American culture which sought to explain the country’s identity in American terms. Frederick Jackson Turner’s elaboration of his Frontier thesis is only the most well-known attempt to provide an explanation of American development in terms of conditions within the country itself (see [Chapter 5](#)).

What these various criticisms of ‘American exceptionalism’ suggest are the problems involved in generalising about the American experience. This is not to deny that the national dimension of historical and cultural analysis is significant, nor is it to dismiss the extensive literature on the American character, which, in any case, was rather more sensitive to matters of region and ethnicity than has sometimes been argued. It is, however, to emphasise that students, in seeking to understand American culture, need to take into account both internal variation and division as well as international and cross-cultural comparison. One of the aims of this book, then, is to encourage students both to become aware of these

internal divisions and at the same time to consider how they relate to conventional or accepted definitions of American identity.

### WHAT IS AMERICAN STUDIES?

If the problematic nature of national identity is one major concern which recent inquiry in American Studies has addressed, a second is the process of interdisciplinary work. It may be helpful here to say something about what we mean by interdisciplinarity and in so doing to identify some of the benefits as well as potential problems involved in this kind of approach. American Studies, as practised both in the United States and abroad, has long advocated movement beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and encouraged efforts to establish more open and cooperative projects between academic areas. As might be expected, however, such an enterprise has had a controversial and much disputed life, for a whole range of reasons, particularly in the last twenty years when the very nature of what we mean by an academic discipline has come under scrutiny from a number of different directions.<sup>2</sup> It is not our intention here to provide a review of this work; students who wish to follow its contours may be guided by the material in the notes and the suggestions for further reading. Rather, we want to open up areas of debate, and thus possible avenues of cultural exploration for students to develop in their own projects. In the individual chapters which follow, rather than providing interpretative overviews of the topics concerned, our aim is to suggest a range of potential approaches to American culture. What follows, then, by way of discussion of interdisciplinary issues, is a starting-point or a place of departure.

Central to any interdisciplinary enterprise is the relationship between texts to be studied and the contexts from which they come. There are two main issues to examine here. One is what we mean by 'texts'. Traditional approaches based on the study of literature, history and politics, tended to favour certain kinds of texts at the expense of others, presenting an established canon of great works from which might be distilled the essence of American culture. Certain kinds of texts were appropriate for sustained examination while others were not. The debate over what should be included in the canon has been hotly contested in recent years and is clearly related to the issues raised in the opening stages of this introduction. Whose America is reflected in any specific list of texts for close study? Can the works of key writers in themselves provide an adequate guide to the complexities of a culture as varied and as divided as that of the United States? Are certain kinds of texts worth more than others because they are more complex or contain particular revelatory or inspirational qualities? In attempting to come to terms with these questions, our approach has been to retain an emphasis on the importance of certain forms of literary and artistic production which seem to us to require sustained and careful reading, but at the same time not to limit ourselves to what has been traditionally included in such a category. For one thing, what might be defined as 'elite' or 'high' culture has clearly

changed over time. Lawrence Levine's work on the emergence of cultural distinctions in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America is a salutary reminder that the status of texts and writers is not fixed but has varied according to the pressure of specific historical events (Levine 1988).

If we define culture at its broadest as 'a way of life', then it also becomes clear that to restrict the study of cultural products to a small handful of approved texts runs the risk of omitting a great deal. One recent suggestion takes the opposite position; texts are simply 'those stories that Americans tell one another in order to make sense of their lives' (Mechling 1989:4). According to this definition, then, a whole range of cultural products and artefacts become available for analysis. It may still be that in such a scheme of study there remains room for qualitative judgement, that some stories carry greater conviction and resonance than others, but the possibilities for making connections between different aspects of the wider culture are greatly extended. The opening up of different kinds of texts for scrutiny, too, may yield surprising results. Listening closely to the stories they tell and how those stories fit with other stories in the culture may reveal specific texts in the popular domain which repay close study, and which are as questioning and as complex as more ostensibly serious works. In this collection, therefore, while retaining a strong emphasis on the works of a range of established writers from Edgar Allan Poe to Toni Morrison, we have also juxtaposed them with material from other sources including popular culture, photography, art, music, film and material artefacts. Moreover, in making connections between different texts, it might be argued that new kinds of texts are created which themselves can be read and interpreted. An example here might be the description of the city as a text, which can be read in a range of different ways, but which itself is made up of a range of different texts or stories.

If the concept of a text is open to redefinition, then so too is the concept of context or 'history'. The implications of recent work in cultural theory for the discipline of history are considerable and remind us that written history is shaped and crafted in order to represent events to the reader, just as fiction is. Conventional notions of history as an empirically based quest for the truth about the past have been criticised as having an unquestioning and innocent approach to methodological and epistemological issues. Many of these criticisms are undoubtedly polemical in tone, and in their determination to make a theoretical case tend to ignore the sophistication, range and depth of much recent historical work. Ironically, they sometimes rely on particular versions of the past or models of historical interpretation which that work has undermined.<sup>3</sup> Despite this tendency, however, it is nevertheless helpful to identify some of the central points in recent work on the philosophy of history, for they suggest ways of encouraging links between history and other disciplines in the humanities in a way which opens doors to interdisciplinary work.<sup>4</sup> These points may be summarised as follows:

1 There is a critical distinction between 'the past' and 'history'.



- 2 History in the end is made by historians, defined here to include not just professional historians but all those who are interested in making some sense of the past. For example, an American historian like Frederick Jackson Turner established a narrative of Western history that sought to explain not just that region of the nation, but the entire make-up of a national character.
- 3 History as a discourse is a construct which cannot comprehend the whole of the past. The past, in its totality, is simply too big, too various, to encompass in any one account.
- 4 History, therefore, is made up of a range of different accounts of the past and we come to the past through its different histories, and it is these histories which we must weigh against each other as we seek to make sense of the past. There is no accurate and unchanging historical record of the past out there against which we can check our stories for their truth. Thus new feminist or ethnic histories must be explored against the more 'traditional' male-centred constructions of historians like Jackson Turner.
- 5 Because history is a partial account of the past, it is subject to the same pressures as other stories; it is written according to certain conventions and rules and employs a range of narrative devices, which may be explicit or implicit. The historian communicates by employing a range of strategies which are commonly thought of as the province of the novelist, such as metaphor, repetition, personification, closure and others. The same is true, of course, of the documentary materials which the historian consults.
- 6 These narratives are themselves contested, that is, they are in a dynamic relationship with each other. Particular kinds of narratives may have predominated at specific times, because they were the expression of dominant cultural forms or political systems. Other narratives remained unconstructed or silenced because they were not admitted into the dominant culture. Thus, until recently, Native Americans and African Americans have been silenced in history by a process that has denied them an authoritative historical voice.
- 7 Histories are written by historians who themselves are located in a specific social context, and whose observations, interpretations and judgements are partly shaped by the conceptual categories they bring to their task.

It now may be possible to see how issues to do with the concept of an unproblematic national culture mesh with methodological questions over what kinds of texts are worthy of scrutiny, and how these texts in turn link with the process of historical inquiry. An openness to a range of textual material—to include, for instance, popular as well as high culture, imaginative as well as documentary material, novels or films as well as histories—may open up the question of national identity and how it has been made, which moves beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries, and instead posits a range of competing discourses as the focus of analysis. Thus an event like the quincentennial of Columbus in 1992 was contested by different interpretations of the meanings of

the ‘discovery/conquest’ of America (see [Chapter 2](#)). It should be emphasised here, however, that our argument is not to represent history as the same as fiction. Historians have to engage with something which exists outside of the imagination, namely the past, and as David Lowenthal emphasises, the historian should not

knowingly...invent or exclude things that affect his conclusions ...he dare not fabricate a character, ascribe unknown traits so as to make his tale more intelligible, because he could neither hide such inventions from others with access to the public record nor justify them when found out.

(Lowenthal 1985:229)

Novelists or film-makers, by contrast, are not constrained by the need to marshal, test and shape evidence. They need make no claim to having wrestled with the facts of the past or to having adopted a neutral or disinterested approach to their chosen material. Their story aims to touch the emotions and senses through the power of the written word, to communicate feeling. But despite this important difference, both fiction and history use language as rhetoric (that is, language designed to persuade or impress) and it is this attention to the form in which texts are expressed that allows us to link what might be described as the study of institutions with the study of culture.

### USING THE BOOK

In what follows we have not used the same mode of analysis in each chapter, since investigations of different themes or topics clearly demand different approaches. This book is not, as we have stressed, a survey or an attempt to write a textbook with all the answers. As Michael Fischer has written, ‘the text is not hermetically sealed, but points beyond itself’ (in Clifford and Marcus 1986:201). This book points to many other areas of study, avenues of exploration and research. Thus [Chapter 6](#) on *The American City* takes what might be described as a post-structuralist approach to the city as a text whose meanings are constantly shifting and unfixable, whereas [Chapter 7](#) analyses the ways in which gender has defined power relations at work in America. We have, however, developed a self-conscious and explicit description of the practices we have adopted in the various chapters, as part of those chapters themselves. We have also included discussions of texts in a little more detail than a conventional survey would allow, again in an attempt to suggest possible approaches to a range of interdisciplinary textual material. The texts chosen for this purpose are not meant to be representative but, rather, to be helpful examples of what can be done through this kind of work.

At the end of each chapter we have provided concrete suggestions for follow-up work that will allow students to develop their own approaches to the topics concerned. Works cited in each chapter indicate a range of textual materials

which might be used for further study. What we would encourage in these chapters, then, is what Fred Inglis has recently described as ‘the theory of open-mindedness’ which honours the plurality of perspectives, relishes the varieties of intellectual experience, acknowledges the location and uncertainty of old knowledge itself (Inglis 1993: 227). At the same time, however, we also want to encourage students to explore some of the ways in which difference is connected to issues of power expressed through history, that ‘the inherited notion of American culture is the product of historical struggles that have been won by some and lost by others’ and that it is important to study the interaction between differing individuals and forces (Fox-Genovese 1990:27).

### CRITICAL APPROACHES

For the remainder of this introduction, we will present, in more detail, some of the approaches we see as informing the chapters that make up this book. It is our intention to begin with an overview of some of the concepts that structure and influence individual chapters and provide a certain amount of explanation and context for these approaches. We have tried to explain them in the particular contexts in which they will be used in this book and provide, through the notes and reading lists, ways of continuing the process started here through individual projects. It is important to emphasise, however, that individual chapters, with their specific applications of these critical approaches, will put the flesh and bones onto the skeleton assembled here.

#### **Myth and ideology**

American national myths, like the promised land or Turner’s frontier thesis, ‘attempt to put us at peace with ourselves and our existence’ (Storey 1993:74) by confirming certain qualities and attributes. These could become the focus for attempting to define the ‘national character’ and aspirations by suggesting that all people held these beliefs as common and shared. American Studies has often followed and explored, even helped to define, some of these mythic frameworks. Critical studies such as R.W.B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* or Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* are examples of texts that help to enunciate American mythic sensibility by reinforcing specific notions of the nation as Edenic or as wilderness. In one sense, the purpose of myth is to make the world explicable, to magically resolve its problems and contradictions. ‘Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution’ (Lévi-Strauss 1963:224). Ronald Wright adds that, ‘Myth is an arrangement of the past... in patterns [that] create and reinforce archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that we live and die by them’ (Wright 1992:5).

Thus myths are the stories we tell each other as a culture in order to explain complexities and to banish contradictions, thus making the world seem simpler and more comfortable for us to inhabit. For example, if America was a ‘virgin

land', a wilderness, it was 'free' to be civilised and occupied by the pioneers, irrespective of the indigenous population. Roland Barthes warns against such complacency and reminds us to be vigilant and willing to interrogate the 'falsely obvious' (1973:11) since 'By myth Barthes also means ideology understood as a body of ideas and practices which defend the status quo and actively promote the values and interests of the dominant groups in society' (Storey 1993:78). For Barthes, myths alter the past by endowing the shifting, complex processes of history with the appearance of something 'natural' and 'eternal'. Myth is 'depoliticised speech' because it is as if the complexities that we recognise in speech have been hollowed out until all that remains is 'what goes without saying', the 'taken for granted'—a simple version denuded of political debate and difference.

Thus myths are ideological because they are primarily concerned with the ways in which particular images of the world are conveyed and reinforced through texts and practices. Ideology can be explained as those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing that exist within and inform our everyday lives and connect us to wider structures of power in society in ways that contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of social power (Eagleton 1983). Such ideological myths exist everywhere in American culture, helping to shape the way people think and write about the nation, its history and its life, and they need to be examined. For example, the idea of America as a new Eden, a place of new birth, mission and promise has been perpetuated in various forms throughout its history. Through interrogating these myths and ideologies we see the lines of power that have structured and given preferred meanings to particular renditions of the past and privileged certain groups as a result. This is not, however, a simple corrective, for that would imply that a 'myth' can be opposed by a 'truth', when, in fact, culture is more usefully viewed as a series of dynamic and contested ideological forces and interpretations.

### Interdisciplinary studies

Interdisciplinary studies suggest being at the boundary of the individual disciplines where they begin to merge and intermingle, and it associates this with the condition of being on the margins of the normalised, accepted and official culture of America. These positions, both the abstract academic one and the real, ideological one, can be productive and invigorating. Being at these 'boundaries' can provide a new way of seeing a culture like the United States because one is pushed beyond the centre where the world is defined, ordered and laid out, and permitted to see with the eyes of the Other (those excluded and marginalised by mainstream, dominant American culture). Here, a shift takes place giving a 'sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction...an exploratory, restless movement' (Bhabha 1994:1) because the established, safe sense of the 'real' has been questioned and replaced by an 'awareness of the subject positions—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—

that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world' (ibid.: 1). At the boundaries of American culture, there is a multicultural, multiperspectival, critical way of seeing, from where one might gain both these new perspectives and grasp 'the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (ibid.: 4). This latter concern with cultural hybridity will be discussed later with regard to ethnicity and pluralism (see [Chapter 2](#)).

As a meeting place of many cultures, systems of ritual and belief, America can be seen as a vast borderland where identity, language and space are constantly inter-changed, contested and crossed-over. Interdisciplinary studies, which both interconnects and transgresses boundaries as a method of exploration, provides a suitable method through which to engage with these dominant voices, and to appreciate and listen to the other voices, recognising their mutual struggles to be heard.

### Multicultural and multi-perspectival

The development of critical cultural studies has been largely promoted by groups on the margins of power, excluded from the mainstream: women, ethnic minorities, gays and others. Through their exploration of new critical approaches, the old systems of representation and power have been interrogated and resisted. For example, multiculturalism, that is, the belief that a healthy culture is made up of many different people with diverse systems of belief and practice, has encouraged the analysis of relationships of domination and oppression, social stereotyping, and focused upon resistance to domination, the need for self-definition and the assertion of difference. Similarly, feminism has analysed the relations of power, finding many connections with the struggles of ethnic groups in America (see Adrienne Rich's work discussed later), but also contributed to the new critical voices that urge reconsideration, revision and the interdisciplinary search for new approaches beyond the simplistic 'either/or' mentality of critical thinking that suggests there are only opposites and no complex, negotiated terrains. Such terrains give voice to what Foucault calls 'subjugated knowledges' (1980:81), that is, to buried or marginalised cultural forms that have to be heard as part of the complex field of society. He emphasises the need to combine the 'erudite knowledge' with 'popular', 'local, regional... differential knowledge incapable of unanimity' (ibid.: 82), because in this mix there is a fuller picture of the multi-layered cultural climate that we would associate with the United States. A multi-dimensional view of culture fostered by these new social movements has enabled approaches to texts that are challenging because they demand that we ask new questions about who speaks, who defines, who controls and who is included or excluded from this process.

## A CULTURE OF MANY VOICES

Certain groups have, for various reasons, sought to present America as a single nation and played down its diverse components. This is typified by the significance of Noah Webster's dictionary and his call for a common language in the 1790s. As Mikhail Bakhtin recognised, there are many voices running through language and literature, as in culture itself, and these must be acknowledged in an ideally 'heteroglossic' (many voiced) formulation of society:

at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past...these 'languages' of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying 'languages'.

(Bakhtin 1990:291)

Post-structuralist thinking (see [Chapter 6](#)) has recognised that texts are not closed, but plural with 'an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning' (Eagleton 1983: 138). To impose a single meaning or to attempt to find one is to misrepresent the complexity of the text (or nation) itself, and it is our contention that a variety of readings across the disciplines is one method of exploring the fullness of both the text and the nation, to hear the many voices that Bakhtin describes.

This reveals issues of power too; of whose voice is 'normally' heard in culture and what it says to us and how it frames our society in particular ways. These are the questions that emerge when we approach texts from different positions. Diversity, difference, contest, dialogue are the watchwords of this approach, but crucially too, a willingness to acknowledge the 'links and interrelationships' across what Bakhtin called 'the borderlines' (Bakhtin 1984:29), brings us back to our concern for the interdisciplinary method.

This book will pay attention to many voices and how they have recorded their lives, and recognise how history is always in a process of revision concerned with the analyses of power, ideology and representation. America, a nation of differences, has to be examined with close consideration of the ways in which those differences relate to those who have the loudest voices, the most authority, status and wealth, and those who do not. Furthermore, such systems must be explored in order that such hierarchical structures are revealed and explained.

## CULTURAL POLITICS/CULTURAL STUDIES

America, like all cultures, is multi-faceted and ever-changing, and therefore it has to be constantly questioned and examined using the most appropriate tools available. In recent years, cultural studies has provided new analytical

approaches through which many traditional attitudes towards ‘culture’ have shifted, allowing a wider interpretation of the word. Rather than just ‘high’ culture—the best thought and written, with eternal values and authority—there has been a perceived need to include other forms of cultural expression, drawn from popular culture, mass media (referred to in the past as ‘low’ culture) and to broaden what could be studied to include not just traditional forms of expression, but new forms (film, television, comics) and a fuller definition of the concept of text. In this definition, culture is ‘the ensemble of social processes by which meanings are produced, circulated and exchanged’ (Thwaites *et al.* 1994: 1), and all these ‘social processes’ can be ‘read’, interpreted, and contested as texts. A useful way of envisaging this is to see culture as ‘an assemblage of texts, loosely and sometimes contradictorily united’ (Clifford 1988:41) which constitute meanings, ideologies and subjectivities as they weave together, collide and merge.

This leads us through a series of vital questions about cultural formation, power, ideology and representation:

Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated?  
 What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden?  
 Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized?  
 What voices shall be heard and which be silenced? Who is representing whom and on what basis?

(Jordan and Weedon 1995:4)

Hence, in American terms, such questions reveal how certain non-white cultures have been ‘hidden’, or women’s histories have been erased in favour of the dominant male stories of the nation. Through the close study of cultural expressions, texts and practices we can raise these questions and begin to see the ideological positions that are registered socially in cultural institutions such as the family, education, the media, the churches, the law and language. These are termed *discourses* which constitute, rather than simply describing or reflecting reality, and seek to form our concepts about our identity and about what the world means. Discourses organise statements, define texts, promote meanings, representations and stories, position subjects, and are endlessly in competition for our attention as they *construct* our sense of what is right and wrong, normal and abnormal, important or not worthy of our attention. These competing discourses can at any one time achieve greater authority within the cultural system, and become *dominant discourses*, carrying more status, power and social significance. For example, a discourse of American patriotism in a time of war might be a gathering of texts such as the flag, emotional music, images of heroism and sacrifice and speeches of resolution and determination from the White House. Together these are discursive formations that construct patriotism

as logical, acceptable and ‘natural’—as if it is a timeless and eternal condition of all normal, good Americans.

The influence of such discursive formations within culture are immense, structuring power and influence, attitudes, beliefs and identity. After all, the effect of discourse is to *position* us in relation to a variety of social forces. It *subjects* us. So, using our example of patriotic discourse, Japanese Americans in the Second World War were imprisoned because they were perceived as a threat to the ‘American’ cause. They were ‘subjected’ and ‘positioned’ by this patriotic discourse and defined as dangerous. This is precisely the contested terrain into which cultural studies goes in order to debate these issues of and assumptions about identity, gender, class, the family, education, ethnicity, the environment, religion and technology. In so doing, it reveals how power and ideology work to legitimate social inequalities, but it also explores how forms of resistance emerge as part of this complex cultural contest. For just as dominant discourses emerge in culture, so can resistant, counter-discourses which struggle to be heard in the cultural arena and attempt to alter the received and dominant modes of expression and definition also emerge. This is a central interest in this book, as in much cultural studies, for it is through these resisting voices that new and interesting critical challenges are made to the centralised and established order.

### POWER AND POSITION

America is a powerful nation, with immense wealth, military strength and global influence, and this is how it likes to represent itself to the world. But how is this power achieved, by whom, for whom and at what cost to others? It is vital that such assumptions and representations are questioned since power exists in different ways throughout culture and can be seen in all practices that have meaning. In their creation of meaning and our relation to that meaning, we are positioned, that is, we are ‘hailed’ or ‘buttonholed’ (Barthes 1973:124–5) into a position which includes (or excludes) us in the relationship. The effect of this is ideological, for it serves to orient people in social contexts towards accepting certain values as natural, obvious and self-evident and embodying these ideologies to such an extent that they appear to resolve contradictions and represent values which do not necessarily cohere with their lived experiences.

To modify an example from Barthes (1973) and Jordan and Weedon (1995), consider an image of an African-American child, hand on heart, gazing on the Stars and Stripes at the beginning of the school day and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. The child is ‘hailed’ as one of the people and a part of an ideological system from which ‘history evaporates’ (Barthes 1973:117) for the ‘long story’ of slavery, segregation and lack of civil rights has been emptied out and replaced by a simple ‘myth’; ‘a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* image’ (ibid.: 118). This particular example stresses ‘One nation under God’ and therefore promotes and makes ‘natural’ the ideology of a united and coherent America, ‘with liberty and justice for all’. We may feel comfortable with these



myths and values, and may go along with the positions they appear to offer us, or we may resist them and their attempts to place and define us. The power of discourse can contribute significantly to the formation of powerful notions of ‘Americanness’ or national identity. To reduce the image of the child to a single meaning is to denude it of possibility and to ignore the contradictory and competing meanings that have constructed it. Of course, in a particular situation the image could be read simply as a signifier of patriotism, loyalty and equal opportunity—with an emphasis upon racial harmony, unity and the American dream. This could be the dominant reading of the meanings on offer, fixed by social circumstance, cultural background, education, and so on, and reinforced through powerful institutions (school, family, the media, etc). Such subject positionings are difficult to resist for they anchor the image’s meanings in very specific ways, but by adopting marginal perspectives one can provide alternative ways of seeing, suggest different identities and new forms of resistance.

Cultural studies seeks to listen to these marginal voices and to the perspectives they bring to the debates about power, authority and meaning. These latter forces are connected to a term used throughout this book —*hegemony*. This is a term that helps explain the way that power works within culture that is in itself ‘free and democratic’, like America. Hegemony refers to the ways in which a dominant class ‘doesn’t merely rule but leads a society through the exertion of moral and intellectual leadership’ (Storey 1993:119) so that a consensus is established in which all classes appear to support and subscribe to its ideologies and cultural meanings, incorporating them into the existing power structure. Hegemony’s embracing of consensus means that any opposition can be ‘contained and channelled into ideologically safe harbours’ (ibid.: 119) not through imposition, but through negotiation. So subordinate groups are not ignored, but given a certain ‘place’, a position within the embrace of the dominant group, and their views articulated to a degree within the master-narrative. A master-narrative is the grand story told by the dominant groups to legitimate and justify their actions and policies. It attempts to encompass and totalise by a process of selection and exclusion of alternative, often critical, perspectives. For example, in America African Americans have been ‘placed’ within a dominant white cultural narrative, but through political struggle, cultural self-assertion and intervention have developed an increasing role in the mainstream. Hegemony asserts cultural struggle and is best defined as ‘a contested and shifting set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership’ (Strinati 1995:170).

## DIALOGISM

As we noted earlier, cultural anthropology and cultural studies have recognised the importance of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and in particular his call for dialogism. Based on the study of linguistics and language use, Bakhtin’s work can be very useful in the analysis of American culture. As Reising commented, it

'provides the basis for a new appreciation of the heterogeneity of American [culture], a heterogeneity often blurred or denied by the polarization of canonical/noncanonical, major/minor, aesthetic/social' (Reising 1986:234). Language is dialogical, interacting self and other in a constant process of 'intermingling of diverse points of view' (ibid.: 234), and culture can be seen as functioning in a similar manner, as 'an open-ended, creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions' (Clifford 1988:46). In adopting this approach to American Studies, 'the intention is to dialogize dominant monologues, indeed, to show that dialogue is not an abstract ideal... but that it is everywhere' (Krupat 1992:237) and that in examining this dialogue we can move closer to 'a textured sense of being American' (Fischer 1986:230). As in a dialogue, culture is always in a process of negotiation, with positions and identities shifting, with official voices being parodied and satirised, with power being contested.

To summarise, we would agree that American 'culture is contested, temporal and emergent' (Clifford and Marcus 1986:19) and through cultural studies we can examine these elements, both to identify patterns of power, inequality, domination and resistance, and also to see the possibilities for change and development in the future. America has always been a place of invention and of dreams, and this book will attempt in various ways to explore the possibilities that still exist within American culture. To borrow from the anthropologist James Clifford, there is still a 'persistent hope for the reinvention of difference' within America (Clifford 1988:15) which takes a variety of forms in its cultural life and energy. These 'histories of emergent differences require other ways of telling... there is no single model' (ibid.: 17), but as this book examines its various topics there are recurrent concerns about new forms revealed in interdisciplinary ways. The recognition and awareness of America as a still emerging, creative and dynamic place in which new, hybrid identities are everpossible are still prominent; but they are seen in the context of the histories and stories already told and often hidden, that reveal a darker reality that has created the present from which anything new must emerge.<sup>5</sup>

### **THE CONTINUOUS 'PLAY' OF CULTURE, HISTORY AND POWER**

This book will examine these identities, their constructions, their representations and their relationships to power and authority and show, through the attention to specific themes and texts, how and why America is a complex 'symbol in contention' (Trachtenberg 1982:8) rather than a single, fixed 'given'. If one of the central functions of historians is to 'lock up and unlock memory' (Appleby *et al.* 1994:155), then this book is involved in the latter part of this process, engaged in the unlocking and 'dethroning' (ibid.: 3) of certain long-held versions and myths of American culture and the 'simplified story that was told about the nation's past' (ibid.: 294). Hence, the Wild West has given rise to immensely

influential national myths and, through their interrogation, we can unlock relations of power that excluded women, blacks and Hispanics, attempted to erase the Indian and ravaged the land. We are concerned with ideologies, representations, power, discourse, hegemony and identity as constant factors in the construction of America as a broad, multi-faceted and ‘imagined community’ whose cultural identity is

a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ ...[and] belongs to the future as much as to the past...not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture...fixed in some essentialised past, [but] subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.

(Hall 1990:225)

It is within these contexts that this book will show ‘a living mix of varied and opposing [American] voices’ (Bakhtin 1990:xxviii), constructed of many stories, told by many people from different positions and for different purposes. They change in value, worth and power, are argued for and against, are denied, hidden or celebrated, become official or remain unofficial, but taken together, in all their multiplicities, they represent America, and it is this ‘living mix’ of stories that is the concern of this book.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 For a forceful statement of this view see G. Gunn (1987) *American Studies as Cultural Criticism*, in *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2 For recent reviews of this debate see: R.King, ‘The Eighties’ in M.Bradbury and H.Temperley (eds) (1989) *Introduction to American Studies*, London: Longman, especially pp. 377–81. A very helpful and wide-ranging guide to recent work relevant to the interdisciplinary approach to American Studies is T.V.Reed, ‘Theory and Method in American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography’, *American Studies International*, vol. 30, no. 2, April, pp. 4–34.
- 3 For an attack by a mainstream historian on this tendency in recent cultural criticism and cultural theory, see A. Marwick, ‘Introduction’, in A. Marwick (ed.) (1990) *The Arts, Literature and Society*, London: Routledge.
- 4 K. Jenkins (1991) *Re-Thinking History*, London: Routledge, provides a concise overview of recent work. See also D. Goodman (1993) ‘Postmodernism and History’, *American Studies International* vol. 31, no. 2, October, pp. 17–23.
- 5 Hybridity is a much discussed term within cultural studies and in particular post-colonial studies and it is an issue we discuss more in [Chapter 2](#) in relation to American immigration and ethnicity.
- 6 An associated concept to that of stories that we use in the book, is that of cultural scripting, or the idea that identity can be scripted through discourse, through power and ideology in ways that appear to pre-define and limit the agency of the self and its capacity to ‘write’ its own script. For more on this, see [Chapter 7](#).

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# Chapter 1

## New beginnings

### American culture and identity

Identity marks the conjuncture of our past with the social, cultural and economic relations we live within.

(Rutherford 1990:19)

Stuart Hall has written that cultural identity is not a 'fixed essence... lying unchanged outside history and culture', and is 'not [a] once-and-forall...to which we can make some final and absolute Return' (Rutherford 1990:226). It is 'constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth ...made within the discourse of history and culture' (ibid.: 226) and hence cannot be simply defined or 'recovered' like some lost, true being. To grapple with the idea of cultural identity, therefore, is to examine the lines and discourses of its construction and to recognise the existence within it of many meanings. As the introduction suggested, America is a place where different identities mix and collide, an assemblage, a multiplicity, constantly producing and reproducing new selves and transforming old ones and, therefore, cannot claim to possess a single, closed identity with a specific set of values. Some Americans, however, prefer the notion of identity to be hegemonic, fixed and clearly surrounded by distinct boundaries and definitions. For example, some would care to think of white, male and heterosexual as the standard measure of 'Americanness', with a deep respect for the flag and a strong sense of regional identity, say, to the South or to Louisiana or Boston. However, these are ideological positions that are not shared or representative of the nation as a whole; indeed, no set of beliefs or values can be, and this is precisely the point. Instead, America has to be interpreted or 'read' as a complex, multifaceted text, like a novel or film with a rich array of different characters and events, within which exist many voices telling various and different stories. And as with any such text, there are internal tensions, dramas and contradictions which contribute, indeed, constitute what might be called its identity.<sup>1</sup>

Postmodern and post-structuralist thinking has recognised these kinds of knowledges and approaches, and begun from the point of distrusting any 'meta-' or 'grand narratives', that is totalising stories that claim to speak for all and explain all. For example, to argue that America is exceptional and that its history

was divinely ordained and destined to follow a set course, is to read America as a limited and ‘closed’ text through a controlling meta-narrative or ‘master-story’. Rather than seek out the controlling, organising single meaning, it is more important to follow the different stories that constitute the threads of the text—its texture, to persist with the metaphor. In America these threads are diverse, divergent, coherent, contrary and competing, they cross and separate, clash and merge, weaving in and out of one another, forming and de-forming, gathering and fraying all at the same time.

Of course, these metaphors are helpful only up to a point, for we must recognise the nature of the historical and political realm in which this American text is formed. Certain stories are preferred and achieve greater status and power, whilst others are derided or erased. Traditionally in America, male, white, heterosexual stories and versions of history have emerged as prominent and therefore have formed what we might term the dominant regime of representation or dominant ideological culture. These have tended to define American ‘national identity’.

The rapid growth of industrialisation and urbanisation—the outward signs of modernity—encouraged the articulation of the nation as whole and unified in order that production and economic growth could develop around common goals, shared beliefs and a sense of cohesion. If in reality this never existed, there was a persistent emphasis upon the ‘melting pot’ as a way of bringing people together into the American nation. However, with the questioning of modernity and its values and the increasing rediscovery of ethnic, marginalised and minority histories in America, this semblance of unity has had to be revised. ‘*E pluribus unum*’—out of many one, is a more controversial slogan for America today, for it suggests, on one level, the possibility of integration, of melting the parts into a whole, when in fact the parts may insist on remaining distinct and unmelted (see [Chapter 5](#)). American identity is constructed through a wide range of competing forces or ‘heterogeneous dialogues’, as parts of ‘the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference’ (Smart 1993:149). The modern universalising tendencies that sought to identify national traits, beliefs and values and call them identity, can no longer be accorded under these conditions of ‘reinterpretation, modification, transformation and challenge’ (ibid.: 147).

There is a tension between the conventional discourses of American identity a complex set of statements, myths and ways of seeing that constitutes a prevalent notion of a core of values that equal America’ to the people and the world, and a series of counter-discourses that question and critique the neatness and stability of just such a view of identity. The following chapter will explore some of the key elements of the myth of national identity and suggest other, counter-discourses, currently at work in American culture. The texts used offer differing perspectives on America’s concern with beginnings and particularly with the ideas of identity formation within the wider, changing cultural framework.



## READING COLUMBUS

One means by which America has unified itself is through an imagined communal mythology that all could share and that provided a cluster of beliefs through which the nation could be articulated, both to itself and to the world. The issue of how the five hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage of 1492 has been commemorated is revealing here. Traditional mythology about Columbus's 'discovery' of the New World and the way in which it led to the republican and democratic values embedded in the history of the United States may be traced back to Joel Barlow's epic *Columbiad* (1807) and Washington Irving's *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828). In the nineteenth century Columbus became widely adopted as the basis of many American placenames, and Columbus Day became part of the litany of national days of celebration. The Chicago World's Fair of 1893, marking the four hundredth anniversary of the first voyage, reinforced the narrative link between discovery and the power and progress of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Columbus thus became integrated into Manifest Destiny, the belief that America's progress was divinely ordained. As part of this process the Columbian myth became anglicised, but it could also act as a symbol for immigrant groups like Italians as to the role they could play in contributing to America's historic mission. What became clear by the 1980s, however, as preparations were made for the 'Quincentenary Jubilee', was that many Americans found it hard, if not impossible, to see the anniversary as a 'jubilee'. There was nothing to celebrate in the legacy of Columbus. According to many of his critics, he had been the harbinger not of progress and civilisation, but genocide, slavery and the reckless exploitation of the environment. Leading the accusations were those minority groups who felt that the coming of the Spanish to America had brought an imperial project which had delivered not civilisation but catastrophe. This reversal of the nineteenth-century myth of Columbus is revealing because it shows how the revival of concern for the interests of racial and ethnic minorities is closely linked to the reading and rewriting of American history. It is also significant in that it brings into focus some of the problems which emerge when one myth is discredited only to be replaced by another. At issue here, to some extent, is a debate about the functions of history. Some of the participants in the Columbus controversy assumed either that rewriting the Columbus myth would allow the 'truth' to emerge, as if there was a correct version of his life and its aftermath, once distortions had been cast aside. Others argued that older versions of the Columbus story were simply reflections of who held power at the time they were propagated. Historical truth from this perspective was determined by those who had the authority to make it seem convincing. Emotions ran so high over the issue in Berkeley, California that 12 October 1992 was declared 'Indigenous Peoples' Day' instead of celebrating Columbus. Many argued that historical inquiry must involve the constant re-examination and reassessment of evidence and argument using reason and

intelligence, not skin colour and emotion, in coming to terms with controversial themes of the past. These debates suggest how America is still struggling with its own identity and that an important part of its image is constructed through persistent myths that must be examined from a variety of perspectives.

### **THE AMERICAN DREAM OF IDENTITY: *THE GREAT GATSBY***

The Columbus myths enabled white Americans to find a beginning, to declare a courageous opening to their 'story'. It was part of the influential dream myth of origin so prevalent in America. 'America, said the founding documents, was the living incarnation of the search for a common humanity...America declared itself as a dream...the microcosm, or prefiguration of humanity' (Calhoun 1994: 159). F.Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1926) is aware both of the power of American dreams and the problems of seeking them out in lived experience. The ideals of endless progress, self-creation, achievement and success—the mythicised dream incorporated in the spirit of Columbus—are played out in the figure of Jay Gatsby as seen through the eyes of Nick Carraway. The novel concerns itself with issues of identity and in particular with the temptation to believe in a 'dream' which is manifested in Gatsby's yearning for Daisy Buchanan, a woman he almost married in the past, who encompasses 'the endless desire to return to "lost origins", to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning' (Rutherford 1990:236), and yet proves to be beyond his reach and unattainable as all such dreams are.

'You can't repeat the past.'

'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'

(Fitzgerald 1974:117)

In Nick Carraway's story of Jay Gatsby one can uncover much about the contradictions of identity and how these are central to any conception of 'America'. In the same way that Nick constructs a history of Gatsby through the telling of his narrative, so too has America been invented and reinvented by each generation. On one level, Nick's story amplifies one of the founding myths of American culture, the belief in the fresh start, the new beginning. In the case of Gatsby, Nick tells us, he 'sprang from his Platonic conception of himself' (ibid.: 105), that is a self-making process in which 'he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent' (ibid.: 105), full of hope and 'romantic readiness' (ibid.: 8). In 1980, Ronald Reagan spoke too of how 'we built a new breed of human called an American' (quoted in Bercovitch and Jehlen 1986:26), as if to invoke the idea of self-creation as a core myth of American identity. Gatsby comes to embody similar American ideological principles for Nick and through him he records his own 'history' of America. It

is a story, however, marked by its contradictions, its ambiguities and its complexities. As we read Nick's story, what emerges are some of the necessary doubts and queries we bring to any consideration of America and American identity.

At the close of the narrative, Nick returns to Gatsby's empty house refusing to listen to the taxi-driver's 'story' of his friend and erasing an obscene word scratched on the steps by a boy, as if to remind us that it is only Nick's story we will hear. The exclusion of other voices at the end of the novel perpetuates the control that Nick has exercised for all the story. This history, this Gatsby, is one funnelled through Nick's eyes, tempered by a total belief in Gatsby and what Nick wants to see in him—the Dream. In the moonlight, a characteristic time of romance and uncertain vision, Nick returns in his mind to another age when the houses of West Egg are replaced by a fresh vision of possibility, 'the old island that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world' when 'the last and greatest of all human dreams' still seemed feasible (ibid.: 187). This dream, for Nick, links Gatsby with Columbus and represents the 'last time in history' when mankind faced 'something commensurate to his capacity for wonder'; the moment in which mankind physically arrived at a place big enough to hold its dreams and allow it to invent new selves and new beginnings.<sup>2</sup> For Nick—and this was also Gatsby's quest—there was a belief that all things were possible still and that the sense of the past was not lost but could be repeated and recovered. And yet, at the very moment that Nick reveals this equation to us, it is brought into question because the dream as a tangible achievement' was already behind him' (ibid.: 188). What remains is the spirit of the quest, the indefatigable urge to go on looking and searching, 'boats against the current', for something in the future that is only held in the memory of the past.

The 'past' is the last word of *The Great Gatsby* and serves to remind us of the ambivalence of the novel's sense of time and history. Nick preserves a story of Gatsby by controlling what we are allowed to know about him, and yet there is still a sense of 'the foul dust' that surrounds his dream in the sub-texts of his business contacts and acquaintances. Nick admits at one point that Gatsby

must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream...A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted ted fortuitously about  
(ibid.: 168)

Here, the New World is a different vision, still of dreams, but trapped in a hopeless, lost cycle of despair symbolised throughout the novel by the wasteland of the 'valley of ashes'. Even Nick sees himself as 'within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life' (ibid.: 42). All people desire to invent and reinvent themselves, Fitzgerald suggests, and none more so than Americans, many of whom travelled to the land itself with that

aim and belief. But there are complex reasons why they are denied those dreams in a culture not structured on simple myths, but on ideologies of power, class, race and gender.

*The Great Gatsby's* fascination with the multiple identities of America, embodied in the figure of Gatsby himself, are played out around the idea of the dream and the new beginning. Again and again in American culture, there has been a belief in the possibility of renewal set alongside doubts and questionings about the reality of such a concept. This has often been interpreted as a naïve, superficial dream associated with the mythic portrayals of America as the promised land and a new Eden. This 'new' continent seemed to offer the last great hope for mankind to begin again and put right all the wrongs of the Old World. The truth of such claims was quickly dispelled and yet it survived as a structural myth in American culture.

The very 'Americanness' of Fitzgerald's novel has much to do with its internal conflicts and contradictions, as if within itself a whole drama of American uncertainty and division is played out. Rather like Marshall Berman's definition of modernity, *The Great Gatsby* presents a world 'that promises...and at the same time,...threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are'. It is a world of 'disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish' (Berman 1983:15). Experiencing the narrative's dark moments and its radiant dreams is to fall into these contradictions embodied in Gatsby himself, who is 'the poet of openness, the future, the green light'. And 'On the other hand, his most profound profession of faith is that the past can "of course" be repeated; he is a prophet of stasis' (Holquist 1991:180). This tension between stasis and the future is part of the network of contradictions and conflicts that one must acknowledge in any consideration of an American identity wrestling with diversity and unity, assimilation and separation, individualism and community.

### **MAYBE THIS IS HEAVEN: *FIELD OF DREAMS* (1989)**

Fitzgerald's examination of America's dreamscape and its sense of identity born out of newness and beginning has become a major theme in American cultural expression. Individual courage, persistence and determination focused on idealism and 'dream' have become a strong, resilient strand in expressions of 'Americanness'. Phil Alden Robinson's film *Field of Dreams* (1989) dwells on possibility, rekindling a sense of wonder that the Reagan presidency had promised, but failed to deliver. Outside the institutional organisations of power, such as banks, the film returns to the fundamental ideological units, the individual and the family following the dream. It belongs to a particular tradition in American thought, derived from strands of Puritan and republican traditions, 'a discourse of moral virtue and responsibility' stemming from 'a belief in chosenness and an original unity of communal virtue in a "city set upon a hill" or a "virtuous republic" of yeomen farmers' (King 1993:364). Appropriately, it

involves the land and an Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) who hears voices from the fields telling him that 'if you build it, he will come'. Ploughing up his crops, and so rejecting economic security, he builds a baseball field in the belief that it will connect him with some lost sense of life that is unclear until the end of the film. The clue is the role of his own father:

I never forgave him for getting old...He must've had dreams but he never did anything about them...he could have heard voices but he sure didn't listen to them...He never did one spontaneous thing in all the years I knew him. I'm afraid of that happening to me.

Ray says, 'I'm scared to death of turning into my father' because the father is the Past, but not one to be restored or repeated as in the mythic return so prevalent in the American Dream. Rather, he is a signifier of waste, of the failure of the dream rather than its fulfilment. Other characters gather around Ray and the film draws together the threads of their disparate dreams, as if all of them need to reconcile themselves with some aspect of their past. Just as Ray will ultimately be reconciled with his father who returns as a ghost from the past, so the film reminds us of the values that the 1980s have destroyed: family, friendship, individualism, radicalism (the 1960s are a constant point of reference) and dreams.

People will come...as innocent as children, longing for the past... it's money they have and it's peace they like...they'll watch the game and it'll be like they dipped themselves in magic waters, the memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces.

This field, this game is part of our past...it reminds us of all that was once good and could be good again...

There is, of course, a link back to Gatsby here, for Shoeless Joe Jackson, who returns to the baseball field, was cast out from the game by the 1919 World Series fixing scandal. In Fitzgerald's novel, it is Gatsby's friend, Meyer Wolfshiem, who is said to have fixed the series and represents the dark individualism, the dream's inversion, corrupt and yet entrepreneurial, for as Gatsby says, 'he just saw the opportunity' (Fitzgerald 1974:80). It is Wolfshiem's greed and power that *Field of Dreams* opposes with its renewal of past values, both of the 1960s' counter-culture and the original 'capacity for wonder' that Nick Carraway longs for. The film criticises the book-burners of the Moral Majority, as well as the bankers foreclosing on Ray's farm, and thus connects to a wider liberal agenda. But it is *the* American game, baseball, that has been corrupted and the film uses it symbolically to represent all that has to be renewed, as Robinson said himself, 'it's symbolic of the better things about America that have been lost' (Robinson 1989:6).

For all its powerful, emotive force, the film can be viewed as conservative, reiterating the pull to the land and to the Puritan dream of the city on the hill (Ray's white house is prominent throughout) as signifiers of goodness and vision. The community in which Ray lives mocks him, but in the end they will come to his vision, built from the individual power of his dream. Its values are those of the family, the land, hard work and strong belief, but it also celebrates the 1960s as a time of possibility, talks of reconciliation and moves towards some shared vision for the future. The final visual image of the film, as the camera moves heavenward, is of the baseball field at night with the lights of a thousand cars moving towards it across the mid-West. The field is the heart in the heart of America and the people are its renewing blood surging to their dreams.

### **‘THE SURFACE OF AN IDENTITY’: THE PAST AS PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE**

The powerful emotional and mythic images employed in *Field of Dreams* speak of renewal and reconciliation, popular themes in American political rhetoric. D.H. Lawrence celebrated a ‘new voice’ in American literature, ‘a shifting over from the old psyche to something new’, but this ‘displacement...hurt’ (Lawrence 1977:7). It was about ‘cutting away the old emotions and consciousness’ (ibid.: 8) leading ‘us back, through pang after pang of disintegrative sensation, back towards the end of all things, where the beginning is: just as the year begins where the year is utterly dead’ (Lawrence 1962:117). This poetic language suggests something of the impulse to change and renewal that has characterised many of the myths of America, but whereas Lawrence’s words are full of complexity and unspoken meanings, by the time the language has been selected and re-used in the political sphere, it has become curtailed and simplified. It is no surprise perhaps to find the Inaugural Address of President Bill Clinton in 1993 employing similar seasonal imagery to describe his version of America’s new hope. After the Republican presidencies of Bush and Reagan, Clinton called for ‘the mystery of American renewal’, ‘a new season of renewal’ to once again alter the country and replenish the nation and to draw for that process upon the fundamental core myths of American culture. First, the belief in the capacity ‘to reinvent America’, second, to ‘define what it means to be an American’ and third, to ‘begin anew with energy and hope, with faith and discipline’ (Maidment and Dawson 1994:197–200). The implications of this speech reinforce key ideas and assumptions about American identity that connect it with a ‘mystery’, an invocation of the divine and Manifest Destiny of the nation as some final expression of the promised land, and also that it is possible for all Americans to participate in this ‘divine’ mission—this dream. Individuals, wrapped in the nation, choose to define themselves, to invent their own identity and place within the idealised new Spring, ‘a spring reborn’. Nature itself is a part of the divine mystery of America’s renewal, its capacity for change and for opportunity, and it

is the heritage of this generation to ‘rededicate’ themselves to the dream, ‘the very idea of America’ (ibid.: 200).

Clinton’s speech implies American identity is free from ideology when he says, ‘we march to the music of our time, [but] our mission is timeless’ (ibid.: 197), as if history has been by-passed in the creation of the values and goals he talks of. He is, however, reinvoking the core myths, an essence, around which America has structured its dominant ideological meanings, myths whose ‘meaning is *already* complete...a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions’ (Barthes 1976:117). Clinton’s speech, his story of America, ‘thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to *establish* [American identity]’ (ibid.: 125) by repeating the past, or the language of the past, and seeking to apply it to the present. ‘Myth is speech *stolen* [from the past] and *restored* [to the present]’ (ibid.: 125) and the images it restores transform historical processes into apparently natural occurrences so that we fail to read them as a motive, only as a reason (see Barthes 1976:129).

These myths form a complex ideological system that appears simple and uncomplicated for it functions by assumption, and we *assume* its values for they seem to be natural, to belong, to fit the place they have been given in the order of things. Of course, we must suspect such an order of neatness and interrogate the system that is in operation, its ideologies, assumptions and exclusions. For this mythic framework excludes by constructing a single narrative of America, fixing certain dominant meanings: of individuality, the nation, Nature, divinity, discipline and work etc., that cannot apply to all Americans, nor should they. The umbrella of myth tries to incorporate and *speak for* all whilst at the same time claiming that Americans can ‘define what it means to be an American’. Here is the contradiction of myth/ideology, for it glosses over or elides difference, contingency and diversity in favour of clarity which ‘goes-without-saying’; it functions to reassure (as Inaugural Addresses must) and ‘organizes a world without contradictions’ (Barthes 1976:143). The language is ‘full of rites and power, which none the less desires to pass itself off as innocently natural’ (Rylance 1994:50). The Inaugural Address speaks to the American people, seeking to reassure them of the new beginnings of the new presidency, of its commitment to great visions and old traditions, and as such functions less at a level of policy-making than as a rallying cry for the continuity of the new presidential term of office. It serves to remind Americans of ‘their’ individual and collective dreams.

The presidential discourse of America is a tried and tested mythological system that attempts to speak of renewal and invoke new beginnings as an appeal that ‘*harmonizes* with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself’ (ibid.: 156). Thus, Clinton, a Democrat, employs similar rhetoric to Reagan whose Inaugural Address of 1981 claimed the old territory of Dream, Frontier and renewal once again: ‘let us review our determination, our courage, and our strength. And let us renew our faith and our hope. We have every right to

dream heroic dreams...Their values sustain our national life' (Maidment and Dawson 1994:1940). The broad, sweeping, general appeal is to 'eternal' values that nobody can disagree with, often cynically referred to as 'Mom and apple pie'—and its function is to evaporate history from the content of the discourse and remove 'all soiling trace of origin or choice' (Barthes 1976:151).

Whereas the rhetoric remains in this mythic speech, any genuine call to the past as a truly destructive, or deconstructive, process has gone and been replaced by the actionless imagery of renewal. If Lawrence wrote of the 'disintegrative sensation' and William Carlos Williams of the urge 'to clear the GROUND' (Williams 1971:219) as gestures of real, radical American assertion in opposition to the stale, Old World values, then by the conversion of the impulse to presidential rhetoric all that remains is the appeal and a distant memory of possibility. Barthes argues that criticism involves 'the essential destruction of the past' (Barthes 1976:158) and not simply a 'restoring' and evocation of its images, for any harmonised narrative, any rendering of cultural wholeness is an improbable deception, a trick of mythology. Nick Carraway *wants* to believe in Gatsby's restorative dream, his wholeness of vision, but Fitzgerald's text encourages the reader to see beyond his 'single window' and 'partial view' (Fitzgerald 1974:10–11) and recognise that 'the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing' (ibid.: 106). That novel's subtle contradictions, its doubts and tensions, remind us of America's diversity and the impossibility of any single, authoritative, totalising point of view.

The mythic spin of presidential discourse, of the ideological past restored like Gatsby's mausoleum-like mansion, is finally empty and exists only 'at the surface of an identity' (Barthes 1976:101) excluding the multifaceted details of cultural difference and the ambiguous nature of that 'past'. America has to be 'read' as a polysemy that is, a space of many signs, a rich text, 'a complex signifier, a contested textual construct that bears the name "America"' (Mathy 1993:3). It belongs to the realms of post-structural contemporary criticism in which the 'text'—here, America—is plural and coming from 'innumerable centres' as it 'ceaselessly posits meaning, ceaselessly to evaporate it' (Rylance 1994:80).

Any 'partial view' that seeks to label America in a single manner misses the vast 'teeming nation of nations' that Walt Whitman recognised as its source of democratic hope. However, it is not enough to say America is 'many things' since these are elements in a struggle for both meaning and, therefore, for power. These competing discourses are expressions of the struggles that construct America, and the presidential discourse discussed above taps into the deep tradition of myths of new beginnings and the dream. There exist alongside such powerful discourses the marginalised, counter- or border-discourses that are also 'America', but they exist on the edge of the frame fighting to be heard and to become more influential.



## COUNTER-CULTURAL DREAMS

The radical criticism of the mainstream by the counter-cultures of the 1950s and 1960s is an interesting example of how the embodiment of possibility in America lived on as part of a counter-hegemonic alternative voice. Counter-cultural critics felt that the dream imagery had been hijacked by the corporate ‘organisation man’ and the values of the new beginning turned into the slogans of the consumer culture and presidential politics. In the works of many Beat writers, who emerged as rebellious figures willing to criticise and attack mainstream society, there is a determined effort to reclaim the identity of America as a statement of possibility rather than production. Allen Ginsberg wrote of

an America gone mad with materialism...prepared to battle the world in defense of a false image of its Authority. Not the wild and beautiful America of the comrades of Whitman...where the spiritual independence of each individual was an America.

(Allen 1960:333)

This lost America has to be rediscovered, or reinvented, as a protest against the narrowing vision of ‘Authority’—Ginsberg’s expression for the dominant hegemonic power which dictates the terms of existence, spells out the dream through a ‘fixed and universal monopoly on reality’ (Allen and Tallman 1973: 243). ‘America will be discovered’ (Allen 1960:321) and for Ginsberg and other artists, it was through a renewal of form, a challenge to the stasis that seemed only to serve the *status quo* of hegemony. As Michael McClure wrote, ‘we wanted to make it new and we wanted to invent it...we wanted voice and we wanted vision’ (McClure 1982:12–13). The language recalls the mythic notion of new beginnings and celebrates the idealism of America, not as an imperial power, a conqueror of native lands or an oppressor of minorities, but as a place capable of change—make it new, he cries. For these critics there was something worth saving, something that was not mere rhetoric.

The counter-culture sought both the renewal of ‘wonder’ and the politics of opposition, both vision and action; and in this regard it was very much in an American tradition. The poet, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, called for ‘a rebirth of wonder’ and ‘for someone to really discover America’ (Ferlinghetti 1968:49), emphasising both the loss of spirit and the failure in American life to realise the true potential of the place. What had to be discovered was that which had been obscured by dominant, but limited definitions of American identity, that excluded or marginalised vital groups with much to contribute. It is significant that alongside and within the counter-culture emerged other alternative, previously marginalised voices (African Americans, Native Americans, women, gays, etc.) offering different expressions and definitions of identities.

In the Port Huron Statement (1962), ‘the most authentically American expression of a new radicalism’ (Sayres *et al.* 1984:250), the counter-culture

voiced familiar calls for ‘American values’ which had been lost as a generation was ‘maturing in complacency’ (Maidment and Dawson 1994: 237), and demanded change. It repeated the plea to go ‘beneath’ ‘the temporary equilibriums of our society’, ‘the stagnation of those who have closed their minds to the future’ and to reject the feeling of ‘the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as well’ (ibid.: 238). The hegemonic, dominant culture promised stability and prosperity, but also perpetuated norms which excluded and limited the capacity for human potential. American identity has always involved tensions between the individual and the collective identity, for as the Port Huron Statement concludes, ‘the object is not to have one’s way so much as it is to have a way that is one’s own’ (ibid.: 241).

Thus in a key film often read as a counter-cultural text, *Easy Rider* (1968), one of the characters, Hanson (Jack Nicholson), says, ‘This used to be a helluva country. I can’t understand what’s going on’ and throughout the film we are presented with images of nostalgia for some half-remembered golden age, signified most often as an eternal, mythical West as opposed to the intolerance and corruptions of a modern world. The film’s valuesystem is contradictory throughout, but it does valorise certain traditional images such as the land and the family, very much in the way *Field of Dreams* did in the late 1980s. Sitting down to eat with a mixed-marriage family (another image of reconciliation and hope?) of Mexican and American, Wyatt comments on the ‘spread’ and the righteousness of ‘living from the land’ as if to celebrate a vision of timelessness and wholeness outside the mania of the city they have left behind. The drug culture, as portrayed in the early parts of the film, supports the view that alternative perceptions were part of the process of re-visioning America and questioning its values. This is suggested in the film, although never fully developed, through the sense of the land conveyed through Native American culture. Much of the journey is through Native-American lands of Utah and New Mexico, with sequences in Monument Valley and Taos Pueblo, and makes references to the ‘people’ buried in the sacred land itself (see Plate 1), as if to articulate the film’s tentative portrayal of new identities and its challenges to the accepted culture of the times. Indeed, the film plays with alternatives to the dominant culture, but none are satisfactory and any sense of resistance is ultimately contained in the individual figures of Wyatt and Billy who are destroyed and erased at the end of the movie. Change seems impossible, as the camera lifts above the final fiery destruction, in a shot reminiscent of the concluding shot of *Field of Dreams*, but unlike that film’s sense of regeneration and possibility, *Easy Rider* ends in horror, death and the denial of alternatives.

As Richard King has written, ‘since the 1960s it has been impossible to see American culture as a unitary or even dualistic entity...[and] plurality emerged with full force as an ideal’ (Gidley 1993:373). The 1960s opened a dialogue with the stale imagery of the American Dream and sought to reinvent it with hope and to enlarge it through inclusiveness, by ‘stressing the *utopian* aspects...as distinguished from its *economic* aspects’ (Sayres *et al.* 1984:249). As Fredric



*Plate 1 Easy Rider's landscape: approaching Monument Valley, Arizona*

*Source:* Neil Campbell, 1995

Jameson argues, the 1960s in America was part of a wider global reaction to colonialism involving ‘those inner colonized of the first world—“minorities”, marginals, and women—’ who became integral to a ‘coming to self-consciousness of subject peoples’ (Sayres *et al.* 1984:181). Groups excluded from early visions of the ‘dream’ and silenced by the processes of history, sought to have some role in the renewal of ideas of identity. As the radical Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua has written, ‘We have come to realise that we are not alone in our struggles nor separate nor autonomous but that we—white black straight queer female male—are connected and interdependent’ (Moraga and Anzaldua 1983: Foreword). This recognition of a diverse but connected struggle for renewal can still be expressed in the mythic language of America: *‘Women, let’s not let the danger of the journey and the vastness of the territory scare us—let’s look forward and open paths in these woods’* (*ibid.*, italics in the original). In ‘unlearning to not speak’, as the poet and novelist Marge Piercy puts it, women and other excluded groups have explored and reinvented identities, not to reduce them down to a formulaic myth, but to provide true scope for expansiveness and diversity (see [Chapter 7](#)).

## MULTIPLICITY, DIFFERENCE AND RE-VISION

As we have seen in this chapter and in the introduction, identity is a constant shifting territory in America, with renewal as a significant element in the recognition of difference and diversity, rather than fixity and stasis. American identity is characterised by re-vision as a process of renewal: 'Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' (Rich 1993:167). The voices of people of colour, feminists and radicals coming from the margins of American culture have caused the 'assumptions' that Adrienne Rich refers to, to be examined and reviewed, but this is a process inherent in a radical interpretation of the myth of new beginnings. The French critic Gilles Deleuze argues, like D.H.Lawrence and others, that America is concerned with 'deterritorialisation' or the movement across lines and boundaries, unafraid to flee to new lands or leave old ones behind. He writes of the American passion for 'departure, becoming, passage' in its creation of 'a New Earth' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987:36).

The very act of movement is akin to the desire for renewal, for 'becoming' American. The constant 'passages' suggest that identity cannot in this scheme of things become fixed, nor arrive at some final point in which the true American is defined as an eternal essence. Deleuze touches upon the fact of American restlessness, its mobilities, as a sign of its 'multiplicity' (ibid.: vi)—'a set of lines or dimensions which are irreducible to one another' and in which 'what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is "between"...*a set of relations which are not separable from each other*' (ibid.: vii—our italics).

This is crucial, for it suggests something of the nature of American identities as plural and irreducible to a single fixed idea of Americanness', but also, in contrast, dynamic, best recognised—to repeat—as 'a set of relations which are not separable from each other'(ibid.). The implications of connection and dialogue come through here, and the idea of an American cultural identity derived through multiplicities rather than conformity and closure is in keeping with current attitudes to cultural difference. 'The time for "assimilating" minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has passed' (Rutherford 1990:219) and what must be set alongside is a new definition of cultural identity which is not based on any true Americanness, any 'oneness' of agreed values and history, but the recognition of difference. 'We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about "one experience, one identity", without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute... [American] "uniqueness"' (ibid.: 225). In this definition, cultural identity is

a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past...[and] Far from being fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power.

(ibid.: 225)

The American dream, with its strong pull to some essential sense of eternal values, cannot be accepted as the only aspect of cultural identity, for to do so would be to exclude different responses to it and also to ignore the historical processes at work.

A healthy culture is continually aware of these 'positionings' and acknowledges the importance of the voicing of such differences. As Juan Flores and George Yudice point out, speaking from the position of the US/Mexican border, 'the search for "America", the inclusive, multicultural society of the continent, has to do with nothing less than the imaginative ethos of re-mapping and re-naming in the service not only of Latinos but all claimants' (Boyce-Davies 1994:10). These renegotiations must be a part of the discussion of identity in a contemporary culture where the fixities of big concepts like 'nation', 'identity', 'culture' must be continually reexamined. Definitions are only provisional and 'subject to new analyses, new questions and new understandings if we are to unlock some of the narrow terms of the discourses in which we are inscribed' (ibid.: 5).

The American sense of new beginnings, once demythicised, can still have a genuine and important meaning in the exploration of cultural practices and identity, for it is part of the endless efforts to trace the self, to follow the many lines that make up the 'teeming nation of nations' and to keep revisiting and redefining them from new perspectives for 'a new interrogation of meaning' (ibid.: 5). In part, what is needed is Cornel West's 'new cultural politics of difference' which

affirms the perennial quest for precious ideals of individuality and democracy by digging deep in the depths of human particularities and social specificities in order to construct new kinds of connections, affinities and communities across empire, nation, region, gender, age and sexual orientation

(West 1993:29)

### **NEW AGE POSSIBILITY: *GRAND CANYON* (1992)**

One example of how some of these contradictions have been dealt with in recent years is through a Hollywood mainstream film, Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* (1992). Released in the same year as the Los Angeles riots following the acquittal of the policemen who beat Rodney King, the film explores urban life, race and the possibility for regeneration. Los Angeles represents a particular hybrid city containing a mix of cultures and languages that resembles an archetypal vision of contemporary America, with its slogan 'It All Comes Together in L.A.' As Edward Soja has written, 'Everywhere seems also to be in Los Angeles...reproducing *in situ* the customary colours and confrontations of a hundred different homelands' (Soja 1989:223). Against this background, Kasdan's film constructs a narrative around the various social and relational

dilemmas of a small group of characters, white and black, caught up in a city in decline, where poverty, random crime and violence are everywhere. The politics of the film are liberal, as Giroux has discussed at length (Giroux and McLaren 1994), preferring not to debate responsibility for this crisis or to analyse its connections to wider systems of oppression within American culture. Instead, the film personalises events around the central relationship of Mack (Kevin Kline) and Simon (Danny Glover), who meet by chance when the latter rescues the former from the threat of black street gangs. Despite criticisms of the film, it does register the difficulties inherent in a pluralist city where cultures are separated on economic and social lines. It raises the issues of race, gender, inequality and power in a number of ways, but ultimately cannot explore them except as a means to a hopeful resolution. It states that ‘the world doesn’t make any sense...anymore...and we’re getting used to it’ and ‘there’s a gulf in this country, an ever widening abyss between the people who have stuff and the people who don’t have shit, like this big hole has opened up, as big as the fucking Grand Canyon’. However, in examining identity in contemporary America, the film excludes the past that has created these circumstances, confusing it with ‘luck’ and ‘chance’, motifs used throughout the piece, and ultimately, the resolution of these problems are a combination of individual kindness, with Mack’s ‘rescue’ of Simon’s family from a dangerous neighbourhood through his personal influence, and through the mystery of a reconciliation in the face of nature. The earlier motif of the Grand Canyon is reprieved not as a signifier of urban crisis, but as a reminder of human powerlessness in the face of such an awesome natural phenomenon:

it took so long for that thing to get to look like that and it ain’t done either, you know it happens right while you’re sitting there watching it, it’s happening right now while we’re sitting here in this ugly town... You just realise what a joke we people are...thinking that what we do is going to matter all that much...it’s a split second we’ve been here.

(Simon to Mack)

As Giroux writes, the film ‘subordinates human agency to the grand forces of nature and allows whites to feel good about themselves while simultaneously absolving them of any responsibility’ (Giroux and McLaren 1994:43). As the characters stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon they resemble a new community, inter-racial, men and women, young and old, but one without any power except in the hope derived from the land itself. Giroux calls this a ‘New Age sense of possibility which...collapses irreducible differences’ (ibid.: 42) into a moment of unifying energy in which all are one with nature and each other. In this history-less moment, beyond the reality of class and economic division, the question is asked, ‘So what do you think?’, and the reply is ‘I think...it’s not all bad’. Finally, therefore, the film is unsatisfactory for it presents a sense of crisis without any analysis of its cultural history, only to seek a resolution which



*Plate 2* Tourists at the Grand Canyon, Arizona

*Source:* Neil Campbell, 1995

maintains the ideological order that structures race and gender in America. The film admits that cultural difference is now part of American culture, but finally can only reinforce a range of apolitical, sentimental values in place of genuine political concerns or action (see [Plate 2](#)).

### **CONCLUSION: NEW INTERROGATIONS—GLORIA ANZALDUA, BARRY LOPEZ AND TRINH T. MINH-HA**

If a film like *Grand Canyon* stumbles under the complex identities of American culture, other texts have attempted to confront it more fully. Barry Lopez and Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, combine a number of the perspectives that we have put forward in this chapter in an effort to both realise the complex nature of American identities and to suggest a constructive and realistic way ahead. They are both concerned with what James Cliff Ford calls ‘presents-becoming-futures’ involving the recognition of both ‘utopian, persistent hope for the reinvention of difference’ and the realisation of the potential for the ‘destructive, homogenizing effects of global economic and cultural centralization’ (Clifford 1988:15). They are interdisciplinary writers and activists, concerned with environmental issues, radical politics and cultural criticism who have expressed their views in many voices: fiction, essays, travel writing, and meditative poetic pieces. Their works

attempt to redefine American identities to some extent by ‘re-mapping’ and decentring certain assumptions about the self and its relationships to place and others. Their work is hybrid (see [Chapter 2](#)) in that it merges with other cultural forms such as oral traditions, myths, trickster stories, and it unfixes itself from any obvious, stable tradition that one might too neatly term ‘American’. They are border-writers, endlessly crossing boundaries between different cultural practices—becoming, challenging, redefining what it is to live in America. In the words of D. Emily Hicks, ‘Border writing offers a new form of knowledge: information about and understanding of the present to the past in terms of the possibilities of the future’ (Hicks 1991: xxxi). Between culture and nature, man and animal, life and death, space and place, wilderness and civilisation, new stories are told that remind us of William Carlos Williams’s statement: ‘History, history! We fools, what do we know or care? History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery’ (Williams 1971:55).

For Barry Lopez, America is a conquered land, colonised by Spaniards and other Europeans, and he writes of the horrors of conquest and imperial hegemony demanding that we ‘rediscover the original wisdom’ derived from pre-conquest cultures and their relationships ‘with the nonhuman world’ (Lopez 1988:198). To ‘reclaim that metaphysics’ is tied to the ‘practical need’ (ibid.: 198) to see beyond the terrible history and seek an imaginative new beginning that refigures the relationship of humanity to place. In *The Rediscovery of North America* (1990) Lopez brings together these ideas, tracing a ‘tone’ back to the conquest of America and agreeing with Tzvetan Todorov’s claim that it ‘heralds and establishes our [America’s] present identity’ (Todorov 1987:5). Since colonisation, argues Lopez, ‘we have imposed, not proposed... We said what we thought, and bent to our will whatever resisted’ (Lopez 1990:18). In the New World ‘we came to talk, not to listen’ (ibid.: 19), thus establishing a monologue in which other voices were ignored, destroyed or marginalised. The first ‘new beginning’ ignored what the New World had to say and closed its mind to the wisdom of the place and its particular energies, preferring instead to view the land as ‘empty’ and awaiting the arrival of the European mind to ‘write’ itself onto the continent. Identity as such was formed around exclusions and denials, especially of Native cultures and existing traditions, rather than openness and possibility

However, even in Lopez’s dark remembrances there is still belief: ‘It is still in some real sense the New World’ (ibid.: 29), because the idea of American identity remains fluid. For him, this means a chance for new beginnings in which ‘proposals’ are made, a dialogue—‘opening an intelligent conversation’ (ibid.: 36)—with the environment created which would permit a new ‘moral universe’ where the land was included in ‘the meaning of the word community’ (ibid.: 34). He continues: ‘In these ways we begin, I think, to find a home, to sense how to fit a place’ (ibid.: 37), and it is this concept of home that is so important to Lopez, for it indicates ‘a place where we take on the responsibilities of adults to the human community’ (ibid.: 48). This ‘home’ can be a new beginning, ‘a motif



for a culture that values difference and thrives on its own diversity' (Rutherford 1990:25) but rejects the static 'dream' of some lost time.

Lopez recognises the New World not as a place to 'recover' but to 'rediscover', that is to see it differently, unlike before. There is no whole sense of America that can be recovered, so 'we need to sojourn in it again, to discover the lineaments of cooperation with it' (Lopez 1990:49)—'we have a monumental adjustment to make, and only our companions on the ship to look to. We must turn to each other, and sense that this is possible' (ibid.: 58). This renewal of hope, based on the need to change and to look again at the way people live, carries with it the contemporary concern for ecology and the traditional beliefs of possibility. For Lopez, these elements are closely related to the land, the wisdom of ancient tribes, nature and to the actual knowledge of modernity, working together and 'rethinking our relationships' (Lopez 1988: 198). As he wrote in *Arctic Dreams* (1986), there is a need for an

altered perspective to imagine afresh the way to a lasting security of the soul and heart, and toward an accommodation in the flow of time we call history, ours and the world's. That dream...is the dream of great and common people alike.

(1987:12)

Lopez's qualified optimism may appear mystical and inappropriate to the harsh politics of the contemporary world, but the critic and film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha has written that 'identity is a way of re-departing... to start again with re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals' (Trinh 1990:328). Here the American sense of new beginning is empowering, learning from the past with the belief that one can begin again without repeating all the mistakes of the past. It becomes 'everything monologism has repressed...Here again and anew, gender and sexuality and other struggles of borders...The challenge is thus: how can one re-create without re-circulating domination?' (ibid.: 329). As in Barry Lopez's work, Trinh T. Minh-ha appropriates images of renewal and infuses them with new purposes to indicate the possibility of inclusion and expansion within America without stating the older definitions of totality. In her book *Woman Native Other*, Trinh states that what is desirable is a community 'built on differences...[that]...subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one', articulated through a story that 'circulates like a gift' but which cannot be possessed by any one person or group, 'a gift built on multiplicity...inexhaustible within its own limits' (Trinh 1989:2). In her vision, 'Life is a perpetual to and fro, a dis/continuous releasing and absorbing of the self' (ibid.: 128) where 'plurality adds up to no total' (ibid.: 330), but offers a source of renewal with its many voices, 'companions on the ship', to use Lopez's phrase, working towards different destinations and with different priorities. This suggests a sensitive and human response to the complexities of contemporary

culture which presents a possible way forward to make it over 'a-new a-gain', as she puts it (ibid.: 128).

Gloria Anzaldua, writing as a Chicana lesbian feminist, sees herself as existing in the multiple 'borderlands' of American culture: 'that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct human cultures encounter one another's "otherness" and appropriate, accommodate, or domesticate it through language' (Kolodny 1992:9). Just as Lopez and Trinh are fascinated by the possibilities of the border, so too is Anzaldua, recognising in it an 'inherently unstable locus... of environmental transitions and cultural interpenetrations' (ibid.: 10) which 'destabilizes easy assumptions about centers and margins' (ibid.: 12). The border, for Anzaldua, is resistant to unitary explanations and neat stories; it is a place where 'different cultures, identities, sexualities, classes, geographies, races, genders and so on collide or interchange' (Boyce-Davies, 1994:16).

In many respects, as we discussed in the Introduction, this sense of 'a space where cultures conflict, contest, and reconstitute one another' (Smith 1993:169) is a description of American culture itself; multiple and dynamic. And it is in this precise environment of possibility that Anzaldua imagines her new, hybrid subjectivity, the *mestiza*, constituted by the acts of crossing and recrossing the border until 'a new life begins' (Anzaldua 1987:49). For her, the old ideas of being assimilated as an 'American' are meaningless, for 'she learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality... Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else' (ibid.: 79). It is a 'new birth' or beginning, what she terms a 'new consciousness' (ibid.: 80), but it is no easy, harmonious position, rather, one full of turmoil and pain, involving the 'uprooting of dualistic thinking' (ibid.) that constantly divides and sets one against the other. This 'third perspective' (ibid.: 46) offers a new subjectivity beyond the norms and expectations of a narrowly defined 'American' identity, seen as 'universal' (but in fact white, male, heterosexual, etc.). It is a visionary new beginning cast from the realities of a postmodern culture of difference and multiplicity with a sense of self that is open, plural, 'a space through which to negotiate ambivalence and heteroglossia' (Smith 1993:175). Evoking once again Bakhtin's cultural ideal, Anzaldua posits a new America where 'many languages intermingle with one another, in a state of nonhierarchical multiplicity, creating a hybrid language' (ibid.: 176).

The utopianism of these positions, despite their realistic acceptance of struggle and contest, asserts the persistence of the ideas of reinvention and new beginnings in American culture but refigured through the new positions of marginality, difference and otherness. It is not necessarily an end to the 'broad-based democratic cultural discourse that implies more than a collection of marginalized groups' (King 1993:378), but, rather, a reconstruction of American cultural identities in which new groups find a voice and new subjectivities emerge. As Trinh T.Minh-ha has said,

the self...is not so much a core as a process, one finds oneself in the context of cultural hybridity, always pushing one's questioning of oneself to the limit of what one is and what one is not...Fragmentation is therefore a way of living at the borders.

(Wheale 1995:252)<sup>3</sup>

Such a positive use of her multiple identities, as Vietnamese-African-French-American, is a recognition of how such unfixing of cultural identity can 'displace certainties in order to gain new ground' (ibid.). To borrow one of the titles from her films, one might term this new ground of identity as a 'reassemblage' acknowledging 'there is no real me to return to, no whole self...re are instead, diverse recognitions of self through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity' (ibid.: 255). Perhaps here in the postmodern shifting of identity, within the universal pressures of globalisation, diversity and difference is the appropriate platform for a democratic America which recognises its own multiplicities and relates to wider, extra-national cultural connections to do with language, gender, race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. In this re-vision there exists the timeless idea of the American dream, recast, but still vibrant in its signification of creative regeneration and the quest for new beginnings.

## NOTES

- 1 These 'others' speaking from the margins of American mainstream culture will be vital to the re-vision undertaken in this book.
- 2 Barry Lopez (see the final section of this chapter) has actually used Fitzgerald's phrase in expressing his beliefs 'It's important for me...to go into a story with a capacity for wonder' (Aton 1986:13).
- 3 The arguments about hybridity and new American identities are taken up and developed in [Chapter 2](#).

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### FOLLOW-UP WORK

- 1 Using W.Truettner (ed.) *The West As America* as a source of images, consider the ‘dream’ of America conveyed in the Columbus paintings, particularly that of Emanuel Leutze (see [Plate 5](#)). What sense of the ‘New World’ is created here and how? Look at the figures in the painting and their relationships—what do they suggest of the connotations of Columbus’s role?
- 2 Using a presidential Inaugural Address, analyse its use of rhetoric and in particular the different ways it draws upon certain ‘mythic’ perceptions of America. What images does it use? What references to the dream, to the future, to the people?

#### *Assignments and areas of study*

- 3 (a) Some have argued that hybridity represents the best hope for America as a diverse culture. Discuss the arguments for and against this position, using a range of examples. Use [Chapter 2](#) as well.
- (b) How has any Hollywood film explored the utopian possibilities of America in the contemporary world and what ideological implications emerge as a result? (Such diverse films as *Trading Places*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Philadelphia* could be used.)

## Chapter 2

# Ethnicity and immigration

### Between many worlds

#### **ETHNIC AMERICA: 'A VAST INGATHERING'**<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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, Crèvecoeur, 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 selfconsciously, 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 (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]



*Plate 3* Native-American histories: Newspaper Rock, Canyonlands National Park, Utah

*Source:* Neil Campbell, 1995

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' (Joseph 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 Tower 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 racist 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 firsthand 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.

(Yeziarska 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 Yeziarska, who portrays a woman's struggle between the dreams of 'the new golden country' (Yeziarska 1975:9) and the 'shut-in-ness' (Yeziarska 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 selfdefinition. 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 Yeziarska'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' (Yeziarska 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 Yeziarska'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', Yeziarska's immigrants are trapped in the ghettos of the New World, choking and restricted, struggling to better themselves through education and hard work. However, Yeziarska 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 Yeziarska, 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), Yeziarska 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 Yeziarska's work, but was connected to her through his mentor John Dewey, who had a brief relationship with Yeziarska. Bourne's essay questions the 'melting pot' theory of immigration and the process of assimilation that it presumed, and like Yeziarska 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 uniform-ity' (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 Yeziarska'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 perpetrators 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 hardhitting 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, imperfectly 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, illfitting 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:<sup>4</sup> 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 cominglings 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 doubleaction 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 rearticulate 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 shareownership 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 identifiers’ 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 con

temporary 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*.

# Chapter 3

## African Americans

### 'I don't sing other people's voices'

I don't sing other people's voices.

(Skip James)

#### OUT OF SLAVERY

This chapter discusses the issues surrounding African Americans and their struggle for self-definition within the United States of America, through an exploration of various assertive modes of expression. In a culture whose dominant historical voice has been white, there is a vital need for African Americans to present their lives, past and future, as of equal importance in the 'American story'. As Werner Sollors writes, 'For this reason, what is called "memory"...may become a form of counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary "History"' (Sollors 1994:8). African-American 'voices' actively express 'memory', as Sollors refers to it, present 'counterhistories' to resist the tendency to exclude, and articulate African-American identities to break the imposed 'silence'<sup>1</sup> inherited from slavery and perpetuated in the written history and social frameworks of the USA. This chapter will emphasise the dynamic quality of the contest between 'silence' and 'voice' in African-American culture and how this process has been integral to a wider struggle for political power and authority in the United States. This concept of expressive 'voices' takes a variety of forms: slave songs, autobiography fiction, political speech, rap music and film, but together they create an alternative mode of communication through which the African Americans both state their own culture and assert their difference, whilst positioning themselves alongside the often more dominant voices of white mainstream culture. These 'repositories of individual memories, taken together, create a collective communal memory' (Fabre and O'Meally 1994:9) that represent a black counterhistorical identity. What we will show, in the words of Manning Marable, is that this 'identity is not something our oppressors forced upon us. It is a cultural and ethnic awareness we have collectively constructed for ourselves over hundreds of years. This identity is a cultural umbilical cord connecting us with Africa' (Marable 1992:295).

This 'collective construction' of an identity began with the vital oral culture from Africa sustained through expressive modes such as song and story. This was, according to Ralph Ellison, 'what we had in place of freedom' (Ellison 1972:255), because 'since we were excluded from the cultural mainstream', it was 'only performative spaces we had left' (Hall 1992:27). In the very first black newspaper, published in 1827, its editor John B. Russwurm wrote that for 'too long others have spoken for us' (Ripley 1993:11) and so put into words the primary concern of African Americans, to speak for themselves and dispel the 'implication...that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply fit in' (West 1993a:256–7).

To resist definition and speak for oneself is fundamental to the assertion of identity, as bell hooks puts it,

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice.

(Mariani 1991:340)

In order to examine the idea of expression, of 'voice' and 'talking back', we will begin with the heritage of slavery in African-American culture and its impact on the positioning of people of colour within a framework of values dominated by the mainstream culture of whites who tended to assume the slave was 'a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which the white man could write what he chose' (Levine 1977: 52). The 'master-culture', like the master of the plantation who sought to rule the lives of the slaves, tried to impose its norms and values on the minority group who were derided because of their colour and because of an inherited European view of the African as barbaric, heathen and inferior.

The African was...defined as an inferior human being. The representation of the African as Other signified phenotypical and cultural characteristics as evidence of this inferiority and the attributed condition of Africans therefore constituted a measure of European progress and civilization

(Miles 1989:30)

Defining the African within these limits of representation meant the power and status of the master were increased since, as the quotation suggests, the slave acted as an Other or a mirror against which the whites measured themselves and their value systems and to assume the inferiority of the African thus bolstered the power of the whites. The master/slave system was grounded in denials: of black history, identity, humanity, community, knowledge and language. These were all seen as means through which slaves might assert themselves and ultimately

question their condition in relation to the dominant group. To deny or erase these was, therefore, a method of control, a device to deny the slaves' identity and history and enforce an impression of being adrift, worthless and devoid of ancestry.

In 1965, during the struggles for civil rights, James Baldwin echoed many of these ideas when he wrote:

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you... I was taught in American history books that Africa had no history and neither did I. I was a savage about whom the least said the better... You belonged where white people put you.

(Baldwin 1985:404)

Baldwin's own writings sought to construct a place in America for the black man and to defy being positioned by 'challenging the white world's assumptions' (Baldwin 1963:31):

the truth about a black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, *has* been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions.

(*ibid.*: 62)

Similarly, the increased political demands for Black Power in the 1960s followed this argument, claiming that any movement 'must speak in the tone of that community...[so that] black people are going to use the words they want to use—not just the words whites want to hear' (Carmichael 1966:5).

### NEW BLACK HISTORIES

As a consequence of the civil rights movement and the kind of 'refusal' that Baldwin and Carmichael refer to, African-American and white American historians working on slave culture began to question official versions of black history by arguing that the denials, brutality and restraints of slavery did not crush the persistent desire in the slave community to maintain their own identities and their own sense of culture. The work of John W. Blassingame (1972), for example, demonstrates how through various cultural forms, such as songs, stories, dance and religion,

the rigors of bondage did not crush the slave's creative energies [and] through these means the slave could view himself as an object, hold on to

fantasies about his status, engender hope and patience, and at least use rebellious language when contemplating his life.

(Blassingame 1972:59)

The tentative assertions made here by Blassingame hint at the controversial nature of these claims, but later in the book his point is made even more clearly when he states that such slave expression encouraged 'group identification' and therefore argued 'that slaves were not solely dependent on the white man's cultural frames of reference for their ideas and values' (ibid.: 75–6).

Lawrence Levine develops these arguments, claiming that slaves 'were able to create an independent art form and a distinctive voice' (Levine 1977:30) through vital channels of expression outside the control of the 'master-culture'. The importance of language and of preserving a 'voice' is a recurrent idea in these new histories of slavery and its culture. They indicate an important stream of resistance which was conveyed through the arts of expression, especially song and story-telling. For through these, the communities of Africans could articulate and understand their place in the world outside of the immediate horrors and restrictions of slavery. The past was not dead in these oral arts, but very much present and real in the authority of the singer/teller. As Africans in America, they had 'alternatives open to them—alternatives that they themselves fashioned out of the fusion of their African heritage and their new religion' (ibid.: 35). Levine's emphasis falls importantly on the phrase 'that they themselves fashioned' because it underscores the essential quality of selfdefinition associated with these creative acts. In them and through them, the self is asserted in a world of constant denial in which the 'definitions belong to the definers, not the defined' (Morrison 1987:190).

Levine's idea of 'fusion' establishes a sense of new identity for African Americans who as slaves still maintained an effective and life-affirming set of values through the power of the voice and its willingness to enter into a dialogue with the dominant culture's own expressions. Levine is clearly seeing in these early examples a pattern in history towards integration wherein the black and white culture could find some point of harmonious contact. In this respect Levine's history is in keeping with a particular set of arguments and interpretations of African-American life associated with the stance of Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement. The liberal position suggested by Levine is of a distinct and valid 'black culture and consciousness' which 'interacted with a larger society that deeply affected it but to which it did not completely succumb' (Levine 1977:297).

In contrast to the white historian's liberal perspective offered by Levine, Sterling Stuckey's work argues that the roots of black 'nationalist consciousness' (Stuckey 1987:30) can be found in the slave culture because it was there that different tribes were forced together in slavery into shared experiences and 'the principal forms of cultural expression [were] essentially the same' and helped to mould a 'oneness of black culture' (ibid.: 82, 83).

In all these versions of slavery, the idea of a resistance and defiance of the master-culture is paramount and is always connected to the ability of the slaves to hold on to the ancestral past through the internal rituals, songs and stories of the group. Recent scholarship has suggested even more complex and ambiguous relationships between the slave and the master in which the master encouraged slave performance as an 'exotic presence' (Abrahams 1992:xvii), but the slave used this as a means of maintaining community and ancient beliefs. Abrahams argues for 'dynamic, expressive interrelations of the two cultures living side by side' (ibid.:xvii), acknowledging the persistence of African culture in the expressive, but subversive, lives of slaves. This passing on is expressed well in two brief fictional examples. In Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) Brother Tarp passes on a link from a slave's leg chain, saying 'it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you to remember what we're really fighting against' (1952:313). An object can voice history and memory, tell a vital story as part of the struggle. Second, in Alice Walker's *Meridian* the story of Louvinie, the story-teller, is used as a reminder of both the importance of passing on the memories, and also of the risk it poses to white society who fear the re-writing of 'their' versions of history. Her tongue 'was clipped out at the root' (1976:33) as a punishment for telling her tales, thus imposing silence and obedience once again.

Levine tells of a way the slaves continued these rituals of telling and passing on despite the ever-watchful eyes of the overseers, and captures the two sides of the 'fearful paradox' (Baldwin 1963:71). He describes how slaves would contain the sounds of their shouts, songs and rituals by various means, for example, by chanting into a large kettle which muffled their voices so they would not be found out. He comments, 'they could shout and sing all they wanted to and the noise would not go outside' (Levine 1977:42). The paradox is surely in the slaves' desire to express themselves and yet at the same time being unable to move 'outside', into a genuine, public point of contact with the world beyond the plantation. This encapsulates an important aspect of the struggle for voice and expression in black life. How could the creative spirit, the assertion of a valid, black history, be extended rather than be continually stifled by the presence of a more dominant and powerful voice of the white master-culture?

One answer to this had to be the increasing presence of African Americans in the public sphere, particularly during the civil rights movement, as a determined effort to take their 'voice' outside and engage directly with the authorised and official culture. Indeed, the very writing of new black histories demonstrates post-civil rights confidence in their use of slave testimony and narratives and shows the pattern of resistance and the need to hold on to an identity despite the slave system's brutal attempts to erase it as crucially linked to the struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. One slave narrative above all serves to illustrate the need 'to voice or speak the African into existence in Western letters' (Gates 1985:403) and that is Frederick Douglass's. Unlike Levine's story of the muffling of the voice, Douglass had to find ways out of this imposed silence of slavery in order

to tell the world ‘outside’ of its horrors. In this respect it is a kind of prototype for so many African-American literary forms. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) charts the journey from slavery by linking it with the assertion and command of language. For Douglass the process of liberation is intimately connected with the ability to express and define oneself in society. Consider, for example, how the narrative begins:

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it...slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters...to keep their slaves thus ignorant.

(Douglass 1982:47)

What does this suggest of Douglass’s condition under slavery? He goes on in the next few lines to answer this question using negatives such as ‘I could not tell...deprived...not allowed... I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me’ (ibid.: 47–8). The ‘want of information’ (ibid.: 47) oppresses him, dehumanises him to the level below a horse by depriving him of basic human facts of identity. He is denied an immediate history, but recognises the importance of finding a means of articulating as a source of self-assertion.<sup>2</sup> It is through songs that Douglass is first stirred:

They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension...they breathed the complaint of souls boiling with the bitterest anguish.... The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.

(ibid.: 57–8)

Years later the African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of also being ‘stirred’ (Du Bois 1965:378) by the ‘sorrow songs’ because they were ‘full of the voices of the past’ and ‘the singular spiritual heritage’ (ibid.: 378) which together formed ‘unvoiced longing toward a truer world of misty wanderings and hidden ways’ (ibid.: 380). Writing in 1903, Du Bois saw the ‘negro’ as part of a world that yielded him ‘no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world’ (ibid.: 214–15). This became Du Bois’s famous definition of ‘doubleconsciousness’ for the African American, ‘always looking at the world through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’ (ibid.: 215). Du Bois wrote of the ‘twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder’ (ibid.: 215).

Prompted by the slave songs, Douglass and later Du Bois, felt the call to resist the *prescribed* world of the master-culture, by which we mean a world already

set out, as if literally ‘written’ for the African American, with its denials, its imposed public silences and its cruel disciplinary system. As Douglass writes, ‘To all these complaints, no matter how unjust, the slave must answer never a word... When [the master] spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble’ (Douglass 1982:61).

In another slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) the female slave-author, Harriet Jacobs, uses almost identical words to identify her master’s control over speech and movement: ‘I was obliged to stand and listen to such language as he saw fit to address to me’ (Gates 1987: 364). Echoing Levine’s stifling of voice story, Douglass writes that there evolved a ‘maxim’ for slaves defined by these boundaries: ‘a still tongue makes a wise head. They suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in so doing prove themselves members of the human family’ (Douglass 1982:62). It was as if the only way to be connected to the ‘human family’ was to ‘suppress’ speech and expression and follow the lead of the master who dictated and ‘authored’ the terms of life in a system of ‘no answering back’ (ibid.: 65). Douglass states clearly the relationship of expression to freedom: ‘What he most dreaded, I most desired... That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought’ (ibid.: 79). To have knowledge, to read, write and express oneself was to step outside the master’s boundaries and away from the dictated and defined world he established and controlled for the slave. Indeed, any effort to ‘talk back’ was a blow against a system that denied the African American ‘the full, complex ambiguity of the human’ and preferred to present the image of the ‘oversimplified clown, a beast, or an angel’ (Ellison 1972:26). W.E.B. Du Bois saw the journey to knowledge and expression as essential for the development of a strong culture.

In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back.

(Du Bois 1965:218)

Du Bois’s sense of the veil that must be seen through is a valuable image, for it suggests the difficulty of asserting a self in a world that continually seeks to place and determine what you are and can be by prescribing your history and denying you any opportunity to express your thoughts or feelings. Later, James Baldwin wrote, ‘The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you... Please try to be clear,...about the reality which lies behind the words’ (Baldwin 1963:16).

In a similar vein, Houston Baker has written that ‘blacks lay veiled in a shroud of silence, invisible not because they had no face, but rather because they had no



voice. Voice, after all, presupposes face... Without a voice, the African is absent, or defaced, from history' (Baker 1987:104). The slave narrative was an essential expressive effort to break this silence, for as Baker adds, 'slaves could inscribe their selves only in language' (ibid.: 105). Expression, through speech, song and later writing was a means of resistance, an 'act of creating a public, historical self' (ibid.: 108) and to enable the radical shift of the African American from prescription to inscription and from clownish representation and oversimplification to complex, human ambiguity. The terms are important for they suggest the very politics of the process towards authority in African-American culture as prefigured in the author-ing of their own life stories and history. This struggle for voice and identity within African-American life can be linked to the post-colonial movements of Africa where similar arguments have been made about the need to maintain and develop the languages of resistance. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o has written, 'Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history' (Williams and Chrisman 1994:441). Ralph Ellison, whose novel *Invisible Man* (1952) is concerned with the need to break the silence and invisibility that surrounded black life, expressed this idea with characteristic sharpness.

For history records the pattern of men's lives, they say... All things ...are duly recorded—all things of importance that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by.

(Ellison 1952:353)

Slave narratives, like those of Douglass and Jacobs, and later 'autobiographical criticism', as bell hooks has termed it, are concerned with 'sharing the contradictions of our lives, [to] help each other learn how to grapple with contradictions as part of the process of becoming a critical thinker, a radical subject' (hooks 1994a: 186). These forms of expression are characteristically about the transformation of the self from the object of someone else's control and authority, to the possibility of self-definition and being one's own subject. As hooks writes, quoting Michelle Cliff, it is the 'work against the odds to claim the I' (1994a:177) from those who would contain, define and limit black experience and continue to deny them the full opportunity within the USA.

### **IMAGINATIVE CULTURAL RETRIEVAL**

African-American expression provides a means of 'claiming the I' through telling personal and cultural histories that together form a vital strand of black experience not given space in traditional white history books. As Malcolm X

writes in his *Autobiography*, at school when they came to the section on Negro history, 'it was exactly one paragraph long' and told how the 'slaves...were lazy and dumb and shiftless' (Malcolm X 1985:110). Instead of the dominant culture's control of language, African-American culture took up the call to re-establish its own history as a means of political and social assertion, through a diverse 'telling', using a variety of avenues through which to express its own vision and to tell its own story rather than the 'whitened' version that Malcolm X knew. As one person said, 'while you whites have schools and books for teaching your children, we tell stories, for stories are our books' (Levine 1977: 90). The use of memory has become central to this process for it allows the inclusion of stories excluded or denigrated or erased from the versions of white history. African myths, folklore, the communal stories and tales of slavery and freedom could be passed on orally, as they always had been, through alternative channels of communication within the black community. If the books, media and other techniques of the mainstream dominant culture denied space and access to these stories then other ways had to be found to express the continuities of black life.

The post-colonial critic Edward Said argues that, 'The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them' (Said 1994:xiii). In a world where such power dictates, authorises and controls what can be said, done and thought, there is a need to intervene in the process and 'un-block' the imperialist grip on a single version, and to 'progress beyond a number of assumptions that have been accepted uncritically for too long' (Levine 1977:444). For bell hooks this means habits of being that were a part of traditional black folk experience that we can re-enact, rituals of belonging...[the] sharing of stories that taught history, family genealogy, and the facts about the AfricanAmerican past (hooks 1991:39). In this type of alternative education 'memory [is]...a way of knowing and learning from the past' (ibid.: 40) so that one might be able 'to accept one's past—one's history—[and] learn...how to use it' (Baldwin 1963:71) in a positive, assertive way.

George Lipsitz calls this 'counter-memory' which he explains as 'not just a rejection of history, but a reconstitution of it' (Lipsitz 1990:227),

a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and then builds...[it] looks to the past for hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives...[and] forces revision...by supplying new perspectives.

(Lipsitz 1990:213)

In writing, it is like 'literary archaeology' visiting the 'site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply'

(Morrison 1987b:112) in order to provide a sense of racial continuity in a culture structured on its denial.

A very similar and related project is Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), a film set at the turn of the century in the South Carolina islands dealing with a Gullah family of slave descendants who have retained their ancestral connections to Africa and yet are being pulled into the world of the 'mainland' with all its new pressures and demands. The film is about story-telling and the importance of passing on the memories of the people as a mode of cultural anchorage. To this end, Dash is concerned with the role of the 'griot' or story-teller who 'will recount the family's history, with the stories going off at a tangent, weaving in and out' (Dash 1993: Argus/BFI video sleeve).<sup>3</sup> This is how she structures her film too, with many voices in the text, from the past, the future and the present, echoing the work of Walker and Morrison, to whom Dash has paid homage as her inspiration; 'they made me whole' (ibid.) she says, and their technique was transposed into her own film-making. At a key point in the film, the sense of struggle and the threat of the loss of the past and its traditions are emphasised through the ideas of 'recollection', stories and their importance. Nana, the great-grandmother, tells the leaving Eli Peazant: 'It's up to the living to keep in touch with the dead... Respect your elders, respect your family, respect your ancestors... Call on your ancestors Eli, let them guide... Never forget who we is and how far we done come this far/It is the duty of each generation to connect with their past, to remember the 'wisdom', for it provides a framework of belief and history that is not that imposed by the white culture. There's a time, a recollection, something somebody remembers, we carry these memories inside of we... I'm trying to give you something to take along with you, along with all your great big dreams.' Dash's film dramatises the process of recovery and invites us to 'undergo a triple process of recollecting the disremembered past, recognizing and reappraising cultural icons and codes, and recentering and revalidating the self' so that African Americans 'consider our positions and our power in the USA' (Bambara 1993 125).

Dash, therefore, has continued and up-dated the work of Blessingame, Stuckey, Genovese and others who have reclaimed invaluable aspects of previously buried histories for black culture and expression, and paralleled imaginative writing's efforts to go further. The novels of Toni Morrison, in particular, demonstrate the imaginative reconstruction of black history, using fiction to tell 'a whole unrecorded history' (Ellison 1952:379). As Michelle Wallace has written,

we must choose to recount and recollect the negativity, the discount, the loss. In the process, we may, ultimately make a new kind of history that first recalls how its own disciplinary discourse was made in brutality and exclusion, and second, a history that seeks as its starting point the heterogeneity of the present.

(Mariani 1991:139)

Toni Morrison's fiction, like Dash's film, aims 'to bear witness to a history that is unrecorded, untaught, in mainstream education, and to enlighten our people' (Wisker 1993:80) through the telling of stories often ignored in conventional sources. Echoing Du Bois, she longs 'to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate' (Morrison 1987:109–10). She wishes 'to implement the stories that I heard' so as to 'fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left' and to re-position the African American into 'the discourse that proceeded without us' (Morrison 1987b:111–12). Like Wallace, she writes of a 'reconstruction of a world...[and] exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth' (1987b:115). Through her form of counter-memory, Morrison's fiction aims to re-position African Americans in American life by reexamining their history. In her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she writes,

Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or creep singly up to the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we learned to deal with.

(Morrison 1970:11)

Morrison combats marginalisation through the reconstructive process of telling African-American history to remind her audience, both black and white, of the restrictions imposed on the opportunities of young blacks, as in this section from *The Bluest Eye*:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn ...how to behave...In short, how to get rid of funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.

(ibid.: 64)

Reminiscent of Jacobs and Douglass, this passage posits 'funkiness' as a version of self-expression that needs to find an outlet, for 'Funk is really nothing more than the intrusion of the past in the present' (Gates 1984: 280). What Morrison calls eruptions of funk are the threads of an alternative narrative of African-American life that refuse to be veiled behind the master narrative. Indeed, this is the premise of the novel *Beloved*, wherein the past returns to the present in the form of a family ghost in order to bring others to certain recognitions about their past lives and their racial history.

The community of women are central to this vision of a 'new history', for they pass it on to their children. As bell hooks writes,

We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace', most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits.

(hooks 1991:42)

The 'ghost' of the past, *Beloved*, enters into one such 'homeplace' in Morrison's novel of the same name, and forces the group of women to uncover and discuss their lives. This force of counter-memory surges into the lives of Sethe and Denver to strengthen them against the repressive, dominant power of 'schoolteacher', the overseer on the plantation. He literally 'writes' the existence of the slaves by charting and recording them in his 'book', with their 'characteristics' divided into 'animal' and 'human', their bodies measured in pseudo-scientific ways, aimed at dehumanisation as a means of social control. Under the gaze of the master who writes only his version of the narrative into his 'notebook' and thereby excludes all other stories, Sethe is contained by his words. 'First his shotgun, then his thoughts, for schoolteacher didn't take advice from Negroes. The information they offered he called backtalk and developed a variety of corrections (which he recorded in his notebook) to reeducate them' (Morrison 1987a:220). What is 'recorded' by schoolteacher is indicative of the single, authorised narrative of black history that must be countered by 'funkiness', the 'homeplace' and the other expressions to which the community has access. It is 'voice', 'backtalk', or 'talking back' that provides the resistance to the schoolteacher's master-culture. In the novel, it is through the stories Denver is, at first, reluctant to hear from her mother, grandmother, Paul D and *Beloved* that 'backtalk' emerges as reconstructed history. Only through these is Denver released into the world and able to re-engage with the black community in a way that further aids her healing. The novel suggests remembering is a way forward for the future (Denver), as Baby Suggs, her grandmother, earlier instructs her to 'Know it, and go on out of the yard. Go on' (*ibid.*: 244). She must listen to her ancestral voice, not so she can dwell in the past horrors, but so that she can both know who she is and use this to move forward with greater certainty. The growth of Denver from the sheltered and protected daughter of Sethe to her final position in the novel is shown when Paul D says,

'Well, if you want my opinion-'  
 'I don't', she said. 'I have my own'.  
 'You grown', he said.

(*ibid.*: 267)

Denver's assertion of independent thought and opinion shows she has indeed 'grown', both from childhood but also into a new knowledge of her self within a community which comes together at the end of the novel to exorcise the ghost of *Beloved*, a community described as 'voices of women [that] searched for the

right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it' (ibid.: 261).

Denver's process is echoed in the words at the novel's end; 'she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order' (ibid.: 272-3), for her growth has depended upon the 'pieces I am' being told and brought out into the open, rather than evaded or hidden from view. Out of the pieces of the (hi)story, memory and wisdom, Denver reconstructs a self which is not reliant upon the schoolteacher's 'story', or indeed even Paul D's, but comes out of her 'familial past' in order to provide her with 'some kind of tomorrow' (ibid.: 273). Denver's going out of the yard is the step into the future based on 'knowing' rather than ignorance, and is her effort to fill 'the space of not knowing' as a positive gesture of resistance and reconstruction of self and community.

### LINKS IN THE CHAIN: MUSIC AND SPEECH

If contemporary fiction could play a part in the process of self-definition and the growing confidence of African Americans in the public sphere, then as important, if not more so, has been the role of music. We have already seen that songs played an important part in the preservation of African culture for slaves, and that tradition, like so many others, was passed on as musical forms developed. As Lawrence Levine has written,

Black secular song, along with other forms of oral tradition, allowed them to express themselves communally and individually, to derive pleasure, to perpetuate traditions, to keep values from eroding, and to begin to create new expressive moods...which continued a rich internal life.

(Levine 1977:297)

The potential of music and language to challenge white power is characterised by this section from Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Son, these niggers writing. Profaning our sacred words. Taking them from us and beating them on the anvil of Boogie-Woogie, putting their black hands on them so that they shine like burnished amulets. Taking our words, son, these filthy niggers and using them.

(Reed 1972:130)

To acquire a language seen only as 'white' and seek to 'use' it, and indeed prove that it can be used with power and authority, was a threat to the established order of things. Music had long provided a source of just such powerful expression within the black community

One can see this in Ralph Ellison's description of jazz musicians' delicate balance...between strong individual personality and the group' (Ellison 1972: 189) which, he goes on to write, had as its goal

the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision.

(ibid.: 189)

Jazz, for Ellison, was ‘a definition of...identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition’ (ibid.: 234) because it permits full creative expression of the self, in combination with others responding to their energy, but both relating to a long, varied tradition of other forms of articulation. In *Invisible Man* Louis Armstrong’s jazz reveals ‘unheard sounds... and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak’ (ibid.: 11). And these voices open a journey into an often hidden African-American past, with

an old woman singing a spiritual...a beautiful girl...pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slave owners who bid for her naked body... I heard someone shout: ‘Brothers and sisters, my text for this morning is the “Blackness of Blackness”.’

(ibid.: 13)

In this, Ellison suggests the capacity of music to carry ‘a whole unrecorded history’ (ibid.: 379) and to offer the listener and the performer access to emotions and ideas little expressed in the mainstream dominant culture. August Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1985) makes a similar claim about the blues in a speech given by Ma Rainey, a real-life blues singer from the 1920s.

White folks don’t understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life... This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.

(Wilson 1985:194–5)

Black music, in various forms, is about ‘talking’, ‘understanding’ and ‘filling up’ life, for it channels emotions and responses into an accepted mode of expression. Blues was ‘a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of Black life in America’ (Hill Collins 1990: 99). If other routes of communication are not available, then the AfricanAmerican has learned to use those that are—the song, the pulpit, the written word—as methods of resistance and self-definition.

The African American traditions of song, story-telling and preaching found a precise outlet in the politics of the civil rights movement and beyond. With the increased importance of the mass meeting, often directed from local churches,

expression was a vital component of the political process. The meetings were 'events/places where participants could express fear as well as resolution, anger as well as understanding, make plans and formulate strategies...expression became a way of channelling fear and anger into effective collective action' (King 1988:10). On such occasions expression found a variety of avenues, as it always had in black life: preaching, testifying, passing on stories of the movement and through the 'freedom songs', which had taken on a precise relationship to the push for civil rights. Richard King calls these expressions 'the new language of public action' (1988:11), and it can be seen in the oratory of Martin Luther King who built his speeches upon a diverse background of biblical, folk and slave stories to weave a persuasive, rhythmic song-like pattern which asserted the individual power of the voice, but included the audience in the spectacle and the occasion. It is, as Levine wrote of slave songs and Ellison of jazz, both personal and political, individual and collective. Instead of 'a junkheap of isolated voices, unrelated experiences, and forgettable characters' (Miller 1992:131), preachers formed a chain of connections, creating a 'choir of voices' (ibid.: 144), the many in one. In King's speeches there is a strong attention to 'voice merging', or the bringing together of diverse moments into a harmonious whole, paralleling his style with the politics of integration for which he stood. Drawing upon concepts which were as much a part of white American mythology as black, such as the American Dream, he merged them with a rich tradition integrating the hopes of one section of the community with the aspirations of another in the civil rights movement. His most famous speech, 'I Have a Dream' (1963), creates just such a new, inclusive voice for America that unites around Abraham Lincoln, under whose memorial the speech was given, the biblical prophecies of Isaiah and Amos, 'justice rolls down like waters...', and the Negro spiritual, 'Free at last'.

This powerful voice became vital to the movement in the 1950s and 1960s where public speeches, rallies and marches were an essential method of protest, but also of communication within the African-American community. The new confidence and visibility of King can be compared to the growing black music business, and in particular the Tamla Motown label established by Berry Gordy in 1960. Although not overtly political, the fact of a successful black enterprise and the impact of black performers echoed the slow changes being made politically. Within the wider context of the civil rights movement and dramatic social change, Martha Reeves's song 'Dancing in the Street' is a call to emancipation: 'Calling out around the world, are you ready for a brand new beat'. Motown's merging of gospel traditions such as tambourines, clapping, call and response and advisory lyrics, with the interest in a greater freedom of expression, provided a base for Motown and other soul singers to contribute to the voicing of black culture. As James Brown sang, 'Say it Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)'.

Politics continued to discover the power of language in other ways. For example, Malcolm X, during his time in prison, saw the relationship between self-



expression and liberation, beginning with reading and moving on to the power of speech: '[I]n the prison, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been' (Malcolm X 1968:280). Malcolm X's use of language could be more direct than the 'voice-merging' style of King, and used none of the preaching techniques that King had learned in the seminary. Malcolm's voice comes out of the poverty of the ghetto where he 'learned early that crying out in protest could accomplish things' (ibid.: 86) and he speaks in a direct and forceful manner; more James Brown than Motown:

I'm speaking as a victim of this American system...I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare. These 22 million victims are waking up. Their eyes are coming open. They're beginning to see what they used to only look at.

(Malcolm X in Lauter 1994:2497)

The tone and choice of words show clearly the different message and yet the vital importance of the voice as the means of communication within the community. For Malcolm X, the voice must carry the 'raw, naked truth ...to clear the air of the racial mirages, cliches and lies' (Malcolm X 1968: 379). He goes on in the same speech to call for 'a new interpretation' of the civil rights movement, for 'black nationalism' to 'enable us to come into it, take part in it', rather than wait for others to give you 'what's already yours' (Lauter 1994:2500–1). As Eldridge Cleaver later wrote, Malcolm X 'articulated...aspirations better than any other man of our time...he had continued to give voice to the mute ambitions in the black man's soul' (Cleaver 1968:47). Malcolm X's autobiography explains his own, personal journey towards self-determination, but like so much black autobiography, it also relates to the wider condition of the community's movement to political status. The individual voice must be found so that it can speak out with confidence and self-respect to the group, to 'build up the black race's ability to do for itself' (Malcolm X 1968:382), within a context provided by the stories and heritage of a meaningful past. In this way the individual life can become a 'testimony of some social value' (ibid.: 497) for it becomes a thread within the larger fabric of black life.

Thus, the push for self-definition, 'the claiming of the I', was only a stage in the political process, which aimed at transforming the T to a 'We': 'We must move past always focusing on the "personal self" because there's a larger self. There's a "self" of black people' (Tate: 1983:134). Alice Walker, who was active in the civil rights movement, captures these sentiments in her novel *Meridian* (1976) which shows the struggle of Meridian Hill for selfdefinition, both as woman and African American, in a white, male-dominated society, but also shows her growing awareness of the importance of community to the wider struggle. Walker echoes the words of Stokely Carmichael, the Black Power leader, who wrote of the need to 'create in the community an aroused and continuing black consciousness that will provide the basis for political strength' (Carmichael 1966:

6). Walker suggests this in a scene at the end of the novel when Meridian goes to church to hear a politicised preacher, 'deliberately imitating King...consciously keeping the voice alive...not his own voice at all, but rather the voice of millions who could no longer speak' (Walker 1976:200). Walker sees the strands of tradition come together: the oral inspiration, the re-telling of black history and the empowerment of the group through vital expressivity: 'Focussing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, black women writers affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision that, once articulated, can be shared' (Pryse and Spillers 1985:5). This 'sharing' is demonstrated in the communality of the gathering at the end of the novel.

[L]et us weave your story and your son's life and death into what we already know—into songs, the sermons, the 'brother and sister'—... 'the church' (and Meridian knew they did not just mean simply 'church' as in Baptist, Methodist or whatnot, but rather communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence), 'the music, the form of worship that has always sustained us, the kind of ritual you share with us, these are the ways to transformation that we know'... In comprehending this, there was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it... And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life.

(Walker 1976:204).

Meridian's revelation connects so many of the strands of black resistance, and emphasises the power of the voice, what she calls the 'song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation' as the means 'that holds them together' (ibid.: 205) as part of a broad unified view of black life within America, rather than separate from it. Her politics are closer to those of Martin Luther King and the integrationists than to the more extreme views of the Black Muslims who called for separation, or the Black Power movement who felt the civil rights movement's 'tone of voice was adapted to an audience of liberal whites' (Carmichael 1966:5).

However, in the later stage of the career of Malcolm X, for so long a voice associated with black nationalism and the Muslims, one sees emerging a position quite close to that expressed in Walker's novel. It is a new universalism, 'committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female' (Walker 1984: n.p.), a call for human rights, not dissimilar from that expressed by Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael who wrote in 1966, 'We are just going to work, in the way we see fit, and on our goals we define, not for civil rights but for all human rights' (Carmichael 1967: 8). Malcolm X states his goal as, 'truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it for or against.

I'm a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity *as a whole*' (Malcolm X 1968:483). There is less talk of separatism and more about joint responsibility between races since 'with equal rights there had to be a bearing of equal responsibilities' (ibid.: 494). By the end of his autobiography, Malcolm X, echoing King, expresses his hopes in terms of the specific contribution he had made to the struggle for human rights in America.

Sometimes, I have dared to dream to myself that one day, history may even say that my voice—which disturbed the white man's smugness, and his arrogance, and his complacency—that my voice helped to save America from a grave, possibly even a fatal catastrophe.

(ibid.: 496)

Malcolm X's tone, as ever, is far more direct and assertive in its condemnation of white culture than is King's, but his use of the 'dream' and his recognition that it is his 'voice' that carries his authority place the two together in the struggle for 'what America must become' (Baldwin 1963: 17). It also recognises the inter-relatedness of the two cultures, black and white, and echoes Stuart Hall's comment that identity could no longer be told as 'two histories, one over here, one over there, never having spoken to one another' (King 1991:48), since there are too many connections between the two.

### NEW BLACK VOICES

In contemporary American culture, it is hip hop that best exemplifies the continuing importance of the necessity of expression in African-American life. Despite the struggles of those figures and movements discussed in this chapter, there is a constant need for African Americans to assert their rights within a hegemonic white society, and one means, as we have shown, is through popular cultural expression. Rap music, in particular, articulates a youthful, vital voice, at once rooted in the everyday traditions and sources that have been discussed throughout, but also creating a new mode of expression. As always, the voice has found a new form, a different tone through which to convey its messages and resist the dominant culture. As rapper Melle Mel has said, 'Rap music makes up for its lack of melody with its sense of reminder. It's linked somewhere into a legacy that has been overlooked, forgotten, or just pushed to the side amongst the glut of everything else' (Melle Mel, 'Looking for the Perfect Beat', *The South Bank Show* 1993).

In an interview in 1989 Cornel West (1992:222) commented that 'music and preaching' are central to African-American communication and that 'rap is unique because it combines the black preacher and the black music tradition... pulling from the past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product' that links the 'oral, the literate, and the musical' (ibid.). The essence of

what Melle Mel calls the 'reminder' in rap music, is a call to an African-American history which for so long has been hidden or erased by a dominant white culture in the USA. Like the preacher calling to his congregation, or indeed King or Malcolm X from their platforms, the rapper exhorts his audience to listen and to learn from the words he weaves into narratives of experience and the rhythms of black life. But as West suggests, the form of the rap intertwines different modes, extending, sampling, playing with sound and language in an effort to create something new and communicative. It is the new "testimony" for the underclass' providing young blacks with a 'critical voice...a "common literacy"...explaining, demanding, urging' (hooks 1994b: 424). Rapper Chuck D calls rap 'media piracy...to get a big text to people... an information network of sorts...to fuel the mind and the body' (*South Bank Show* 1993). Rap 'is black America's TV station...and black life doesn't get the total spectrum of information through anything else' (Ross and Rose 1994:103).

Tricia Rose terms this characteristic 'polyvocal conversations' (Rose 1994:2) through which raps become elaborate stories 'to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture' (ibid.: 3). As the sounds are 'mixed' in the textures of the 'sonic force' of the music, so too does the vocal 'cut and mix' different threads of stories and snippets of noise from the variety of street life experienced by the African American. Chuck D of 'Public Enemy' explains the effects of this on his work: 'I'm trying to alert as many people as possible and that's why on my records I like to put noise in them. I consider them an alarm f or BlackAmericans' (BBC *Rap Rap Rapido* 1992). 'Noise', like shouting at a congregation or haranging a crowd, can be a useful tool for the orator and works together with the educational passing on of communal stories. As Rose writes, like "noise" on the one hand and communal countermemory on the other, rap music conjures and razes in one stroke' (Rose 1994:65), constructing 'oppositional transcripts' as cultural responses to oppression and the stories told from within the closed circle of a preferred, official discourse. Rap provides resistance to 'dominant public transcripts' (ibid.: 100), offering the oppressed a public arena through which to air their 'hidden transcript' and so to give voice to a history not often told: 'a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless' (ibid.: 101). Hence, a rap like Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power' attacks both lyrically and musically the bastions of the mainstream. Elvis Presley, 'a hero to most' means nothing to the young, urban black man who sees him as a 'racist ... simple and plain' in a culture that pretends that 'we are the same', when there are vast differences in wealth and power. The rap calls for forthrightness: 'What we need is awareness, we can't get careless' and to question such bases of power. A more extreme rap is that of Ice T's 'Freedom of Speech' of 1990 which challenges those who would censor rap lyrics: 'We should be able to say anything/Our lungs were meant to shout... Say what we feel, yell out what's real'. Expression is still a marker of freedom, 'a form of testimony...of social protest' (Rose 1994: 144-5) that rap has taken forward by embracing technology to construct a musical style that pushes African-American story-telling into the

future. Rap refuses to languish in the past, but instead has found a method of speaking to the future.

Rappers...are the miners, they are the cultivators of communal artifacts, refining and developing the framework of alternative identities that draw on Afrodiasporic approaches to sound organization, rhythm, pleasure, style, and community... Rap is a technologically sophisticated project in African-American recuperation and revision ...yet another way to unnerve and simultaneously revitalize American culture.

(ibid.: 185)

Like Morrison's literary archaeology and project to re-write history, rap is engaged in 'massive archiving', 'gather[ing]...a reservoir of threads' (Baker 1993b:89) drawn from a range of sources into a new, vital hybrid form. But despite the technology, Baker argues it is, in the end, 'the voice' that 'catches the consciousness' (ibid.: 91), the voice that refutes homogeneity in favour of the critical mix of the 'sonic soul force', the dialogics of 'edutainment' as KRS-1 terms it: education and entertainment speaking together as the 'updated song of explanation' (Baker 1993a:46).

## CONCLUSION

it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead

(Ellison 1952:207)

Manning Marable has written that:

African-American identity is much more than race. It is also the traditions, rituals, values, and belief systems of African-American people...our culture, history, art and literature...our sense of ethnic consciousness and pride in our heritage of resistance against racism.

(Dent 1992:295)

And this 'collectively constructed' identity is an essential part of the freedom struggle to go alongside the more specific dismantling of the economic, legal and social aspects of racism, for it empowers the black community through expressions of human dignity which assert 'a sense of "being-for-ourselves", and not for others' (ibid.: 302). But as many critics have commented, these processes are unfinished and cannot be ignored in the contemporary world. As Marable puts it, 'we need to construct a new, dynamic cultural politics to inspire a new generation of African Americans' (ibid.: 302), and as Stuart Hall has written,

Cultural identity...is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

(Hall in Rutherford 1990:225).

Hall's sense of the relationships between the past and the future are important for our reading of African-American cultural identity, since it is, as Marable suggests, precisely the connection, through time that sustains and gives meaning to the struggle for self-determination. It has been the struggle to 'position' oneself rather than be positioned by others that we have followed in African-American life, and yet, as Hall says, it is in 'constant transformation'.

One description of the future, provided by Cornel West, is of the 'new cultural politics of difference' in which differences are not elided, but accepted as healthy expressions of individual and communal energies. Rather than an 'a homogenizing impulse' (West 1993b:17), which suggests that all black people are the same, West calls for 'responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of Black practices' (ibid.: 14) and that engage with the 'mainstream' and the 'nourishing subcultures', so that they 'cultivate critical sensibilities and personal accountability—without inhibiting individual expressions, curiosities and idiosyncrasies' (ibid.). West's vision is 'to look beyond the same elites and voices that recycle the older frameworks' to 'a new language of empathy and compassion' (West 1993a:260). With the recent emphasis in the United States on multiculturalism and diversity, such ideas suggest a way towards a possible mutual inter-relationship between all Americans, but also allow for the distinctive differences within the black community itself. Hall (Dent 1992: 33), borrowing from Bakhtin, argues for 'a dialogic rather than a strictly oppositional way' of interpreting culture which provides us with a version of difference and diversity engaged in dialogue and negotiation with the other voices/powers that surround it.

Perhaps, to pursue the idea of 'voice', the African-American community's struggle to find its own voice within America has, at least, provided the opportunity to be heard in the public arena. This recalls the scene in *Invisible Man* when the narrator delivers a speech inadvertently referring to 'social equality' only to be greeted with 'the sudden stillness ...sounds of displeasure...[and] hostile phrases' (Ellison 1952:30), and the swift reminder '*you've got to know your place at all times*' (ibid.: 30). In contrast, Alice Walker, describing a voter registration episode in *Meridian*, states, 'It may be useless. Or maybe it can be the beginning of the use of your voice. You have to get used to using your voice, you know. You start on simple things and move on' (Walker 1976:210). Between the

1940s and the 1960s, clearly things have changed, but the need to ‘move on’ is essential, so as to have both a voiced identity rooted in a strong sense of the past, and to use it in the context of the world in which there are still many changes to be made. As Catherine Clinton has written, ‘the power of memory must draw us out of the novel [and other cultural forms] and into the archives. Erasure and silence will not defeat us if we remember— this is a story to pass on’ (Fabre and O’Meally 1994:216).

## NOTES

- 1 Silence is a concept often used, as here, to suggest the cultural impositions and denials of slavery, but as we shall argue, despite these conditions there was always a powerful Voice’ of resistance within the black community. In part, the silence of slavery was a colonial myth reinforcing positions of control and power (see H.Bhabha 1994).
- 2 This is also reflected in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1968:256).
- 3 Julie Dash’s structure is reminiscent of quilt-making in that it weaves and connects fragments, or scraps of recollections and stories, into a complex and multi-faceted text. In this she links with an important African-American craft tradition that has become highly significant in the work of Afri-feminists like Morrison and Walker. See in particular Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1984).

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## FOLLOW-UP WORK

### *Film and African-American experience*

1 This chapter has discussed the ways in which different attitudes to integration and separation have been central to post-war African American culture. A contemporary text that can be very useful as an interdisciplinary focus for a continued debate on this is the film *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1988) which examines the idea of dualities across a multicultural New York. In particular, examine the self-conscious scenes in which Lee directs the audience to the language of racism and the other divisions of the city: Radio Raheem's 'love and hate' speech; Buggin' Out's insistence about having 'brothers' on the wall of the Italian restaurant, Mookie's final confrontation with Sal and Smiley's picture of King and Malcolm X. Lee's form and structure are totally bound up with his content.

This approach can be usefully compared with the feminist work of Julie Dash and again her choice of narrative style: lyrical, mystical and re-articulating the 'griot' story-telling traditions through the new medium of film. Another comparison is to Leslie Harris's film *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*

2 African-American art has not been examined here, but many of the ideas put forward could be applied and related to the work of an artist like Romare Bearden (1911–1988). In particular his use of collage and photomontage can

be related to our interests in story-telling and quilting traditions since as an artist he was fully aware of literary figures as well, and like Dash in film, sought to create visual equivalence to their work.

*Assignments and areas of study*

- 3 (a) The issue of stereotyping in African-American culture. The documentary *Color Adjustment* (1992, Marlon Riggs) is an excellent look at the way television has represented black Americans and can be viewed with other materials such as essays by Michele Wallace or Robert Townsend's film *Hollywood Shuffle*.
- (b) An examination of traditions of 'Voice' in African-American culture through an analysis of King's 'I Have A Dream' speech, looking at his combinations of traditions, intertextual references and modes of address. You could also examine a contemporary rap song such as Grandmaster Flash's 'The Message' or a soul song like Aretha Franklin's 'Respect', for the diverse ways in which they project political points of view through form and content.

## Chapter 4

### In God we trust?

#### Religion in American life

The role played by religious thought and practice is of immense importance to a full understanding of American life. As Anthony Giddens has argued, religion is a 'central part of human experience, influencing how we perceive and react to the environments in which we live' (Giddens 1993:452). Social surveys suggest how importantly this is reflected in the contemporary United States. In 1994, for instance, 90 per cent of Americans said they were religious, and 93 per cent of those claiming to be religious said they were Christians. Nearly 70 per cent of the population belonged to churches of some kind, and around 40 per cent attended a church service every week. A 1992 survey found that 70 per cent of Americans believed in life after death, compared to 38 per cent of Germans, 44 per cent of Britons and 54 per cent of Italians. Half of the population claim they pray at least once a day. Belief is matched by financial commitment, with contributions to religion estimated at \$57 billion a year in the mid-1990s. There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America/wrote de Tocqueville in 1835 (1965:233), but his comment might equally apply to the contemporary republic. What further complicates the picture today, of course, is that Christianity has been joined by a number of other religions to make the American religious mosaic much more varied than it was in the mid-nineteenth century. The great waves of Jewish immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made the United States a major centre of Judaism. In the twentieth century a range of other religions have grown significantly including Islam, and a host of New Age groupings.

But to emphasise statistics about church attendance or denominational membership is to paint only part of the picture. Religious traditions in America have always involved visions of America itself. America was where good and evil would struggle in a continuing battle for supremacy in full view of the rest of the world. It may be that America's divine mission would ensure a victory for light over darkness, but the various narratives of that mission have been frequently aware of the dangers of failure. Jonathan Edwards, in the early eighteenth century, on the one hand, located America as the place where God's plans for the world would be realised, where the 'Sun of righteousness' would shine over a paradise set in the wilderness of the West, but at the same time he

could issue apocalyptic warnings about the ever-present threat of hell and eternal damnation. The religious dimension to the story of America, where good and evil exist alongside each other, has been a pervasive theme in the country's expressive culture, giving it a powerful resonance beyond the history of specific churches and often endowing its language with special meaning and force. From this perspective, religious imagery and religious themes have had a considerable influence on the way Americans have reflected and acted, not only in the literature they have produced, but also in political language and rhetoric.

The importance of religion in American culture may, on the one hand, seem surprising since as part of its historical development the United States relinquished the concept of an established church and instead opted for religious freedom, and a system of churches based on the voluntary principle. The words of Article 6 of the Constitution make the point clearly: 'no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States,' This is reinforced by the declaration in the First Amendment that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof/ For Thomas Jefferson, these provisions were intended, as he suggested to a group of Baptists in 1802, to 'build a wall of separation between church and state' which would prevent mutual interference. The principle of the separation of church and state assumed the secular identity of the state and forbade it from the promotion of specific forms of religious belief and practice. In the contemporary world it has often been argued that those societies in which religion has continued to survive as a major force have been those where the church has been an arm of the state. Secularisation, in contrast, went hand in hand with modernisation which by its very nature offered a series of irresistible challenges to traditional forms of religious influence. Economic growth, technological sophistication, wider educational provision, and the development of new forms of popular culture, would all weaken the grip of religion on ordinary citizens, and usher in a society where the blinkers of religious belief would be discarded in favour of rational and self-determined choices about how to live the good life. However, in the United States the decision to avoid established religion on the European model has clearly not demonstrated an inexorable link between modernisation and the decline of religious observation. In his discussion of the links between religion and politics in the United States Kenneth Wald argued that the United States was 'a conspicuous exception to the generalisation that economic development goes hand in hand with a decline in religious sentiment' (Wald 1987:6). Elsewhere in the Western world, the development of modern societies has been reflected in patterns of religious decline, but in America this does not appear to have happened in quite the same way. Secularisation, of course, can be measured in other ways than formal church membership. Churchgoing does not necessarily imply profound belief, and positive answers in opinion surveys may disguise a fairly low level of genuine commitment. At the same time, too, assessing the impact of secularisation needs to take into account the extent to which religious

organisations are able to exercise an influential public role. High levels of church attendance may still be accompanied by a decline in the political and social influence of church groups. Whatever the answers to these questions, it remains the case, as Robert Handy has succinctly put it, that the provisions of the constitution ‘meant that the churches would increasingly become wholly voluntary institutions, dependent on their ability to reach and persuade free people to join and support them, and that religious pluralism would markedly increase’ (Handy 1976:142). This emphasis on persuasion and competition has characterised American religion ever since the late eighteenth century and appears to have encouraged rather than deterred religious activity. Moreover, religious freedom has not necessarily meant neutrality about the importance of religion in American life. As the social indicators appear to suggest, religion is clearly of central importance in American culture, even though it is not ‘established’ in any formal sense through a national church. The motto of the country is ‘In God we trust’; the federal Congress has chaplains who watch over its business and pray for its successful conclusion; church properties are able to claim tax exemption; and oath-taking in court involves the pledge ‘so help me God’. When incoming American Presidents make their Inaugural Address, custom and popular expectation demand some reference to God’s purpose for America. ‘In this dedication of a Nation we humbly ask the blessing of God/ declared Franklin D.Roosevelt in 1933. ‘May he protect each and every one of us. May he guide us in the days to come’. Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1957 sought ‘before all else...upon our common labor as a union, the blessings of Almighty God’. The Roman Catholic John F.Kennedy concluded his remarks in 1961 by asking God’s blessing and his help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work ‘must truly be our own’ (Wrage and Baskerville 1962:161, 313–14, 320). ‘God Bless America,’ wrote Irving Berlin in 1939, ‘My Home, Sweet Home,’ a song which has come to serve almost as an alternative national anthem.

It is against this background, that we want, in this chapter, to look at some of the ways in which religion continues to resonate in contemporary American society, and at how the issues it raises influence debates about such topics as the proper division between the sacred and the secular, the private and the public. Our approach is necessarily selective here and does not attempt to provide a survey of American religious practice as a whole. Rather, we have chosen areas for discussion which seem to us to offer insights into the continuing debates about the importance of religion in the modern United States, and the part it plays in contributing to the formation of a national identity, in a manner which we hope will connect with themes explored in other chapters, notably [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#).

### **THE EYES OF ALL PEOPLE SHALL BE UPON US**

The fate of America has from the very beginning been entwined with notions of religious destiny, which stretch back to John Winthrop’s vision, in the early

seventeenth century, of Massachusetts as a ‘city upon a hill’, with the eyes of the world upon it (see the discussion in [Chapter 1](#)). Puritans like Winthrop envisaged a community in which life would be guided by God’s will, and there would be close links between civil government and religious authority. Using the biblical precedents of Genesis and Exodus, the Puritans presented themselves as God’s Chosen People, searching for the Promised Land. William Bradford, in his journal *Of Plymouth Plantation*, testified at length to the religious significance of the Puritan destiny. Having battled across the Atlantic, the first settlers encountered ‘a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men’, without ‘friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain them or refresh their weather-beaten bodies, [nor] houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succour’. All that was left to sustain them was ‘the Spirit of God and His Grace’ (Miller and Johnson 1963:100–1). At the beginning of his epic ecclesiastical history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, first published in 1702, Cotton Mather presented his central theme.

I write the *Wonders* of the Christian Religion, flying from the Depravations of Europe to the *American Strand*: And, assisted by the Holy Author of that *Religion*, I do with all the conscience of *Truth*, required therein by Him, who is the Truth itself, Report the *Wonderful Displays* of his Infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness and Faithfulness, wherewith His *Divine Providence* hath irradiated an *Indian Wilderness*

(ibid.: 163)

Puritanism had begun to lose its energies by the end of the seventeenth century, but it bequeathed to subsequent American culture a sense of the importance of God’s purpose for the nation. The Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, which emerged at a time when many colonists had come to believe that religious piety was in decline, provided the opportunity for a fresh reaffirmation of God’s role in directing the fortunes of his chosen people. It emphasised the importance of the Millennium, when Christ would return to establish a new kingdom on earth over which he would reign for a thousand years before the Last Judgement. The Millennium, in the words of the evangelist Samuel Hopkins in his *Treatise on the Millennium* published in 1793, would be a time of ‘eminent holiness’ when there would be ‘a great increase of light and knowledge’. It would be a time of universal peace, love and general and cordial friendship, when truth and harmony would prevail over error and conflict. The earth would be marked by ‘great enjoyment, happiness and universal joy... All outward worldly circumstances would then be agreeable and prosperous.’ Here religious prophecy merged with republican optimism to describe ‘a coming golden age of benevolence, prosperity and righteousness’ (Wood 1990:45–53). The Revolution, while it reinforced the special destiny of the United States in political terms, acted as something of a solvent on traditional forms of religion, by cutting churches loose from government, and by encouraging rationalism and concepts of

individual liberty. In the 1790s formal church membership for white adults may have dropped to as low as 10 per cent of the population. However, as in the early eighteenth century, concern over the decline of religious belief was in turn followed by a fresh wave of revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening which had a profound impact both on the scale of church membership, and on the range of American sectarianism. In the nineteenth century, despite the Republican commitment to freedom of religion, Americans themselves as well as external commentators frequently remarked on how important broad religious values were for some sense of national identity. The most important of European writers on America, Comte Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote in 1835, in his classic text, *Democracy in America*, that America's westward progress was providential in that it was 'like some flood of humanity, rising constantly and driven on by the hand of God'. The phrase 'manifest destiny', coined in the 1839 by John L.O'Sullivan, a New York editor, expressed similar attitudes and encouraged the expansion of American borders, and the spreading of American influence. Henry F.May has discussed how these kinds of attitudes in the early nineteenth century meshed with evangelicalism and revivalism to form what has been described as the religion of the Republic, a national religion which in his words was 'Progressive, Patriotic and Protestant' (May 1983:179). It was progressive in the sense that it incorporated the belief inherited from the eighteenth century Enlightenment that mankind had within it the capability to improve its position through the application of reason and science. At the same time it drew on the pervasive popular hope in mainstream evangelicalism about the advent of the millennium and the establishment of God's kingdom on this earth. As part of this process the world would be converted to Christianity and democracy in a manner which connected America's historic destiny to the full implications of the Protestant Reformation, particularly its belief that salvation would be obtained by faith, and that all believers were members of the priesthood, concepts which May argues worked as well for the secular as for the sacred sphere. This Protestant world-view also emphasised the importance of personal morality both for individuals and for the success of the national project. All of this would be achieved within America, to which God had given a special purpose in the world.

May argues that this discourse prospered during the nineteenth century reaching something of a peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where it was reflected not only in a range of religious activists like Henry Ward Beecher and Washington Gladden but also in political leaders like Theodore Roosevelt, and above all Woodrow Wilson, whose views about America's role in the wider world contained many of these assumptions. What damaged this vision was the disillusion which followed the end of the First World War. In 1919 a range of American churches launched the Interchurch World Movement which aimed to convert the whole world to evangelical Christianity through a mighty crusade which would be the 'greatest programme undertaken by Christians since the days of the Apostles'. The movement collapsed, however, without achieving



any of its aims, and this, for May, marked at least the end of the hegemony of the progressive, Protestant strand in American religious discourse, though it remained a significant force in the way many Americans thought about their country and its place in the world (May 1983:163–83).

By that stage of course, American religion had become much more varied in its make-up. The great waves of immigration of the nineteenth and early twentieth century brought with them a massive influx of fresh Christian and non-Christian beliefs which served to dilute the Protestant domination of American religious culture. By the early twentieth century, for instance, Catholicism had become a major force in American religious life, sustained by a highly organised parochial system, and with strong links to the international Catholic Church. At the same time Judaism had become well established, particularly in the major cities of the East Coast, where large numbers of Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe settled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many Protestants were alarmed at the threat these developments posed to ‘the American tradition’, and threw their support behind such movements as the campaign to end unrestricted immigration, in part because it promised to prevent further erosion of the religious beliefs which had guided the Republic through the first hundred years of its history. By the 1920s, however, it was too late, and much more extensive patterns of religious diversity had become firmly entrenched on American soil.

### **CHANGING PATTERNS IN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Against this backdrop, one important theme in interpretations of American religion in the twentieth century has been that of secularisation. In adjusting themselves to the demands of modern culture, it has been argued, major religious groups have lost the qualities which distinguished them from each other, and in so doing have lost their traditional hold on their members. The Church no longer dominates particular communities, regardless of orientation, in the way that it used to do. This is a process that has operated at different speeds and at different times across the country, but it appears to be nevertheless relentless. The traditional Sunday, for instance, in which patterns of life were lived according to a routine of expected church attendance, and there was little opportunity for any other kind of activity outside of the home, has come under considerable pressure. Community custom, sometimes reinforced by Blue laws, ensured that Sunday was very different from other days of the week. Since the Second World War, however, the whole concept of Sunday as a special day set aside for prayer and rest has come under attack from a host of rival attractions such as restaurants, shopping malls, supermarkets and cinemas. Norman Mailer put the charge succinctly in *Advertisements for Myself*. ‘American Protestantism has become oriented to the machine, and lukewarm in its enthusiasm for such notions as heaven, hell and the soul’ (Mailer 1968:348). To this extent, then, secularisation

appears to have had some effect on the way people live their religious lives on a daily basis. The statistics cited at the start of this chapter may appear to contradict this argument, but seen from this angle they represent the popularity of a diluted, generalised form of religion in which the importance attached to sharply defined matters of theology or dogma has given way to a broader acceptance of what Will Herberg called 'the American Way of Life' (Herberg 1955:86–94).

There may, however, be another way of approaching the supposed secularisation of American life. One conventional attribute of religious behaviour in the United States has been the importance of denominational loyalty. American Christians for much of American history worshipped as members of specific denominations, and often exhibited mistrust and sometimes hostility towards rival groups. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American denominations frequently asserted the supremacy of their own missions as against the errors and apostasies of their rivals. The division was perhaps clearest in the split between Catholics and Protestants, and American history is littered with outbreaks of conflict between the two. As late as the 1950s a leading Catholic churchman, Cardinal Francis Spellman, Archbishop of New York, could refer to Protestants as unhooded Klansmen. Tensions, however, were also frequently apparent within Protestantism, and encouraged that tendency towards sectarianism which has been such a marked feature of American society. These divisions and tensions, it has often been argued, were due in great part to such factors as class, race, ethnicity and region. Christians had been driven apart from each other by forces outside of religion itself, and by the absence of any official state sponsorship of a particular form of Christianity. As late as 1958, a major public opinion survey of the Detroit area found that there were still substantial differences in the way that Protestants, Catholics and Jews perceived a wide range of personal and private issues, including sexual morality, the role of the family, social reform, and attitudes to work.

However, more recent evidence seems to suggest that the fences between denominations are beginning to break down. In the period since the Second World War, in particular, significant changes appear to have been taking place in the firmness of the attachment Americans make to a specific domination. As late as 1955, a vast majority of church members remained loyal to the denomination of their childhood. By 1985, however, something like a third of adults had switched from the denomination in which they had been reared. In some of the older denominations this trend has been particularly striking. Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians all have recently witnessed significant loss of members to other denominations of the order of around 40 per cent. Even Catholics, Baptists and Jews have shown significant losses of around 25 per cent.

What this trend appears to show, in part, is an increasing tendency for American worshippers to experiment with attending services across traditional boundaries. Almost two-thirds of Americans in the 1980s attended the church services of at least three different denominations, a trend which appears to be

encouraged by educational background and inter-marriage. At those services, too, they could expect to receive an increasingly warm welcome, as denominations themselves relaxed rules on participation. Surveys in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that most Protestants were in favour of more cooperation between local churches and generally sympathetic to the beliefs and practices of Protestants in other denominations. This shift has not only been apparent within the Protestant Churches but also between Catholics and Protestants. The successful participation of Catholics in American political life at the highest level was crowned by John F. Kennedy's election in 1960 as President. Marriages between Catholics and Protestants are all far less controversial in the 1990s than they were in the 1950s. The concept of the Catholic as some kind of alien other in American life has markedly declined, as ecumenism has spread throughout considerable sections of the Christian world. Catholics and Protestants frequently cooperate at a local level in a way which would have been unthinkable forty years ago.

This weakening of denominational loyalties, however, has clearly not led to a broad cross-religious consensus on public issues, in opposition, say, to a secular perspective, as the discussion of fundamentalism (see pp. 109–115) makes clear. Instead a number of commentators have pointed to a sweeping ideological realignment which has taken place across denominational boundaries. In place of the traditional division between Catholics and Protestants, for instance, what has emerged is a growing affinity between orthodox and progressive groups in either camp. Surveys in the 1980s increasingly found that those who held orthodox views on the theology of their faith, whatever the denomination, often had more in common on a range of public issues with orthodox members of other denominations than with progressive members of their own faith. The obverse was also the case, as progressives of one faith frequently made common cause with progressives of another. Generally orthodox opinion was sympathetic to what might be described as a right-wing set of political and cultural attitudes, while progressives were more likely to veer towards liberalism. If one takes the example of America's role in the world, for instance, a major 1987 survey found that a considerable majority of the orthodox within Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism believed that America was a 'force for good' in the world, while a slight majority of progressives believed that her influence was either 'neutral' or a 'force for ill'. The orthodox were far more likely to be suspicious of government programmes like social welfare, while progressives were much more likely to be sympathetic to federal reform programmes. These divisions between orthodox and progressive within denominations have been reflected in an increasing number of alliances across what were often in the past unbreachable barriers, as like-minded believers have to come together to make common cause on the cultural issues that concern them. Though one way of categorising these alliances is to see them along a conservative-liberal political spectrum, this may not get to the heart of the matter. Political ideology, it has been argued, merely reflects a much deeper disagreement over the sources of moral authority. For the

orthodox, moral authority comes from God's will for the world; for progressives moral authority is to be found in rational attempts to come to terms with the world, without relying on external authority. Two recent commentators conclude that it is

these opposing conceptions of moral authority [which] are at the heart of most of the political and ideological disagreements in American public discourse—including the debates over abortion, legitimate sexuality, the nature of the family, the moral content of education, Church/State law, the meaning of First Amendment free speech liberties, and on and on.

(Hunter and Rice 1991:331).

This suggests that the apparent public commitment to religion, as suggested by the statistics at the start of the chapter, is not as straightforward as it might at first appear. Religion may or may not be declining in America under pressure from secularisation, but it is changing, and as it changes it remains part of that continuing struggle to define American culture which has existed since the late eighteenth century.

### **CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM**

One powerful challenge to the plausibility of theories of secularisation and one of the most striking phenomena in recent American social history has been the continuing vitality of Evangelical Christianity, sometimes but not always associated with fundamentalist traits. Mainstream Protestant denominations like the Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians have lost ground to a range of Evangelical groups including Fundamentalists, Charismatics and Pentecostals. The most controversial and sensational popular representation of evangelicalism has been the recent growth of television preachers who have been able to reach massive new audiences through their exploitation of the electronic media, but despite their undoubted success and the attention which has been paid to them, they are not fully representative of the sheer variety of evangelicalism in practice, particularly at a grass-roots level. One of our concerns in a number of the topics examined in this collection has been to show how a range of American institutions and social practices are mediated by such key concepts as class, race and region, and this is as true of evangelicalism as it is of other areas of American life. Evangelicalism, then, is a varied form of religious expression, and it is important in examining it to note that not all evangelicals are fundamentalists. We shall be exploring below the links between fundamentalism and the political Right in the period after 1970, but throughout the post-war era there have been other successful evangelical movements which have sought to try to adapt evangelicalism more effectively to mainstream American life, rather than simply call for the restoration of the old ways. One representative figure of this strain in modern evangelicalism was Billy Graham, who had been educated

at the stronghold of conservative fundamentalism, Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, but whose crusades of the 1950s sought to appeal to many ordinary Americans in a manner which was selfconsciously inclusive, and which though often anti-communist, often showed some sympathy for liberal issues. Graham, in the late 1960s, was sometimes criticised by more politically right-wing evangelicals who felt that his willingness to admit that racism and poverty were pressing problems in contemporary America was betraying the cause. This is a reminder that religious conservatism did not always imply political conservatism. Most black evangelicals, as we shall see below, hardly fitted into that equation, and even one of the fastest-growing of all evangelical groupings, the Southern Baptists, contained a significant liberal wing. There were a number of prominent evangelicals who were sympathetic to domestic liberal causes, and who also became involved in the Vietnam anti-war movement. Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon, for instance, linked his evangelical commitment to support for civil rights and opposition to the escalation of the war in Vietnam, but perhaps the most prominent liberal evangelical on the national stage was Jimmy Carter, the former Governor of Georgia who was elected as President in 1976. Carter talked openly during his campaign about being 'born again', about how the experience of conversion had transformed his life, and encouraged a commitment to social justice at home and human rights abroad.

Another feature of post-war evangelism has been the attempt to use its influence to try to restore some sense of community in a society which it sees as threatened by increasing divisions between individuals and groups. In a considerable number of American cities the size of many evangelical congregations has encouraged their emergence as alternative communities which offer shops, schools, and a whole array of social and cultural institutions alongside their staple religious services. Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, in the north-western suburbs of Chicago, has a regular weekend congregation of 15,000 and its physical appearance is something of a cross between a giant corporate headquarters and a shopping mall. Its services are carefully crafted and choreographed, more like variety shows, with a sophisticated packaging aimed at its mainly white middle-class audience. The church is equipped with extensive lighting and sound systems, and video recording systems which capture on tape every detail of the weekly meetings. Its services and values are based on market research carried out in the 1970s, which discovered that one way to recapture suburban support was to adapt to its surrounding culture. The pastors of the church refer to themselves as the senior management team, and use the language of business administration to convey their message. Jim Dettner, a Senior Pastor at the church, explained that

one thing you have to understand about Willow Creek is that we've been strategic about picking our target market. We decided who it was that we were trying to reach and we're smart enough to know that in order to

transform these people at their core values you have to build a bridge to them to reach them.

Willow Creek is unashamedly based on the premise that religious truth can be packaged and sold in much the same way as any other product. Its supporters insist that this truth is unchanging but its presentation in a form which is congenial to its suburban audience allows it to be communicated in a manner which would otherwise be impossible. Adherence to the literal truth of the Bible and the experience of being born again are presented in the carefully crafted language and form of mainstream popular entertainment. There is also a strong emphasis on the church as a source of community in a world where other social institutions are seen as weak or inadequate. Willow Creek, according to its own prospectus, is

A center of activity, fellowship and learning for the hundreds of sports teams, youth groups and children's ministries that meet regularly, a community where families and friends can meet to talk, eat and share each other's lives as they sit in the 750-seat Atrium/Food Court.

It also provides a range of support services for its members, which cover such areas as recovery from addiction, financial advice, and family counselling, as well as practical workshops teaching basic skills like car maintenance and do-it-yourself. Willow Creek's success has made it a model for many other similar community churches across the country, which have also sought to make contemporary evangelicalism much more palatable and accessible. As in the 1920s, when attempts to modernise church services aroused criticism from more orthodox sources, the community church has its critics, who have generally argued that it has given in rather too easily to contemporary culture. Market research and adaptation to the demands of modern consumerism are an insufficient guide to what form religious belief and practice should take. To rely on them overmuch is to abdicate the Church's traditional responsibility to give people what faith and doctrine say they need, rather than what people themselves say they want.

A still more recent development within contemporary evangelism, Promise Keepers, has also moved outside the confines of existing denominations and sought to build a broad-based coalition which can appeal to a range of supporters from across the spectrum. Its main constituency is male and its strategy is based on the holding of gigantic rallies in which Christian men come together to make a range of promises to uphold proper Christian values, including commitment to marriage and the family, sexual fidelity, and participation in church. Promise 6 emphasises its cross-denominational role. Supporters have to pledge to reach 'beyond any racial or denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity'. Whether it will ever gain significant black support is an open question, but its very existence makes for an interesting comparison with the

Million Man March, sponsored by the black Nation of Islam, and its leader Louis Farrakhan (see p. 120). From different religious traditions, and from across the racial divide both Promise Keepers and the Million Man March suggest alternative ways of mobilising religious support in ways that traditional churches find difficult.

Alongside these attempts to adapt traditional evangelism to what were perceived as the problems of contemporary America has been the continuing potency of an alternative strand in Protestant evangelism which emphasised the saving of the individual soul as against some form of accommodation with the modern world. Hopes for a progressive transformation of the world into a better place were doomed. In the words of one of its most influential spokesmen, Dwight L. Moody, 'The Earth was going to grow worse and worse' and the distinction between sinners and those who had been saved would become ever clearer. Men needed to be saved from the world rather than to work to change it. In contrast to the post-millennial beliefs of many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century preachers, this tradition, sometimes described as pre-millennial, argued that conditions on earth would inexorably worsen until Jesus returned to establish his Kingdom at the battle of Armageddon. Until then true believers should concentrate on saving their own souls, for only they would not have to suffer the tribulations accompanying the final struggles between Christ and Antichrist. Instead, they would rise into the air to meet Christ, in a process known as the 'secret rapture', and thus escape the terrors of the end of the world. The implication of this position was that political action on this earth was pointless. It was far better to prepare yourself for the rapture. This trend was reinforced by the crusades of the late nineteenth century against vice and alcohol, and the revivalist attempts by figures like Moody to resist the modernising and liberalising forces at work in early twentieth-century America. It was suspicious of the liberal sympathies of the Social Gospel, and of the spread both of other religions, often associated with the immigrant churches, and a renewed rationalism which sought to come to terms with science and other features of modern society. Between 1900 and 1915, it acquired a newly self-conscious tone with the emergence of 'fundamentalism', a phrase coined to represent efforts to reawaken evangelism to the fundamentals of faith. At the heart of fundamentalism lay a belief in the literal truth of the Bible, and what made it immediately effective was the link between the conviction of its own cause, and the effectiveness with which it spread its message. In a precursor of the direct mailing tactics used so effectively by the religious Right in the 1970s and 1980s, books and pamphlets containing the fundamentals of faith were widely distributed across the country. By the 1920s a recognisable coalition of conservative Christian groups had emerged, opposed to the teaching of evolution in the public school system and the influence of Catholicism, as well as older targets like alcohol. During the 1930s and the Second World War, however, religious conservatism moved away from the kind of assertive confrontation with the demons of modern, urban America, which had been reflected in the cultural

struggles of the the 1910s and 1920s over such issues as prohibition and the public school curriculum. Instead it regrouped, preferring to focus on promoting its activities at a local and regional level. However, after the Second World War, it once again emerged into the national arena from its bases in the South and the West as it profited from the religious revival of the late 1940s and 1950s, when it gained a strongly patriotic and anticommunist gloss.

An important feature of its success was its capacity to organise effectively. Bodies such as Carl McIntyre's American Council of Christian Churches, and Billy James Hargis' Christian Crusade provided successful examples of leadership and coordination for the Christian Right to use in the 1970s and 1980s.

During the 1960s and early 1970s it became clear that religious conservatism was well established, not just in the South and West, but increasingly in metropolitan centres in the North. During the cultural turbulence of the 1960s, there was a tendency to underestimate its potency, in part because of the attention paid in the national media to voices of dissent on the left, but this apparent silence was misleading. The unravelling of political liberalism and the collapse of left-wing radicalism at the end of the decade provided a space into which religious conservatism could move, as a self-proclaimed alternative to the supposed collapse of moral values. It is worth noting here that despite all the attention given to the charismatic preachers who led this return into the public limelight what appears to have mattered more in ensuring the long-term success of the movement was the power of the fundamentalist discourse. When, as happened on a regular basis, an influential preacher was caught in a sexual or financial scandal, it does not seem to have seriously weakened the effectiveness of the fundamentalist cause. The language and arguments of the Bible remained an enduring guide, even when sullied by the misdemeanours of the preachers who uttered them.

As fundamentalism prospered in the 1970s, the links between it and political conservatism became much more explicit. Among the torchbearers here was Jerry Falwell, pastor at the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, and f founder of Liberty Baptist College, whose task was to train a new generation of fundamentalist ministers to save America. Falwell had risen to national prominence through the success of his *Old Time Gospel Hour* which was widely distributed across the country every Sunday morning. Though in the early 1960s Falwell had firmly asserted that churchmen should concentrate on individual transformation rather than social reformation, by 1980 he had changed his mind, and had emerged as the leader of what he called the 'Moral Majority', a movement aimed at pushing back the tide of 'secular humanism' which apparently threatened the stability of American life. It was opposed, amongst many other causes, to the right to abortion, to the Equal Rights Amendment for women, to legal and social equality for homosexuals, and argued strongly for the protection of the traditional family, and for the spread of religious values into areas of American life from which they had been excluded by the doctrine of the separation of church and state. Particularly important here was the issue of



prayer in the public school system, which had been barred by the Supreme Court, but which became an important symbol of the renewed fundamentalist commitment to political action. By 1980 the Moral Majority and other conservative religious groupings had firmly attached themselves to the coat-tails of Ronald Reagan's presidential candidacy, in which issues like anti-abortion and anti-feminism became linked to Reagan's emphasis on the need to revive the free enterprise economy and American military capability.

What appeared to give this period of conservative influence an extra dimension was its sophisticated use of the mass media, and, in particular, television, as well as its willingness to adapt to the demands of contemporary patterns of living. As Michael Lienesch has suggested, one important characteristic of the religious Right in action has been the way in which popular preachers have been adept at using the mass media to promote their causes. A great deal of publicity has been given to the electronic church in the 1980s and 1990s, but the kinds of techniques it uses built on the use of radio by such figures as Gerald L.K. Smith in the 1930s, Rev. Carl McIntyre in the 1940s and 1950s, and Billy James Hargis in the 1950s and early 1960s. All three showed how it was possible to use the media to promote fundamentalist messages beyond the confines of the traditional pulpit. By 1994 the National Religious Broadcasters' Conference was able to claim that 1,600 radio stations and 274 television channels broadcast a religious message every day, a rise of 50 per cent for radio since 1984, and 33 per cent for television. There are, here, obvious paradoxes in the re-emergence of fundamentalism as an efficient and effective exponent of the use of modern technology. Many fundamentalists inveigh against the innovations of contemporary society and the way they ensnare the unsuspecting into a trap of consumerism and fulfilment of the self. On the other hand, their message is frequently conveyed through sophisticated use of modern media forms and a willingness to confront what they see as the godless manipulators of popular culture on their own ground.

Whatever the importance of the role played by the Moral Majority in helping Ronald Reagan to gain the presidency, in office he proved to be something of a disappointment, failing to deliver on many of the key fundamentalist issues like abortion and school prayer, so it was not surprising in 1988 when televangelist Pat Robertson decided that if politicians were unreliable it might be more effective for religious leaders to run for office themselves. His bid for the 1988 presidential nomination faltered, but it only reinforced the conviction that if the fundamentalist cause was to prevail it had to enter fully into the political mainstream, and, more specifically, play a central role in the organisation and ideological development of the Republican Party. Since Robertson's failure in 1988, this push has been reflected in grass-roots campaigns which have sought to develop effective ideological and institutional bases in American communities which will provide a more enduring support for the achievement of long-term political power. Using his extremely popular television show, the *700 Club*, and his own cable television station, the Family Channel, to great effect, Robertson

launched an alternative to Falwell's Moral Majority, which he called the Christian Coalition. By the time of the 1994 mid-term elections it could claim a membership of almost two million, and a highly effective set of campaign strategies. These were reflected in the successes of the Republican Party in November 1994, when the role of the religious vote appears to have been very important in a number of Congressional races.

When the Moral Majority went into decline in the mid-1980s, and Falwell began to experience a number of organisational and financial problems, it was for a time argued that the political wing of fundamentalism had lost its effectiveness. The success of the Christian Coalition, however, suggests that this is misleading, and that this time its political influence is much more securely based than in the early 1980s. It also points to an ambiguity in the attitudes of fundamentalists towards political activity. A central strand in fundamentalist theology had been premillennial, emphasising, as we have seen, efforts to save men's souls. The success of the Christian Coalition, however, indicated a move towards the post-millennial position on the Second Coming. It might be possible to avert the worst aspects of Armageddon, by preparing the way for Jesus's return. Christian action now could help in the transition to the establishment of the Kingdom on this earth. For many Christian activists in the 1980s and 1990s saving your own soul remained important, but personal salvation must be accompanied by work to establish a truly Christian society. The traditional division between church and state set up by the Founding Fathers had only allowed the spread of humanism and secularism, and therefore disdain for Christian moral values. The moral order at the heart of the universe is broken daily in blasphemy, adulterous sex, lying, disrespect for parents, and coveting,' argued Pat Robertson in his tract, *The New World Order*, published in 1992. 'Society encourages, where possible, every imaginable conduct to violate the true moral law' (Breiblid 1996:260). Faced with such a situation, post-millennialism demanded that Christians no longer refrain from political involvement, but commit themselves fully to the task of establishing God's Kingdom. 'It's important for us not to be afraid of political power,' declared an Iowa housewife in 1994. 'We have to assume it as it is given to us and God prepares us to take it. Inch by inch, line by line, we move the way God directs us, reviving America to return to her roots,' As these comments suggest, however, this version of post-millennialism looked to the past rather than the future. Preparation for the millennium could be achieved by restoring that older America before a purer past had been sullied by the perils of modern life. As Falwell put it, before his apparent disillusion with political activism, his aim was a crusade to 'lead the nation back to the moral stance that made America great... to bring America back...to the way we were' (Combs 1993:126).

### AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGION

As we have seen elsewhere in this book, one of the central themes in American history has been the interaction between white and black culture, whether in the nineteenth-century South, or across the nation in the twentieth century. Of no area has this been truer than religion. African American religion has been extremely important both for American religious culture as a whole, and for the black community itself. Malcolm X regularly used to argue that in America ‘the black man ha[d] been robbed by the white man of his culture, of his identity, of his soul, of his self’. Slavery in particular had provided the opportunity for the colonisation of the black mind, through the imposition of white values and beliefs, especially Christianity. Any sense of an autonomous African religion had been destroyed by the horrors of the Middle Passage, and the oppressiveness of the plantation system. We will be returning to the Nation of Islam later in this discussion, but at this stage it is important to note that there is an alternative vision of the part played by the Christian religion in black culture, which has emphasised its significance in encouraging the emergence of black identity and self-worth. This may be traced back to the period of slavery before the Civil War. Under the restrictions of slave society, masters generally assumed control of their slaves’ religious behaviour. Christianity was widespread on the plantation, both because many masters encouraged missionary activity but also because slaves often converted voluntarily. Slaves generally were expected to worship under white supervision in services held by white ministers, and in the same churches as their masters, though seating arrangements were generally segregated. Nevertheless, despite this emphasis on supervision and control, one of the most striking themes in the slave experience was the way in which the slaves themselves succeeded in developing their own distinctive religious beliefs and practices, in a manner which enabled them to withstand the travails of bondage. What was crucial here was the autonomy they managed to find in the practice of their faith. The evidence culled from their religious behaviour shows that slaves were not simply acted upon, the passive and downtrodden recipients of whatever their master chose to give them but rather, acted for themselves in a way that was extremely important in encouraging a sense of identity and purpose in their lives. As John Blassingame has put it, ‘In religion, slave(s) exercised their own independence of conscience’ (Blassingame 1972:viii). Under slavery, African Americans developed many of the features which were to mark black Christianity in the future. Of particular interest here was the way in which slaves meshed African inheritances with the evangelical practices they took from white society.

After emancipation, the freedmen withdrew from the white-dominated churches in which they had been forced to worship before the Civil War, and set up their own religious institutions. For many of them the freedom to leave behind white preachers and their messages of obedience and restraint and to practise their faith in the way that they chose for themselves was an act of immense

importance. 'Praise God for this day of liberty to worship God!' declared one ex-slave (Litwack 1980:465). As a result of this process the new black churches assumed a central position in the lives of African Americans; they quickly became the main social and cultural institutions which blacks made and operated for themselves, and therefore were indispensable in promoting a sense of communal purpose. Black churches provided the organisational framework for most activities of the community: economic, political, and educational as well as religious. At the same time, they provided an opportunity for the expression of individual faith in a manner which encouraged a sense of identity, and confirmed God's role in their lives. In deciding to 'make Jesus their choice', as Cornel West has put it, 'and to share with one another their common Christian sense of purpose and Christian understanding of their circumstances', they created a situation in which their faith enabled them to hope for eventual triumph, however much they were 'seemingly forever on the cross, perennially crucified, continuously abused and incessantly devaluated' (West 1993:117-18). Within the black churches, ministers assumed a particular significance, not just as preachers of the gospel, but also as educators, community organisers and political leaders. W.E.B. Du Bois at the turn of the century would call the preacher 'the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil' (Branch 1988:3).

If one turns against this backdrop to the black experience in post-Second World War America, and in particular to the civil rights movement, then the enduring importance of the black church is readily apparent. As civil rights activity developed across the South at a local level in the 1940s and early 1950s, and then assumed national prominence with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began in 1955, religion played a crucial role. It provided, amongst other things, an organisational structure with deep roots in the black community which could mobilise human and financial support in a manner which was largely independent of white society. It also, in the black ministry, provided a ready pool of potential leaders, many of them college-educated, who could draw on a long tradition of testifying on behalf of their congregations. Black preachers brought to the movement a language which allowed them to link contemporary political struggles to the age-old efforts to escape from captivity and reach the promised land.

All of this was reflected in the career of Martin Luther King who in his career as figure-head of the civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968, became the most significant spokesman of his generation for the importance of religion in national public life. This was never an easy task. King faced many critics, both within his own black community, and from the white churches, who argued that his social activism threatened public order, and ran the risk of damaging the spiritual role of the church by dragging it into politics. While it was true, as suggested above, that the black church was an indispensable institutional foundation for the civil rights movement, there were nevertheless many individual black ministers who were fearful of challenging the racial *status*

*quo* for fear of awakening white reprisals, and this was reflected in the caution of established church groups like the National Baptist Convention. King found here that it was more effective to use new organisations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which he helped to set up in 1957, to stimulate the black churches into social action. By moving outside the established centres of authority in the black religious community, King encouraged a grass-roots revival which would play an essential role in transforming the face of the South in the 1960s. At the same time, he spoke out against those in the white religious community who argued that episodes like the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the Birmingham Campaign of 1963 brought religion too much into politics. It was the responsibility of politicians to effect political change, not churchmen. King in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* argued that such a distinction made no sense when men were confronted with evil. It was vital for the sacred to inform the secular if God's will was to be realised. No society could ever fully meet the exacting aims laid down in the Bible, but it was always important that committed Christians struggle to achieve them. Put another way, civil law had to be judged by higher principles than those of the State. King argued:

A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law... Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.

(King 1964:84)

The Jim Crow statutes of the South were unjust because segregation distorted the soul and damaged the personality. Drawing on the German theologian Paul Tillich's argument that sin was separation, King indicted segregation because it exemplified man's 'awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness' (King 1964:85). Faced with such evidence of sin, the contemporary church had spoken too often in 'a weak, ineffectual voice, with an uncertain sound'. Organised religion had become too wedded to the preservation of the *status quo*, when it should be a 'headlight leading men to higher levels of justice'. Faced with compromise and complacency, civil disobedience would reawaken the national conscience, and carry it back to 'the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God', to all 'the best in the American dream'.

As the example of King's career makes clear, Christianity has been central to the African-American experience, but it has been challenged over the last forty years by the rise of Islam as an alternative form of religious behaviour. Islam has owed its growing popularity in America to a number of factors, but particularly influential has been the argument that it was the original religion of those Africans who were captured and brought across the Atlantic as slaves. Whereas the black Christian tradition has emphasised the role it played in giving African Americans a sense of identity and purpose, the Muslim claim that theirs was the true faith has fitted well into the search for African roots in other areas of black

life. This argument was given its most forceful and effective statement by Malcolm X who became the leading American spokesman for Islam in the early 1960s. He was a member of the Nation of Islam which, despite its name, is scorned by orthodox Muslims, because of its reluctance to believe that Muhammad himself was the last prophet. The Nation of Islam gives that honour to Elijah Muhammad, the former Elijah Poole, who was instrumental in building up the nation in the post-war era. Still, Islam, for Malcolm, provided a means for the recovery of an identity which had been stripped from him by white Americans. In America, argued Malcolm,

the black man has been colonised mentally, his mind has been destroyed, his identity has been destroyed, he has been made to hate his black skin, he has been made to hate the texture of his hair, he has been made to hate the features that God gave him.

(Malcolm X 1980:263)

The chief weapon of colonisation had been Christianity which had been imposed on black slaves to make them pliant and obedient. If African Americans were to restore any feelings of self-worth, then they had to reject the religion of slavery and segregation, no matter how pervasive it was in the black community. In its most radical form, Islam assumed a black nationalist tone in the 1960s, specifically rejecting the integrationist approach of King to America's racial problems, and calling for a separatist solution to the country's racial problems. In the last years of his life Malcolm became increasingly drawn to mainstream Islam outside of the United States, and under its influence began to admit that some form of cooperation between the oppressed of both the white and the black race might be possible, but his early death in 1965 left the implications of this move unfulfilled. Malcolm's journey through the particular stages of his life was vividly described in his *Autobiography*, which though it consistently denounces the links between Christianity and racism, itself belongs to a confessional tradition in which the sinner repents of his sins and through the process of conversion becomes a preacher for his newly found faith. After breaking with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm eventually found some sense of resolution on a visit to Mecca where he joined his fellow pilgrims 'drinking without hesitation from the same glass as others ...washing from the same little pitcher of water; and sleeping with eight or ten others on a mat in the open' (ibid.: 343-4).

The most recent manifestation of Islam in the United States has been the rise of Louis Farrakhan, like Malcolm also a member of the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan has become a figure of controversy because of the way in which his fervent black nationalism has spilled over into messages of open hostility to white society, and because of his often virulent attacks on American Jews for their historical role as slave traders, ghetto employers and landlords. Farrakhan's fierce invective, however, cannot hide the continuing success of the Nation of Islam. By 1995 the sect had mosques in about 120 American cities, as well as a range of other social

and cultural institutions, which increasingly helped to make it a viable alternative to the Christian Church. An important aspect of the sect is its emphasis on community work of various kinds. It organises its own schools, which are run according to a strict regimen which emphasises strict discipline and the virtues of a traditional curriculum. It also operates a range of other community ventures including supermarkets, restaurants, bakeries and bookstores. Recruits have to undergo ‘manhood training classes’ which underline the importance of good behaviour, a sober dress code, and rigorous self-discipline. Within the black community it runs a range of rehabilitation programmes for drug addicts, alcoholics, ex-prisoners and gang members, in a manner which emphasises self-help and the need for the community to take more responsibility for its own conduct. As some of this suggests, the Nation of Islam is undoubtedly male in its orientation. Women within the organisation are assigned traditional roles which emphasise housework and child-rearing and clothing regulations which call for them to be covered. Farrakhan, too, shares white conservative concerns that welfare subsidises single women to have babies out of wedlock. Many of these attitudes were reflected in the Million Man March of 1995, when several hundred thousand black men met in the Mall in Washington, DC under the auspices of the Nation of Islam. The success of the march was a clue to the Nation’s increasing appeal. To many African-Americans, Muslims are attractive because of the consistency between their message and the way they live their lives. Black Christianity, from this perspective, cannot help but be weakened by the compromises it has had to make with white society, partly because of a shared commitment to similar religious beliefs and practices. The reason so many white Americans outside of the South were sympathetic to Martin Luther King, members of the Nation of Islam have argued, was that his approach did not directly confront their own involvement in an oppressive system. Farrakhan, in contrast, continually underlines two of the most unpalatable facts about contemporary American life. Many African-Americans are full of anger at the oppressive nature of white society, and many white Americans are frightened of their black counterparts.

### CONCLUSION

Ronald Reagan in his 1983 address to the National Association of Evangelicals talked about a ‘great spiritual awakening in America, a renewal of the traditional values that have been the bedrock of America’s goodness and greatness’. Americans were far more religious than people of other nations, with ‘a deep reverence for the importance of family ties and religious belief’. Americans lived in an imperfect world in which sin and evil existed, but their glory lay in their ‘capacity for transcending the moral evils of [the] past’. They would never abandon their belief in God, because it ensured that the source of their strength in the quest for human freedom was not material but spiritual (Erickson 1985:155–66). Reagan’s words, and the support they aroused, testified to the continuing

importance of religion in American life, but they also perhaps disguised some of the underlying patterns in religious behaviour which made his picture of a 'great spiritual awakening' in America more complicated than it might at first seem. The evidence of the last half of the twentieth century might suggest that American religion was still thriving, but at the same time it was also changing. Religious behaviour and practice had been forced to adapt to the changing conditions of the late twentieth-century world, and even where there were apparent strongholds of resistance to modernity, as in fundamental evangelicalism, these were themselves often created with the weapons and techniques of modern society.

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### FOLLOW-UP WORK

- 1 How has religion been represented in American cinema? Movies for individual consideration here might include those which treat specific moments/themes in American religious culture, like *Inherit the Wind* which deals with the Scopes trial of 1924 when fundamentalists challenged the teaching of Darwinian biology in the public school system or *Elmer Gantry* which looks at evangelism. Another approach is to look at how religion has influenced the work of specific directors, for instance, Frank Capra or Martin Scorsese. To what extent do films like *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Mean Streets* use religious themes and motifs?
- 2 The relationship between religion and ethnicity may be fruitfully explored through the work of specific writers like Philip Roth, both in early work like the range of stories collected in *Goodbye, Columbus* and more self-reflective later novels like *The Counterlife* (1988).
- 3 The place of religion in popular culture may be explored through its influence on both black and white musical forms. The development of black consciousness and its expression in a range of musical forms, from slave spirituals, through the blues and gospel, to soul raise all kinds of questions about cultural identity Lawrence Levine's (1977) classic study, *Black*

*Culture and Black Consciousness*, is a helpful starting-point here. Similarly, the importance of religious themes in the country music of the South again raises questions about the construction of cultural identity.

*Assignments and areas for further study*

- 1 Has the wide range of religious choice in America meant that all religions have equal status? What implications has America's traditional commitment to religious freedom had for non-Christian religions? How have non-Christian religions such as Judaism and Islam fitted into a society which has tended to assume that America is, above all, a Christian nation? What has religious freedom meant for the different denominations of the Christian church or for non-believers?
- 2 How has religious liberty accorded with concepts of secularisation? The principle of the separation of church and state assumes the secular identity of the state, but how far has this been reflected in practice?
- 3 What has been the relationship between religious diversity and civic values? If America has never had an established church, has it nevertheless had what has been described as a 'civil religion', in which a number of key shared concepts are articulated in ways that share some of the characteristics of an established religion on the European model? 'Civil religion' here has been defined by Robert Nisbet as 'the religious or quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political state'. What kind of role have such traditions and values had in American history where established national institutions have been relatively weak?

## Chapter 5

### Approaches to regionalism

#### The West and the South

Michel Foucault has argued that history has excluded too readily ‘particular, local, regional knowledge...incapable of unanimity’, in favour of ‘systematising thought’, or the official version (Foucault 1980:82). He calls for the ‘subjugated knowledges’ which have been ‘buried’ below myths to be rediscovered and injected into our perceptions of culture. He calls for a ‘genealogy’—a ‘painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts’—which would combine erudite knowledge and ‘local memories’ (ibid.: 83) in the understanding of the cultural process. Rather than assume a ‘unitary’ version of the American West or South, this method insists upon the inclusion of multiple stories of local and regional significance. Such a method takes note of the struggles of power which have marked the burial of certain stories and the elevation of others and builds them into the analysis. It questions the notion that a particular place or region has a unique or settled set of qualities, and instead argues that stories which have been written about such places have often been written from a perspective which is partial and selective and may even downgrade or omit groups or interests whose experiences or values do not fit with the received version. This is a reminder that we need to take care when we examine the way in which the supposed identity of a place interacts with its history. Generalisations about the character of the South or West may depend upon assumptions about their ‘past’ which themselves contain untested judgements. As Doreen Massey has recently argued, ‘the identity of places is very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* those histories are told, and *which* history turns out to be dominant’ (Massey 1995:186). Exploring regional identity in this manner may provide a method through which to counter the urge to present a common, unified story about America, what Fisher calls its ‘unitary myth’ (Fisher 1991:viii). This might be the Puritan ‘mission’ or the Turner thesis (examined in this chapter) which both attempt to understand America through an all-encompassing story of beginning—a metanarrative which explains the nation to its people. The recognition of alternative stories in the form of regional variety and difference asserts diversity and pluralism against this totalising impulse. Regionalism in this sense may not be merely geographical, but might also include such concepts as race, gender and ethnicity, as each balks against the assumption of some common identity, and prefers

instead the assertion of difference. From this perspective, this chapter will argue that ‘regionalism is always, in America, part of a civil war within representation’ (ibid.: xiv) and that by examining texts of region we can uncover both the value of ‘subjugated knowledges’ and what they reveal about the groups that created them, and their place within the larger frame of the nation. Rooted in the actual varied landscapes of America, one can see regionalism as the critical interrogation of the centre, with its official histories and definitions, and the celebration of local multiplicity as well as national diversity.

### CASE STUDY 1: REVISING THE AMERICAN WEST

All America lies at the end of the wilderness road, and our past is not dead past but still lives in us... Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live; and what they lived, we dream. That is why our western story still holds us, however ineptly told.

(Whipple 1943:65)

This quotation begins Larry McMurtry’s epic novel of the West *Lonesome Dove* (1985) and closes the recent television documentary *The Wild West* (1995).<sup>1</sup> It is both suggestive and ambiguous about the relationship of the ‘historic’ West to contemporary America’s sense of itself. After the transmission of Ric Burns’s documentary series *The Wild West*, one reviewer wrote that, ‘Anyone who seeks to understand the United States has first to understand this story, for the West...’s the place where we became mythic in our own minds’” (*The Observer* 21 May 1995:21). Like Whipple’s statement, this suggests that the development of American culture and identity and how it has seen and defined itself are linked to the West; and second, it indicates the intertwined relationships between the ‘mythic’ and the historical, that is, between actual events and how they have been told and retold over time. It reminds us that the West is a ‘story’ over which there has been an endless contest for ‘understanding’, and lastly, it suggests there might, in fact be, a final understanding, a ‘knowing’ of the story, which raises the issue of how the ‘story’ of the West has been produced and received over the last century.

This section will examine how the West, as a region, has been dominant in the way America has imagined itself as a nation. Through representations in different texts we will witness ‘a pendulum between a diversity of sectional voices and an ever-new project of unity’ (Fisher 1991:xii). By adopting revisionist approaches, we will show the region as dynamic and unsettled instead of one through which a coherent, single American identity emerges.<sup>2</sup> By studying the narratives of place as responses to the West, one acknowledges previously ignored or silenced voices asserting their presence in ‘history’, just as they have

in the culture as a whole. In so doing, they have enriched the whole picture and forced many reassessments of long-held beliefs and assumptions about the formation of the American nation (see the Introduction and [Chapter 1](#)). In pursuing these threads, we will also show that the construction of the idea of the West reveals certain ideologies that are central to any consideration of American cultural values: exceptionalism, destiny, power, race, ecology, gender and identity. Through examining aspects of this region, one is able to see universal concerns played out in its local and specific representations, tracing the continued significance of the West in the American imagination.

### IMAGINED WESTS

In Michael Crichton's film *Westworld* (1973) an organised theme park becomes out of control when illusions take on a frightening and brutal reality. At the heart of the pleasure park is the most popular resort, 'Westworld', in which rich, white middle-class, urban, male Americans take on the personae of Wild West gunfighters, with the guarantee that their fantasies will be played out under a safe and structured set of rules. This is a simulation of a particular version of the West, with all the outcomes pre-arranged and ordered, and a script ready to be followed. When the robot gunfighter (Yul Brynner) breaks out of the neatness of the script, the version of the West is radically altered. Blood, death and fear enter the previously safe and constructed world of 'history'.

In many respects, the film articulates the nature of the American West's relationship to the American cultural memory. The West has too often become a neat script, mixing mythic notions of heroism with stories of the formation of the 'true' character and institutions of the nation forged in its confrontation with 'wilderness'. This orderly vision, as we shall see, has been disrupted in recent years by a 'New Western History'<sup>3</sup> which has sought to revise these 'scripts' of the region and unsettle and challenge the myths that have persisted for so long as central tenets of Americanism. The comforts of such old histories have been disturbed by the intrusive new force, like Yul Brynner's robot, bringing in its wake a new consciousness about the West's past and future. As in the film, once the challenge is made to the bastion of 'reality' that determines the 'world of the West', this new history is a site of struggle and resistance, conquest and death, and contention and confusion rather than neat, orderly patterns of existence. Westworld is akin to myth because

Myth functions to control history, to shape it in text or image as an ordained sequence of events. The world is rendered pure in the process; complexity and contradictions give way to order, clarity, and direction. Myth, then, can be understood as an abstract shelter restricting debate.

(Truettner 1991:40)

Similarly, Disneyland's 'Frontierland' puts the West at the centre of American history and character as a 'tribute to those hardy pioneers... [and] frontier way of life...symbolized by the coonskin cap and the cowboy hat, the calico sunbonnet and the plantation straw' (Fjellman 1992: 73). The assumptions are part of a "'Disney realism", sort of Utopian in nature [which]...program[s] out all the negative, unwanted elements and program[s] in the positive elements' (Zukin 1991:222). In E.L. Doctorow's radical novel, *The Book of Daniel* (1971), Disneyland's 'mono rail' directs, not just people, but their views, 'like a birth canal' (1974:292), permitting them to participate in 'mythic rituals of the culture' (ibid.: 292), where 'historical reality' becomes a 'sentimental compression...[a] radical process of reduction' (ibid.: 295), and what remains is 'a substitute for education and, eventually a substitute for experience' (ibid.). Just as Disneyland reduces history to a simple tale, 'totalitarian in nature' (ibid.: 294), and excludes all elements that do not fit its pattern, it also excludes marginalised people, according to Doctorow, who do not conform to the park's idea of America: There is an absence altogether of long-haired youth, heads, hippies, girls in miniskirts, gypsies...Disneyland turns away people it doesn't like the looks of' (Doctorow 1974:296). Both Disneyland's representation of the West and its dramatisation in the theme park of Westworld exemplify the dominance of the region in the nation's efforts to define its identity.

An earlier attempt to centralise the importance of the West in the history of the nation was Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, given as a lecture at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. He argued that on the frontier, a 'line' between savagery and civilisation, American 'traits' and institutions were forged in contact with a variety of forces, of which three were 'free land', nature and the Indian. Turner's 'thesis' attempts to *explain* American progress across the West, as if the complex histories of the region could be organised, like Disneyland, into an identifiable, single shape. Turner, in 1893, seemed to have the field of Western American History fully corralled, unified under the concept "frontier"... In fact, the apparently unifying concept of the frontier had arbitrary limits that excluded more than they contained' (Limerick 1987:21). Turner's 'corral'<sup>4</sup> was constructed to exclude certain views of America and exclude a number of other voices and interpretations which did not fit the particular story he wanted to tell. As Turner had written in 1889, four years before delivering his thesis, 'American history needs a connected and unified account of the progress of civilisation across the continent' (Trachtenberg 1982:13), and the notion of a 'frontier' provided the opportunity for him to produce a 'coherent, integrated story' (ibid.: 13), a creation story for America. However, Turner's 'corral' defines America by exclusion, measuring its resilient 'character' against Native Americans, the land and by little or no reference to women or other ethnic groups. It creates a 'cultural myth' (ibid.: 17), controlled like Disneyland: tidy, simple and apparently natural, that is, in a manner which makes its contents appear to be acceptable and 'taken-forgranted'. Turner's language reveals precise ideological readings of the West as a vacant place

available, because of its primitive state, to the ‘advance’ of the urban, sophisticated developments that appeared inevitable and natural. It was a ‘wilderness’ to be won by creating ‘progress out of the primitive’ (Milner 1989: 2) in a movement as ‘natural’ as glaciation but predicated upon the diminishment of the Native American, the silencing of women and the ‘masterful grasp of material things’ (ibid.: 21) implied in a phrase like, ‘in spite of environment’ (ibid.). Revisionism and the reassertion of marginalised voices in the West have permitted a critical reassessment of Turner’s grand narrative. To borrow from Limerick, ‘Exclude women (*Native-Americans and their relationship to land*) from Western history, and unreality sets in. Restore them, and the Western drama gains a fully human cast of characters’ (1987:52—our additions in italics). Revisionism can enlarge what the thesis had reduced and show the West not as a ‘corral’, but an open range of contesting forces, a ‘liminal landscape of changing meanings’ (Kolodny 1992:9) in which ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender and geographical diversities have entered the critical arena.

### LAND AND THE WEST

The examination of regions is, as we have seen, only partly about geography, but always about place and space. The responses to and representations of the Western landscape have been central to the diverse human interactions within the region and to study them reveals much about the ecological attitudes prevalent over time in region and nation. One of Kolodny’s ‘changing meanings’ is clearly that of land and to trace some of these changes is to see how the West’s ecology has been interpreted differently by those who lived within it.

For Native Americans, the land is sacred, bound up in an intricate web of meaning with all living things, including humankind. The land cannot become property since ‘We are the land, and the land is mother to us all’ and ‘the land is not really a place, separate from ourselves’ (Gunn Allen 1992:119). The abundant wholeness at the centre of this ritual imagery is contained in the metaphorical ‘sacred hoop’ or circle of being, which is ‘dynamic and encompassing’ (ibid.: 56):

In American Indian thought, God is known as the All Spirit, and other beings are also spirit... The natural state of existence is whole. Thus healing chants and ceremonies emphasize restoration of wholeness, for division is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole.

(ibid.: 60)

In contrast, many Anglo-Americans came to the land ‘as possessive individuals pursuing private dreams, trying to fence in their portion of the whole’ and ‘thought about the land as they thought about each other, in simplifying, fragmenting terms’ (Worster 1994:14–15). As Sitting Bull said, ‘healthy feet can

hear the very heart of Holy Earth', but the white invaders of his nation's lands had 'a love of possession [which] is a disease with them' and sought to 'claim this mother of ours, the earth, for their own and fence their neighbors away... [and] deface her with their buildings and their refuse' (Turner 1977:255). Thus ecological imperialism was part of the process by which existing Indian attitudes to the land were altered with the arrival of the settlers.

In the West the capitalist ideology of ownership found a perfect manifestation; it was a 'cultural imperative' (Limerick 1987:53) to see the land as something to divide, distribute and register. As we have seen, the Turner thesis was based upon the premise that there was 'free land' into which the white settlers came 'winning a wilderness' (Milner 1989:2). If it was 'free', it was also 'vacant' and 'virgin' to the white settlers, with strong connotations of the promised land, imbued with a mystical sense in early painted images. This linked it with biblical stories of a new Canaan, suggesting the 'fecundity and promise of the New World and the untold riches that lay in its dark and unexplored corridors' (Greenblatt 1991:85). Herein lies a constant theme in the history of the West—the conflict between the longed-for possibility of spiritual renewal (fecundity) and the pull to the materiality of wealth (riches). The blurring of distinctions between wealth and spirit is typical of the representation of the West in the minds of many nineteenth-century white Americans.

The Gold Rush of 1849 encouraged the development of new settlements and railroads, but quickly replaced the romantic image of the lone prospector with the large corporations who introduced hydraulic mining often diverting precious water to blast the ore. As Trachtenberg writes, 'in the path of America's future seemed to lie a *natural* history' (Trachtenberg 1982:18) rapidly interpreted as 'natural wealth' to be consumed and used. The Homestead Act (1862) parcelled the land into 160-acre plots to be sold for the nominal amount of \$10, and meanwhile the railroad companies were being awarded huge land grants to enable the continued expansion of the railroads across the Plains. Native lands were being divided, buffalo ranges bisected and the once-uncharted wilderness was being surveyed by large corporate interests: railroads, mining and timber companies, driven by profit and loss.

This westward push was imperialist; Time's noblest offspring is the last' as George Berkeley wrote in *Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America* (1726). America was the final act of Time, following its Manifest Destiny which God ordained, to be the domain of the white settler whose duty it was to 'overspread the continent allotted by Providence' (John L.O'Sullivan quoted in Milner *et al.* 1994:166), move west, occupy and possess the lands there. The journalist, William Gilpin, wrote in 1846 that 'the untransacted destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent—to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean—...to teach old nations a new civilization—to confirm the destiny of the human race' (Truettner 1991:101). A painting such as Leutze's 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' (1861) dramatises these urges perfectly (see [Plate 4](#)).



The West had to be tamed and made to produce, but as T.K. Whipple describes, the impact of the white settler on the land was 'Like alien invaders [who] came and raped a continent, and called it progress, civilization. They treated the country savagely...they tortured and enslaved it' (Whipple 1943:45).

The use of images of sexual violence and conquest have of ten been used to describe the possession of the West, and have been taken as a starting point for the kind of feminist revisions which explore the 'psychosexual dynamic' of the West 'where the material and the erotic were to be harmoniously intermingled' (Kolodny 1984:3, 4) in male language. The land-as-feminine provided a repetitive image of the West as a place of male protection, possession and assault, in which the woman was passively held as fantasy or ideal. A cluster of images emerged that have maintained their power within American culture to the extent that Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldua described the situation in the following way:

The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it...we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history.

(Anzaldua 1987:8)

The excluded are linked here through the metaphors of violation: women, 'Indians and Mexicans' and the land are all tied to an identity and history that revisionism has sought to reassert.

### MASCULINITY AND THE LAND

The dominant image of the land in white American culture is that associated with masculinity. The West is represented as the testing ground for manhood. The film *Pale Rider* (1985) contains a key scene showing the process of hydraulic mining as a Hellish, phallic vision of the land's destruction. In *Shane*, which *Pale Rider* echoes in many ways, the final resistance of the land is signified by the tree stump which is collectively removed by Joe and Shane's 'manpower' (Schaefer 1989:37). In *Pale Rider*, the manpower, now embodied in the machine, is detached and brutal in its destructiveness, but the scene goes further, in juxtaposing the violation of the land with the attempted rape of a young girl. The environmental 'raping' of the land is paralleled to the male subordination and violation of the girl. The scene is crude and problematical, especially as it ultimately becomes a vehicle for the 'saviour-hero' to rescue the girl and the land from their fates, but, however one responds to the film's ideology, this scene does show that even Hollywood mainstream cinema has been touched by revisionism and has attempted to inter-link contemporary concerns about masculinity and its relationship to the feminine and to the environment.<sup>5</sup>

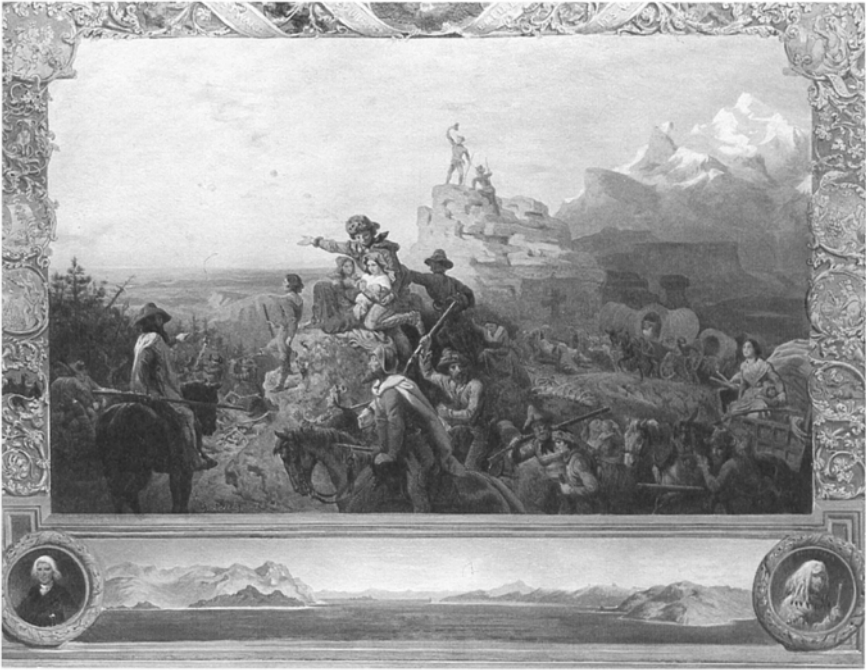


Plate 4 Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, 'Westward the course of empire takes its way', 1861

Source: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Bequest of Sara Carr Upton

The opening sequences of many classic Western films begin with the hero emerging from the land, as if he is part of its hardness, its severity: 'it says...you will become like this—hard, austere, sublime... you will have to do without here' (Tompkins 1992:71). The land is immense, powerful and dominating, but man aspires to its supremacy and so 'men imitate the land in Westerns...which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving' (ibid.: 72–3). This is the chosen landscape of hills and desert, excluding as myths do so well, the other formations of land that promise 'fertility, abundance, softness, fluidity, manylayeredness' (ibid.: 74) for these may be confused with other, feminine qualities. The apparent blankness presents the male hero with a 'tabula rasa on which man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live' (ibid.). However 'fictional' these images are, they demonstrate the dominant attitude to the land as testing ground for masculine expression, for simple, unsocial, premodern rituals to take place. In *Shane* (1949), for example, the hero enters 'from the open plain beyond' (Schaefer 1989:5), his clothes with 'the dust of distance...beaten into them', his body with 'the endurance in the lines of that dark figure and the quiet power in its effortless, unthinking adjustment' and his face 'lean and hard and burned' (ibid.: 6). The young observer, Bob, sees in Shane the lone rider, born from the

land, that Tompkins writes about, and learns from him a version of masculinity: 'Everything about him showed the effects of long use and hard use, but showed too the strength of quality and competence' (ibid.: 9). But for all his fascination, Shane, like the land he comes from, is no longer suited to the progress represented in the novel by the Starrett family. The 'open range can't last forever', for the future lies with the homesteader and with settlement and, 'the thing to do is pick your spot, get your land, your own land' (1989:13). But Shane, like Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956),<sup>6</sup> cannot settle or own the land because it is in him and defines his being. Both men need the openness and freedom of the range and cannot exist within a social domain of the feminine, the domestic or the settled. They carry back to the land the central myth of a masculine West.

This myth is examined in Cormac McCarthy's revisionist novel *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), where the West is a place of imperialism and Manifest Destiny is not a sacred quest but a brutal and terrifying assault. At its heart is Judge Holden, who exemplifies the mythic relationship to the land *in extremis*, wishing to possess the land totally.

McCarthy dramatises what Slotkin recognised about the West.

Its ideological underpinnings are those same 'laws' of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinism's 'survival of the fittest' as a rationale for social order, and 'Manifest Destiny' that have been the building blocks of our domestic historiographical tradition and political ideology.

(Slotkin 1985:15)

Holden desires to be 'suzerain of the earth' (McCarthy 1990:198), a Godlike omnipotent force who acquires all the knowledge contained in nature and stores it in a ledger for himself. At one point, he is seen breaking fossils and minerals from the land because 'he purported to read news of the earth's origins' in them (ibid.: 116), but this is not knowledge to be shared, only to add to his power. The natural objects are 'his [God's] words', since 'He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things' (ibid.: 116) and Holden is Faust, Ahab, Lear—a terrible vision of mankind's quest for power and control, here played out in the West, the 'terra damnata' of conquest and imperialism. He must kill to possess, destroy to steal the knowledge and claim it for himself. As D.H.Lawrence wrote,

To *know* a living thing is to kill it. You have to kill a thing to know it satisfactorily. For this reason, the desirous consciousness, the SPIRIT, is a vampire...to *know* any thing is to try to suck the life out of that being.

(Lawrence 1977:75)

The land is being sucked of all its value for 'man does...want to master the secret of life and of individuality' (ibid.: 76). Holden is a dark, rapacious

portrayal of the ideology of possession, even to the extent of refuting 'manifest destiny' as such and seeking to claim control of it himself: 'Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth' (McCarthy 1990:198). Holden's 'claim' is not a patch of land, but the earth itself and all its 'secrets' so that he will have 'taken charge of the world...[and] effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate' (ibid.: 199). He personifies destructive, imperial values where 'the act of destruction itself somehow makes us believe in our manhood and godhood, our Ahab's power to dominate life and to perpetuate and extend ourselves and our power' (Slotkin 1973:563). Holden is totalitarianism writ large, with his wilful desire for immortality paralleled with the westward quest which sought to possess the land, destroy the Native American and exclude anything that had no role in this grand design. The West's 'blank page', as Turner called it, offered the opportunity for self-assertion on a massive and terrifying scale. He wrote, 'the individual has been given an open field, unchecked by restraints of an old social order, or of scientific administration of government [and] the self-made man was the Western man's ideal' (Turner 1962:213).

This rampant, unrestrained individualism epitomises the West as a place of brutal competition, death and horror, where, as William Burroughs wrote, 'all the filth and horror, fear, hate, disease and death of human history flows between you and the Western lands' (Burroughs 1988:257). How far all this is from the prevalent myths of the golden land and from the 'sacred hoop' of Native-American culture. In the extreme revisionism of McCarthy, we are forced to see the repressed of the Western story as he 'rehistoricizes the mythic subject' (Slotkin 1985:45), not by claiming to give us actual truths about the West, but by creating an imaginative representation that jars the reader into rethinking the old stories and the hollowed-out myths.

### WOMEN AND THE WEST

One of the most important revisions of the American West has been undertaken by feminist critics who have challenged the conventional histories and representations of the region. Susan Armitage puts it clearly: 'most histories of the American West are heroic tales: stories of adventure, exploration and conflict...their coherence is achieved by a narrowing of focus' (Armitage and Jameson 1987:10). As Tompkins has argued, such narratives of the West developed as an 'answer' (1992:39) to the prevalence of domestic, sentimental, female books popular in the East which 'Culturally and politically...establish women at the center of the world's most important work [saving souls] and...assert that in the end spiritual power is always superior to worldly might' (ibid.: 38).

For Tompkins, the Western is 'secular, materialist, and antifeminist; it focuses on conflict in the public space, is obsessed by death, and worships the phallus'

(*ibid.*: 28). Its masculine representations refer directly to the feminine realms of power: the home, the Church, the family, and seek, as textual re-workings of actuality, to keep the domains apart and allow men the space in which to *imagine* an order in which they can be tested. Thus the Western genre developed a whole set of ‘counterrituals and beliefs’ (*ibid.*: 35) to portray masculinity and exclude or marginalise women. The cultural order from which Turner emerged in 1893 permitted him to write of a ‘masterful grasp...restless, nervous energy... dominant individualism’ (Milner 1989:21), always gendered as ‘he’, and reacting to ‘the cult of domesticity’ that had dominated American Victorian society.

Even a sensitive, radical poet like Walt Whitman in his ‘Pioneers, O Pioneers’ (1865) demonstrates through its language and imagery the prevailing idea of the West as the domain of men:

full of manly pride and friendship...

Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the  
unknown ways...

We the primeval forests felling.

We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,

We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving.

(Whitman 1971:194)

It is a male fantasy of control and domination over both the land and the feminine which comes through this poem, that in so many other ways celebrates the expansionist policies of westward movement. In relationships with women and land, man had to be assertive, to prove himself as superior, to ‘tame’ them in different ways, and literature offered one method, becoming ‘psychosexual dramas of men intent on possessing a virgin continent’ (Kolodny 1984:xiii). ‘New histories’ of the West show the significant roles of women in the region, not just in the permitted, stereotyped roles of ‘help-mate’, civiliser, whore and mother, but by providing new female viewpoints. One method is to re-value the individual stories of women’s lives, their domestic rituals and everyday habits, in contrast to the search for the grand narratives of the West, which sought to identify large trends and ‘waves’ of settlement.

A ‘classic’ Western novel and later a film, *Shane*, which has many merits, portrays Marian Starrett in the stereotyped mould of the Madonna of the Prairie, the civilising force for which men struggle. The first words that define her in the text are ‘mother’s kitchen garden’ (Schaefer 1989:7), and we are soon told: ‘She was proud of her cooking... As long as she could still prepare a proper dinner, she would tell father when things were not going right, she knew she was still civilized and there was hope of getting ahead’ (*ibid.*: 11). She is domestic, civilised and yet strangely, as the novel suggests, capable of being stirred by the sexual threat of the wild Shane. As a woman in the West, she has to be contained by the role, by the house and by the garden, all of which demonstrate the limits of her permitted territory. She may be in the wilderness, but it cannot be in her. It must be repressed and channelled into the healthy domestication that the novel

delineates. It was for women, for civilisation, such texts suggest, that men strove to tame the land, remove the wild Indian and drive away the outlaw. In John Ford's classic Western film *My Darling Clementine* (1946), women are firmly rooted in the stereotypes of whore-half-breed Chihuahua and schoolteacher-virgin Clementine, and 'women, the family and the bonds of community can thrive, it seems, only when the West has been tamed. They are the motive that invests the history of western violence with virtue' (Milner *et al.* 1994:316). In the film, Wyatt Earp is shown to be gradually 'civilised' and in one scene is washed, dressed and perfumed at the barber shop before escorting Clementine to the new town church dance where he is eased into the Fordian ritual of community, the dance. Here, Earp removes his hat and joins the ritual that bonds him, in part, to the new West of town and community and signals the ultimate settlement and organisation that his violence has enabled. Although he cannot finally settle, the process has been established in the film, as in so many Westerns, and women and the feminine are at its heart, remaining behind in the new order which has begun to reconcile 'the premodern West and the new, civilized West' (White 1991:628). The film echoes the ending of *Shane* in which the reassuring voice of Marian asserts that Shane has not gone but remains 'here, in this place, *in this place he gave us*. He's around us and in us, and he always will be' (Schaefer 1989:157—our emphases). The civilised, tamed West is the domain of Marian, Clementine and of all the other Madonna-women that masculine mythology created to explain the violence of the country. One image captures this filmic sentimental ideology perfectly, George Caleb Bingham's painting 'Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap' (1851–2). It portrays a Madonna figure being led on a white horse into the Western light by the strong, rugged, begunned Turner-esque Boone. The hierarchy of power is apparent in the composition and the definitions of what women could be in the West are emphasised (see [Plate 5](#)).

The ideological elements of these myths serve at least two purposes: first, to gender the West and set definite roles for women and men and second, to link this with the wider process of westward expansion as if the two were totally normal and ordained, 'a quality of absolute legitimacy, as if what is being described is natural and unquestionable and therefore a fully sanctioned enterprise' (Truettner 1991:40). Fortunately, these ideologies can be revealed 'when viewed through a new perspective' and be seen to '*yield* [an] agenda' (*ibid.*) which at the time of their making was masked by their social acceptance and the apparent harmlessness of their intention. Such a 'new perspective' can be seen in the fictional work of Willa Cather, who was prepared to challenge the gendered representations of the West.



Plate 5 George Caleb Bingham, 'Daniel Boone escorting settlers through the Cumberland Gap', 1851–2

Source: Washington University of Art, St Louis

### **A NEW FEMININE WEST: WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS***

In Willa Cather's *O Pioneers* (1913), the traditional, constrained view of the Madonna of the Prairie is countered by answering Whitman's poem, from which she borrows her title, in its portrayal of a capable woman with vision and power who develops a creative, mutual relationship with the land. Cather's Alexandra Bergson comes from a family whose father saw the land as something to 'tame' (Cather 1913:20) because 'its Genius was unfriendly to man' (ibid.), an 'enigma... like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness' (ibid.: 22). She learns from her father's persistence and industriousness, her mother's sense of heritage and preservation (we see her endlessly preserving fruit in the novel) and above all from the proto-environmentalist Ivar, who lives in harmony with the land. Rather than 'break' the land, Alex learns to live 'without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done' (ibid.: 36). She has a 'new relation' to the land in which her 'house is the big out-of-doors, and...it is in the soil that she expresses herself best' (ibid.: 71, 84). For Cather, the public space is available to women and they can operate within it without simply imitating men and their mistakes. The Western land is not to be

subdued, but to be nurtured and lived with, becoming like an extension of her own body: 'she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil' (ibid.: 204). Cather proposes a mutual relationship to the land, closer to the Native-American view: 'we come and go, but the land is always here' (ibid.: 308). Indeed, in one of the final speeches in the novel, Alex, talking to her future husband Carl, discusses the future of the West and claims 'it is we who write it, with the best we have' (ibid.: 307). The emphasis here is on the 'we', the male and female 'writing' of Western history and the 'writing' of the landscape itself. Elinore Pruitt Stewart, who read and admired Willa Cather, actually lived the frontier life and wrote about it in her letters, seeing homesteading for women as a means of expression and liberation from the ordeals and limitations of the urban East:

any woman who can stand her own company...see the beauty of the sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put in much time at the careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed; will have independence, plenty to eat all the time, and a home of her own in the end

(Milner 1989:408)

This 'new perspective' of women's histories is one of the tools by which 'conventional' history can be interrogated and the 'dominant discourse' of white male history be shown to 'close down [effect a closure] on those readings they wish not to run' (Jenkins 1991:67). As Anzaldúa writes, 'Culture forms our beliefs... Culture is made by those in power—men' (Anzaldúa 1987:16), but she, like many other women, has begun to question this discourse. Diverse voices have now been empowered by this rethinking of Western history: Chicana, Native-American, AsianAmerican women have expressed their stories alongside the more conventionally accepted and official versions in a new multiculturalism in the West.<sup>7</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: THE CONTESTED LANDSCAPES OF THE CONTEMPORARY WEST**

These revisions have made accessible more stories about the West, rather than just the official history or the myths transmitted through popular discourse. Slotkin's 'productive revision of myth' will 'open the system and permit it to adjust its beliefs [and the fictions that carry them] to changing realities' because, if not, the alternative is 'the rigid defense of existing systems, the refusal of change, which bind us to dead or destructive patterns of action and belief that are out of phase with social and environmental reality' (Slotkin 1992:654–5). Reappraisals 'destabilise the past and fracture it, so that, in the cracks opened up, new histories can be made' (Jenkins 1991:66) reminding us 'that interpretations... are aligned to the dominant discursive practices' (ibid.: 66). Bret Easton Ellis's



novel *Less Than Zero* (1985) is a form of this 'new history' whose epigraph is: 'There's a feeling I get when I look to the West', and represents an excessive, metropolitan region without any concern for the past. In a series of stunning motifs that conclude the novel, Ellis writes of 'ghosts; apparitions of the Wild West' that haunt the wealthy suburbs, with Indians intruding, like the return of the repressed, into the self-obsessed lives of these 'new frontiersmen' (Ellis 1985: 206). No-one wants to think about the past, about the ravaging of the land and the Native population that has enabled the vast wealth of his young characters, but it refuses to go away. It remains, a reminder of other lives and other values.

Other images follow. First, a poster of California 'old and torn down the middle and tilted and hanging unevenly', juxtaposed with 'an old deserted carnival' and a coyote howling (ibid.: 207). This curious, powerful montage spells out the contemporary West, part carnival, part degraded lopsided illusion, part ghostly, natural past. At this moment, Clay, the novel's central character knows 'it was time to go back' (ibid.: 207), by which he means to the East, to his own personal past, and also into the forgotten past of the West, to understand how his world 'so violent and malicious' (ibid.: 208) was formed. The inner collapse in Ellis's West is reflected in the landscape that intrudes into the human environment like a sinister reminder of the past. The 'houses falling, slipping down the hills in the middle of the night' (ibid.: 114), the earthquakes and the storms suggest the fragility of human existence in the West and remind us of the everpresent environment. As Worster wrote, 'the western lands were not a blank slate on which any identity, old or new, could be arbitrarily written' (Worster 1994:6).

Mike Davis, who has contributed in recent years to the necessary 'antimythography' (Davis 1990:41) of the West has developed a specific critique of Western environmental abuse. He shows how the West has become a dump for the weapons industry, for nuclear waste and experimentation, and uses the photographs of Richard Misrach as documents of this environmental damage.<sup>8</sup> These photographs are a 'frontal attack on the hegemony of Ansel Adams' whose awesome photographs of nature in the West have been seen as a final statement of environmental well-being. Misrach and others have 'rudely deconstructed this myth of the virginal, if imperilled nature' and present an 'alternative iconography' (ibid.: 57-8) of Western waste and debris in order to instigate a photographic equivalent to the work of historians, writers and film-makers discussed earlier. They are 'resurveying' the West, just as it had been originally in the 1870s, in part to demonstrate change and destruction and more generally, as with all revisioning, to alert people to what lies behind the official versions of events. In the words of Mark Klett, one of the 'rephotographers' of the West, the aim was 'to raise questions we might never have thought to ask' (Bruce 1990:81) about the West as a zone of engagement where different peoples and geographies collide. It is, however, clear that the Turner 'corral' has been opened forever to new and exciting versions of the West, but as Richard

White comments, 'this revisioning and reimagining of the West is never complete' (White 1991: 629).

### CASE STUDY 2: THE SOUTH—BEYOND COMPREHENSION?

As with the American West, the South has been a region with many competing stories, each making claims upon the region and how it might be a part of or separate from other areas of the nation. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, Henry Watterson, editor of the *Louisville Courier*, wrote that 'The South is simply a geographic expression' and he, along with a number of other editors and politicians, hoped for the disappearance of what they saw as outmoded Southern values and their replacement by national values which would enable the South to become fully integrated into the rest of the country. By the time of the Second World War, however, it had become clear to some observers, that Watterson's dreams had not yet been realised. The South is not quite a nation within a nation, but the next thing to it/ asserted W.J.Cash in 1941 (1971:vii). This exchange suggests something of the long-term significance of the debate over the place of the South in the United States, and how closely that debate is connected to arguments about the identity of the region. Discussions about the differences between the South and the rest of the nation have been common among American historians, and this has been reflected in a number of other cultural forms including literature and journalism. In American popular culture too, the question of Southern difference has been a staple topic. Shreve McCannon famously urged Quentin Compson in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, to 'Tell about the South! What do they do there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?', and his injunction has been reflected in the many competing and conflicting attempts to define Southern identity, and come to terms with what to many is an enigma beyond comprehension (Faulkner 1965:174).

These persistent efforts to understand the South have come both from within the region and from outside and it is important at the outset to note the recurrent tensions between these external versions and the ways in which Southerners themselves have articulated their own beliefs and values. This sense of difference has been shared not only by outside observers of the South but also by Southerners themselves as expressed in Southern nationalist ideology before the Civil War, or the language of defeat and the lost cause. William Styron caught something of this tension in the arguments about the meaning of the South in his novel *Sophie's Choice* where one character says,

at least Southerners have ventured North, have come to see what the North is like, while very few Northerners have ever really troubled themselves to travel to the South... I remember you're saying how *smug* Northerners appeared to be in their wilful and self-righteous arrogance... How can I really have hated a place I have never seen or known?

(Styron 1979:418–19)

This shows how revealing it is to look at the ambiguous ways in which outsiders have interpreted and responded to the South. There are, for instance, stories about the South which have held particular power for non-Southerners and in turn have become part of the problem of adequately defining what the South is in any clear-cut way. One of the most influential of all versions of the South was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which was largely written in Maine and was based on very limited direct knowledge of the region. Another northerner, Stephen Foster, from Pittsburgh, helped to popularise nostalgic views of plantation society with such songs as 'My Old Kentucky Home' and 'Ole Folks at Home', views echoed in the widely reproduced lithographs of Currier and Ives. Charles K. Harris, a New York Jew, who wrote, amongst others, 'Mid the Green Fields of Virginia', had never visited the state, confessed that his version of the South all came from the imagination and that he had no idea whether corn was grown in Virginia or whether there were any hills in the Carolinas (Malone 1993:131).

#### A DIVERSE SOUTH

These contradictions suggest the diversity of attempts to define the South's apparent difference from the rest of the nation and how this has changed over time. It is a debate which began in the late eighteenth century, became more intense in the national crisis over slavery in the nineteenth century and still thrives today. A number of commentators have argued that these differences have been much exaggerated and that Southern values and American values have had, and continue to have, much in common. As one of the leading analysts of Southern difference once admitted, 'To imagine [the South] existing outside this continent would be quite impossible' (Cash 1971:viii). Others went further, asserting that many of the distinctive, often negative qualities of the South like violence and racism were only intensified versions of basic American characteristics. Some have argued that even at the time of the greatest apparent difference between the North and South during the Civil War era, Americans had more in common than set them apart.

A variation of this argument has suggested that though a distinctive Southern identity may once have existed, it has gradually been eroded by the forces of modernisation which have already come to dominate other parts of the country. Urbanisation, industrialisation, the rise of mass communications, an integrated mass transport system, air-conditioning, have all worked together to break down Southern isolation and to link the region firmly with the national mainstream. There have been a number of moments in post-Civil War Southern history when it has been claimed that these kinds of forces significantly changed the 'old' South and made it in some way 'new'. In the 1880s Henry Grady, the publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*, defined this 'newness': 'We have sowed towns and

cities in the place of theories, and put business in the place of politics ... We have fallen in love with work' (Brinkley 1995:435). Industrial development and material progress on the northern model would enable the South to resist economic dependency, and regain self-respect after military defeat in the Civil War. In 1895 Booker T. Washington foresaw a 'new heaven and a new earth' in his 'beloved South', as a result of material prosperity and the obliteration of racial animosities. Often these 'new' Souths turned out not to bring a 'new heaven and a new earth' and old patterns of life remained. For many the New South foreseen in the late nineteenth century did not appear until after the Second World War when industrial workers for the first time outnumbered farmers, and a majority of the Southern population became urban. Regardless of when the New South became a reality, it is clear that economic indicators suggest the rural, agricultural South has long given way to a social order which shares many of the same conditions as other parts of the country.

In contrast, some observers of Southern society and culture argued for the distinctiveness of the region, and have continued to do so despite the apparent convergence of material conditions between the South and the rest of the country. The South, they argue, is less a collection of material or geographical factors, than a state of mind, a set of psychological tendencies. Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to the French aristocrat the Marquis de Chastellux in 1785, assumed that certain qualities might be linked to climate. The warmth of Virginia, he thought, unnerved both body and mind and its people were fiery, indolent, independent and generous amongst other things, in contrast with the cool North. Jefferson's generalisations are an easy target, but contemporary analysts of region continue to emphasise cultural inheritance. Fischer, for instance, has recently argued for the persistence of cultural 'folkways' which have shaped regional cultures. Cultural systems from this perspective 'have their own imperatives, and are not mere reflexes of material relationships' (Fischer 1989:10). John Shelton Reed has argued extensively for what he has described as 'the cultural and cognitive reality' of the South, and that it exists as a 'sociological phenomenon' (Reed 1982:3). The long history of attempts to paint a vanishing South are often linked to arguments about convergence between the Southern way of life and the rest of the nation. Yet a host of factors including culture, religion, social and ethnic traits, myth and folklore, suggest that the South will remain distinctive for a long while. These cultural differences have often been reinforced at times when the South has been under pressure from the forces of change. A recent study of the University of Mississippi pointed out how supposedly traditional symbols like the carrying of a giant Confederate flag at football games, the singing of Dixie as the school song, and the adoption of Colonel Rebel, a white-goateed Southern gentleman of the old school, as mascot, only dated back to the late 1940s and the challenges to the Southern way of life in the aftermath of the Second World War.

If the debate over the nationalisation of the South remains unresolved, it is also important to be aware of the dangers involved in assuming a monolithic South and underplaying variations within the region. Classically, the American South

has often been defined as the eleven former confederate states along with Kentucky, perhaps holding a marginal position half-in, half-out. But what have these eleven/twelve states had in common in terms of their material experience? There are clearly problems with finding objective characteristics like the weather which can be quantitatively assessed in a manner which will tell us where one region begins and another ends. Ulrich B. Phillips, writing in the 1920s believed the weather was the chief agent making the South distinctive because heat and humidity encouraged the cultivation of specific staple crops like tobacco, rice and cotton, which in turn encouraged plantations and a slave labour force. *Absalom, Absalom* echoes this link between land, climate and character:

This land, this South, for which God has done so much with woods for game and streams for fish and deep rich soil for seed and lush springs to sprout it and long summers to mature it and short mild winters for men and animals.

(Cowley 1977:xxv-vi)

However, on closer analysis, the concept of a 'solid' South tends to fragment when confronted with the internal variety of the region. To discuss the Appalachian mountain regions alongside the Mississippi Delta, or southern Louisiana alongside Virginia, or Florida alongside anywhere, may only expose the fragility of any attempt to provide an objective description of the region as a whole. The South, in geographical terms, has been marked by diverse agricultural patterns, linked to particular types of soil or weather. Recent writers have pointed out the diversity of the Southern economy over place and time, and it is these complexities which exist beneath such broad categories as 'South', 'North' and 'West' which have impressed many commentators. Even during the South's brief existence as an independent nation during the Civil War, there was considerable tension between different parts of the Confederacy over the conduct of political affairs, which, at least in part, reflected local economic conditions. The Southern up-country, where a majority of white Southerners lived, contained substantial pockets of disaffection with the Confederate cause, and often open and hostile resentment to what many came to see as a rich man's war. Such differences continued to persist in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, surfacing with regularity to disrupt the conventional image of the solid white South.

Another set of problems emerge when we link problems of southern identity to issues of race. Reed has put the question clearly. 'Are Southern blacks "Southerners" in any important sense?' (Reed 1982:3). Specific versions of Southern myths assume that the South is white. The black response to such versions of the South has been varied, with some like Booker T. Washington, advocating an acceptance of dominant white values at least as a tactic. In the context of the violence and segregation of the late nineteenth-century South, Washington argued that rather than agitating for immediate equality and

integration, black Southerners should concentrate on improving their own communities through education and economic development. Once they had something worthy of recognition, then their place in the South would be acknowledged. Others have argued for a re-modelling of the South on inter-racial lines, while retaining a love for the South as a place. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was largely made up of local black activists who were seeking to remake the South, rather than simply leave it as many of the previous generations had done in the 1920s and 1940s. This attempt to transform the South into a racial democracy and to integrate blacks into the mainstream of Southern life could have ironic consequences as Martin Luther King noted, writing from Birmingham gaol in the summer of 1963. 'Virtues so long regarded as the exclusive property of the white South—gallantry, loyalty and pride - had passed to the Negro demonstrators in the heart of the summer's battles' (King 1964:116).

Many blacks rejected the South altogether and simply left it behind, joining the Great Migration to the cities of the North and West in a search for economic opportunities and as an escape from the restrictions of Southern society. Those who stayed found it easier to identify with the changes in the South wrought by the civil rights movement. Another discourse of the South has emphasised black-white interaction and even cooperation. A North Carolina poll of 1971 asked a sample of the adult general population: 'Some people around here think of themselves as Southerners, others don't. How about you—would you say that you are a Southerner or not?' Some 82 per cent of whites answered that they were Southerners, but so did 75 per cent of blacks. As this suggests, 'Southern blacks have on the one hand re-evaluated their white fellow-Southerners and at the same time laid increasing claim themselves to the label "Southerner"' (Reed 1982:116–19).

In approaching regional identity it is also helpful to note the difference between 'region', and 'regionalism'. The former term defines region in apparently objective terms by analysing, say, its dominant economic and social characteristics. Use of the term 'regionalism', however, goes further and becomes an act of advocacy for a particular set of qualities. 'Regionalism' here owes its origins to the early nineteenth-century romantic association between land and culture. One conventional approach has been that regionalist arguments have often been conservative in approach, looking back to older traditions and patterns of life which have been threatened or even swamped by the modern world. In the inter-war years, for instance, a group of Southern writers and intellectuals, who came to be described as the 'Agrarians', produced a critique of the urbanising, industrialising forces threatening what they most valued about the South. This 'Southern manifesto' appeared in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1939) which warned of the threat to individualist and humanist values in a world dominated by the developing power of an economic and political order which linked centralised government to a productive system based on the machine and the cash nexus. More recently, however, advocates of

regionalism have asserted its usefulness as an assertion of difference against the claims of the centralised state dominated by monopolistic economic and cultural institutions. Sometimes these two trends have come together to produce regionalist arguments which are difficult to classify neatly on a conventional left-right spectrum.

Faced with such difficulties in arriving at any firm physiographic, cultural or social definitions of the South and its relationship to the rest of the nation, it may be more helpful to try to approach the problem of Southern identity through the range of attempts to perceive it. The South, from this perspective, exists because people have seen it as existing, and their efforts to articulate what they have seen, or imagined, carry significance in themselves. Southerners, as with inhabitants of other cultures, have developed, within a changing historical context, ways of seeing the world that link with their everyday experience. As Richard Gray has argued 'the South is primarily a concept, a matter of knowing even more than being, and, as such, part of the language of our currency and perception' (Gray 1986:xi-xii). Southerners have been 'busy reimagining and remaking their place in the act of seeing and describing it' (*ibid.*). The 'stories' created constitute the South and can be examined for 'the often ambiguous ways in which Southerners have interpreted and responded to national developments' (Ownby 1993:3). This approach puts an emphasis on culture as a process in which people are actively engaged and which they make for themselves even though this frequently involves disagreement and contest since people enjoy unequal access to influential cultural institutions and organisations. Reed attempts to develop a sociology of regional groups, pointing out how difficult it is to define region in a way which will help to explain regional group behaviour. He suggests starting from the other end by exploring who belongs to regional groups, and then mapping their habitat. For Reed, 'it is less that Southerners are people who come from the South... than that the South is where Southerners come from' (1982:120). Such an approach puts the emphasis on how group identification is established and how people perceive their identity.

Against this backdrop we want to use examples of how stories have been told about the South and to explore some of the ways cultural evidence can shed light both on what it has meant to be Southern at different stages in Southern history and how that difference has been articulated by a range of insiders and outsiders. All the while, it is worth noting David Potter's warning about the difficulties facing historians of the South in trying to come to terms with a region 'whose boundaries are indeterminate, whose degree of separateness has fluctuated over time [and] whose distinctiveness may be in some sense fictitious' (Potter 1968: 182).

### **DOCUMENTARY REPORTAGE**

One attempt to define Southern identity has been to 'document' it in some way and to uncover through observation and investigation a more accurate picture of

the region's life. This goes back to Northern and European travellers to the slave South in the years before the Civil War, and has remained a prolific source of material about the region in the twentieth century. The urge to 'document' and how we should interpret works of documentary remain complex. As Paula Rabinowitz has argued, 'documentaries construct not only a vision of truth and identity but an appropriate way of seeing that vision' and so in examining documentary we must interrogate 'what it says, to whom, about whom, and for whom— and *how* it says it' (Rabinowitz 1994:7).

In looking at the various forms of documentary which follow it is helpful to bear these considerations in mind. Who has sponsored these specific works? For which kinds of audience are they intended? What kinds of assumptions and expectations would different kinds of audiences have brought to the consumption of these images? How do these assumptions and expectations differ from our own? What kinds of narrative and other formal devices do these works use to gain their effect? These are all awkward questions, but they help to remind us that documentary is a *constructed* form, whose ambiguous meanings need to be as carefully explored as more transparently invented or imagined work. This is crucial when using this material for a history of the South or any other region because documentary work may appear to give us an objective view about different aspects of life in the South, but ultimately they are partial accounts, ideological texts produced according to certain conventions and rules to communicate what they see as the 'truth' about the period.

Some of the most powerful images of the South in the twentieth century are provided in the work of photographers in the 1930s who documented the region in a manner which has exercised a considerable hold on how the decade has been remembered. Much of this work was supported by the federal government, through the activities of a photographic section attached first to the Resettlement Administration and then the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Some FSA work celebrated the 'successes' of agency programmes, but the pictures which had the greatest impact were those which documented the problems associated with rural poverty. FSA photographs were often used in the news media to illustrate the work of the New Deal in rural America, and, more particularly, the South. Photography's apparent transparency represented a South with 'the dignity of fact' (Orvell 1989:229), which Dorothea Lange summed up by the quotation from Francis Bacon displayed on her darkroom door: 'The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution or imposture, without error or confusion, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention' (ibid.).

However, in examples of FSA work this emphasis on 'fact' and 'things as they are, without substitution or imposture' is problematic since photographic images 'manipulate the subject in front of the camera' (ibid.: 85). Rather than seeing the photograph as an accurate record of the real world, unchanged by artifice or invention, one must ask 'What was a "truthful" picture of reality? Was truth to be found in literal exactitude or in artistic generalisation?' Did it matter if a



picture was true or if it was convincing? (ibid.: 8). Thus, a FSA photograph by Arthur Rothstein, *Oklahoma 1936*, depicts a father and his son caught in a dust storm which the photographer himself admitted was a 'directed' picture arranged for maximum effect. 'Provided the results are a faithful reproduction of what the photographer believes he saw/ Rothstein later argued, 'whatever takes place in the making of a picture is justified' (ibid.: 230). Walker Evans, whom we shall be discussing more closely later, felt that in work like this Rothstein had violated the tenets of true documentary: 'that's where the word "documentary" holds,' he argued, 'you don't touch a *thing*. You manipulate, if you like, when you frame a picture—one foot one way or one foot another. But you're not putting anything in.' Rothstein, however, was unrepentant. For him, a 'factual and true' picture could be gained by exercising an explicit degree of directorial control over his subject. Evans, in contrast, argued that his ideal was to create a pure record; documentary should be 'stark record'. Alteration or manipulation was out of the question, since it would result in propaganda (all in Orvell 1989:230–1).

Evans put some of these ideas into practice through his and James Agee's documentary book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, first published in 1941, which combined essays and photographs to record the daily lives of average or representative white Southern tenant farmers. Agee had no formal connections with Southern culture, or with the beliefs and values of established writers in the region, but was a particular advocate of the possibilities of popular culture, especially film and photography and linked them to a hostility to the kind of social and cultural conservatism he saw in the work of the Southern Agrarians. Along with his collaborator Walker Evans, Agee approached Southern identity and how it might be documented, as a radicalised Southerner who had left home and returned to look again at what he had left behind, but more particularly because he raised so explicitly and emphatically the problems associated with the very process of looking. What authority do we have to record and interpret the lives of others, particularly the poor? For what audiences are our interpretations intended? How can the experiences of our subjects be communicated in a manner that does not demean or marginalise them? In this respect, one critic has suggested that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is not so much a book about share-cropping, but a book about the writing of a book about share-cropping. In so doing, he raised questions about the contradictions the South faced in the late 1930s, between preserving a past associated with suffering and poverty and at the same time containing immense reserves of resilience and cultural depth, and opting for a future which provided material improvement, but at the expense of communal values.

The opening passages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are concerned with Agee's relentless self-questioning about both the morality of his undertaking, and the technical frailty of the resources at his disposal.

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying... to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged

group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of 'honest journalism' (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbias.

(Agee 1965:7)

Agee doubts that language can accurately represent the Southern people and yet he persists in an attempt to capture their spirit. Agee rejects conventional forms of documentary and their concern with 'facts' and objectivity, using different formal devices to overcome concerns about the limitations of the written word. These include extremely detailed accounts of specific topics like work and housing, autobiographical confessions and poetry. Equally important are the 60 uncaptioned, unintegrated photographs by Walker Evans which precede the written text, for they stand in juxtaposition to it, and in so doing reinforce Agee's concerns with the means of representation. Agee argued that the camera's 'next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness' could overcome the problems he found with words because the camera's ice-cold eye was 'incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth' (*ibid.*).

In Evans's photographs his subjects are aware of their part in the making of the photograph and 'are conscious of the camera, of its manipulator, and of the unknowable audience behind it. They are not taken off guard; on the contrary they have been given time to arrange and compose themselves for the picture' (Stott 1973:268). Evans tried to give those whom he photographed a degree of self-respect as well as being aware of the sensibilities of the viewer. What Agee and Evans in their different ways consider, therefore, is what some historians have also identified as a central issue in seeking to understand the lives of ordinary Southerners, particularly the poor, in the 1930s. Progress here was not always an unmixed blessing. It brought with it the benefits of modernisation such as electrification, improved roads, and scientific farming, bringing the South closer to the American mainstream, but it also damaged a way of life, patterns of living, a culture. Agee and Evans, in constantly calling our attention to the beauty of the share-croppers' poverty, in asserting the dignity with which they lived their lives, also remind us 'That the world can be improved and yet must be celebrated as it is are contradictions. The beginning of maturity may be the recognition that both are true' (Stott 1973:289).

### WRITING THE SOUTH

A powerful theme in Southern culture has been the relationship between writers and the region, and this link between writing and place has raised important interpretative issues. Is Southern literature to be valued for the accuracy and depth with which it depicts the geography of the South or, rather, should it be

judged as work of the imagination, the authority of which is only diminished by seeking to chain it too closely to some concept of a 'real' world? This tension might be illustrated with reference to the work of a host of Southern writers, but it is most classically found in the work and life of William Faulkner. Faulkner lived most of his life in the small Mississippi town of Oxford, where he created the imagined region he called Yoknapatawpha. This was an invented landscape in which he could confront Southern history and society. But in seeking to come to terms with the burdens of the Southern past, Faulkner treated history not just as a collection of factual events, but as an opportunity for reconstructing the past through the power and scope of his imagination. Southern writers are often concerned with specific themes: family, race, religion, a sense of place and the imperfectibility of man and for Faulkner, and others like Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate and William Styron, these themes are worked out within the context of Southern history. In contrast, Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985) marks a shift from these traditional concerns, presenting a protagonist, Sam Hughes, who inhabits a world where time is measured by the national popular culture which colours every part of her existence. Television schedules and music concerts provide markers for particular stages in her life, and this apparent lack of rootedness in communal qualities is reinforced by Sam's restless mobility. In place of Faulkner's contained Yoknapatawpha, we are provided with a South dominated by the road, and by Sam's final trip with her grandmother and her uncle Emmett from Kentucky to the Vietnam memorial in Washington, DC, where she hopes to trace her father's name in the wall. It is not true that Sam is unconcerned with history, but her version of the past comes at the intersection between her personal efforts to make sense of her father's life and the war in Vietnam in which he died, rather than falling under the influence of the older complexities of Southern history. Her past is national rather than regional or local, and her engagement with it is touched by the same popular culture which affects other parts of the country, rather than by any specific Southern values. It is also a short-term past which only goes back to the early 1960s when the Beatles first came to America, and makes little attempt to connect the tragedy of Vietnam to deeper themes in the American or the Southern historical experience. C. Vann Woodward once commented that the South, at least up until the Vietnam War, had been un-American in having undergone an experience which no other part of the country had shared, the lesson of defeat and submission after war. He cherished the hope that this might provide a counter-balance to an unquestioned national faith in political progress and 'the conviction that American ideals, values and principles inevitably prevail in the end' (Woodward 1968:188-9). He was later forced to qualify his position as Southern politicians like President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk played an instrumental role in leading America into Vietnam, but he remained convinced that Americans still had something to learn from the experience of the South with history (ibid.: 233). The main characters in *In Country*, however, are notable for their distrust of history: 'You can't learn from the past,' declares Sam's uncle Emmett. 'The

main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history is' (Mason 1985:226). Mason's South of shopping malls, fast-food restaurants, television series and pop songs, with its concomitant distrust of history and tradition, appears to mark something of a break with the conventions of Southern culture. On the other hand, it may also suggest that *In Country* is different, not so much about different kinds of Southerners from those who wrote and appeared in earlier Southern fiction. Mason is not writing about the privileged, as older writers had, but about 'the common people' (Hobson 1994: 23). One version of the South may be being discarded here, but another may be appearing in its place.

### SOUTHERN MUSIC

In a visit to Memphis in 1968, the journalist Stanley Booth recorded meeting Dan Penn, an influential producer and song-writer, at the highly successful American Studios. He spoke of the South as a place where, 'People...don't let nobody tell them what to do,' 'But how does it happen that they know what to do?', Booth asked, and Penn 'squinted at me across the desk, "I ain't any explanation for it," he said' (Booth 1993:78). Penn's laconic style catches something of the unpredictable and often innovative way in which Southern music has developed. Popular music has been one of the most significant cultural forms in the lives of many Southerners, and has been one of the most important contributions the South has made to a wider American culture. Southern white and black music, as an expression of the values and beliefs of the common people of the South, has had a particularly important role in the way that ordinary Southerners have thought and felt about the most important themes in their lives such as family, land, work, sacred and profane love.

Such music raises issues about the relationship between popular culture and more traditional notions of Southern culture, linked to the plantation myth and the genteel traditions of the Old South, and emphasises the importance of the relationship between culture and historical change. The spread of Southern music, both across the region, and over the rest of nation, has been closely connected with the modernisation of the South and arguments as to whether that process has diluted distinctively Southern qualities. Because it is so closely identified with the lives of ordinary Southerners, it also inevitably raises the issue of race, and how that has affected the kinds of musical expression which have emerged from the region. Country music has been a particularly important form, and can be examined in a number of ways. One approach is to look at it in the context of the modernisation of Southern culture. As Bill Malone has suggested, 'country entertainers were torn between tradition and modernity' because their music 'had its origins in the folk culture of the South—a diverse culture that drew upon the interrelating resources of Europe and Africa', but it was developed and spread, first throughout the South and then the rest of the nation, by the communications revolution of the inter-war years, symbolised by

the growth of radio and the record industry (Malone 1987:3). This, of course, was precisely the period in which the rural small-town South was being transformed by the experience of agricultural modernisation. Country music, on the one hand, celebrated many of those virtues which 'progress' seemed to be undermining: a sense of place, community, family, church, motherhood whilst, on the other hand, it became increasingly popular directly as a result of modernising forces and technological innovation.

This tension between old and new is apparent in the careers of some of the key performers in early country music. The Carter Family, for instance, came from the Clinch mountains of Virginia and their music generally projected a consistent mood, that of the family home, where their 'sound remained that of an intimate singing for a small circle of friends where the values of home and family, decency and modesty, were both assumed and shared as living Christian rural fellowship' (ibid.: 65–8). However, one of the important factors in the popularisation of the Carter Family's traditional music was Mexican border radio. Located just across the Rio Grande, and thus outside federal frequency regulations, these stations broadcast to much of the continental United States, as far as the Canadian border. Border radio programming was extremely varied, but it used country music (or hillbilly music as it was still generally called) interspersed with extensive advertising and religious evangelism.

Another significant figure in the development of country music was Jimmy Rodgers, 'The Singing Brakeman', who celebrated a different image of the South from the settled community of the Carters: the attraction of the open road, of individuals who had left home because of opportunity, homelessness, eviction and crime. He became a decisive influence in 'country music's evolution as a star-oriented phenomenon, with traits increasingly national rather than local in scope' (ibid.: 77), even though he himself never performed in the North, spending his short career crisscrossing the South on vaudeville tours and travelling tent shows. More than was the case with the Carter Family, his commercial success on radio and record helped to bring a romantic stereotype of a certain set of Southern attitudes to a regional, national and international audience. Rodgers's songs about leaving were closely connected to changes affecting the South in the 1920s and 1930s as the Depression, drought, agricultural modernisation and government policies forced Southerners to go on the move. As Pete Daniel has noted 'the farther they removed themselves from the country, the more alluring country music became' (Daniel 1987:102).

During the Second World War country music became increasingly national in its appeal as Southerners continued to migrate in ever-increasing numbers to the West and North, and as the appeal of radio spread still further. This boom lasted into the mid-1950s through the careers of such figures as Hank Williams, and the introduction of country music to television, but in the mid-1950s it was severely challenged by an alternative form of Southern music, rock and roll. Elvis Presley was a Southerner, but his early music, while drawing on traditional white (and black) sources, rapidly changed into something new and distinctive.

Country music responded in two main ways, either by adapting some of the style and instrumentation of 'pop' music, or by periodically reasserting its traditional roots. Since the late 1950s both of these trends have been in existence, sometimes working together, sometimes in opposition to each other.

Another important theme in Southern popular music has been the interplay between black and white cultures; while there have been, and are, predominantly black idioms, like the blues, or predominantly white idioms, like country music, both are impossible to understand without an appreciation of the biracial world from which they emerged. The nature of this 'sharing', however, is a complex question which involves in particular a central issue in Southern popular culture, the relationship between black and white races and their cultural expressions. As Edward Ayers has emphasised, 'the presence of black Southerners shaped the private actions and public culture of the white South' (Ayers 1992:119). Charles Joyner has argued that 'the central theme of Southern history has been racial integration' and that 'cultural styles have always refused to abide by any colour line, however rigidly it may have been drawn' (Joyner 1993:3-5). The mixing of cultural traditions has been more important than any other single factor for the extraordinary richness of Southern culture. Even though the South for much of its history has followed a policy of implicit segregation, in terms of popular culture it is evident that both races have been heavily influenced by each other. A number of important white musicians both learned from and cooperated with black musicians and vice versa, to create a 'common legacy of musical performance' (Malone 1993:151). Elvis Presley drew on the black rhythm and blues of his home town in Memphis, as did Carl Perkins, whose 'Blue Suede Shoes' became the first record to reach the top of the pop, country and rhythm and blues charts. Stanley Booth claims this was more important than the Emancipation Proclamation which was an edict handed down from above, whereas the success of 'Blue Suede Shoes' among African Americans represented an actual grass-roots acknowledgement of a common heritage, a mutual overcoming of poverty and a kind of redemption (Booth 1993:14). The Stax label was another cooperative venture that Rodgers Redding, the brother of the leading soul singer Otis Redding, praised in a similar manner: 'What made it work, the key to it all was black and white working together as a team' (Guralnick 1986:405).

### FILM AND THE SOUTH

Southern identity has also been constructed through film. From its earliest days Hollywood has frequently used the South as subject matter, and in so doing helped to inform the images that Southerners held of their own region as well as the impressions of non-Southerners, whether in the rest of the country or outside America altogether. Hollywood has often tended to present a range of stereotypical versions of the South, but their resonance and effectiveness have varied according to the era in which they were produced, and the concerns and

values of the audiences who consumed them. One of the most influential of these versions is what a number of critics have labelled the 'Southern', as a counterpart to the more widely recognised genre of the 'Western'. For Leslie Fiedler, writing in 1968, the Southern actively sought 'melodrama, a series of bloody events, sexual by implication at least, played out in the blood-heat of a "long hot summer" against a background of miasmal swamps, live oak, Spanish moss, and the decaying plantation house' (Fiedler 1972:15–16). The Southern has tended to come in two forms, one relatively nostalgic and benign, the other darker and brooding and the two themes have of ten been combined in the same film. Traditional versions of the South have been represented in two of the most influential blockbusters in Hollywood history, *Birth of a Nation* (D.W.Griffith, 1915) and *Gone With The Wind* (David Selznick, 1939). *Birth of a Nation* is a difficult film to deal with at the end of the twentieth century, because its version of Southern history so explicitly endorses white supremacy, and either the child-like or bestial nature of African Americans. Griffith presents a history of the South in which the 'lost cause' of the Confederacy represents all that was best about Southern values and, by implication, those of the rest of the nation. National unity between North and South could only be restored if the virtues of the Southern cause were fully understood and appreciated by 'outsiders'. As one of Griffith's collaborators declared, it was hoped that 'every man who comes out of one of our theaters is a Southern partisan for life' (Kirby 1976:4).

Scott Simmon has argued that one way to read *Birth of a Nation* is as part of the sustained Southern argument against Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ever since the novel's original publication in 1852 Southern writers have inveighed against what they saw as Stowe's misrepresentation of the slave South, and the two novels by Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman*, were in part an angry riposte to a popular staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1901. Griffith, Simmon argues, used Dixon's material to turn Stowe on her head. 'Whereas Stowe's suffering mothers and violated women served to damn the institution of slavery, the *Birth's* suffering mothers and violated women damned Reconstruction ideals of equality' (Simmon 1993:125–6). Family and home were revealingly exploited by Griffith as symbols of morality, and women in particular presented as the epitome of purity, whose reputation and safety it was the duty of men to protect. In one of the key scenes of the film, the daughter of the South Carolinian Cameron family throws herself off a cliff to escape the pursuit of Gus, a renegade black soldier. Death for her is far sweeter than dishonour. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan, inspired by her brother, the Little Colonel, would protect Southern womanhood from such threats, and in so doing, regain white supremacy and restore order and harmony in society.

Twenty-four years later, *Gone With The Wind* follows Griffiths in representing the plantation South as a kind of Eden, dominated by grace, honour and community but, fitting the Depression years in which it was produced, shows how that idyll was to be destroyed by social collapse and economic disaster. The solution this time is not, however, simply to redeem the South by restoring white rule, though

there are affinities between the versions of Reconstruction presented in *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With The Wind*, but instead to reassert traditional American beliefs in the virtues of individual effort. Scarlett in the end refuses to stay with Rhett Butler in the privileged and backward-looking seclusion of Charleston and prefers to return to Tara in the hope of restoring both her own and her region's fortunes.

But to leave the impression that this kind of treatment of the South on film is the only or even the most dominant one would be misleading. Other influential themes have emerged, particularly since the 1940s. One is the treatment of racial issues, often from a critical or liberal perspective. One of the path-breakers here was *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), based on William Faulkner's novel, but it has been followed by such films as *The Intruder* (1962), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1963) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). Another more recent trend has been the emergence of films whose protagonists have come from the Southern working-class, often as a conscious alternative to the plantation tradition. Sometimes labelled 'hickflicks', these have taken various forms. One popular plot presents restless white male heroes confronting and sometimes overcoming representatives of state authority, often in the form of the police. Characteristically such narratives have often combined comedy and violence as in the Burt Reynolds *Smokey and the Bandit* cycle, but they have also on occasion had a more serious purpose as in a film like *Cool Hand Luke* where Paul Newman experiences the travails of a Southern chain-gang for a crime which only involved getting drunk and destroying a parking meter. An alternative version of the poor white South, which has allowed more space for women as representatives of what was most important in the culture of the 'common people', and has often presented men as part of the problem, may be found in the recent series of films dealing with Southern music, and particularly country and western. Films like *A Coalminer's Daughter* (1980) and *Sweet Dreams* (1985) portray the lives of singers Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline and provide a counter to the plantation myth in which such women appear only on the periphery of the action, and may be seen as part of the same process as the democratisation of Southern literature in the hands of writers like Bobbie Ann Mason. Changing attitudes towards the representation of women in the American South is presented in a still more radical form in *Thelma and Louise* (1991). The South here is not represented by a specific, idealised place like Tara, but instead by many of the same developments that Mason writes about in *In Country*: the open road, cheap motels, popular music. The main protagonists do not look to men for their protection, but instead take their own revenge on an uncaring husband by deserting him, and on would-be rapists by exacting their own, violent, form of revenge. And yet by inverting many of the conventions of the Southern way of life, the film still ties in to many of the debates about Southernness, which gives its often turbulent and violent atmosphere an added resonance.



## CONCLUSION

As the editors of the massive *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* argue, 'The American South has long generated powerful images and complex emotions' (Wilson and Ferris 1989:viii). In its scale and range the *Encyclopedia* is itself evidence that, despite the nationalising of American culture, the debate over Southern difference is likely to continue for some time yet. In testifying to the vitality of Southern culture in the present as well as in the past, to the host of interpretations of its relationship to the rest of the United States, and to the way in which its cultural products have spread far beyond American borders, it ensures its significance as a distinctive region within American culture will long deserve further examination. It may be that modernisation has rendered aspects of the Southern world less distinctive and has destroyed that older notion of a 'separate South', set apart from the rest of the country, but somehow Southerners, and Southern identity still persist.

## NOTES

- 1 *The Wild West* (1995), produced by Ric Burns and Lisa Ades, WGBH Educational Foundation and Steeplechase Films Inc.
- 2 The approach taken here examines the 'new history' as it relates to the land and women, but it would be possible to consider other re-examinations of Hispanic peoples or Asian Americans in the West.
- 3 New Western History is best represented in the works of Limerick, Milner, Worster and White as listed in the bibliography.
- 4 The idea of the 'corral' is echoed in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1974:296) when he describes Disneyland's 'mazes of pens' controlling the crowds.
- 5 The cinema has always been a perpetuator of the myths of the West, but has also, to a degree, been involved in revisionism too. In recent years, a film like *Unforgiven* (1992) can be seen as challenging some of the generic styles of the Western, especially in its de-mystifying of the gunfighter.
- 6 John Ford's *The Searchers* portrays an archetypal gunfighter in Ethan Edwards who is excluded from the orderly domestic world at the end of the film. He is too chaotic, too violent to have a place in the 'civilised' West.
- 7 Ana Castillo's novel *So Far From God* (1994a) is concerned, in part, with both the land and the stories told by her community.
- 8 See Richard Misrach (1990) *Bravo 20*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

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### FOLLOW-UP WORK

- 1 What kinds of ‘local’ knowledges emerge in ‘regional’ texts, and how do they function to expand ideas about the nature of Americanness?
- 2 How has the South or the West been represented by non-American writers and film-makers? What versions, for instance, emerge in such films about the regions as *Mississippi Burning* or *The Night of the Hunter* (South) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (West)?

#### *Assignments and areas for study*

- 3 (a) Demonstrate the revisionist positions of any text (verbal or visual) and explain how they seek to adjust preconceived views of the West or South in the process.
- (b) Recent films, literature and history have become concerned with multicultural contributions and histories of the West. Choose a group and examine their experience and representation in Western history. You might consider Chinese Americans or Hispanic Americans in this study.
- (c) What dividends might be gained from a study of contemporary Southern black writers, or black writers about the South, particularly in terms of the debate discussed above about the continuing significance of history for Southern authors?
- (d) What kind of versions of the South are represented in rock music in the period since the 1960s? Have Southern rock musicians possessed a distinctive self-consciousness that marks them out from other American performers?

# Chapter 6

## The American city

### 'The old knot of contrariety'

#### CAN WE READ THE CITY?

A popular contemporary perception of America is as a vast city recreated from half-remembered fragments of films, television dramas, popular music, and a thousand advertising images. Quite simply, American cities *appear* to be all around us. This is only one aspect of how we imagine America, but it is, for many of us, the most attractive, engaging and threatening aspect of the country. However, despite the constant presence of American cities in our lives, regardless of where we live, they remain mysterious and unknowable, like a familiar text that we seem to possess but whose final meaning evades us as we attempt to read it.

This idea may sound rather odd. After all, how can a city be a text? But a city is a gathering of meanings in which people invest their interpretations and seek to create their own (hi)story, and therefore resembles a text. A city is constructed like a text, it is 'an inscription of man in space' (Barthes 1988:193),<sup>1</sup> unfolding, challenging, confusing, thrilling and threatening all at the same time. When Joyce Carol Oates asked in 1981, 'If the City is a text, how shall we read it?' (Jaye and Watts 1981:11), she expressed this fascination with the need to comprehend the very product of our own creation which had somehow become mysterious. It is these different layers of meaning within the city that are hard to fathom, and vary depending on where you read them from: high and low, skyscraper or street level, uptown or the ghetto, inside or out, feminine or masculine, rich or poor, and so on. These differing points of view explain the endless possibility of the city for artists and the fascination for historians and sociologists studying its meanings.

This chapter will reflect upon various meanings of the city, employing an alternative to a strictly historical or sociological methodology.<sup>2</sup> Such approaches are, of course, an important part of how we understand problems of contemporary city life, but it is also revealing and provocative to explore the multi-faceted nature of the city from different perspectives. James Donald, for instance, has written, 'By calling this diversity "the city", we ascribe to it a

coherence or integrity. *The city*, is above all, a representation...*an imagined environment*' (Bocock and Thompson 1992:422).

What must concern us then, argues Donald, is how we read the representations of the city and the discourses that express them to us. The idea of discourse is used here to suggest the manner through which the city is represented to us in language and related frames of reference and definition. Discourses (see the Introduction) are 'the conceptual frameworks which allow some modes of thought and deny others...a body of unwritten rules which *attempt to regulate* what can be written, thought, and acted upon in a particular field' (Storey 1993: 92—our emphases). These discourses are not *about* the city, but they *constitute* it for us as 'readers'/viewers. That is, they do not simply describe, but seek to form our concepts about what the city is and how it relates to life in a wider sense. Discourses 'organize statements, define texts, promote meanings and position subjects' (Peim 1993:38), and any study of urban life has to confront these different formations as they compete for our attention. To what extent the individual can choose between these formations is a matter of intense debate which, indeed, emerges as an issue in many urban texts themselves, such as *Sister Carrie*, as we shall see later. This method derives from post-structuralism,<sup>3</sup> which we have discussed elsewhere, and although we do not have the space to explore its many diverse meanings, certain concepts are particularly relevant here. What it offers is one approach and a new way of seeing things which may have been taken for granted before or, indeed, overlooked altogether.

If structuralism looked for the underlying structure upon which rested meaning, then post-structuralism proposes an alternative, in which 'meaning is always in process' (Storey 1993:85) and a text is a 'multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (Barthes 1977:146). This description conveys an image of city-as-text, and like the perceiver of the city, the reader is the only person that can 'bring a temporary unity to a text' (Storey 1993:85), but that in itself does not fix permanently or define the meaning of the city. It represents it for that moment in the process of signification, with the understanding that meaning is deferred because people will bring various perspectives to that moment and so interpret it differently. The city, seen in this way, is a chain of meanings in competition with one another, with certain interpretations emerging at specific points in time with more authority and subsequent power than others.

Adopting this approach allows us to interrogate certain established or dominant readings of the city in order to question them and seek alternative ways of seeing. If there can be no guaranteed or fixed single meaning of the city, it does not just signal the fact that 'anything goes' or that everything is relative, but that certain dominant or prevailing discourses and fixed meanings have emerged in the city through time and that the contexts within which these readings have arisen need to be reexamined in the light of new theoretical understandings.



### COMPETING VERSIONS OF THE CITY

The problem of reading the city can be traced back to the foundation of America. John Winthrop, the first Governor of Massachusetts, gave a sermon on the *Arbella* as it crossed the Atlantic to America in 1630, and spoke of his vision of a new community like 'a City upon a Hill', with 'the eyes of all people...upon us'. The ideal of the heavenly city employed here says much about the utopian dreams so often associated with city planning in the future, but it also emphasises the necessity of establishing the city as orderly and godly because the 'eyes' of the world were looking on. He goes on to say 'we shall be *made a story* and a by-word through the world' thereby asserting an early example of the ways in which the city image has been constructed through narrative. The city-story would be watched (and *read*) by the world, noting the good or the bad within it, just as Winthrop, as a Puritan, linked echoes of Sodom and Gomorrah to the possible darker future of the American city, whilst envisioning in it the strongest beliefs and loftiest aspirations of his community. In part this fits with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), in which he describes the road to salvation as passing through Vanity Fair, with its corruptions and disorder, to the Celestial City with its streets paved with gold.

The dark view of cities can be seen in Thomas Jefferson's comment that cities were 'pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of men' and that 'those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God... [and] the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do the strength of the human body' (Bender 1975: 21). The Jeffersonian warning about the dangers of unrestrained urbanism stressed two broad points: that cities threatened personal morality by encouraging vice, sin and indulgence and that they might ultimately threaten the Republic itself. These arguments reached a climax in the work of the Reverend Josiah Strong whose *Our Country* (1885) argued that America was to be God's instrument to redeem the world, but the city stood in the way of that mission since it was a 'storm center' full of 'menace'. The following extract suggests his tone:

The city is the nerve center of our civilization. It is also the storm center ... It is the city where wealth is massed; and here are the tangible evidences of it piled many stories high. Here the sway of Mammon is widest, and his worship the most constant and eager. Here are luxuries gathered—everything that dazzles the eye, or tempts the appetite; here is the most extravagant expenditure. Here also, is the congestion of wealth the severest...here in sharp contrast, are the ennui of surfeit and the desperation of starvation... Here is heaped the social dynamite; her roughs, gamblers, thieves, robbers, lawless and desperate men... ready...to raise riots for the purpose of destruction and plunder; here gather foreigners and wage-workers...especially susceptible to socialist

arguments... Thus is our civilization multiplying and focalizing the elements of anarchy and destruction.

(Glaab 1963:330–6)

This frames the city as a dark and fearful place in the Jeffersonian tradition, with the over-riding threats the new urban masses made to social order. At the same time, however, that Strong interpreted cities in these terms, the poet Walt Whitman defined them in more positive ways, as organic bodies, a ‘simple, compact, well-join’d scheme’ intimately connecting the individual to the whole, and calling for them to.

Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample  
and sufficient rivers,

Expand, being than which none else is more spiritual,

Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

(Whitman, ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ 1971:140)

This essentially positive discourse of the city as vital and dynamic is reflected in William James’s appropriation of Strong’s ‘storm center’ image recasting the city as ‘the center of the cyclone’ producing the ‘pulse of the machine,’ which he found ‘magnificent’ along with

the heaven-scaling audacity of it all, and the lightness withal, as if there were nothing that was not easy, and the great pulses and bounds of progress, so many in directions all simultaneous that the coordination is indefinitely future [and] give a kind of drumming background of life that I have never felt before.

(James 1920:67)

His metaphors, like Whitman’s, contributed to an alternative discourse of the city, stressing its dynamic, forward-looking qualities and transformative potential. This kind of discursive conflict is typical of the ways American cities have been read, and is indicative of the city as meaning in process rather than as fixed and static.

This is evident in the ways cities have continued to be represented in the twentieth century, for example, in the work of Woody Allen, and particularly the film *Manhattan* (1979) where the narrator is trying to write the definitive version of the city he loves, but finds the task impossible, reverting instead to a series of complex re-writings which range wildly from

He romanticized it out of all proportion, and to him no matter what the season was, this was still a town that existed in black and white and pulsed to the great tunes of George Gershwin.

to

He adored New York City, to him it was a metaphor for the decay of contemporary culture...how hard it was to exist in a society desensitized by drugs, loud music, television.

to

He was as tough and romantic as the city he loved, behind his blackrimmed glasses was the coiled sexual power of a jungle cat... New York was his town and it always would be.

At the same time as the voice-over offers us the sense of the city as indefinable, the visual images, in glowing black and white, spread New York's familiar landmarks before us at a distance and with the camera high up in the clouds. This romantic perspective suggests the mystery of the city, without having to confront at 'street level' its awkward and unromantic realities. Because we, as an audience, are at a distance, both physically and formally (Allen uses both black and white photography and a stirring George Gershwin soundtrack), the city shines out as a place of awe and excitement, vitality and wonder. There is little threat in this myth of Manhattan as a gorgeous moment, with all its contradictions reduced into a singular and potent vision. Despite the narrator's comment about it being the 'metaphor for the decay of modern society', the tone and the final swelling music suggest otherwise.

### **THEORETICAL CITY: THE DESIRE FOR CONTROL AND ORDER**

Thus, from whichever era of American life, the city has always been a focus for human desires and dreams, a place of possibility, success and threat. This is echoed in the way many people, like Whitman, think of the city as alive; writing, for example, about its 'heart' and its 'soul', or like Henry James, in his book *The American Scene* (1907), about 'its sharp free accent...[and] its loose limbs' (Marqusee 1988:160). Viewed as human and organic, the city takes on a moral condition too so that its culture is seen to reflect the values, attitudes and mores of the people who breathe within it. Frederick Howe, a believer in the possibilities of the city, wrote in 1905 of society as 'an organism like the human body, of which the city is the head, heart, and center of the nervous system' (Howe 1905:10). Above all, the American city is a text created, a story written by people who sought to impose their vision of order, their designs upon the world, and to some extent to control the wilderness into a contained and disciplined environment. But at the very same time there was a contrary discourse, which sees control as impossible and where social conflict, crime and corruption flourish. Just as the Puritan Winthrop can be seen as constructing a single discourse for his people, of the city as a testament to their grace, there emerged a counter-discourse which defined the city as the place of recklessness

and opportunity, a place of desire, offering the freedom from older, more traditional restraints.

Despite the efforts of people to 'plan' the city, there is a resistance to this form of control and containment, as if the dynamism unleashed in its creation is too immense to manipulate and direct into safe, orderly patterns. Rem Koolhaas, in his book *Delirious New York* (1978), claimed 'the Grid's [pattern of city streets] two-dimensional discipline creates undreamt of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy' (Berman 1983:287). It is a text we cannot read without difficulties, since it always reaches beyond itself, overflows, contradicts and questions what it is and what it can be. This is the 'archetypal ambivalence of the city' with its 'clashing contradictions', and 'perhaps the central fascination of the city, both real and fictional, is that it embodies man's contradictory feelings—pride, love, anxiety and hatred—towards the civilization he has created and the culture to which he belongs' (Pike 1981:26). The city is not an easy text to read, but one riddled with contradictions and ambiguities, which account for its mysterious fascinations and its 'new inexplicableness...and new unintelligibility' (Trachtenberg 1982:103).

Trachtenberg's city is *the* modern place where the possibilities of technology, planning, industrialisation and commerce come together in a single environment which thrust together people, ideas and opportunities in a particular mix of 'productive kinds of strangeness and distance' (Walder 1990:166). The great works of modernist art and literature erupted from this creative mix, reflecting the city itself whose very structures were symbolic expressions of this impulse. As Marshall Berman has written:

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction...in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world—and, at the same time, threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.

(Berman 1983:14–15)

This sense of the city environment as an 'old knot of contrariety', to borrow a phrase from Walt Whitman, echoes the competing discourses we discussed earlier, and is amplified in a helpful essay by the social theorist, Michel de Certeau. For him, New York City seen from a skyscraper is a text 'in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal opposites of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space' (de Certeau 1988:91). It is an ever-changing space/text that 'invents itself from hour to hour' where 'the spectator can read into it a universe that is constantly exploding' and indulge in the 'gigantic rhetoric of excess' that constitutes the urban landscape of America (ibid.). This sense of the whole city spread out like a multi-dimensional text that can be read, 'grasped', even understood, is questioned as it reduces and 'makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its...mobility'

(ibid.: 92) because one is surveying a ‘picture’, removed and organised by distance so that all one sees are the grids and the blocks, with all the order and control of the city-planners’ blueprints. It is the ‘theoretical’ city because the life of the city, its ‘practices’, go on below in the hubbub and chaos of the streets and cannot be seen from the remove of the high vantages point. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator’ (ibid.: 93).

Thus the city’s contradictions abound, as Poe charted in ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (see pp. 169–70) or Paul Auster in *The New York Trilogy* (1987), and are hard to define or fix, despite the constant efforts of planners and designers to create something like the City Beautiful<sup>4</sup> as a model of order and social control. The design of the city has always been at odds with the way people live within it, as if there is a natural resistance in city life to the desired principles of control and order that seem always to be a significant part of their creation. This theoretical argument can be examined in relation to the earlier comments about representation in Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* and its tendency to remove us from the city for specific reasons and effects.

The city planners dreamt of a ‘benign coercion’... ‘to eradicate the communal culture of working-class and immigrant streets, to erase that culture’s offensive and disturbing foreignness, and replace it with middleclass norms of hearth and tea table’. This was ‘the ordering hand of corporate organization, the values of system and hierarchy asserting itself into the lives of the streets and the bustling neighbourhoods (all Trachtenberg 1982:111). The potentially unreadable text of the groundlevel streets had to be legitimised, ordered, and contained into a stable, disciplined text and this can be seen as giving rise to what has been termed a clash between ‘civic horizontalism and corporate verticality’ (Taylor 1992:52), where the corporation accesses the tower as a symbol of its power and the rest of the city exists down below in its shadow. An example of this is the skyline of the booming Southern city, Nashville, which has developed rapidly, but still bears the traces of the past at lower levels. Plate 6 shows this hierarchical skyline with the foreground of the preserved past, as the city plans into itself a ‘historic’ simulation of Fort Nashborough, the original settlement of 1779, over-shadowed by the dilapidated ware-houses of the old riverfront gradually being reclaimed as leisure and shopping sites. Hovering over both, is the symbolic skyscraper of the Bell Corporation, epitomising the new economy of Nashville as the financial and insurance centre of the mid-South.

### **THE UNDIVULGED CITY: POE’S ‘THE MAN OF THE CROWD’**

De Certeau’s city of levels and networks, like intermingling stories, is a very exciting way of approaching urban experience and one which can be useful to bear in mind as we begin to examine more specific examples of attempts to read



*Plate 6 A Nashville skyline*

*Source:* Neil Campbell, 1994

the city. Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (1845) deliberates upon the meaning of the city and suggests that it is like crime itself whose 'essence...is undivulged' (Poe 1975:179).

The story begins with the warning that 'it does not permit itself to be read' (*ibid.*) and then conveys the condition of the city seen through the eyes of a questing narrator following 'the man of the crowd'. It is the classic story of the

city, in which the narrator, who sees himself as a man of vision, intellect and reason confronts the ‘mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed’ (ibid.: 179) in the belief that he can unravel them. As in Poe’s later Dupin stories,<sup>5</sup> the belief that the city can be understood and solved is central to this piece. Reading his newspaper in the coffeehouse, he surveys the streets outside, as if he could follow the lines and columns of the urban world in the same manner he ‘amuses’ himself with the paper’s text and in so doing, categorises the ‘divisions’ he witnesses like the sections of the newspaper. This arrogant detachment permits the city scene to become a neat ‘scale’ into which he fits all the types he sees in the crowd, enabling him to ‘frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years’ (ibid.: 183—our emphases). Poe’s narrator echoes the problem described by de Certeau, of the city characterised by those who would try to read its history in a ‘glance’, and in so doing miss the complex web of relations and practices unfolding there. The urge to define and fix the city as a single thing, like the original and eternal desire to plan and control the life of the city, is suggested here in the actions of the narrator and then rapidly countered by the eruption of ‘the man of the crowd’ who presents an insoluble dilemma. From the narrator’s logical ‘analysis of the meaning conveyed’, he is altered by the sight of the man, and ‘there arose confusedly and paradoxically within [his] mind’ a new set of ideas which cannot be so easily reduced to a formula (ibid.: 183). As he follows the man, now engaged himself with the street’s ‘waver...jostle and hum’ (ibid.: 184), rather than removed behind the glass, he faces the paradoxes and contradictions which defy his ‘scale’ of meaning and open him up to the street level city, which ‘aroused, startled, fascinated’ (ibid.) in equal measure. He is exposed to the multi-faceted urban environment, beyond his simplified and limited categories, such as ‘poverty... crime... filth...desolation’ (ibid.: 186–7), to a complex text ‘crossed and recrossed’ which ‘is a grosser book than the *Hortulus Animae*...that *es läßt sich nicht lesen*’ [it does not permit itself to be read] (ibid.: 179).

The city, embodied in the story, is unreadable and somehow always beyond final comprehension, reinforcing de Certeau’s argument that ‘Beneath the discourses that ideologise the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer’ (de Certeau 1984:95). As complex as this seems, it theorises what other texts, like *The Man of the Crowd*, *Manhattan* or *The Great Gatsby*, explore, which is the problematical nature of defining the city and trying to fix its patterns into a single, identifiable shape. Those who try to do this, planners and reformers, are merely seeking to impose on the amorphous plurality of the city a set order and discipline, like the narrator in Poe’s story believing such variety can be read and categorised into a neat ‘scale’. The lived experience of the ‘migrational city’ is in flux and process unlike the orderly interpretative grid of rational definition that some would try to place upon it. Difference, rather than sameness, is essential to this reading of the city

## THE 'PERSUASIVE LIGHT': COMMERCE AND THE CITY

The tensions inherent within this process can be felt by examining the late 1800s and the specific concerns about the social consequences of the city environment which emerge with rapid urban growth and population increases of extraordinary proportions. In a period between 1870 and 1900, when, for example, Chicago's population multiplied by five times and New York topped 3.4 million, and when 11 million immigrants arrived in the USA, journalists like Jacob Riis, with his book *How The Other Half Lives* (1890) and Stephen Crane with his *City Sketches* and *Maggie* (1893) began to question the human costs of such expansion. All these works warrant attention, but we shall examine a novel in which the energies and the consequences of city life are explored in detail and with enormous power. The realist tradition sought to read the city in close-up, with attention to the street, in the hope of exposing its practices and some of the environmental determinants shaping people's lives. Even this project, for all its merits, proved limited as a way of defining the city.

In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), the city has 'cunning wiles' which attract with the 'large forces which allure...the gleam of a thousand lights...the persuasive light' (Dreiser 1986:4), and represents the world of urban commerce as a beacon pulling into it the moths like Caroline Meeber. She is 'carried' into the glow of money and the urban dynamo in a way which links her journey with the particular view of the city's rapid expansion as a threat to some older order of things in America, connected to rural, village life and values. Writers like Stephen Crane and Upton Sinclair used realism as a technique to expose the reader to the details of city life and attempted to convince us of the forces that swept their characters into despair and death. Their work, like Dreiser's, does, however, suggest a discontent with the promise of the city and question its cultural dominance and its value systems. This attention to the dark side of the city brought into focus doubts about the rapid growth of industrial, commercial centres and the effects on those living within them. For example, Dreiser's innocent Carrie approaches the city with hope, but the narrator qualifies the reader's impressions with doubts about her destination.

To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled the approach to the city is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be the evening — that mystic period between the glare and the gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night...The street, the lamp, the lighted chamber set for dining are for me. The theatres, the halls, the parties...these are mine in the night.

(ibid.: 10)

For Dreiser, the city lures with the promise and the mystery, but below the gleam is a well of despair where wealth is disguised in the terrible labours of the poor



and exploited, and where the dream of a good life is constructed around the needs of the commercial culture of greed.

It is like a chemical reagent. One day of it, like one drop of the other, will so affect and discolor the views, the aims, the desires of the mind, that it will thereafter remain forever dyed...like opium to the untried body. A craving is set up...dreams unfilled—gnawing, luring, idle phantoms which beckon and lead.

(*ibid.*: 305)

The city is a drug whose commerce is insatiable, a craving that leads us on into an endless cycle of desire and lack. This echoes Henry Adams's famous comment of 1905 that

The outline of the city became frantic in its effort to explain something that defied meaning. Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and to have asserted its freedom... The city had the air of hysteria, and the citizens were crying in every accent of anger and alarm, that the new forces must at any cost be brought under control.

(Adams 1918:499)

These writings propose an idea of the city out of control, ruled by forces too powerful for the individual to contend with, and so being swept along in its wake. Adams believed these changes required 'a new social mind' and the 'need to jump' (*ibid.*: 498) into its rapid accelerations in order to keep up at all, but Dreiser feared the capacity of such change to damage and corrupt. Carrie, he writes, 'had little power of initiative, but nevertheless she seemed ever capable of getting herself into the tide of change where she would be easily borne along' (Dreiser 1986:321).

In this way, Carrie becomes like any other object swept along in the urban tide, and she is 'stared at and ogled...in fashion's throng, on parade in a showplace' (*ibid.*: 323–4). It is only when she obtains wealth and power that Carrie can move beyond this condition, but only at the expense of others, for then, 'She was capital' (*ibid.*: 447), thus asserting Stephen Crane's sense of the city as a place of hierarchy and status where alienation, superficiality and selfishness are the norm.

### **THE SPACES OF THE CITY: ARCHITECTURE, ART AND AMBIVALENCE**

However, typical of the ever-contrary nature of the American city, whilst these versions were appearing there emerged further emphasis upon the need to control this burgeoning environment and attempt to make it work for people rather than against them. This took various forms, political, social, economic and

aesthetic. Upton Sinclair, whilst railing against the hierarchy of the city, saw within the idea of the new masses a hope for American socialism as an alternative to the cult of the scientific manager. Here, through collective action, instead of alienation, the worker might find a new place in a community of strong, shared values. Other aspects of the 'new social mind' can be seen in the city parks movement of Frederick Law Olmstead, the growth of interest in public hygiene in the 1890s and the development in architectural design within the 'City Beautiful' group. The notion of a hysterical city, posited by Henry Adams, had to be harnessed and brought to order, and these types of social disciplines were attempts to do just that. Once again, the city could be a tribute to human endeavour rather than a mark of its failures, brought about by the assertion of control. As Burnham and Bennett wrote in their 'Plan of Chicago' (1909), 'the time has come to bring order out of the chaos incident to rapid growth, and especially to the influx of people of many nationalities without common traditions or habits of life' (Weimar 1962:86). And yet, as their language indicates, the most well-intentioned planning has within it precise ideological purposes, in this case, to control the immigrant masses and prevent disorder on the streets.

So too the growth of the skyscraper suggested a new vision of the city which was exuberant and triumphant, but which created dark canyons below. As Frank Lloyd Wright commented in 1929, it created 'The overpowering sense of the cell. The dreary emphasis of narrowness, slicing, edging, niching and crowding. Tier above tier the soulless shelf, the empty crevice, the winding ways of the windy unhealthy canyon' (Marqusee 1988:165). The ironic relation between these two effects once again reinforces the dominant idea of the city as ambiguous and contrary, what Lewis Mumford would term 'negative energy...suicidal vitality' in 1934 (*ibid.*: 160). Louis Sullivan, in his essay, 'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered' (1898) wrote,

It must be tall, every inch of it tall. The force and power of altitude must be in it, the glory and the pride of exaltation must be in it. It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line.

(Taylor 1992:64)

The language and assumptions here are very revealing about the attitudes embodied in the 'tall building', as a masculine, phallic sign of pride, control, authority and no *dissent*. Here, architecture signifies the desire to order and control the urban space through design, and also registers a variety of ideological meanings about how that might be achieved (see Plates 7 and 8).

Edward Hopper (see Plates 9 and 10) is an example of an artist whose work was fascinated by the 'raw disorder of New York' (Levin 1980:22) and its many spaces. This urban space surrounds his subjects, outwardly echoing their inner fears and anxieties, their mix of 'interest, curiosity, fear', which were for Hopper



Plate 7 Chicago skyline from Lake Michigan

Source: Jane Campbell, 1995

the primary responses to the city (ibid.: 47). In Hopper's art the city takes many forms, moving away from it as a place of elitism and social institutions towards a world of 'mobility and moral relativism replacing the older fixed standards... with a new amalgam of its own' (Harris: 1990:25–6). His is a city of streets and everyday practices which we glimpse through the paintings like compelled spectators, before the scene disappears into the rush of the urban whirl. It has a close parallel with the experience of the city recorded in *The Great Gatsby* (1926), written at the time of some of Hopper's finest work,

there was a *glimpse* of red-belted ocean-going ships... a cobbled slum lined with the dark, undeserted saloons of the faded-gilt nineteenthundreds. Then the valley of the ashes opened out on both sides of us, and I had a *glimpse* of Mrs Wilson *straining* at the garage pump with *panting vitality* as we went by....

Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a *constant flicker* upon the *moving* cars, with the city *rising up* across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of nonolfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first *wild* promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.

(Fitzgerald 1974:74–5—our emphases)



*Plate 8* Chicago Sears Tower from the street

*Source:* Neil Campbell, 1995

Fitzgerald's description conveys the frenetic pace and mobility of city life with an edge of sexuality, mystery and a strange mixture of glamour, wealth and



Plate 9 Edward Hopper, 'Office at night', 1940

*Source:* Collection of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, gift of the T.B.Walker Foundation, Gilbert M.Walker Fund, 1948

fading glory that is always part of the urban milieu. This is the environment of 'sugar lumps' and 'garage pumps', where 'anything can happen...anything at all'.

Like Dreiser too, Hopper's attention is given to the sites of popular culture in the city, to the restaurants, movie-houses, theatres, shops, and to the everyday world of work. Too often these images in Hopper have been explained too neatly as representative of the modern sensibility, of alienation and loneliness in the wastelands of urban America. By a closer consideration of some such paintings, one might see other interpretations, other readings of the cityscape he portrays. We will examine one painting in more depth, 'Office at Night' (1940), in order to suggest this approach. Hopper said this painting was suggested to him

by many rides on the 'L'train in New York City after dark and glimpses of office interiors that were so fleeting as to leave fresh and vivid impressions

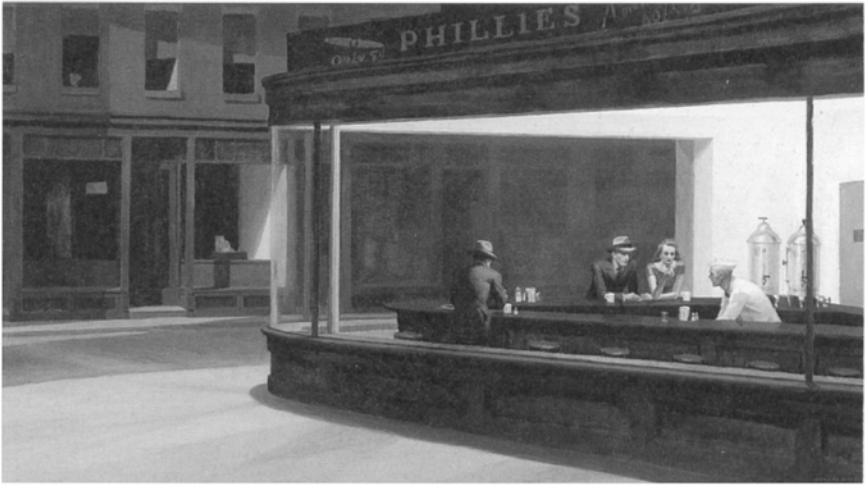


Plate 10 Edward Hopper, 'Nighthawks', 1942

Source: Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.51

on my mind. My aim was to try to give the sense of an isolated and lonely office interior.

(Levin 1980:58)

Notice the similarity to Fitzgerald's language: 'glimpses/fleeting/ impressions', and the predominant concern with capturing the moment. In doing this, the artist takes us into the world of the office, with its objects and order, its hierarchy and relationships. Although one might sense a kind of 'estrangement' and 'malaise', words Gail Levin has used about Hopper, perhaps most strongly suggested by the white space yawning at the centre of the picture, other messages about city life are here too. One significant detail is the repetitive reminder of routine work taking place, through the two figures themselves, but even more so through the pieces of paper positioned around the room. We notice them on the floor, chair, desks, in the man's hand, being filed by the woman; these are signifiers of production, of time filled up, of work completed (there are letters ready to be posted), in an efficient and orderly environment where not even a direct look is permitted. These latter points are suggested by the total arrangement and starkness of the room; for example, the eye is drawn to the umbrella in the corner, the perfectly neat chair and the pure geometry of the man's desk top, all echoed in the rectangles of the screen, walls and window. This echoes the office in Herman Melville's story of Wall Street, 'Bartleby', with its 'desk close up to a small side window [which] commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light...from far above, between two lofty buildings' (Melville 1979:67).

And yet, despite all this work, order and control there is something else carried in the picture's focal point, the woman. Her body's shape under the dress echoes the line in *Gatsby* about Mrs Wilson's 'straining...panting vitality', and is in total contrast with the severe, rigid lines of the room, as if her desire for something other than the routinised world of the office is being suggested. Perhaps it is something she links with the man, since Hopper encloses them within the oblong of light cast from the man's desk light, *or* with the night itself that exists just beyond the boundary of the stark, disciplined office. This may be an image of repressed femininity, caught and held in a masculine world of procedure, paper and routine with a woman powerless to act, 'gaz[ing] speechlessly at nothingness' (Wilson 1991:82), or it may suggest the tension between the desire to contain the city and the need to express and discover its mysteries, its 'carnival' aspects.<sup>6</sup> As Wilson also reminds us in her feminist study of the city,

a place of growing threat and paranoia to men, might be a place of liberation for women. The city offers women freedom... True, on the one hand it makes necessary routinised rituals of transportation and clock watching, factory discipline and timetables, but...at every turn...the city dweller is also offered the opposite—pleasure, deviation, disruption... urban life is actually based on this perpetual struggle between rigid, routinised order and pleasurable anarchy, the malefemale dichotomy  
(Wilson 1991:8)

The 'male-female dichotomy' that Wilson describes can be seen acted out in the shadowy and tense environments of *film noir*, and like Hopper's painting often create a sense of ambiguity about life in the city. For example, the film *Farewell, My Lovely* (1944) opens with the line, 'There's something about the dead silence of an office building at night. Not quite real'. This sense of the 'not quite real' is ever-present in Hopper and *film noir*, and draws us back to the idea of the city as complex and mysterious.

### COLLAGE CITY

Unlike the ambivalence in Hopper's work and the shadows of *film noir*, the film musical *42nd Street* (1933) culminates in a routine about the street whose lyrics and images record that the city/street is 'a crazy quilt' where difference is merged into a harmonious whole, and 'side by side they're glorified, where the underworld can meet the elite, 42nd Street'. This concept of the city as a totality is also registered visually, as we see pedlars close up to play golf and a multicultural New York joining together to create the city skyline itself, at whose summit is not the skyscraper, but the lovers themselves. In this discourse of the city, humanity is in control of a benign and unified environment centred on the image of the quilt with all its pieces coherent and patterned towards the whole. This ideological notion of the 1930s which sought to provide a unitary resolution

for the complex, historical problems of the city was soon countered by the uncertainties of modernism (see Berman), and beyond that by the fragmentations of the postmodern city.

To contrast this effort at portraying the city as a seamless whole, one might look at Hubert Selby Jr.'s novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964), which both belongs to the dark, critical tradition of Dreiser, Crane and Sinclair, and also charts new territory as well. This is not 42nd Street or Broadway, but the Housing Projects of post-war Brooklyn, where the brutalities and deprivations of urban life are expressed without unitary resolutions or hopeful escapes. The power and innovation of the novel lie in its prefiguration of postmodern ideas about the collision of voices in the city, captured in Selby's cacophony of capitalised exchanges where noise seems to replace communication and callousness care. Selby's nightmare city fragments like his text and the lives of his subjects so that any dream of coherence and possibility is gone. Here, the city is more of a 'collage', with 'the highly differentiated spaces and mixtures' of the contemporary city (Harvey 1989:40). Just as de Certeau argued, the city can only be totalised and defined from a distance and at the exclusion of the street life within it, and any effort to provide a grand narrative<sup>7</sup> which encompasses the various movements of the city is false and artificial. Postmodernism rejects such attempts, preferring 'a multiplicity and mixing of styles and codes, forsaking modernism's attempts to impose a unifying or over-arching (meta-)theory or narrative' (Hall *et al* 1992:227).

Thus seeing the city as a collage/montage where texts intersect with other texts and no single reading can ever be final returns us to the idea of the city as a place of competing discourses in eternal contest for power. Donald Barthelme has written that 'New York City is or can be regarded as a collage' and 'the point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality' (Bellamy 1974:51). In the postmodern urban space 'unlike things' are thrown together, clashing and colliding, rather similar to the ways in which the elements of collage interact, overlap, cover, layer, and so on. No single view *is* the collage, for it is all the parts at the same time working with and against itself. This creates friction out of the proximity and promiscuity within the space, just as the city does. As Michel Foucault has written, postmodernism 'prefer[s] what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems' (Harvey 1989:44). It may be that the city has always been this kind of space and postmodernism has merely offered a new set of terms with which to describe a much more consistent notion of the city in America.

David Harvey refers to the artist Robert Rauschenberg as one of the 'pioneers of the postmodern movement' (*ibid.*: 55) and this is, in part, explained by his interest in collage or 'combines' where, as John Cage said, 'there is no more subject than there is in a page from a newspaper. Each thing that is there is a subject. It is a situation involving multiplicity' (Cage 1961:25). This decentred view of art suited Rauschenberg's portrayal of the city wherein he used its



detritus to construct a 'fused metaphor' (Rose 1967:217) for urban life. Later these developed into the 'combine' form with the artist incorporating three-dimensional objects so that they spill out from the frame and begin to offer back the junk of our world. The artist himself said that 'New York is a maze of unorganized experiences peopled by the unexpected, change is unavoidable' (Conrad 1984:301).

In 'Estate', 1963 (see Plate 11), a silk-screen painting, Rauschenberg creates the sense of collage, by colliding images and merging and overlaying a series of urban fragments which seem to mix the politics of housing through a kaleidoscope of colour, time, buildings and slums, as well as the signs of the city: the Statue of Liberty ironically lop-sided, and the road sign calling us to stop. It employs certain ironies, a characteristic of postmodernism, to contrast inadequate urban housing with the expensive excursion into space, and simple, natural elements like birds and water, with the chaos of the city that man has created. The painting signifies many things, but always the motion and whirl of the city, captured in the close details and the larger blocks of colour and shape at a distance, which play with our perceptions and constantly alter our point of view. When Joel Rose's novel *Kill The Poor* (1988) was published in Britain it used this painting on its cover. The novel, like Rauschenberg's painting, centres on housing problems in New York with a playful sense of the irony and absurdity of the postmodern city. This extract shows how Rose conveys the place through the fragments of the city-collage which surround his narrator.

My daughter goes to daycare across the street from where I live. The butcher shop around the corner was closed down for selling human meat as barbecue. Paul Newman is filming on the corner. All over the neighborhood, homesteaders are rebuilding shells of buildings that have been abandoned by their landlords. No one likes poor people. On the corner heroin is sold for ten dollars a bag... One day there will be a link between the rich section of town and the poor. My grandmother said they were saying the same thing when she first moved here more than seventy-five years ago. But she doesn't live here now.

(Rose 1990:18)

Rose's ironic view of his neighbourhood combines the world-weariness of our age with a sharp observant wit and critique of a society where power is in the hands of a few and where image is everything. In some ways like Jay McInerney, he explores the 'ethic of appearances' in the hope of finding the 'ethic of engagement', despite the seeming despondency embodied in the urban space.

Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) is fully conscious of the tradition of urban texts in which it can be placed. He has written introductions for an earlier novel of the city, *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos (1986 edition) and for the collection *New York: An Illustrated Anthology* (Marqusee

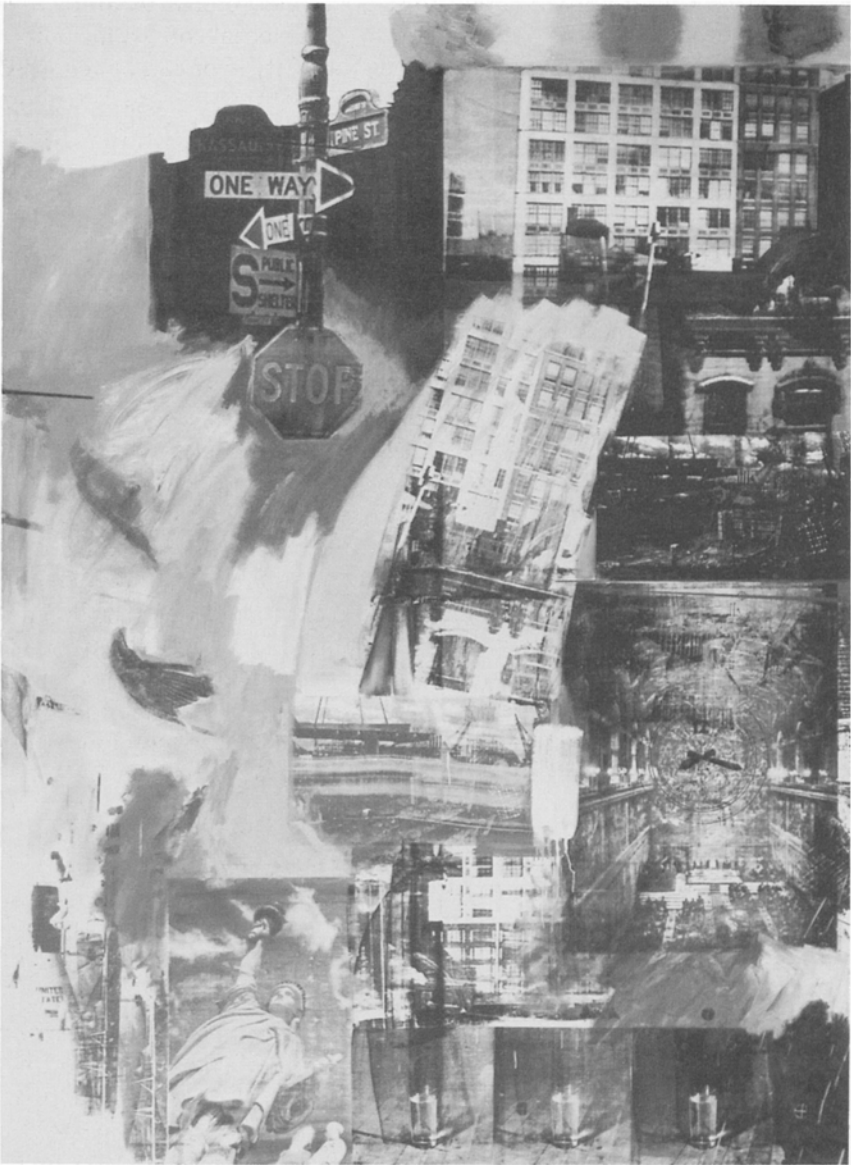


Plate 11 Robert Rauschenberg, 'Estate', 1963

Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art: gift of the Friends of the Philadelphia Museum of Art

1988), as well as referring to others like *The Great Gatsby* in interviews and indirectly within his own novel (see 1984:180, 'the first Dutch settlers'). His first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City* is an extraordinary urban text which asserts the

sense of a postmodern city, a 'republic of voices' (McInerney 1984:6) echoing 'the idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism' (Harvey 1989:48). For McInerney, the city is a dialogue where many voices mix and engage in an endless parade and struggle which resist the single dominant discourse and the fixed notions of what a city should be, in favour of a more fluid, processive sense.<sup>8</sup> The novel's unnamed protagonist breaks from a job in which he checks and edits language until it is 'verified' and printable, and thus acceptable to the dominant 'voice', and plunges into a journey of education about values and community.

He captures the city's collage-like, ambivalent quality early on: 'a lone hooker totters on heels and tugs at her skirt... Coming closer, you see that she is a man in drag... Downriver, the Statue of Liberty shimmers in the haze. Across the the water, a huge Colgate sign welcomes you to New Jersey, the Garden State (McInerney 1984:10). For the protagonist, the city is unlike the magazine he works for, it cannot be verified, ordered and checked because it is always surprising, as his excursions into the street and subway reveal. One brief example shows this many-voiced city.

You step into the train. The car is full of Hasidim from Brooklyn... He is reading from his Talmud, running his finger across the page. The strange script is similar to the graffiti signatures all over the surface of the subway car, but the man does not look up at the graffiti, nor does and a History, a Community... At Fourteenth Street three Rastafarians he try to steal a peek at the headlines of your *Post*. This man has God get on, and soon the car reeks of sweat and reefer. Sometimes you feel like the only man in the city without group affiliation.

(*ibid.*:57)

The strange scripts of the city co-mingle creating a new language in dialogue at all times and curiously unreadable. What McInerney accepts is that the postmodern city is a place of 'competing beliefs, cultures and "stories"...[and that] this play of unnerving contrasts and extremes is the essence of the "postmodern" experience' (Wilson 1991:135–6). To accept this flow is not to give in to chaos, but to find a way of living with multiplicity without seeking to distort it into a fixed and single, dominant discourse. One can find 'community' within this flux of voices because it provides the space for self-expression and the possibility for dialogue, bringing it close to Michel Foucault's concept of the *heterotopia*, which when applied to the city suggests a place capable of juxtaposing in a single locale several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. It is 'disturbing' because in the heterotopia things do not 'hold together' neatly in order, but are spaces of 'contest', of 'a multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions' where 'no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these

groupings dissolve again' because the city is too unstable and changing to sustain them as fixed and final (Foucault 1966:xviii).

### LIVING WITH THE CITY: RAP MUSIC

One contemporary form that best expresses elements of the 'heterotopic' is rap music, which is clearly an urban musical form which has grown out of the conditions of the city, mixing and sampling from the 'voices' all around it. The sound-space of rap juxtaposes several sites which appear incompatible, according to Cornell West, 'pulling from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product' (Brooker 1992:222). Jefferson Morley described Afrika Bambaata's 'Planet Rock' (1982) as a 'sonic collage of dance beats, pop culture references, and rap exhortation' (Morley 1992:xxiii) and David Toop chose an appropriate urban metaphor to explore this collage further, claiming rap was, 'like a long subway ride with the doors opening onto a different kind of music at every stop' (Toop 1984:154).

As well as its form, rap's themes have been consistently about the city and the inherent pressures at work within the ghetto, and so to some extent follow a black tradition going back to urban Blues and Motown—Marvin Gaye's 'Inner City Blues' and Stevie Wonder's 'Living for the City'. But the unique combination of postmodern city rhythms with provocative, relevant lyrics give rap an important place in the soundtrack of contemporary urban life.

Rap is the basis of an alternative media network...The institutions devoted to rap convey the music, the ideas, and the information that are often excluded from the white-dominated (and increasingly corporate) media, like TV, daily newspapers, magazines and books.

(Morley 1992:xxix)

Rap's differences show that it too, like the city, is in process, shifting with time between a variety of responses to the world it describes.<sup>9</sup> From the 'gangsta' rap of Ice Cube and its engagement with urban violence and gang culture, to the playful pastiche of De La Soul, or the politico-social rap of The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, such a multiplicity of forms and voices suggest the healthy resistance and response to how the city can be read. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 'The Message' (1982) was an early example of this urban engagement, its video a collage of city scenes, slums and graffiti. The lyrics and the pounding rap beat speak of 'Rats in the front room, roaches in the back/ Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat', and re-invoke the imagery of an earlier urban protester, Upton Sinclair in the refrain, 'It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under'. It rails against poverty, deprivation and inequality using the rhythms of the music to suggest the urban freneticism and the relentless struggle as if there were a 'neon King Kong,

standing on my back'. Its form and style suggest the continuing need to find new ways to express and resist the complex nature of urban existence in America.

### CONCLUSION, OR NO CONCLUSION POSSIBLE?

Marshall Berman's provocative book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1983) spends a good deal of time discussing the nature of the city experience and his title, with its insistent irony and ambiguity, stands as a fine expression for the problems of trying to grasp the urban condition in any quantifiable way, for as soon as you have it, it disappears or metamorphoses into something else. In a section of the book he describes an imaginary 'Bronx Mural', which becomes emblematic of the possibility of a city which has learned, however uneasily, to live with itself and with its differences. His description is revealing:

the driver's view of the Bronx's past life would alternate with sweeping vistas of its present ruin. The mural might depict cross-sections of streets, of houses, even of rooms full of people just as they were before the Expressway cut through them all.

(Berman 1983:341)

In this representation of the city the mural would tell the story of immigration, transportation, neighbourhood history, in 'radically different styles, so as to express the amazing variety of imaginative visions that spring from these apparently uniform streets' (ibid.: 342). A close reading of this section suggests Berman's sense of loss, but also his hopes for the future in a city that can be many things, and so at the very least, retains its capacity for wonder and its essential transformative powers. If the city is an 'imagined' place that we all create for ourselves in the very acts of existing within it, then it is perhaps this changing nature which is its strength, being what Ihab Hassan called 'variousness itself *inscribed* in steel and stone' (Jaye and Watts 1981:109: our emphasis) and which makes its study so endlessly fascinating. His choice of the word 'inscribed' reminds us of where this chapter began, with the idea of the city-text that we try to read, and the signs that surround us in the city that we attempt to navigate. It can be, as Grandmaster Flash raps, 'a jungle sometimes', but as Berman reminds us, there is 'disaster and despair...*but there is much more*' (Berman 1983:343) in an environment where many voices and discourses coexist in a contest for dominance and authority.

### NOTES

- 1 References are given in the text and can be related to the works cited at the end of this chapter.

- 2 The historical approach is still extremely valuable to our understanding of culture, its formations and workings, and informs in a more overt way other chapters in this book. Likewise, in using this definition of the idea of discourse, it does not accept that this is the only way of understanding how we respond to the city. Indeed, we are *shaped* by other forces, and in turn *shape* the city in a variety of other ways. We have chosen, in this chapter, to explore the approach of discourse analysis as a possible method.
- 3 Nick Peim, *Critical Theory and the English Teacher: Transforming the Subject*, offers the following definition of post-structuralism:

Post-structuralism renders it impossible to claim that any signifying events, texts or practices can guarantee or fix their own meanings on their own... [it] may be used to question all the familiar and habitual assumptions... everything that has been taken for granted...problematizing the readymade assumptions and practices...[and] likely to be sceptical of the claim of any single system of knowledge...to comprehensive explanatory power, universal value or truth. Post-structuralism would tend to insist that knowledge and understanding are always *positioned*—and that the identity and meaning of things shifts radically given different perspectives and cultural contexts (1993:1–2).

- 4 The City Beautiful Movement flourished in the early 1900s and probably lasted until Burnham and Bennett's Plan of Chicago, 1909.
- 5 Poe's Dupin stories are 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 'The Mystery of Marie Roget', and 'The Purloined Letter'. All, in their own ways relate crime and mystery to the specific urban locale.
- 6 The term 'carnival' derives from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and refers, in part, to the expressions of the underclass, or those usually silenced in society, and can be seen as a form of resistance and as vital step in the dialogical process.
- 7 The phrase 'grand narrative' is borrowed from the work of Jean-François Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) who argues that in the postmodern world there can be no grand, totalising theories which explain and order things for us.
- 8 Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogics, from whence this term is borrowed, is discussed in the Introduction and [Chapter 1](#).
- 9 The brief points on rap in this chapter should be read alongside the earlier consideration of the subject in [Chapter 3](#).

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## FOLLOW-UP WORK

### *Opening sequence exercise—film*

- 1 View two contrasting films which examine city life in different ways, such as *Taxi Driver* and *Saturday Night Fever*, and think about some or all of the following questions.
- (a) How are the central characters introduced to the audience and what kinds of impressions do they create? How is this conveyed to us? Look at body language, relations with others, the way the camera surveys the people.
  - (b) How do they interconnect with their environment? Do they seem confident, at home, relaxed etc. or is there evidence of other relations — if so, what, and again how is this conveyed to the audience?
  - (c) Where is the camera, and at what angles does it address its subjects? Does this affect how we respond to them, and how we respond to the city (remind yourself of de Certeau's comments on how we see the city)?
  - (d) Soundtrack is significant in each sequence, but they are very different. Describe them both, and say how they are related to the mood being established and the way we are responding to place and character.
  - (e) How is the city being conveyed here, both through the visual messages and through the script and soundtrack?

### *Literary analysis*

- 2 Consider Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893).
- (a) [Chapter 2](#). Before Maggie is introduced, Crane conveys a strong sense of environment to us—how does he do this, and what impression does it create of the city and its effects? Be specific in your attention to the language Crane uses to describe the place, as his words are chosen very deliberately to create certain, precise connotations for the reader.



- (b) **Chapter 6**. How is the bar a representative place in the city? Crane uses repeated patterns of language to establish the impression of the bar as a particular type of place, which in the mode of Naturalism that Crane employs influences and shapes the people who occupy that space. What are these patterns, how do they work and how do they relate to the paragraph which describes the fragments of food etc. all around the room?

*Assignments and areas of study*

3 Consider the following:

- (a) ‘Cities are masculine places, built by men for men, and always excluding the active roles of women. We see it in the streets, in the art, in the literature and the media of the urban world.’ Examine this comment using a range of material.
- (b) Research the Chicago World Fair of 1893, the Columbian Exposition, and comment on its significance for the ways in which cities were seen at the time and into the future. Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America*, (1982) **Chapter 7**, is a good starting-point.
- (c) Connect this chapter with those on ethnicity and African Americans and discuss the relationship between the city and ethnic experience. You might read about the Harlem Renaissance, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1968), Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1986) or Hispanic texts such as Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984).

## Chapter 7

### Gender and sexuality

‘To break the old circuits’<sup>1</sup>

In his commentary upon the Columbian Exposition of 1893, Alan Trachtenberg describes the special women’s building as occupying a space between the Court of Honor and the Midway Plaisance, ‘at the point of transition from the official view of reality to the world of exotic amusement, of pleasure’ (Trachtenberg 1982:222). This locational irony suggests the position of women in America at the time of the Exposition, since they were, on one hand, revered as the guardians of virtue, the home and the domestic economy, whilst still seen as possessions, apolitical and, at worst, objects for the male gaze—like the ‘exotic’ women on display on the midway. Should women have been integrated into the main body of the Exhibition, or should they have a separate building? If they did not have the latter division, would their activities and achievements be smothered by the dominant presence of masculine displays? These discussions from the 1890s reveal significant arguments about gender, power and identity that have persisted throughout the twentieth century. Such interpretations reveal the importance of gender within the politics of culture and begin to show the inter-relationships of power, identity, ethnicity and class with issues of gender and sexuality.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine and demonstrate different ways in which ‘cultural constructions of sexual difference fundamentally inform history’ and how

the discourses of gender not only regulate the social behaviour of men and women in sexuality, family and work, but they also become ways of ordering politics and of maintaining hierarchies of all kinds... describ[ing] a fundamental understanding of difference that organizes and produces other relationships of difference—and of power and inequality.

(Melosh 1993:5)

Gender, that is the feminine or the masculine, is not born into us but, rather, emerges as we develop and experience life. It is a socially constructed definition created through the various networks of forces that intersect around us as we grow. These cultural discourses, ‘unities of theme and shared conventions of knowledge’ (Melosh 1993:4), about gender and sexuality, shape and structure us

as subjects within the social order. The privileging of certain discourses over others, as always, will determine which group holds greater authority within the culture at that moment. Thus gender and sexuality are part of the elaborate organisation of power within society which we must examine to appreciate its influence upon the structuring of our lives.

This chapter will explore some examples of the processes and effects of this construction within the American cultural order in the twentieth century. It will also discuss how this order has been questioned in different ways by various groups, such as social and radical feminists and male homosexuals. Gender studies has taken its lead from the questionings of feminism which, in its various forms, challenged assumptions of power based upon the positioning of women in a male-dominated and maledefined society. For example, the tendency for there to be an assumed universal and general address seen as a 'norm' which is, however, male, is an indicator of patriarchal authority. If everything proceeds from this norm, then it displaces women from the centre of society and diminishes their worth and status. Thus, the majority of this chapter will examine gender in relation to women, but will also try to emphasise the equally important effects of these challenges to masculinity in America, for this too is constructed within the discourses of gender and sexuality at work in the culture. As Sidonie Smith has written,

While...gender ideologies rigidly script identities and differences according to apparently 'natural' or 'God-given' distinctions, these cultural scripts of difference remain vulnerable to contradictions from within and contesting social dialects from without that fracture their coherence and dispute their privileges.

(Smith 1993:21)

This chapter will identify some of these 'cultural scripts' and show how they have become hegemonic, whilst demonstrating, as Smith suggests, the possibility for a renegotiation of their dominance and a fracturing of their authority by various means.

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY ROOTS: CULTURAL POLITICS

As early as 1837, Angelina Grimké (1805–1879), an active anti-slavery campaigner, made important connections between slavery and the oppressed position of women in America. She wrote that 'the mere circumstance of sex does not give to man higher rights and responsibilities than to woman' (Lauter *et al.* 1994:1866), and so brought into question the assumption that it was 'natural' for women to adopt specific roles in society and for men to assume others.<sup>2</sup> She continued, 'Our duties originate, not from difference of sex, but from the diversity of our relations in life, the various gifts and talents committed to our

care, and the different eras in which we live' (ibid.). However, she points out that culture has constructed active 'man',

whilst woman has been taught to lean upon an arm of flesh, to sit as a doll arrayed in 'gold, and pearls and costly array', to be admired for her personal charms, and caressed and humored like a spoiled child, or converted into a mere drudge to suit the convenience of her lord and master.

(ibid.)

The language employed by Grimké emphasises the relation between power and gender, since the woman is subordinated into a variety of roles, doll/child/pet, over which the man has control as 'master'. Such conditioned social thinking concretises the hierarchy so that the woman is 'robbed...of essential rights...to think and speak and act', becoming a silenced 'appendage of his being, an instrument of his convenience and pleasure, the pretty toy...the pet animal whom he humored into playfulness and submission' (ibid.). This advanced thinking was influential within America and provided the impetus and the language for women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who organised a woman's convention at Seneca Falls in 1848. Its 'Declaration of Sentiments' echoed the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, emphasising the need for woman's rights and recognition within the democratic framework of the USA which had, it stated, established 'an absolute tyranny' over women (Lauter *et al.* 1994:1946).

This was a momentous occasion for early American feminism, but within it exists the seeds of a debate which has raged, in different forms, within women's groups ever since. That is, whether the demand for equality within the existing system is the correct way forward, or whether the system itself was so strongly biased to men that it would always favour patriarchy. Patriarchy is a concept at the centre of much theorising and debate within gender studies and is best defined as 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (Walby 1990:20). Seneca Falls initiated a number of similar events which became the focus for new forms of collective female activity. As Gerda Lerner has written, 'The emergence of female consciousness... rested on the existence and continuity of woman's clubs movements, and female organizations' (Lerner 1977:392), which included the anti-slavery organisations, The Woman's Christian Temperance Movement (1870s), Female Labor Reform Association (1844) and many others. Through these collectives, women realised organisational skills, reinforced self confidence, developed female support networks and became actively involved in a range of political tasks, such as fund-raising, information distribution and petitioning. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, speaking at the 1851 Woman's Convention in Akron, Ohio said that 'self-reliance is educated *out* of the girl' whereas it was seen as central to the power and authority of men in American society. For her, 'experience comes by

exposure' and therefore girls should not be sheltered behind the screen of patriarchy

Let the girl be thoroughly developed in body and soul, not modeled, like a piece of clay, after some artificial specimen of humanity... Development is one thing, that system of cramping, restraining, torturing, perverting, and mystifying, called education, is quite another.

(Lerner 1977:416)

Such a radical call for change and re-education of women grew during the late 1800s and brought into question the assumptions of patriarchy that women were only represented by the 'cardinal virtues' of 'piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity' (Norton 1989:122)<sup>3</sup> Cady Stanton linked, as Grimke had, the woman with the slave, for 'all mankind stands on alert to restrain their impulses, check their aspirations, fetter their limbs, lest, in their freedom and strength, in their full development, they should take an even platform with the proud man himself' (Clinton 1984:70). Confined by gender definitions, women had to question and challenge this fettering process if they were to play a fuller role in American culture.

At the Columbian Exposition (1893) the ambiguities of the 'woman question' were being played out on the national stage. This celebration of America's place in the world did acknowledge women in various ways; for example, with the Woman's Building, with a female architect, and a Board of Lady Managers. However, these were compromised by the everpresent linking of women with a particularly limiting sphere, the home. For example, male critics belittled the work of Sophie Hayden, the Woman's Building's architect, describing it as having 'graceful timidity or gentleness...[which] differentiates it from its colossal neighbours [*that is, male*], and reveals the sex of its author' (Henry Van Brunt quoted in Banta 1987:528—our emphases and addition). Even Bertha Palmer, President of the Lady Managers, in her speech at the opening of the building, refused to 'discuss...weighty questions' and assured the audience that 'every woman who is presiding over a happy home is fulfilling her highest and truest function' (Muccigrosso 1993:139). As if to reinforce this, the building contained a model kitchen and was next door to the Children's Building with its nurseries and child-care exhibits.

However, the Exposition did give rise to some more radical voices that spoke out against these narrow definitions of women, echoing the earlier statements of Grimke and Stanton. One speech, 'The Woman's Sphere from a Woman's Standpoint', given in the Congress of Women by Laura DeForce Gordon, decried the 'system of repression, suppression and oppression practiced toward women', suggesting that

Woman's sphere in life will be defined and determined by herself alone. Her place in nature, no longer fixed by masculine dogmatism, shall be as

broad and multifarious in scope as God shall decree her capacity and ability to accomplish.

(Burg 1976:240–1)

This more radical approach could be seen in the growth of ‘social feminism’ during the 1890s, which tried to activate the ‘scope’ that Gordon spoke of through social involvement outside the male-defined terrain of the domestic. Associated with figures like Jane Addams (born 1860), who founded Hull House in Chicago as a community for reform and aid for women and families, social feminism has been called ‘municipal housekeeping’ because of its extension of domestic expertise into the wider arena of the public sphere, and so ‘melded traditional charity with intellectual challenge...[permitted] a dominant leadership role... [and] excluded family demands’ (Woloch 1994:253). New Women of the 1890s, who questioned their roles, like Jane Addams, and became empowered in this way, extended the ‘traditional’ gender roles of women into the public domain. The philosophy of ‘social feminism’ could be summed up in the following speech by Marion Talbot in 1911:

The home does not stop at the street door. It is as wide as the world into which the individual steps forth. The determination of the character of that world and the preservation of those interests which she has safeguarded in the home, constitute the real duty resting upon women.

(Woloch 1994:270)

However, to step beyond the street door was to enter the domain of men in a public manner which was controversial, but it became an essential element in the process of emancipation. For example, women’s organisations continued to develop throughout this period: the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (1890), National American Women’s Suffrage Association (1890), National Consumers’ League (1899), National Women’s Trade Union League (1903) and many others providing ‘a living bridge between traditional philanthropy and progressive reform’ (Woloch 1994:299). This accumulation of groups formed a network of women who together pushed forward a number of legislative issues, culminating in the 1920 Nineteenth Amendment to extend suffrage to women.

### **NINETEENTH-CENTURY ROOTS: LITERATURE AND THE ‘FIRST WAVE’ OF FEMINISM**

Such concerns were also emerging in the literature of the period and provided another important source of discussion and cultural expression. For example, Kate Chopin (born 1851) wrote a short piece called ‘Emancipation’ in 1869 beginning with images of confinement, ‘confining walls...bars of iron...a cage’, as if to suggest the condition of women caught in the limited, male-defined world of America. The ‘animal’ that she describes is looked after, but longs for

something more, signified by all that exists beyond the cage, and eventually moves out into 'the Unknown'. Now, without the protecting hand of patriarchy the once-caged animal is awakened to a sensual world: 'seeing, smelling, touching...all things', 'seeking, finding, joying and suffering' (Chopin 1984:177–8). Chopin's sense of activated existence is linked to the freedom from the enclosed world of the cage—patriarchy and domesticity—and although the new life involves suffering, it is preferable to the powerless, protected realm which she clearly associates with the situation of women at the time.

Like so much fiction of the time, Chopin's images of confinement are metaphors for the social controls of patriarchy that separated women into very specific, domestic roles and discouraged other expressions or practices. We see this in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*' (1892), which like her main work of social theory, *Women and Economics* (1898), is concerned with the power relations between men and women. The latter text argues against women as domestic and dependent on men and articulates the 'sexuo-economic' basis of the relationship that 'locks women into their homes and then identifies the work that is done in them as "natural" work for women. Gilman tears away that facade, exposing the reality of the institution as a limiting space' (Lane 1990:252).

Gilman was a friend of Jane Addams and spent a good deal of time at Hull House and was 'formed ideologically and politically in the burgeoning reform activities of the 1880s and 1890s' (ibid.:184). In *The Yellow Wallpaper*', Gilman dramatises aspects of her theory of gender relations, showing a woman in an actual 'limiting space', (over-)protected by her husband to the point of being, like Chopin's animal, a prisoner. Ironically, the woman (unnamed throughout the story) is imprisoned in a nursery whose 'windows are barred...and there are rings and things in the walls' (Gilman 1990:43). She is made child-like as a mark of her powerlessness and locked into a torture chamber/nursery/bedroom ruled over by her doctor husband. All she has is the paper she writes on and the paper on the walls that she 'reads', gradually seeing there a version of her own life: 'Behind the outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day... like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern' (ibid.: 49). The outside pattern is that of patriarchy which has shaped her life and defined her as dependent, weak and silent. But the story interfuses the two patterns until 'she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard ...all the time trying to climb through' (ibid.: 53). It is as if the narrator and the 'creeping woman' have become one in the struggle to free themselves from the pattern and its terrible limiting space. Gilman's ambiguous ending leaves John, the husband, fainted and the woman circling around him rather like an animal freed from its cell but not yet equipped for the wild.

As an imagining of gender power relations the story, like Gilman's theory, is provocative and daring, but it was Kate Chopin who wrote an even more dangerous novel in 1899, *The Awakening*. This shows the 'awakening' of Edna Pontellier from the limiting space of a possessive husband to a new sense of identity and ambiguous freedom. She is 'a valuable piece of personal property' to

her husband (Chopin 1984:44) defined by 'a mother's place' (ibid.: 48) to be a 'mother-woman' only. These social definitions fix her by gender into a certain role which she increasingly is at odds with. She thinks of 'the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions' (ibid.: 57) and this is connected to the tensions explored by Gilman's metaphor of the 'outside pattern'. For Edna Pontellier, the possibility of a life beyond the cage of rigid social expectations is signified by the sea's fluidity which is 'seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell' (ibid.: 57). On or in the sea, she feels liberated, 'borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening...leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails' (ibid.: 81).

Myra Jehlen has written of women existing on a border between states, with 'the female territory...envisioned as one long border, and independence for women, not as a separate country, but as open access to the sea' (Showalter 1986: 264). Edna's sensual perception of 'independence' is just such fluidity which her husband cannot recognise: 'he could not see she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world' (ibid.: 108). At the sea, naked, she casts aside the clothing of pretence associated with the 'man-made' world, to borrow from Perkins Gilman, and in her 'suicide' becomes 'like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known' (ibid.: 175).<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps in the political arena of Woman's Conventions and the Columbian Exposition such radically imagined alternatives to the gender limitations of late nineteenth-century American culture were difficult to formally articulate. As so often, literature could prefigure later, more overt moves towards feminist questioning of the patriarchal norm. Gilman and Chopin's work is close to that of French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous who wrote in 1976 that, 'We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing' and so 'emancipat[e]...the marvelous text of her self' (Marks and De Courtivron 1981: 250). As in French feminism, writers like Chopin and Gilman knew the importance of expression to 'break the snare of silence' (ibid.: 251) and to be assertive through the body: 'Women must write through their bodies... submerge, cut through, get beyond [patriarchy]' (ibid.: 256). Women for Cixous are akin to birds and thieves (a play on the French word *voler* meaning to fly and to steal), using language stolen from men in order to fly: They go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorientating it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down' (ibid.: 258).

At the time of Gilman and Chopin's writing, however, America was unwilling to be 'turned upside down', tending to treat these works as 'scandalous' or eccentric, and peripheral to the mainstream or 'malestream' culture. This is now considered as the 'first wave' of feminism in America, raising important questions about the underlying assumptions embedded in the idea of 'sex-roles' and 'separate spheres' for men and women. However, it is the patriarchal power



of the absent Father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) that typifies the gender authority to be overcome. His language, delivered through a letter, imposes control over the female household in which Marmee, the mother, becomes his mouth-piece:

they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.

(Alcott 1989:8)

Yet even in such a novel there is the figure of Jo March who resists the call to duty and repression and seeks, as Cixous says, to 'break the snare of silence' with her body and her writing. She refuses for as long as possible the social construction of her gender, even though, as the novel suggests, it is an inevitable process. She wants to remain young and outside the gender system that makes her fit the role played out by Marmee and her sisters, but she cannot, and must succumb to marriage and to a role close to that of her dead sister Beth. What the novel shows is the extraordinary power tied to gender and the differences that society imposes on the male and female. When Laurie, Jo's male friend, speaks of his future his speech betrays his assertive self and the social acceptability of male freedom: 'After I'd seen as much of the world as I want to, I'd like to... choose ...I'm never to be bothered...but just enjoy myself and live for what I like' (ibid.: 142). In contrast, Jo's sense of self and future is tentative, qualified and wrapped in fantasy: 'I'd have a stable full of Arabian steeds ...I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle—something heroic or wonderful, ...I don't know what' (ibid.: 143). The 'castle' is a metaphor of confinement, of the domestic world that she knows cannot be avoided, but even before ore this inevitable gender trap, Jo has less certainty than Laurie, fewer options and little access to the world outside her family. This moment is echoed later in the novel with Laurie trying to persuade Jo to run away with him and 'to break out of bounds in some way', but Jo's construction as a 'girl' has convinced her of 'her place': 'I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home' (ibid.: 213). Again and again Alcott reminds the reader of the gender 'civil war' going on in American society whilst the 'real' battles were being fought elsewhere, and she illuminates the often-neglected aspects of power associated with patriarchy and dominance. For example, when Jo sees the fate of Meg marrying John Brooke, she is described as 'enthroned upon his knee, and wearing an expression of abject submission' (ibid.: 232).

During the 1880s and 1890s American women began to organise against such 'abject submission' as we have shown and their responses were never uniform, but formed various strands of feminism, some remaining within the 'family claim' (Rosenberg 1992:65), whilst others sought to extend or challenge this notion of the 'woman's sphere' into a wider social dimension. As Rosenberg

argues, 'All feminists believed that women should band together to claim personal emancipation, but they disagreed about what emancipation meant and how best to achieve it...In these differences of emphasis lay the potential for much future strife' (Rosenberg 1992:68). With the granting of suffrage to women in 1920, one aspect of the campaign had been achieved, but what became increasingly clear was that this wave of feminism was more than a 'campaign'. It was 'a dimension which informed and interrogated every facet of personal, social and political life' (Eagleton 1983:150). It was not just about equality of power and status with men within an established and structured system, but rather more concerned with the 'questioning of all such power and status' (*ibid.*: 150). Matters of gender were now at the heart of American cultural life and would emerge in a variety of forms in the century ahead.

### GENDER AND THE 1950s' 'SECOND WAVE'

After the insecurity of the 1930s and the social disruptions of the Second World War, post-war America looked for a return to security, both in social and political ideologies. Gender offered pre-set compartments into which male and female could be arranged so as to create a sense of 'normalcy' and order that were non-threatening and in keeping with precise, uncomplicated versions of an ideal America developed in these years of consensus. However, this 'consensual hole-in-history', as W.T.Lhamon calls it, was an illusion within which many crucial debates were taking place. Indeed, these were 'crucible years [that] forged the succeeding decades' (Lhamon 1990:3).

In post-1945 America there was a 'new outburst of domestic ideology, a vigorous revival of traditional ideals of woman's place' (Woloch 1994: 493) and yet, at the same time there were increased demands for women in the workplace too. This suggests what Nancy Woloch calls the 'split character' of the age (*ibid.*: 493), with its return to notions of domesticity as the core of women's experience and fulfilment, in conflict with the pull to the labour market. One of the implications of this was a fear within males that their 'masculinity' was under threat. In particular, this definition of masculinity was concerned with employment, 'bread-winning', protection and authority, all of which appeared under fire from potential encroachments of women into these areas. In wartime it had been acceptable, but in peace there had to be a return to 'an ideal script against which [women] measured their performance' (Gatlin 1987:7). The metaphors used here are revealing, for they signal the growing sense of a 'split' resulting in a 'performance' where women re-conformed to scripts 'written' by men in earlier generations. If women worked, as many did, it was seen as temporary before settling into marriage and raising a family in the suburbs. When Betty Friedan examined this kind of cultural conditioning, she used the phrase 'the feminine mystique' to suggest the script that women had to learn in order to be acceptable within the new suburban middle-class:

They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for...All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.

(Friedan 1982:13–14)

A film like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) articulates many of these themes, whilst ostensibly being a ‘youth movie’, situating itself in the suburbs with a mobile family in crisis. The roots of the crisis are to do with gender, and in particular the roles of the mother and the father. This was the age in which Dr Benjamin Spock’s manual, *Baby and Child Care* (1944), warned women against the dual dangers of over-protection and rejection of their children and generally raised the awareness of models of caring in the public mind. This kind of fascination with raising children, alongside the growing interest in psychology, can be seen dramatised in *Rebel Without a Cause*. After all, if things were unstable at home, if children were wayward and confused, then it must be connected to the roles within the family. When Jim Stark (James Dean) cries out ‘you’re tearing me apart’, he indicates the film’s pursuit of familial confusions as its central theme. Dr Spock advised women to stay at home and only ‘to leave home...for a trip to the beauty parlor, to see a movie, to buy a new hat or dress, or visit a good friend’ (Rosenberg 1992:151), and to guard against overprotection, for it could lead to ‘Momism’. This meant adversely affecting the (male) child by smothering and dominating them so as to impair their masculine development as individual beings in a competitive society. The ideal mother was ever present never controlling’ (ibid.: 151), and in order for this to occur, it necessitated a strong husband assuming domestic authority and economic and sexual control in the home so as not to confuse the child. This was a vision of social order sited in gender, which scripted distinct roles within the family, encompassing power and regulation in specific ways. Edmund White sums up the role of ‘manliness’ as ‘a good business suit, ambition, paying one’s bills on time, enough knowledge of baseball to hand out tips at the barbershop’ (White 1983:147). In *Rebel Without a Cause*, the father is weak and ‘feminised’—we see him wearing a frilly apron at one point and Jim mistakes him for his mother—and he is constantly referred to visually as small, imprisoned or indecisive. All the classical masculine traits, according to the cultural stereotype of the strong, individual male figure, are transferred to the mother, who is figured as aggressive, dominant and assertive. In the long opening scene of the film in the police station, the father arrives with Jim wanting to make him ‘king’. Jim literally enthrones him before our eyes, only to see him ‘dethroned’ by the authority of the mother and the grandmother who hover like fearsome Harpies in the background. Later, Jim asks his father to advise him, and so take on his ordained position as masculine role model, but when he cannot, the boy is disgusted. At the height of Jim’s confusion, just prior to his running away to the mansion, he confronts his parents on the stairs of the family home. It is a

wonderful example of director Nicholas Ray's use of the camera, which creates visually a sense of destabilisation with tilted angles and tight close-ups and editing. Jim is imaged as a crucified figure, unable to identify with the weak father who will not stand up for him against his mother. The boy 'longs for unity — with his parents and with his peers—and is repeatedly and frustratingly blocked from it' (Byars 1991:128). The scene ends with Jim kicking a portrait of a matriarchal figure, destroying her whole face before he leaves the room.

In a piece written in 1956 for *Woman's Home Companion* the suburbs were described with 'women...like keepers of a prosperous zoo and the men like so many domesticated animals inside of it'. The man, like Jim's father, is 'ill at ease in a world that robs him of his chance at heroism. He wonders, seeing this gap between his dream and his daily life—is he even a man' (Bailey 1989:103). If masculinity was under threat, then one way of reasserting its traditional 'heroism' was to reinvokethe domestic ideology for women. The 'feminine mystique', the housewife-mother, the suburban goddess, all entwined as a newly written script for post-war women. Appropriately, at the end of *Rebel*, as social order is restored, the father does stand up with Jim ('I'll be as strong as you want me to be') and does silence his wife with a look and a smile before guiding his regenerated family home. Masculinity had to assert itself: 'We must rediscover the art of dominating as the lion dominates the lioness—without force usually, without harshness usually, without faltering always' (Bailey 1989:105). However, a film like *Rebel* with its 'tenuousness of resolution' (Byars 1991: 130) and its distorted realism indicates the underlying discontent with accepted gender divisions and that despite the smoothing over in its narrative closures, society itself was less easily healed.

These examples show that the pursuit of improvements in the lives of women were now being seen as too extreme and that the social price of such changes of gender role and power could have specific social problems. Resolutions had to be presented even if social trends were themselves more contradictory. Television in the 1950s seemed to be part of this re-masculinisation of America, with its prime-time serials like *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke* and *Daniel Boone* conjuring up heroic, frontier images of rugged individuals who lived their lives successfully without the intrusion of women, as if to answer the situation comedies that made the 'feminised' man, like Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners*, the humorous figure of fun. Women had to be contained if men were to rediscover their masculine authority, and from every source messages came to reinforce the importance of the home, family and marriage. Ironically, it became a 'narrowing of women's sphere' (Harvey 1994:xvi) in which 'their primary focus of interest and activity is the home' (ibid.: 73). After all,

what profession offers the daily job of turning out a delicious dinner, of converting a few yards of fabric, a pot of paint, and imagination into a new room? Of seeing a tired and unsure man at the end of a working day become a rested lord of his manor?

(ibid.: 73)

This is the 'cultural script' that had to be recognised and challenged by the gender politics of the age. Betty Friedan's idea of the 'truly feminine woman' scripted in post-war America is echoed by essayist and poet Adrienne Rich, who felt 'that marriage and motherhood...were supposed to be truly womanly', but left her 'feeling unfit, disempowered, adrift' (Rich 1993:244). She saw in her own life and writing the kind of 'split' that Woloch commented on as a characteristic of the age. Rich wrote of 'the split I...experienced between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men' (Rich 1993:171). The conformity to gender expectations and the lines of power channelled through patriarchy forced Rich, like other women at the time, to begin to question this split and the scripts it imposed on women. Her way forward was to 'use myself as an illustration' (ibid.: 170) and connect her own experiences as a woman in the 1950s with wider 'political' struggles. The two should not be separated, for to do so was to accept the political divisions of gender determined by 'masculine ideologies', that said women operated in one sphere and their 'problems [were] trivial, unscholarly, nonexistent' (Rich 1979:207). This recognition that the 'personal' was the 'political' was central to many of the struggles for 'rights' at this time (see [Chapter 3](#)): 'politics was not something "out there" but something "in here" and of the essence of my condition' (Rich 1993:175).

Thus, out of the 1950s came a revived feminism challenging in different ways the 'script' of domestic ideology being written in the decade. 'Scripts specify, like blueprints the whos, whats, whens, wheres and whys for given types of activity...It is like a blueprint or roadmap or recipe, giving directions' (Weeks 1986:57). Such impositions of gender 'scripts' had to be interrogated and challenged by activists, writers and, ultimately, in the lives of ordinary people. If these 'blueprints' did not cohere with individual experience, it was because they spoke from a universalised perspective that did not consider the differences inherent within gender. It has, therefore, always been a characteristic of the excluded and marginalised, like women and homosexuals, that they sought to express their experience in their voice (see [Chapter 3](#)). To this end, personal autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works have been central to gender and sexuality studies. If the dominant culture assigned a particular normalised image, then part of the struggle was to present a counter-image through a variety of forms. As we shall show, a characteristic of gender studies in America has been the proliferation of diverse personal/political histories, stories and accounts determined to demonstrate that 'a person is not simply the *actor* who follows ideological scripts, but is also an *agent* who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them—or not' (Smith 1988:xxxiv-v). The person that 'speaks' for themselves, in whatever arena or form, has been transformed from object, defined by others, to subject in the process of self-definition.

Women since first wave feminism had begun to connect their personal experience to the wider world of politics, and by the 1960s it became sloganised as ‘the personal is the political’. Using broadly autobiographical experiences, many self-conscious works of subjectivity demonstrated ‘new scripts for women’s lives...being written...as oppositional cultural practices trying to change the cultural meanings of gender’ (Lauret 1994: 97, 99). They rejected the ‘malestream’ stories that had privileged certain views of achievement, history and existence, and pointed out that ‘they are neither objective, nor value-free, nor inclusively “human”’ (Rich 1979: 207). Women’s stories intervene in these assumptions ‘offering explorations of the social and psychic construction of female subjectivity’ (Lauret 1994:99) and asserting women as active, articulate beings in the process of becoming and change, rather than the products of a patriarchal configuration as mother, lover or wife. Instead of the ‘careers of domestic perfection’ with women defined by ‘the suburbs, technology...the family’ and characterised by ‘the sense of drift, of being pulled along on a current’ (Rich 1979:42), women were rediscovering their lives and finding ways to express them.

### **OUT OF THE 1950S: SYLVIA PLATH, *THE BELL JAR* (1963)**

Published in 1963, the same year as Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Plath’s novel is an example of ‘self-conscious subjectivity’ in which her own life is the raw material through which to explore a ‘split’ self in a split age. Here the central character, Esther Greenwood, is divided between what she is ‘supposed to be’ (Plath 1972:2) according to the gender rules of America in the 1950s, and what she wants to be within herself. Early on in the book, she describes herself ‘adrift’, like Rich; ‘I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself...(I was) like a numb trolley-bus... still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo’ (ibid.: 3). The ‘hullabaloo’ consists of all the voices and institutions—family, education, work—that seek to define her as ‘female’ and place her into a specific, preordained category. In particular, Plath uses the world of women’s magazines as an example of the formation of such a set of gender-guidelines, just as Friedan did in her book and more recently Brett Harvey (1994). Esther’s self is fixed, with ‘the years of my life spaced out along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires’ (Plath 1972:129) and all her desires are shrunken and reduced.

One of the prominent metaphors in the novel is that of language and writing which are traditionally denied to women within the framework of patriarchy. Plath asked in her *Journals*,

what inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing...and not feel this jam-up of feeling behind a glass-dam fancy-facade of numb dumb wordage?  
(Yorke 1991:67)

Marginalised, women do not have access to their own voice and are imprisoned in male language, which ‘force[s] us to name our truths in an alien language, to dilute them’ (Rich 1979:207). Toril Moi has termed this ‘the ventriloquism of patriarchy’ (Moi 1985:68), with men speaking for women, and Plath uses this precise image of ventriloquism (Plath 1972: 107) in the novel (as Edmund White later), and in a key section describes how Esther’s mother wanted her to learn shorthand, which she resisted because ‘I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters’ (ibid.: 79). Rather than be ‘a slave in some private, totalitarian state’ (ibid. 89), her definition of marriage, she seeks to ‘dictate’ her own life, write her own script and so reject the limited roles provided by patriarchy:

The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket.  
(ibid.: 87)

To reject the fixed script of wife-mother, with its ‘infinite security’, is to assert the possibility of self-actualisation and alternatives to this ‘norm’; to ‘write your self’, rather than be a ‘scrawled over letter’ (ibid.: 21) ‘reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow’ (Marks and De Courtivron 1981:250). Plath’s novel dramatises, as Chopin’s *The Awakening* had a century before, the desire to emancipate the self from the enclosure of patriarchal definition. The transgressive nature of this resistance is articulated with the powerful and violent imagery of suicide, which as Hélène Cixous writes has a precise function: ‘we must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing’ (Marks and De Courtivron: 250). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther severs her ‘false’ self, ‘the smudgy photograph of the dead girl’ (Plath 1972:154) because it represents the terrible uniformity of gendered society, its impositions and restrictions, buried ‘deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at’ (ibid.: 156).

The radical cutting away of patriarchal power inherent in *The Bell Jar* does not, however, solve Esther’s identity quest, but, like Edna Pontellier and the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it unchains her from the ‘bell jar’ of male definition. Indeed, Esther is, at the end of the novel, full of ‘question marks’ and ‘on the threshold’, ‘pointing to a yet-to-be-determined future’ rather than any ‘fixed and coherent identity’ (ibid.: 257). This is an open reading of identity, which counters the traditional, limited definition of ‘woman’ by men and by liberal feminists like Friedan<sup>5</sup> and presents instead an image of ‘subjectivity which is always positional, provisional, or... “subject to change”’ (Lauret 1994:

101). Plath replaces fixity with flux, adjusting a patriarchal view of woman with, as Rosi Braidotti puts it, 'a knot of interrelated questions' (ibid.: 101), 'as if the usual order of the world had shifted slightly, and entered a new phase' (Plath 1972:252).

Plath's work, to some extent, relates to a struggle within feminism in the 1960s, between Friedan's National Organization for Women (NOW), formed in 1966, and Women's Liberation, because the novel is concerned with Esther's discovery of her self outside of the control of men. Her difference is important to the book and cannot be found within the existing male structures of power which appear as 'totalitarian' and brutalising. She has to free herself from male 'colonialism', wherein her body is their conquest, and assert her own agency, through choice and action at the novel's end. The precise liberation of the body is crucial since for so long it has been the site of restriction and control. Women's bodies apparently defined their lives because they were capable of child-birth and this, as Perkins Gilman asserts, seemed to confine them to the fragile world of the home and the nursery. Plath's fascination with the body typifies the attention given to it in the 1960s and 1970s by feminists who saw it as the lost territory, colonised by men (doctors, teachers, boyfriends, husbands), that had to be rediscovered and repossessed. Writing was a means to this end, for it gave voice to the female body and freed, as Cixous puts it, 'immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal' (Marks and De Courtivron 1981:250).

What remains suggestive in Plath's work became vital to the growth of Radical Feminism in the 1970s, with its call for difference and in some cases, for separatism. This goes back to first wave feminism's concern for issues such as whether or not women could be included within a system so heavily biased to men or whether a separate, woman-identified space was needed. Patriarchal values were so ingrained that women had to exist outside them in order to give full voice to a 'female culture' in its own right. This has been seen in French feminism's call for a distinct women's writing, or *écriture féminine*, in which the female body and female difference are asserted in language.

Such gender-questioning has enabled other factors of difference to be more openly discussed, and in particular, those of class, race and sexuality. Women of colour, often excluded from earlier discussions of gender, could now link their oppressions both to gender and to factors such as racism or poverty. The danger of earlier liberal feminism was its tendency to universalise 'woman', and therefore to see her as white and middle-class, like Friedan's women in *The Feminine Mystique*. Thus, the broad politics of the civil rights movement, including African Americans, Native Americans and lesbians, related to this more open attention to difference in ways that had hitherto been impossible. Such diversity meant that middle-class white feminism was no longer the norm and other voices contributed fruitfully to debates about the inter-relatedness of oppressions across lines of gender, sexuality, class and race. The work of Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Maxine Hong Kingston and Alice Walker is of particular importance in challenging the uniraical model wherein white women



appear 'raceless' as though they speak for everyone (Du Bois and Ruiz 1990: xi), rather like patriarchy once had. The opening-up of gender studies, within the larger frame of cultural studies, has given rise to what Toni Cade Bambara calls a 'gathering-usin-ness' (Moraga and Anzaldua 1983: vi), in which all factors of oppression can be analysed and transformed. One radical group claimed that 'we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking' (Moraga and Anzaldua 1983:210).

### SEXUALITY AND GENDER

The introduction of difference into gender studies has opened up the discussion of sexuality as a key factor in the way identity is constructed and reconstructed. It is no longer possible to pretend that there is a 'unitary erotics' (Merquior 1985: 133) or a 'normal' sexuality but, rather, a diversity of sexualities. These may not represent the views of 'custodians of official reality' (Mariani 1991:20) or be seen as acceptable within the mythical notion of the consensus, but they exist and are part of the cultural order. Plath's Esther Greenwood is circumscribed by gender distinctions, played out in the field of sexuality. For example, masculinity is represented as active and aggressive, like Lenny's place with its 'great white bearskins ...antlers and buffalo horns...[and] cowboy boots echoing like pistol shots' (Plath 1972:15), and women must be passive, 'the place the arrow shoots from' (ibid.: 74). Esther is caught in the sexual 'double standard' of the age in which women were expected to balance sexuality with marriage and children, or risk being ostracised by society. Thus heterosexuality was part of the 1950s' consensus, the uniform response to sexual desire that gave approval to one particular mode of sexual expression and marginalised others. Adrienne Rich calls this 'unexamined heterocentricity' (Rich 1993:203) and views it as ideological for it limits expression and choice and bolsters a patriarchal system that discourages autonomy and choice. What Rich calls for is a rethinking of such norms, of 'compulsory heterosexuality', so as to permit wider discussion and prevent 'the retreat into sameness...and a renewed open season on difference' (ibid.: 204).

Homosexual rights' groups came to the fore in 1969 following a police raid on the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village which turned into a protest riot in which gay men and lesbians made a stand against prejudice and harassment. The Gay Liberation Movement was a product of this event and began to coordinate protest actions, which ranged from direct action to broader critical discussions of the problems of a centralised blinkered view of sexuality. Lesbianism became a decisive factor in the development of radical feminism, with some believing it was the only true expression of feminism, rejecting the patriarchal conventions of family, marriage and reproduction. Some viewed female biology as 'essential', a determinant of being, and so only women knew women's bodies best, and they

were naturally nurturing and non-aggressive. Adrienne Rich called for a 'lesbian continuum' which is not primarily sexual, but to do with 'womanidentified experience' set against 'male tyranny', a 'form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance' (Rich 1993:217) based upon the ideal for a truly 'woman-centred' culture.

Although clearly not an issue confined to the 1950s, sexuality was discussed greatly alongside feminism at this time. Indeed, connections were often made between them, claiming that mothers who were veering away from sexual norms influenced their children into homosexuality or promiscuity (see Friedan 1982, Chapter 11). A film like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which was discussed earlier, also connects with a prevalent theory of the time that 'all parents of homosexuals apparently had severe emotional problems' (Bergman 1991:190), through the figure of Plato who attaches himself to Jim and is the product of a broken home. It is significant that Plato has to die at the end of the film, because in one respect he is the dangerous 'rebel' who threatens the *status quo* of the family and the masculine boundaries of society. Just like women who stand outside the frame of definitions provided by patriarchy, gays and lesbians have to be excluded so that 'order' can be resumed. The film's closure, with its salvation of the family and its prefiguration of the 'new family' of Jim and Judy, testifies to the social drive, the consensus to marginalise or 'kill off' the outsider. 'Heterocentricity' is, therefore, reinforced.

Edmund White's novels *A Boy's Own Story* (1983) and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* (1988) are set in the 1950s and describe the problems of a boy's collision with this heterocentric culture. The link between White's novels and Plath's is an important one and there are many similarities between them, but in particular, they demonstrate the pernicious effects of gender and sexual construction upon the individual. White's 'boy', who is never named in the novel, is surrounded as Esther, by pressures to conform:

in the mid-fifties...there was little consumption of culture and no dissent, not in appearance, belief or behaviour...Everyone ate the same food, wore the same clothes...The three most heinous crimes known to man were Communism, heroin addiction and homosexuality.

(White 1988:7)

White's linking of homosexuality with matters of national security was typical of Cold War paranoia in America, where any threat to the family and to 'normal' sexual behaviour was viewed as potentially anti-American. Plath's novel begins in June 1953 on the day the Rosenbergs were executed for being suspected Soviet spies, and clearly parallels her own 'shock treatment' with their deaths in the electric chair. Women's roles and sexuality were policed and controlled to ensure social order and anyone not conforming were forced into hidden lives. As 'boy' comments, his life was a 'dumb show in which I played such a decisive role—it was merely a simulacrum of actual feelings' (White 1983:70), causing him to

take on a false identity, as Esther had, to be ‘the wolf cub in lamb’s skin’ (ibid.: 79) divided and silenced.

Like Esther, ‘boy’ desires expression and to be able to write his own existence and not have to follow the script of the aforementioned ‘dumb show’. Contained within the discourse of heterosexuality, he sees writing as a way to ‘dictate’, to use Plath’s word, his own subjectivity, with ‘language as a site of resistance to the production of gendered meanings and...the perpetuation of heterosexually normative taboos’ (Easthope and McGowan 1992:135). He is still, however, caught between two forms of expression:

I thought that to write of my own experiences would require a translation out of the crude patois of actual slow suffering...a way of at once elevating and lending momentum to what I felt. At the same time I was drawn to... What if I could write about my life exactly as it was?

(White 1983:41)

To do the latter would require breaking through a level of social taboo and role-playing that is similar to that seen in Plath’s work and called ‘the screen of representation’ by French theorist Luce Irigaray (Yorke 1991:88). White, in the spirit of the age, sees ‘the hidden designs other people were drawing around [him]’ (White 1983:104), one of which tells him that homosexuality is a sickness that can be cured by education, psychiatry, religion—all of which become prominent in the novel. But like Esther, he must pass through the ‘treatments’: confess to his father, betray his teacher and reject the church, before gaining something of his dream of power over the adult-world that had circumscribed him. Luce Irigaray has written that women are

stuck, paralysed by all those images, words, fantasies. Frozen. Transfixed... dividing me up in their own best interests. So either I don’t have any ‘self’, or else I have a multitude of ‘selves’ appropriated by them, for them, according to their needs or desires.

(Yorke 1991:88–9)

How similar this is to readers of both gay and feminist literature, for it expresses precisely the tensions that underpin their identities in a world that privileges a patriarchal, heterocentric existence. To be ‘beyond... the screen of their projections’ (ibid.: 88) is to be a danger, an outsider and a threat to social order and normality.

The kind of consciousness-raising work of Edmund White and other gay writers, with its creative exploration of the dilemmas of gender and sexual identity formation, has become intensified by the spread of AIDS in America.<sup>6</sup> The need to speak openly about homosexuality has been an offshoot of the media’s representations of AIDS and in particular the association of the disease as a ‘gay plague’. Gay lifestyles became thrust into the full light of media

attention, to the extent that in 1979 *Time* magazine's cover would show two males holding hands (and two females) and ask 'How Gay is Gay?'. It became increasingly important that gay people presented their own images to America to counter the scare being conducted in the media. In contrast to the media's single view of marginal, deviant practices that produced the 'plague', many gays wished to present various counter-views stressing pride, community and identity surrounding their sexual preferences. Films like *Longtime Companion* (Norman Rene, 1990) depicted gay lives as close, loving and multi-faceted in their dealing with the AIDS crisis, whilst activist movements like ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) produced powerful slogans: 'Act-Up! Fight back! Fight AIDS!' and 'Silence=Death'. A writer like Gary Indiana, who represents a more radical gay style, wrote of the 'ideological conformity' and 'large totalitarian capacity' of America and that it necessitated gays be wary of '*how we present ourselves to our executioners*' (Mariani 1991:23). This debate about self-representation is as alive in the gay community as it has been in feminist movements. In many respects the solution is representational variety and diversity, what Indiana calls 'a plurality of consciousnesses' (ibid.: 23) and what lesbian feminist Audre Lorde expressed as 'the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference' (Lorde 1982:226).

Perhaps the best example of this kind of 'plurality' is symbolised by the AIDS Quilt, coordinated by the NAMES Project, as a memorial to those, male and female, gay and straight, who have died as a result of the disease. Each panel of the quilt emphasises the individuality of the person in stark contrast to the representations that classify and universalise the sufferers. It does, however, link the individual panels into a whole, to stress unity and diversity whilst creating an AIDS history to set against the myths constructed elsewhere. The quilt becomes a symbolic text, a reading of an invisible history, connecting the condition of AIDS with earlier minority struggles, of women and African Americans in particular:

he who possesses the rhetoric also possesses the power...the Quilt provides an opportunity for People with AIDS (PWA) to repossess the rhetoric and thus inscribe their stories so that they can claim dignity and status for themselves rather than be marginalized into mere victims.

(Elsley 1992:190)

Tragically, AIDS has provided a rallying point for gay activism, community and for concerns about representation—about how 'straight' society projected its images of AIDS and gay life into the homes of America. Controversies abounded, like those surrounding AIDS in advertising, and in particular the use of activist David Kirby dying of AIDS in the 1992 Benetton advertisement. It offended 'straight' society, not just because it portrayed death, but because it showed a gay man in relations with a family and suggested an almost Christ-like demeanour. By 1994, Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* brought together

Hollywood's studios, box-office stars like Tom Hanks and Denzil Washington and rock stars like Bruce Springsteen as a way of dramatising AIDS for the mass market. The drama normalised gay life, via Tom Hanks, and perhaps reduced the complexities surrounding AIDS, but it proved that the issues were at the heart of American life and not confined to the margins of private lives. Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, the cradle of democracy, was the site for a new struggle, and one that was no longer just a gay problem.

By the mid-1990s matters of gender and sexuality were centre-stage, in part because of AIDS, but also as a result of years of discussion arising from feminism. In some respects, Americans had learned that they were plural, made up not just of different colours, ethnicities and classes, but of different sexualities and genders too. The 'centre' with its closed vision of itself as white, heterosexual and male had been challenged on a number of fronts, 'the old narratives, stories, scripts, mythologies [have] become transvalued, re-presented in different terms' (Yorke 1991:1).

## CONCLUSION

You get what you settle for

(*Thelma and Louise*, 1991)

In Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* one of the women interviewed says, 'I'm desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I'm a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?' (Friedan 1982:19). Although a voice from the 1960s, it could have come from the more recent past for women still struggle against this kind of desperate limitation of their identities in a domestic, patriarchal world. A popular cultural text like *Roseanne* shows how this 'despair' and its associated cultural contests can be played out in a different realm of representation with powerful results.

### ***Roseanne: the world blown apart***

The popular television programme *Roseanne*, first screened in 1988, is an example of how mainstream culture has integrated aspects of the contests over gender and sexuality into itself. The show adopts the genre made famous in 1950s shows like *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Honeymooners*, but 'is a conscious fracturing of the myth of the happy suburban family', becoming instead, it has been argued, 'a vehicle of resistance' (Dines and Humez 1995:471) with its deliberate disturbance of gender expectations and sexual norms. *Roseanne* is 'woman-centred' with a 'subversive potential as a source of resistance and inspiration for feminist change' (ibid.: 474), subverting the norms of the sit-com genre which traditionally reduces the influence of the woman along pre-set gender lines.

Roseanne has said that humour related to life can have a decisive effect: 'I found a stage, where I began to tell the truth about my life—because I couldn't tell the truth off the stage. And very quickly, the world began to blow apart' Bonner *et al.* 1992:286). Like many other texts we have examined in this chapter, *Roseanne* is concerned with 'life-telling' and using these experiences within the 'fiction' of the show. For example, the fictional Roseanne longs to write, just as the 'real' Roseanne did. Writing, as always, signifies the desire for self-expression and authority. However, the show 'blows the world apart' by upsetting the conventions of sit-coms in every way; she is fat, loud, appears disrespectful of her husband, indifferent to her kids, and slovenly in her domestic duties. Indeed, 'she built her act and her success on an exposure of the "tropes of femininity"[the ideology of "true womanhood", the perfect wife and mother] by cultivating the opposite [an image of the unruly woman]' (Rowe 1990:413). The show examines female relationships across generations, races and regions and has chosen to explore varieties of female community or 'woman-space' (Dines and Humez 1995:473) in different series (the home, the hair salon, The Lunch Box', etc.) In a recent celebratory episode, Roseanne's kitchen is occupied by a group of quintessential middle-class TV housewives who stayed at home to rear children, clean their houses and cook, like June Cleaver (*Leave it to Beaver*), Donna Reed (*The Donna Reed Show*) and Norma Arnold (*The Wonder Years*). As if to remind the audience of her subversion of their 'norm', Roseanne educates them in her liberated ways and frees them from the 'script' that they have followed in their fictional incarnations. The show made the point, however, as we have within this chapter, that there has been a script of gender and sexuality established in post-war America that has in recent years come under increased questioning. The self-conscious use of these 1950s' 'moms' in a 1990s' show makes one conscious of the constructedness of the roles and how they might be interrogated with humour and irony. Roseanne has written that her mission was 'to break every social norm...and see that it is laughed at...because the people I intend to insult offend me horribly' (Rowe 1990:414).

The show has developed beyond this first-level 'unruliness' with its deconstruction of the 'mom' myth and the American sit-com family, to introduce several other issues such as class, race and sexuality into its gender framework. For example, it has two regular, overt gay characters: Nancy (Sandra Bernhard) and Leon (Martin Mull), who are permitted airtime in which to express their sexuality both visually and verbally. Neither is seen as a 'freak', although like everyone in the show, they are a source of humour. They are workers, managers, lovers who have power, relationships and emotions like all the characters in the comedy. In an infamous episode, Roseanne's overt heterosexuality is challenged by a lesbian relationship, and a screen kiss, with Mariel Hemingway, which deliberately confronted social fears and taboos through the comic medium of the show. Roseanne's control over the show, her 'authority', ensures a diversity in issues and in characterisation which has resisted the conventions and stereotypes of American television and extended debates about family life and 'values'. Her

manic laughter, signalled in the opening title sequence of the show, resembles Cixous's Medusa whose subversive power unhinged and disturbed, or Freud's Dora whose hysteria 'undoes family ties, introduces perturbation into the orderly unfolding of daily life, stirs up magic in apparent reason' (Gallop 1982:133). What a show like *Roseanne* has enabled is a questioning of definitions of gender and sexuality, in particular around the female image, and offered its audience a series of alternative, competing visions of what have so often appeared as fixed and certain categories within American culture. In the past, the 'unruly' woman could be comically assimilated back into the genre, her outrageousness controlled and tempered by the family group. One thinks of Lucille Ball or *Bewitched*, but in *Roseanne* this is never quite the case. The family is not destroyed by her, but it is questioned and decentred and she remains 'unambiguously non-assimilable' (Gallop 1982:134) and so challenging and subversive.

In its own way, the show does assert differences between genders and sexualities, and points towards what we might term postmodern gender and sexuality. This 'rejects all versions of essential femininity or masculinity...[and] suggests that there is no singular, true [gender definition] ...to reclaim' (Jordan and Weedon 1995:203), but instead it is 'fractured, contradictory and produced within social practices' (ibid.: 203). The show demonstrates constant negotiations over gender relations, sexualities and power-lines within and outside the family. However, if *Roseanne* has elements of this postmodern sentiment, it is also highly conscious of how these power relations underpin differences in class, race and gender and how they affect the public validity of the negotiations. The show no longer hides behind the 'screen of projections', but revels in display and spectacle, uses the body as a source of identity and strength and is constantly 'intervening in oppressive identity performances, troubling culturally authorized fictions' (Smith 1993:162) with its carnival spirit. Gender and sexuality are at centre stage and part of the show's cacophony of voices all struggling to be heard—perhaps this is also the position reached in the wider domain of American culture by the mid-1990s.

## NOTES

- 1 Helène Cixous (Marks and De Courtivron 1981:261).
- 2 A continual debate in gender studies has been over 'essentialism' which is the view that 'objects (including people) have an essential, inherent nature which can be discovered' (Burr 1995:184). In terms of gender this is often connected with the idea that women are 'naturally' or 'essentially' home-makers because of their biological link to birth and nurturing. This has, however, been a view contested from all sides of the feminist movement.
- 3 These pieties and 'virtues' can be seen clearly in the fictions of Louisa May Alcott, as examined later.

- 4 Chopin's exploration of gender and suicide connect her work to that of Sylvia Plath, whose *The Bell Jar* is examined in some detail later in this chapter.
- 5 Friedan (1982:233) refers to the 'individual identity' of woman, as though there was a single, fixed 'self' to be found or recovered through feminism. This is a view much discussed and challenged in recent years.
- 6 There are a growing number of influential gay writers in America whose work is multi-faceted in its attitudes, themes and styles. For example, David Leavitt's *The Lost Language of Cranes*; Gary Indiana's *Horse Crazy* or *Rent Boy*, Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* or John Rechy's *City of Night*.

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### FOLLOW-UP WORK

1 Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1991) argues that mainstream cinema is structured for the 'male gaze' and excludes the female point of view because the camera assumes a male perspective. Women in the audience have to adjust their view to fit in with the male one presented to them. Some mainstream films in the 1980s, for example, have attempted to challenge this view and the associated limitations on female representation. Consider Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), which is concerned with feminine identities, or *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which although directed by a man, Ridley Scott, shows two women breaking away from the definitions of a male world characterised by diner and kitchen. The ambiguous ending of *Thelma and Louise*, like *The Awakening*, and *The Bell Jar*, presents the 'reader/viewer' with images of suicide/flight/rebirth, but allows us to decide how we interpret its meanings. Specific questions these films raise are: have the women moved 'beyond' patriarchy or have they simply given in to its inevitable presence and power? What sense of identity emerges in these films?

#### *Assignments and areas of study*

2 Consider the following:

- (a) Friedan and others discuss the impact of women's magazines on the discourse of femininity. Examine closely a range of American magazines, interpreting both written and visual texts, and analyse the 1990s' version of the feminine that emerges. In particular, concentrate on the ideological positions adopted by the magazines, the myths they create and the values they promote. Relate this back to Plath, Friedan and Harvey's view of the 1950s and 1960s.
- (b) Analyse the opening sequences of *Bonnie and Clyde* from the perspective of Mulvey's essay and related gender criticism. What does it tell us of gender relations, power, the male gaze and sexuality in the cinema?

## Chapter 8

### Representing youth

#### Outside the sunken nursery

Late in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (1992), the idea of youth is dwelled upon and a particular metaphor stands out: 'youth really *is*... a sad evocative perfume built of many stray smells' (Coupland 1992:134). To see youth as something built up, or constructed, of many 'stray smells' is to recognise it as a complex, differentiated 'conjunction point for various discourses' (Acland 1995: 10), all informed by race, class, power, gender and sexuality. Youth is one of the sites where these forces cross, mix and clash: 'at a splendid crossroad where the past meets the future in a jumble of personal anxieties and an urgent need for social self-definition' (Fass 1977:5). The nature of this collision has given rise to much debate and discussion of youth, its representations and its expressions, and this chapter will examine some of the issues raised by these arguments. What this chapter cannot do is to survey the field and examine youth from all viewpoints, but many of its arguments connect to other chapters in this book. The diversity of youth cultural practices and texts is a testament to the differences within the constructed label 'youth' and this chapter will reflect and explore some of these diverse responses.

If youth is viewed as a 'crossroad', it provides an appropriate spatial metaphor that locates the concerns of this chapter with the extent to which youth challenges social direction, follows the path dictated for it or gravitates across both positions. We will employ spatial images, as youth texts do themselves, as a means of exploring the idea of social boundaries and how these are both transgressed and reinforced by youth texts within American culture. As Meyer Spacks has written, youth can be seen 'as violators or precursors of system' (Meyer Spacks 1981:296), and this chapter will examine the tensions inherent in this duality. These tensions are poetically expressed by the social scientist Edgar Z. Friedenberg's assessment that 'human life is a continuous thread which each of us spins to his own pattern, rich and complex in meaning. There are no natural knots in it. Yet knots form, nearly always in adolescence' (Friedenberg 1963:3). Youth texts are concerned with the tensions between the desire for a self-generated 'pattern'—'to be oneself'—and the 'knots' that fix and bind youth into someone else's definition.

## YOUTH/HISTORY/REPRESENTATION

America's historical formation has always drawn special connections between itself as a nation and the concept of newness and youthfulness (see [Chapter 1](#)):

We are young, vigorous, unique; 'on the cutting edge of history'. Since we are new, what is young, or vigorous, or unique is good to use *prima facie*... All people, everywhere, value youth...but America is the 'fountain of youth'.

(Robertson 1980:348)

This metaphorical language emphasises a perception of the New World as a place of renewal, literally a rebirth in which the energy of childhood and of youthfulness represents the chance to begin again and undo the corruptions of the Old World. 'Americans sought their lost innocence increasingly in their children. A psychic primitivism of youth replaced an accompanied geographical and cultural primitivism' (Sanford 1961:112). The idea of 'psychic primitivism' means that adult-America endowed its children with the hopes of a new future, for they were untarnished and could develop society from the struggles of their parents who had been touched by the corruptions of the Old World. The investment and the vision were thrust upon the youthful future. This paradigm relates to the view of the Old World as a 'parent culture' which had grown authoritarian in its power, persecuting and alienating certain groups within it and the rebellious 'children' had to oppose them in a classical confrontation between the past and the energetic, new future. To follow blindly the footsteps of past masters was to remain forever a child; one should aim to rival and finally to displace them. Inherited wisdom should be assimilated and transformed, not simply revered and repeated' (Lowenthal 1985:72). The past, linked as always with the Old World, 'like a parent' (Lawrence 1977:10), has to be 'transformed' by the energies imbued by the child of the New World, unafraid to rebel, to question and to challenge. Ironically, this rhetoric which had a genuine purpose in the days of colonial rebellion, later presented problems for the newly forming social system in America since each generation could not be continually challenged by the next without destabilising the established order. This 'certain tension' (ibid.: 11) in the way youth has been viewed in America is central to this chapter, which will explore the ambiguities and complexities that emerge through the continued obsession with youth in the culture. At once desired as a generalised notion, as a sign of vigour and energy, America had to temper and control youth to avoid clashes with the mature culture being formed.

America saw itself as the 'Good Bad Boy', a phrase coined by Leslie Fiedler, because it signified a youth who was 'authentic...crude and unruly in his beginning, but endowed by his creator with an instinctive sense of what is right' (Fiedler 1960:265). Youth then became a site of 'sanctioned rebellion' (Fetterley 1973) because the original rhetoric of protest, challenge and opposition to the

established order was tempered and channelled by the accepted practices of the given social powers. That is, the 'boy' may be 'bad' but only temporarily, before resorting to the 'good', that is, the socially reinforced and approved, or 'sanctioned'. In this analysis, youth is defused and made safe, representing a natural, but contained out-pouring of 'spirit', but one that cannot be permitted to challenge the hegemony of the adult/parent culture. The order remains and the youth is incorporated into the whole society. Many youth texts, that is books, films, television shows, songs, and so on, are microcosmic workings through of this larger cultural picture, demonstrating the necessity for renewed, coherent social/adult order.

A very good example of this in action is the film *The Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955) which was made at a crucial period in the development of a visible youth culture in America. It was the same year that *Rebel Without a Cause* was released, McDonalds opened, Chuck Berry released 'Maybellene', Little Richard 'Tutti Frutti' and Elvis Presley signed for RCA records. The film chose as its subject the efforts of a city schoolteacher Mr Dadier (Glenn Ford) to reach a group of disaffected male students. It set the mould for many 'problem youth' movies from this period, even being the first film to use a rock and roll soundtrack, Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock'. Yet for all its spectacle of violence, antiauthoritarianism and social divisions, the film ultimately aims to reassure and to reassert the power of righteous adult order. The film, like the later middle-class reconciliation movies of John Hughes, plays out cathartically the terrors of Dadier at the hands of his student-tormentor, the manic West, until the film can resolve and reorganise society around a new 'pact' at the end. Dadier, nicknamed 'Daddyio', re-establishes the law of the father at the end by confronting West and rallying the collective conscience of the class and in particular the black student Miller (Sidney Poitier). In a wonderfully surreal scene, filmed from a high angle, we see West prowling around the walls of the classroom looking for support to usurp Dadier's power, but visually it is made clear that he has been contained by the teacher's space and authority and is eventually stopped by the American flag used to hold him back from attacking the Father-figure. The scene is followed by Miller and Dadier leaving the school with their 'pact' established and a new, hopeful order asserted which is both the rule of the 'parent/teacher' Dadier, and a racial bond wrapped up in the red, white and blue. Youthful exuberance by the 1950s was read as dangerous and had to be curbed and channelled into 'pacts' of this kind or else excluded permanently, like West, so as to prevent social disorder. Images of youth had to be managed just as youth on the streets had to be watched and controlled.

Thirty years later John Hughes's *The Breakfast Club* rekindled a similar set of concerns about youth and education. Some of the differences are, however, instructive and relevant to the way youth has been represented and managed. Hughes's films employ adolescent narrators to suggest they are not adult-driven, but do still assert distinct values, moral lessons and return the audience and the

characters to a harmonious sense of order and justice, but not before youth has been paraded as full of possibility and inventiveness, as well as cunning and deviousness. Hughes's films, in their own way, demonstrate reconciliation and incorporation of youth into the mainstream, but recognise the variety (to an extent), resourcefulness and vitality that have to be admitted into that cultural stream. *The Breakfast Club* begins with division of students on class, popularity and gender lines arriving for a detention with the task of writing an essay entitled appropriately 'Who do you think you are?'. Brian, the narrator, tells us 'You see what you want to see. In the simplest terms, the most convenient definitions' and the film's goal is to alter these simple views. The film's closure is a reconciliation of differences into a workable social mix, an ideological vision of America that harks back to the search for fidelity and sincerity at the heart of so many youth texts, as we shall discuss later. The film suggests you can be anything as long as you are honest, have integrity and don't succumb to those who would 'brainwash' you. The final 'club' is a version of the 'pact' at the closure of *The Blackboard Jungle*, a democratisation of youth which harmonises it with the adult world, of ten in Hughes represented by the family or school. They are individuals and a club, united and separate, a classic vision of America as the space for all.

In the nineteenth century, children were often viewed as 'untainted by social artifice' and possessing innocence and emotional spontaneity 'which seemed increasingly absent from the public realm' (Lears 1981:146). This emphasis upon nostalgic sincerity endowed youth with regenerative powers capable of replenishing the corrupt 'public realm' through a 'vision of psychic wholeness, a "simple, genuine self" in a world where selfhood had become problematic and sincerity seemed obsolete' (ibid.: 146). These romantic, Rousseauesque versions of childhood indicate a certain aspect of nineteenth-century attitudes which saw childhood as an expression of values being undermined or lost in the industrial development and urbanisation of America. Childhood could be the receptacle for adult dreams of innocence and hope. Authors like Alcott and Twain, however, suggested a complex relationship between competing versions of youth which present a more interesting social pattern than the 'sicklysweet child' (ibid.: 146) often imagined in nineteenth-century representations. Their work, especially *Little Women* and *Tom Sawyer*, explores tensions within the imagined vision of what youth might be and recognises that youth is a border territory where power and authority are contested and space is won and lost.

### **BOUNDARIES AND YOUTH SPACES**

The concept of youth is 'a term without its own center' (Grossberg 1992: 175), difficult to define, covering many social differences and perceived in a variety of ways depending on the individual's point of view. Youth is part of culture's contested space and any 'unity is an ideological fiction' (Acland 1995:20). The signifiers that we might try to 'read' in order to define youth are mobile and

unfixable, and our attempts to gather them together underline the fact of youth's multi-faceted and complex presence as a concept within American culture.

In *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), where youth is the central focus, Ray makes use of place and space throughout the film to delineate and suggest the 'fields of power relations' (Foucault 1986:247) within which youth exists. Near the end of the film is a particularly relevant sequence of scenes played out in an abandoned mansion, in which Jim (James Dean), Judy (Natalie Wood) and Plato (Sal Mineo) gather. The film's use of space up until this point is dominated by official, adult, public spaces which seem to constrain and trap the young characters: the school, the home, the police station, the planetarium. Only occasionally does the film permit youth to step beyond these defined and controlled spaces and the abandoned mansion represents the most powerful example. It is an excessive family home which is empty and absent of family, father and all the immediate connotations of control and surveillance that the film associates with parental/adult culture. At its heart is an image of this vacancy, a vast, deep, empty swimming pool, which Jim refers to as a 'sunken nursery'. The scene dramatises the film's contention, like *The Blackboard Jungle*, that youth is in crisis in the 1950s and that children are better seen but not heard, for to articulate is to possess a voice which might question the emplacement of the child/youth within the space ordained by the adult-authority. The wild abandon in the 'abandoned mansion' temporarily carnivalises the adult control and parodies the dominance of the family and its values. Jim and Judy act out roles as a parody family exaggerating, for comic-ironic effect, the consumerism and narrowmindedness of the suburban restraint of the family. Judy asks, in a 'role' as Mother, 'what about children?', to which Plato replies 'You see we really don't encourage them, they're so noisy and troublesome'. Indeed, the controlled space of the 'sunken nursery' provides the answer to troublesome youth, for 'if you lock them in you'll never have to see them again, much less talk to them'. Judy answers that 'no one talks to children, no, they just tell them'. In this powerful scene, the parody plays out the concerns of the film with youth and permits its young characters to voice their darkest fears through the veil of the 'play'. For our purposes, it demonstrates the way in which space, its control and ordering indicate the social pressure and authority exercised on youth so as to mould and shape them to the will of the adult world.

The film itself reflects many aspects of youth's relation to American mainstream culture, for it fluctuates between representations of resistance and acceptance of parental-authoritarian hegemony. Youth desires its own space outside the adult/public sphere, beyond the surveillance of the authorities and institutions that dominate their lives. This is characteristic of the way youth uses space, as Grossberg writes:

youth could construct its own places in the space of transition between these institutions: in the street, around the jukebox, at the hop (and later the

mall)...spaces located between the domestic, public and social spaces of the adult world. What the dominant society assumes to be no place at all.

(Grossberg 1992:179)

Youth texts resonate with these marginal spaces where youth finds domains outside of the 'already defined place within a social narrative that was told before it arrived' (ibid.: 179). A nineteenth-century novel, like *Little Women* (1868), presents Jo March's space as her 'garret' where she writes, keeps pet rats and wears an ink-stained shirt, all of which run contrary to the expectations of the age for both gender and youth. Only here, *within* the house of her powerful, absent father whose 'law', like the law of society, she will finally accept, does she have some temporary control. By the time of *Rebel*, youth cannot bear to remain in the family house and can find no freedom within it. The film is full of dramatic exits by Jim, most memorably when he has his climactic row with his parents and leaves into the night, stopping only to fight with his father and destroy a family matriarchal portrait. Contested space dramatises and represents the tensions over conditioning and socialisation that occur during childhood and youth and take a variety of forms, but a predominant example is the domestic control of the house as opposed to Grossberg's notion of the marginal space outside.

### HOUSING THE SELF

The house, as a metaphor for adult-parental space, is often linked to the Father, the representative of the dominant social order, and is a powerful visual image of established, solid, economic territory that surrounds and contains youth, acting as a constant reminder of their subordinate position in the hierarchy of familial and social power. It represents responsibility, order, stability and predictability, the very things that youth is supposed to find itself opposing. Douglas Coupland refers in *Shampoo Planet* (1993) to the joy at finding a space he terms 'the antidote to my father's house' (Coupland 1993:218). In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986), Ferris's rebellion begins and ends in the family home, as if to remind the audience that his adventures are only a rite of passage, literally a 'day off' from the charted life his parents desire for him, rather than acts of total denial and rebellion. He is happy to return and be 're-housed' in the womb-like cosiness of the bed at the end of the film and to receive the approving words and kisses of his parents.

In Joyce Chopra's film *Smooth Talk*, released in the same year as *Ferris* and based on the Joyce Carol Oates story 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?', the house is the central motif in the film, representing the domain of the mother, who spends her life decorating it, and the father, to whom it signifies the pinnacle of his achievements. In a brief scene with his dissatisfied daughter, Connie (Laura Dern), he speaks of the pleasure the house gives him, providing the freedom to sit and smoke 'all night if I want to' on his own 'lawn chair'.



Both the mother and the father's attitudes, embodied in the house, are viewed by Connie as sedentary, lifeless and banal in contrast with her 'trashy day-dreams' of escape, sexual exploration and of the world beyond the boundaries of the house. Again, the visual use of the house makes this set of ideas very clear to the audience. Near the opening of the film, Connie is seen in long-shot walking down the hallway of the house, in shadow, leaning against the walls as if they were the bars of a cage. Just before she exits the house and the shot, she glances through an open door way at her mother who, as always, is seen contemplating the decor of the house, holding up a floral wallpaper onto the very walls that seem to enclose and limit Connie. Boundaries can be real, physical forces but also used to represent a wider range of psychological or social determinants that shape and construct youth within the larger cultural framework. In the story, Oates writes that 'Everything about [Connie] had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home' (Lauter *et al.* 1994:2060–1) and this insideoutside tension is explored in film and story. The attractions of the outside: of men, sexuality and self-identity become threatening through the figure of Arnold Friend, her seducer, who says at the end of the story 'This place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time' (*ibid.*: 2170). The house that Connie desires to escape is now her very fragile protection against the presence of Friend who has brought the seductive outside terrifyingly to life in a manner that reminds Connie of the crossroads of youth. Ironically, at the point of fear she longs to retreat to the safety of her 'daddy's house'.

Coupland's *Generation X* (1992) reflects playfully on the significance of the house:

When someone tells you they've just bought a house, they might as well tell you they no longer have a personality...they're locked into jobs they hate...they're broke...they no longer listen to new ideas ... What few happy moments they possess are those gleaned from dreams of *upgrading*.  
(Coupland 1992:143)

In Terrence Malick's film *Badlands* (1974), the house marks the boundary to be transgressed by its young runaways who see in it Coupland's sense of constraint. Kit (Martin Sheen) invades the house of the Father, kills him, burns his house and steals his daughter. The sequence ends with a long scene in which the house burns as a loud religious choral soundtrack underpins the sacrificial act that has taken place. This film's extremity contrasts with *Smooth Talk*, on one level, but resembles it in its fascination with images of rebellion and rejection of adult authority.

The Father guards and watches his daughter, Holly, in *Badlands* and his authority is destroyed by her lover Kit who wants to liberate them from his control. As Michel Foucault asserts, 'in the first instance, discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space' (Foucault 1977b:141), and youth is

constantly monitored by types of discipline and surveillance. Foucault discusses the ways in which 'enclosure' functions on the subject so that three elements can be ensured: 'knowing, mastering and using' (ibid.: 143). For Connie in *Smooth Talk*, as long as she is in the house of her parents, she cannot be what she wants to be and feels her own identity is compromised. Through the insistence of limits and sanctioned activities within these limits, subjects are correctly trained and normalised, to use Foucault's terms, and take up their places within the social order of adulthood. Youth texts in America have constantly entered into a dialogue with these sanctioned spaces and their circumscribing boundaries, testing out the social order, to offer a sense of 'Otherness' to the ordained and acceptable 'norms' and at the same time, with their incorporation, reinforcing and sustaining the hegemonic, adult framework.

Connie's entrapment as feminine and youth within the expectations of her culture echo Jo March in *Little Women*, who says she was

tired of care and confinement, longed for change, and thoughts of her father blended temptingly with the novel charms of camps and hospitals, liberty and fun. Her eyes kindled as they turned wistfully toward the window, but they fell on the old house opposite, and she shook her head with sorrowful decision.

(Alcott 1989:213)

The contrast between the outside and inside is marked here and suggests the precise limitation that Jo knows she has to conform to. The outside world, linked to 'liberty and fun', is contrasted with the 'house' and Jo 'must be proper, and stop at home' (ibid.: 213), whereas Laurie, her male friend, 'was possessed to break out of bounds in some way' (ibid.: 213) and move into the world beyond. Youth is constructed differently for feminine and masculine, as *Little Women* shows, for boys are permitted some boundary-breaking before being brought back into the fold. Gender is a further boundary that restricts what young females may do within a society whose rules and boundaries are governed and maintained by adults 'whose presence limits the unlimited' (Foucault 1977b: 81).

Foucault's concepts of 'surveillance' and 'panopticism' explain how one group holds power over others and transforms human beings into subjects. The Panopticon, as described by Foucault, ensured a circumscribed world of surveillance in which the practices of the socially dominant group were instilled, 'subject to a system of rewards for good behaviour, but...viewed at all times by a guard at the centre of the circle whom they could not see... All their acts came under official regulation and inspection' (During 1992:156). The Panopticon is 'power reduced to its ideal form' (Foucault 1977b:205) instilling itself into the lives of people as if they were prisoners. That is, not knowing if they were being watched, they assumed they were, and so conformed to the rules of the space. Such social control can be extended beyond the prison to all social institutions and 'render visible those who are inside it...to provide a hold on their conduct, to

carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them' (Foucault 1977b:172). This kind of surveillance internalises control, transforming real walls and bars into the spatial boundaries of everyday life.

The surveillance, control and normalising power of the adult-society represents a set of forces for conformity and repetition that are resisted by the young who seek their own space for expression and definition. Contained and delimited by the space that adults, parents and other institutions of control (school, church, law) have prescribed for them, the young struggle to find ways beyond these 'panoptic' forces.

### **A MODEL YOUTH TEXT? *THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER***

In Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, Judge Thatcher represents the panoptic forces, standing for the laws of the adult community which eventually incorporate Tom, through a process in which the 'individual is carefully fabricated' (Foucault 1977a:217). It is the fabrication of the subject, the 'rightly constructed boy's life' (Twain 1986:152), and the institutions that seek to mould Tom: family, school, church and law, with which the novel is concerned. Twain dramatises judgement as an active communal control working on Tom, as Foucault has written,

the judges of normality are present everywhere...the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements.

(Foucault 1977a: 304)

It is through such means that youth is trained, fabricated and managed, just as in *Tom Sawyer*, tokens reward the assiduous Church-goer able to recite the language of prayer and School uses the Examination as a repetitive, machine-like process aimed at training the young (Twain 1986:137–8).

As a model of youth texts, *Tom Sawyer* contains the alternative impulse towards the transgressive and to all that exists outside the disciplined and controlled precincts of an adult society's rules and boundaries. Twain suggests this with an image rather like those discussed earlier, with the children contained in the church, 'under supervision' (ibid.: 37) but looking at 'the open window and the seductive outside summer scenes' (ibid.: 37). Tom, like so much youth, is caught between the pull of the outside and the comforting controls of supervision from the community. To actually transgress into the 'seductive outside' would be to move closer to Huck Finn's world of the 'lawless...outcast' (ibid.: 45–6) and ultimately into the world of Injun Joe at the social margins. Tom, however, knows the boundaries and is never prepared to transgress them in any genuine way. Indeed, Tom's awareness of the limits and transgressions are interrelated and his

skill is in keeping the two in balance for most of the novel. Twain's language repeatedly emphasises Tom's concern for boundaries: 'Tom drew a line in the dust with his big toe, and said: "I dare you to step over that, and I'll lick you till you can't stand up"' (ibid.: 13). He is defending communal territory, its rules and codes of behaviour from the 'enemy' (ibid.: 14) outside and so acknowledges again the social space within which he moves. Thus, when really tested, Tom opts for the known: to decorate the fence that encloses his world, rather than to break it down.

Similarly, at McDougal's cave, a psychological space where 'it was not customary to venture much beyond this known portion' (ibid.: 177), all the elements that structure and order the discipline of Tom's society are replaced. It is a representation of youth's dilemma and Tom opts for the world of 'security' (ibid.: 203) where the norms are clear and rejects the 'bloody-minded outcast' and true transgressor Injun Joe who lies dead *in the cave*. Unlike Huck, who loathes being the 'target of everybody's gaze', Tom relishes being 'the spectacle' at its heart to the extent that he is willing to become the surrogate son to the community's controlling force, Judge Thatcher, who compares him with George Washington, Father of his Country, the very figure of America's sense of honesty, truth and good ness. The hegemonic enclosure of Tom into the world of the Judge continues with the programme for his future as 'a great lawyer or a great soldier...trained in the best law school in the country, in order that he might be ready for either career or both' (ibid.: 217).

Tom accepts willingly 'the bars and shackles of civilisation [that] shut him in and bound him hand and foot' (ibid.: 217) whereas Huck Finn resists since 'wealth...protection...society' threaten his need to live *outside* the community and he has to be 'dragged...[and] hurled ...into it' (ibid.: 217) and to all its disciplines and routines. To emphasise Tom's total conformity, it is he who takes on the policing parent role with Huck and 'urged him to go home' (ibid.: 218). Becoming the shadow of the Judge, Tom has undergone his fabrication into masculinity and the dominant social order.

The boy makes peace with his father, identifies with him, and is thus introduced into the symbolic role of manhood. He has become a gendered subject...[and] will now grow up within those images and practices which his society happens to define as 'masculine'.

(Eagleton 1983:155)

Twain suggests that youth can, therefore, function in direct relation to the dominant adult culture as an Other, which tests out the boundaries of that social order, and through this process reinforces its rules. Within this pattern, rebellion is inherently vital to the way culture works because youth interacts, challenges and criticises the adult world, only to be incorporated into it in some form. As Acland writes, 'youth acts as an Other, distanced, yet inseparable, from the social order...always dependent upon disgust and desire' (Acland 1995:19). Just

as Tom Sawyer is disciplined for his mischief, he is also the source of fascination for the townsfolk who desire the freedoms and adventures that he has and the fun he enjoys on the margins of their adult-determined boundaries. Acland argues that 'youth...is simultaneously transgressive and revered' (ibid.:19), a tension, as we have argued, seen in most representative youth texts.

### THE DREAM OF EDEN

J.D.Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which has been read as a passionate study of youth alienation, longs for a vision of America that has been lost in the post-war rush into consumerism and technology. For Salinger's hero Holden Caulfield, the adult world is 'phoney' with the panoptic forces moulding and training the young to imitate the society they have created. Early on in the novel, Holden reports ironically his school's mission of 'moulding young boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men' (Salinger 1972:6), but he sees through the advertising image to the phoniness below. However, Holden's journey into the adult-world of New York only confirms the fear he has that no one else can see the false values that he so detests, and it is he that is driven mad by their dominance.

Holden wants to 'hold on' to other values and, as in *Rebel Without a Cause*, at the centre of *Catcher* is a plea for sincerity, honesty and decency, which for Holden is associated with the past, indeed, with the dead and with the static. The psychologist Erik Erikson termed this the search for 'fidelity', for 'disciplined devotion' in youth's roles as 'renewers of ethical strength, as rebels bent on the destruction of the outlived' (Friedenberg 1965:10). In *Rebel*, Plato says that Jim 'doesn't say much, but when he does you know he means it, he's sincere' and Judy replies, 'Well that's the main thing,' Later, Jim's inadequate father tries to persuade his son to lie rather than tell about the fatal crash on the 'chicken run', 'that's the main thing', he says. The film suggests that the gap between these versions of 'the main thing' is significant, contrasting youth's desire for sincerity with adult expediency and duplicity. Jim's father says 'you can't be idealistic all your life, Jim', but this is exactly what the film suggests youth wants to be. The phoney world, without trust and courage, is what Jim is confused by, just like Holden who clings onto his dead brother's memory and his catching mitt as if they contain the magic to connect him to a better, but lost world of innocence and trust. Holden resists overt sexuality for it represents a movement into adulthood and phoniness, responsibilities and choices, preferring instead the world to stand still, in an imaginary time of innocence, like the world he associates with his sister Phoebe and the museum that both she and he have visited. The museum typifies a certain tendency in youth texts towards a celebration of the past and a desire for an unchanging reality. In one respect the museum is Holden's space outside of the rush of adult life where 'everything stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move...Nobody'd be different' (Salinger 1972:127). In *Rebel*, this is the space of the abandoned mansion before it is

disrupted by the arrival of the gang and then the police. The sense of continuity is vital, replacing the rapid change of adulthood with a secure and predictable calm. For Holden the thought that Phoebe is repeating his experience is reassuring, but he knows that although the museum remains the same, she will 'be different every time she saw it' (ibid.: 128): 'Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone. I know that's impossible, but it's too bad anyway' (ibid.: 128).

Texts like *Catcher, Rebel* and others transgress adult social codes because they believe them to be false and desire instead 'lost' values and an authentic world, which is, as Holden admits, 'impossible', because of the inevitability of time and change. Holden's dream of being the catcher in the rye saving children from their 'fall' over the 'crazy cliff' into adulthood is part of his longing to remain in the imaginary, timeless innocence of childhood.

This exact tendency is repeated in the novel *The Outsiders* by S.E.Hinton (1967), written when she was herself in her teens. Like Salinger, but without his humour and irony, the novel's 'family' of boys without parents is a mythic, surrogate community fulfilling one of the central fantasies of youth texts, to exist in a space beyond the adult world. For Hinton, however, the seeming fantasy is inadequate and imbalanced, producing troubled and violent youths who long for another kind of family. As with Holden Caulfield, it is the desire to return to a simpler, womb-like continuity beyond the class-ridden society of gangs and school: 'It seems like there's gotta be someplace without greasers or Socs, with just people. Plain ordinary people... In the country' (Hinton 1972:39). Again the imagery of the 'seductive outside' is prominent, with the country representing a natural space beyond the confining world of the social institutions that mould and impose their values on the youthful characters. In *The Outsiders*, this new imagined space permits the rebirth of the dead parents: 'I brought Mom and Dad back to life... Mom would bake some more chocolate cakes and Dad would drive the pick-up out early to feed the cattle... My mother was golden and beautiful' (ibid.:39-40). A static, golden world without death and change is once again the ideal as in Francis Ford Coppola's film of *The Outsiders* (1983) where the utopian country is rendered visually in golden and bright colours echoing Ponyboy's memory of his mother, and also linking to one of the central motifs in the book, a poem by Robert Frost. Its refrain of 'nothing gold can stay' is a reminder, just like Holden's recognition that the static dream of the museum is impossible, that the boys cannot avoid adulthood and 'stay gold' and yet simultaneously it celebrates the belief that 'you're gold when you are a kid' (ibid.: 127). As Johnny says, 'Too bad it couldn't stay like that all the time' (ibid.: 59), but they know change is inevitable and adulthood will claim them with all its divisions and falsities. This dream of 'Eden', as the Frost poem calls it, is precisely the dream of return to a continuity akin to the womb, to the relationship of unborn child to the Mother where everything co-exists and is part of a whole, total sense of being. Holden longs to be free of New York and fantasises about a

cabin in the woods (Salinger 1972:137–8, 205), that he and Jane would go to whilst they were young and before everything was ‘entirely different’ (ibid.: 138). Jacques Lacan, the French psychologist, termed this the Imaginary, pre-Oedipal phase, in which the child is undivided, coterminous with the mother and untroubled by the crises of sexuality (the Oedipal phase) and the institutions of the social order (Symbolic Order). It is no surprise that in all Hinton’s novels mothers have important, however minor, roles and are often linked with the past and a sense of better times.

In *The Outsiders*, as in *Catcher*, there is a scene in which children are saved. In the case of Hinton’s novel it is an actual event in which Johnny saves children from a burning church, whilst in *Catcher* it is Holden’s fantasy of being the ‘catcher in the rye’. However, they both represent the belief that childhood is a time of sincerity and goodness worth preserving, ‘saving’, from the ‘fall/death’ of adulthood. Johnny says ‘It’s worth saving those kids...When you’re a kid everything’s new, dawn. It’s just when you get used to everything that it’s day’ (Hinton 1972:127). It’s appropriate that Holden’s favourite novel is *The Great Gatsby* whose eponymous hero wants only to ‘repeat the past’ and reinvolve a lost dream of love, since the idea is at the heart of both Salinger’s and Hinton’s novels. A further reference to Fitzgerald comes later in the novel when Holden keeps trying to erase the words ‘fuck you’ from the walls so that the children will not be corrupted by the language, thus echoing Nick Carraway at Gatsby’s mansion at the end of that novel attempting to preserve his friend’s reputation. Both gestures are ‘impossible’ (Salinger 1972:208) efforts to forestall time and change and cling to the ‘capacity for wonder’ (Fitzgerald 1974:188).

Salinger’s final scene is a powerful condensation of youthful desire for sincerity set against this terrible sense of inevitable change and corruption that eats away at the dream. Holden watches Phoebe on the carousel, going round and round in circles, in a perfect unchanging moment: ‘I was sort of afraid she’d fall off... The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it’ (ibid.: 218). Although he prefers the security of her circularity, he recognises the inevitable reaching for the future, for adulthood and her incorporation into the world he detests and he is resigned to do nothing except retreat into his own madness.

Douglas Coupland has a metaphor that captures this problematic desire in youth texts to halt time and keep the future at bay, the ‘Kodak snapshot’. Looking at old photographs he sees that point in which ‘the future is still unknown and has yet to hurt us, and also for that brief moment, our poses are accepted as honest’ (Coupland 1992:17). The association of honesty with static, unchanging points in time is redolent of Holden and Ponyboy’s desire to retain their youth. As the high school valedictorian put it in the film *Say Anything* (Cameron Crowe, 1989), ‘I have something to tell everybody. I’ve glimpsed our future, and all I can say is—go back’.

## THE SPACES OF SELF-CREATION

If one response of youth texts to the onslaught of the social order and adulthood is to hold on to a dream of return and to an Eden beyond its grasp, another has been to seek a measure of control and authority in a world that seems to deny it. Texts and cultural practices explore ways by which the young struggle to find a space for individual or group expression outside or alongside the adult mainstream. This has been achieved in many different forms: music, fashion, gangs, subcultural actions, writing and so on, all of which create a 'language' outside the immediate control of the adult world. As W.T.Lhamon writes, the blues had long invented a 'vernacular doubletalk' to overcome the 'force fields of complex surveillance' (Lhamon 1990:59), and youth culture learned much from oppressed communities elsewhere in America. In a famous scene in the film *The Wild One* (1955) an old barkeeper is bemused by the 'bebop' language of the motorcycle gang who 'jive-talk' to him. The sense of separation and difference is immense and suggests the emergence of youth 'languages' in the 1950s which permitted youth to 'reside in that excluded middle area which resists concrete interpretation' (Lhamon 1990: 62). In this 'middle area' youth created its own 'space' outside the adult world and beyond its comprehension, often characterised by fluidity and forms that celebrate change and motion, like dance, graffiti art and video games. As Donna Gaines comments about suburban 1980s' youth, they 'fought back symbolically; articulating their dissent culturally, in their clothes, language, music, and attitudes...created autonomous spaces for self-expression, carved out a place for themselves on their own terms, and they survived' (Gaines 1992:254).

Lhamon argues that youth culture disrupts temporarily 'polite culture' (Lhamon 1990:106) and interacts with it through such things as laughter, critique and rage, effecting adjustments and change. He puts this well, writing that [young] people 'asserted the principle of public self-definition, and made space for themselves and their idiom in prestigious discourse' (ibid.: 108). In literature this has become a popular youth theme, wherein young narrators aspire to be writers reluctant to spout the established language of their parents, but anxious to construct a world in their own language. Ponyboy 'writes' the narrative that we read as *The Outsiders*, Holden longs to write, as do Jo March, Edmund White's narrator in *A Boy's Own Story* and Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* (see [Chapter 7](#)). The French critic Julia Kristeva recognises this as a major factor in the 'adolescent novel' with the urge for 'a genuine inscription of unconscious contents within language...[and] utilizing, at last and for the first time in his life, a living discourse, one that is not "as if"' (Kristeva 1990:9—our italics). The 'dead' handed-down discourse of the adult-world, Holden's phoniness, has to be cancelled out by the living expressions of a new, youthful language in whatever mode of expression. Although Kristeva writes about the novel, her observations are useful as ways of seeing the various youth texts 'that facilitate...the ultimate reorganization of psychic space, in the time before an ideally postulated



maturity' (ibid.: 10). Youth texts 'represented values and inculcated legends in the unscribed places of minds looking for their own values' (Lhamon 1990: 109), and seek their own authority against a world that constantly tells them to keep quiet. The idea of 'authoring' the self, a common desire in oppressed groups (see Chapter 3 on African-Americans), is a response to all those who would speak for you and dictate the terms of existence. To articulate is to order the world, to exercise power and to control aspects of reality, and this is why youth texts clamour to express themselves, to be heard rather than be trapped in an 'already defined place within a social narrative that was told before it arrived' (Grossberg 1992:179). To write is to control material and empower the self and for powerless, unvoiced youth this is an attractive possibility. For Jo March in *Little Women* this is expressed when she says 'Oh, don't I wish I could fix things for you as I do for my heroines' (Alcott 1989:157) and 'I hate to see things going all criss-cross, and getting snarled up, when a pull here, and a snip there, would straighten it out' (ibid.: 205). If life were like the fiction she controls, she could adjust and edit reality until she had a script she approved of, but in truth others have charge and construct the acceptable world of youth.

Rock music is an example of youth articulation. Coming out of a hybridisation of oppressed culture's musical forms, blues, jazz and country, it offered the possibility for self-expression in a new language. Rock could allow youth to 'live out its alienation in ways that would increase its own sense of control over its everyday life' (Grossberg 1992: 179). Youth music is a means of speaking a 'living discourse', of expressing a counter-voice to the adult society usually presented as the ideal. This was another route to the 'seductive outside', beyond surveillance, authority and control through the creation and articulation of 'temporary differences' (ibid.: 180). These acknowledge what Ponyboy, Holden and others come to see, that youth is brief and soon consumed, but that in the moments in-between childhood and adulthood differences can be signalled, pleasure achieved and challenges made. Music could become 'the space of "magical transformations" in the face of youth's own necessary transformation into its own other, adulthood' (ibid.: 180). Likewise, dancing, losing oneself to the beat and the motion, 'opens up a social space that is quite different from the public and private boundaries that hold our identities all too tightly in place' (Ross and Rose 1994:11). Youth music, and its associated areas of dance and style, liberate the body to express itself in a manner that counters the social controls of adult society. A scene in the film *The Blackboard Jungle* marks this precise disjunction between the music of the adult and the new voice of youth culture when a teacher attempts to engage the class with his treasured record collection. He pleads with them to appreciate the clarinet in one piece when they desire only to 'feel' the music and thus confirms the gap between them as unbridgeable. They destroy his collection and herald a new tradition and the very 'dislocation between the cultures of two generations' (Gillett 1983:16) that Chuck Berry would focus upon in 'Roll Over Beethoven'. Berry's songs read like a saga of youth anthems, intensely critical of established forms of adult life,

with appeals to the road, to young love, to free the body and to resist 'penned adolescence' (ibid.: 81). Rock criticised the institutions, such as school and the family, that were central to the limitations and boundaries that checked and curbed youth, and expressed an 'antidomesticity', attacking 'the place in which its own youth is constructed' (Storey 1993:188). Rock constructed a space in which a new language could speak differently about the world and 'tell the teenage story' (Gillett 1983:101), like Eddie Cochran's 'Summertime Blues' (1958) attack on parents, work and government who exist only to stand in the way of youth desiring 'somethin' else'. As Gillett has written, 'adolescents staked out their freedom in the cities, inspired and reassured by the rock and roll beat' (ibid.: viii) which they could now listen to on small transistors rather than in the company and surveillance of the family on the living-room radiogram. The intimate fantasies of rock and roll transformed by this youth space enhanced the articulation of a new language. The mirror in the bedroom, the dance and the look all became inextricably linked to the performance of rock in the youth-world, so that the sounds of the 1950s, the youth films and the development of street culture began to mingle in a way that produced new styles and voices. The integrative process of rock into youth culture had begun and established lines of power that would emerge and alter through the 1960s' counter-culture and into 1970s' punk and new wave as expressions capable of 'rocking the boat of culture and everyday life' (Grossberg 1992:156). Even if rock could not change the world, it gave voice to protest, desire and pleasure and through that provided a 'disruption of everyday stability' (ibid.: 156). As with other youth texts, this was not necessarily a full rejection of social values, but a temporary halt on them, a space for other questions and expressions to surface, and for an 'identification and belonging' (ibid.: 205) to take place in which youth could map out its own sense of values. It was, as Grossberg argues, the very same desire for authenticity that emerged as a core value in rock, providing a means by which youth could stake out a space for themselves in a world governed by others' boundaries, wherein the music 'spoke' or 'felt' about things that mattered, 'private but common desires' conveyed through performer to audience as an open, true channel of communication.

Youth music, in many forms, answered the surveillance and authority of the dominant culture with 'a counterculture of conspicuous display' (Lipsitz 1994: 20) that 'found a way to contest their erasure, to reintroduce themselves to the public by "throwing out" a new style that made other people take notice' (ibid.: 20). Existing 'underneath the authorised discourses, in the face of the multiple disciplines of the family, the school and the workplace', youth music lingered in 'the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance' (Hebdige 1988: 35), making a deliberate spectacle of itself, flaunting its style. As Connie feels in 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?', 'the music...made everything so good: the music...was something to depend upon' (Lauter *et al.* 1994:2161).

This belief in music as an articulation of youth protest is central to the film *Pump Up the Volume* (1990) whose central character, Mark (Christian Slater),

expresses his anxieties about the contemporary sterility of his dull, Arizona suburb through the medium of rock, transmitting secretly on a pirate radio station. The idea of the secret articulation, of stealing air-time from the official, 'authorised discourse' (Hebdige 1988:35) of adults is an interesting metaphor in itself, but the fact that the pirate DJ uses a disguised voice and rock to present his message suggests the power of the official culture to control alternative expression and force it underground.

The film articulates the 'secret histories...lived histories shared in places coded with secret meanings' (Gaines 1992:47) of teenage suburban life in a society that professes to be concerned about standards, but only speaks in the place of the young themselves rather than allowing them any actual say. 'Hard Harry's' radio 'station' expresses the obverse to a social order built around the precepts 'make the grade, win the prize, play the game' (ibid.: 9) and combines speech, music and form to tell youth stories like those described in *Generation X* as the equivalent to coughing up a piece of diseased lung. 'People want that little fragment, they need it. That little piece of lung makes their own fragments less scary' (Coupland 1992:13).<sup>1</sup>

### AT THE EDGE: THE DARK MOOD

Donna Gaines's *Teenage Wasteland* (1992) is a study of 'suburbia's dead end kids' who find few comforts in a re-imagined past, or in the possibility of claiming authority over the self through expression, and is much more cynical about its position in the world. As Gaines writes, 'These kids were actively guarding their psychic space because the adults controlled everything else' (ibid.: 38). Their options appear to be withdrawal and brooding or violence, destruction and pathology. Youth is, however, even in the darker materials we will examine here, not in total despair, but certainly channels of articulation and self-definition seem limited and receding rapidly. In the darkest scene in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the chicken run, Jim says to the ill-fated Buzz: 'This is the edge... that's the end', as he gazes into the abyss below. In *Less Than Zero* (1985), written thirty years later in the midst of the Reagan years, Bret Easton Ellis's disaffected youth inhabit clubs called 'The Edge' and 'Land's End' and in one scene two characters stand, like Buzz and Jim, looking down into a canyon at the cars wrecked below. In the subsequent conversation, the sense of nihilism which emerges in many of these dark texts is established:

'Where are we going?' ...  
 'I don't know...Just driving.'  
 'But this road doesn't go anywhere,' ...  
 'That doesn't matter.'  
 'What does?' ...

‘Just that we’re on it, dude,’ he said.

(Ellis 1985:195)

One of the refrains in Ellis’s novel is ‘disappear here’, as if to stand as a reminder of the emptiness of the world that surrounds these young characters. All values are gone, even the memory or dream of values, and the only trust in this society is on an Elvis Costello promotional poster tacked to the wall. But the refrain takes us back to *The Catcher in the Rye* where New York’s pavement is like an abyss and Holden is going ‘down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see me again’ (Salinger 1972:204). His ‘saviour’ is his dead brother Allie to whom he appeals, ‘don’t let me disappear’ (ibid.:204). Whereas Holden still believes he can be saved, by the time of *Less Than Zero* ‘Gloom Rules’ (Ellis 1985:107), and as Gaines explains, The world “out there” is shrinking. The possibilities of suburbia are exhausted, and your capacity to dream has reached a dead end’ (Gaines 1992:54). To ‘disappear’ in Gaines’s 1980s’ America, was to ‘burn-out’, to become ‘atomised’ with each person suffering in isolation until ‘you are lost—to those around you, to your loved ones, even to yourself’ (Gaines 1992:101). Ironically, Gaines’s youth find some level of ‘self-preservation’ (ibid.: 102) in ‘disappearing’ because it allows them to ‘numb out... by shutting down, denying access to your feelings’ (ibid.: 101) so that they are alive and yet dead to the world around them: ‘shut down, tuned out; you’re gone’ (ibid.: 101).

*Badlands* (1974) set in motion a genre of film now much imitated by Hollywood (*Natural Born Killers*, *True Romance*), but which clearly belongs to the dark cinema of youth. Terrence Malick’s film contains archetypal images suggestive of rebellion, discontent and psychic amputation, commencing with the killing of the authoritarian father. It is appropriate in the scheme of youth texts that the father is a sign-painter by trade, that is, the outward manifestation of Holden’s ‘phoniness’. Erasing the father not only ‘frees’ the children to wander the badlands, but also strikes at the social order and the lies it creates for itself. When we are told that Kit, the central character in the film, desires ‘a magical world beyond the law’, he is an extreme version of youth’s wish for the seductive outside, beyond the father, the signs and the boundaries of adult laws. Kit’s name suggests his efforts to construct himself throughout the film from the debris all around him, and his failure to assemble a coherent ‘self’ indicates the unaccommodated prototype that he represents in this dark tradition. There is no father to integrate Kit at the end of the film, since all that remains is the law sent to enclose him and impose its definitions upon his ambiguous personality. As Holly says, ‘We lived in utter loneliness, neither here nor there.’ Kit’s arrest marks his end, for he can no longer construct himself in motion, as he has been throughout the film, but has been reclaimed by the realm of the law to be what it wants him to be (the criminal). A prototype for many youth-outsiders, Kit resembles those youths Gaines wrote of in 1980s’ suburbia, ‘disengaged, adrift, alienated. Like you don’t fit in anywhere, there is *no place for you*: in your

family, your school, your town—in the social order’ (Gaines 1992:253—our emphases). As the film ends, Kit flies off into ‘no place’ and with none of the comforts afforded to Tom Sawyer embraced back into the Judge’s world. Having transgressed the boundaries of social space and social order, his final destination is the incarceration of ‘no place’ where surveillance, control and limit are total, awaiting death itself. His last words suggest his misunderstanding of America as a place that values individualism:

Policeman: ‘You’re quite an individual, Kit.’

Kit: ‘Do you think they’ll take that into consideration?’

The extreme individualism exercised by Kit throughout the film is way beyond the acceptable limits of social definitions of self-expression and has to be brought under control, disciplined and punished.

‘I can’t be what I want to be any more than you can/ says Motorcycle Boy at the end of *Rumble Fish* as if to reinforce Kit’s tragic misreading of America. To be young is not to express your own sense of self, but is about learning to be what others have scripted for you. *Rumble Fish* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983) was made back-to-back with Coppola’s other S.E.Hinton adaptation, *The Outsiders*, in 1983, but represents the opposite, dark side of youth movies to the more optimistic and romanticised view of the latter film. *Rumble Fish* is a distorted, brooding film which emphasises certain aspects of the original novel through the character of the Motorcycle Boy (Mickey Rourke). In particular, all heroism and light are drained from the film which is shot in iridescent black and white with a slow surreal quality to it. Whereas *The Outsiders* is like a 1950s’ remake, *Rumble Fish* is a meditation upon Hinton’s major themes produced with a sinister and menacing edge. One of these central concerns is the theme of time, but here it takes on a terrible threat, akin to the work of Ellis. In one scene in the film, a voice-over from the diner owner Benny (Tom Waits) comments that, ‘Time is a funny thing. Time is a very peculiar item. See when you’re young you’ve got time, nothing but time...throw away a couple of years here...and there it doesn’t matter.’ For Motorcycle Boy, time is running out just like his health—he is colour-blind and growing deaf—and the film constantly reminds the audience of time’s influence. In a key scene Motorcycle Boy, echoing a Gaines ‘burn-out’, tells his adoring brother Rusty-James that he is ‘tired’ of being seen as a hero, a Robin Hood or a Pied Piper, because ‘if you’re going to lead people you’ve got to have somewhere to go’. This is reinforced in the following shots by a scene in which the brothers stand in front of a huge, surreal, armless clock-face that towers over them as a reminder of their fragility. With echoes of T.S.Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Coppola’s film indicates a powerful sense of lost dreams and no salvation with its ‘maimed king’, the Motorcycle Boy, who will not be healed and whose ‘kingdom’ is a post-industrial urban desert with no prospect of renewal. Motorcycle Boy ‘is living in a glass bubble and watching the world from it’ (Hinton 1975:69), isolated and detached from any hope from the past and through him Coppola ‘problematizes the teen film’ (Lewis 1992:148) by

upsetting and dislocating the audience's expectations and denying familiar elements, presenting instead only darkness, death and ambiguity. One effect of the film is to oppose a romantic, mythic world of gangs and youth violence and to replace it with a slow, brutal recognition of change that pulls the young out of any sense they might have of immortality or stacticity and into time's realm. As the novel says of Motorcycle Boy, 'He had strange eyes—they made me think of a two-way mirror. Like you could feel somebody on the other side watching you, but the only reflection you saw was your own' (Hinton 1975:27). The film reflects back not the golden images of *The Outsiders* with its darkness dispersed by hope and family, but figures who can barely remember a better time and certainly cannot reclaim it. As the film ends, Motorcycle Boy's last gesture is to free the 'rumble fish' from the pet store into the river, an act completed by Rusty-James, since his brother has been shot by the police. In his last speech, the Boy tells Rusty-James to take his bike and go, 'to leave...to go clear to the ocean... follow the river, clear to the ocean'. Rusty-James is, therefore, connected to the dream of freedom and a return to the primal ocean while his brother cannot be free and must die in the squalor of the claustrophobic city. The film closes with a brief sequence at the ocean, but leaves Rusty-James in the ambiguity of the threshold moment,<sup>2</sup> on the edge of land and ocean contemplating his future, which may be no future at all.

Motorcycle Boy's plea to his brother to follow the river suggests that the movement and fluidity might be a kind of freedom in an otherwise desolate and limiting world, but by *River's Edge* (Tim Hunter, 1987), any sense of liberation has been qualified by the use of the word 'edge', connoting both the marginal and precarious. Like *Badlands* and *Rumble Fish* the film employs images of waste and debris suggesting the futility of young lives being dramatised in the films themselves. In the case of *River's Edge* a human body is signified as waste, dumped by the side of the river with other detritus from this bleak, careless society. Although the familiar youth sub-texts of authenticity and sincerity are employed in the film, they have become threadbare and worthless. Lane says, 'We have to deal with it [the murder]. We've got to test our loyalty against all odds. It's kind of exciting. I feel like Chuck Norris.' As this suggests, loyalty has become unreal, like a movie itself, and within this film the group cannot maintain any loyalty in the face of the overwhelming tedium of their lives. All they have is the marginal space at the river's edge, a space beyond their fragmented, almost non-existent families and the depressing nostalgia of their school, and yet 'this place that is no place is theirs' (Acland 1995:131). This despair is present in the work of Larry Clark, whose photographs of youth in Tulsa, Oklahoma had been very influential on Coppola's *Rumble Fish*. In particular, his film *Kids* (1995) aimed to answer the unreal films that Clark saw as 'bullshit...[and] made by grown-ups who just don't know'. Instead, he 'tried to make a movie that shows, from the kids' point of view, what kids are like when they're out of the house, when the parents aren't around' (Clark 1995:12). Clark's comments return us to *Badlands*, *River's Edge* and to Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1995) which,

in effect, explore youth ‘out of the house, when their parents aren’t around’, engaged in transgressions that exist at the extremes of this idea, out beyond the edge of all social order.<sup>3</sup>

### CONCLUSION: GENERATION X—AN IRONIC, BUT ENCHANTED SPACE

When Kurt Cobain killed himself in April 1994 one fan commented that, ‘He was the one man who sung a message that made me understand who I am’ (reported in the *Observer* 10 April 1994). In some respects his band Nirvana have come to epitomise a generation who had grown up without any sense of who they were or wanted to be. Youth identity had found temporary moorings in the 1960s’ counter-culture, in 1970s’ punk and as resistant to the 1980s’ yuppies, but into the 1990s there seemed to be new conditions prevailing. These were first charted and named by Douglas Coupland in his book *Generation X* (1992), but some of the sentiments were prefigured in the film *Pump Up the Volume* (Allan Moyle, 1990). The teenage pirate DJ ‘Hard Harry’ says, ‘Consider the life of a teenager. You have teachers and parents and TV and movies telling you what to do— The terrible secret is that being young is sometimes less fun than being dead.’ He claims to be part of the ‘why bother generation’ since ‘all the great themes have been used up, been turned into theme parks’. Coupland’s later novel, *Shampoo Planet* (1993), actually imagines an America where everything might be a theme park, epitomised by the vast ‘HistoryWorld’, with its motto ‘INSTANT HISTORY’.

Coupland’s work examines youth who have ‘preferred not to’, to borrow from Herman Melville’s story of non-conformity, ‘Bartleby’, turning their backs on the Reaganite economics and the yuppie competitiveness, to live a subcultural existence ‘neither simply affirmation nor refusal, neither “commercial exploitation” nor “genuine revolt”... [but] a declaration of independence, of otherness, of alien intent, a refusal of anonymity, of subordinate status. It is an insubordination’ (Hebdige 1988:35). Like Bartleby, who reminds the complacent narrator of his reliance on his workers and of his own dubious values, *Generation X* acts to remind the adult, dominant culture that ‘all you’re doing with your life is collecting objects. And nothing else’ (Coupland 1992:11) and that its ‘traditional templates’ (Rushkoff 1994:7) are no longer valid.

As if to displace these narratives of the official culture, the ‘structured environments’ (ibid.: 27) that society creates, the Xers instigate a ‘policy’ of story-telling aimed at cutting through the overload of history that has accumulated like a huge burden on the shoulders of youth. As Rushkoff puts it, the Xers are ‘encumbered’ with a ‘legacy’ from a past in which baby-boomers had transformed themselves from hippie to yuppies and in doing so had run a society ‘on financial credit and social debt’ leaving ‘a huge lump in the snake’s digestive tract called American history’ (ibid.: 3). This weight of expectations led Xers to demand ‘less in life. Less past’; to step outside history and ‘read the

letter inside me' instead of the scripts handed down from others (Coupland 1992: 59). Coupland's characters are like computers overloaded with information from a tired 'accelerated culture' who must 're/con/struct/' themselves by erasing or 'downloading' their history and the materials that fill their lives up, so as to 'decomplicate' (ibid.: 77) life.

The Xers have not become blind to all history, just to its devaluation, having seen it 'turned into a press release, a marketing strategy, and a cynical campaign tool' (ibid.: 151), preferring to desire 'a connection to a past of some importance' (ibid.: 151). To replace a manufactured 'history' with the stories of lives and dreams is part of the 'connection' for Coupland, a way in which youth might inscribe itself into history and create 'a remarkable document and an enchanted space' (ibid.: 150). Yet unlike the darker texts discussed earlier, Xers face the world with irony and an attitude of playfulness that allows them to exist amongst the debris of postmodern America, its advertising, TV, muzak and McJobs (parttime, non-career jobs). Rather than whine, Xers have adapted and 'celebrate the recycled imagery of our media and take pride in our keen appreciation of the folds within the creases of our wrinkled popular culture' (Rushkoff 1994:5). Fully aware of the cynicism of marketing and the marketplace, they make an aesthetic out of 'slacking', that is, of living on the distanced edge of the dominant culture engaging in 'grass-roots cultural hacking' (ibid.: 8) in order to resist, like Bartleby, by 'apathy' 'the mind-numbing Muzak-intoned hypnotic demagoguery' of the adultworld (ibid.: 8). Richard Linklater's film *Slacker* (1992)<sup>4</sup> demonstrates this with humour and observation and like Coupland seems to be answering Gaines's call to break out of the 'psychic holding pen for superfluous young people' (Gaines 1992:254) into a new, ironic space for survival.

*Generation X* begins in the 1970s with the 'darkness and inevitability and fascination', the mood 'held by most young people since the dawn of time' (Coupland 1992:4), and suggests that by the mid-1980s the Xers have moved to the 'periphery' and chosen not to participate in a world that 'confuse[s] shopping with creativity' (ibid.: 11), preferring instead the silence and space of the desert. Here, outside the restrictive spaces of the 'veal-fattening pens', Coupland's image for city workplaces, they erase the history and expectations of the baby-boomers that burden them, and rewrite their own lives through their own stories, in their own space. In the mode of so many youth texts, creativity and expression take on massive significance, for it is through their stories that they reassess their own selves in opposition to those constructed by others. They long for 'a clean slate with no one to read it' (ibid.: 31). For example, Dag's ex-job in advertising is described as 'not creation...but theft' (ibid.: 27) for he feels he is stealing life through deceit, replacing human emotion and desire with simulation.

In a postmodern world, the novel suggests, the grand narratives have become worthless and what can stand in their place are the stories from lives actually lived, of people speaking for themselves in order to 're/con/struct' meanings in everyday terms.<sup>5</sup> As Claire says in the novel, 'Either our lives become stories, or



there's just no way to get through them' (ibid.: 8). The Xers might reject the imposed burden of the past, but they seek 'to make [their] own lives worthwhile tales in the process' (ibid.:8).

*Generation X* does not offer easy conclusions about youth or how its ideals might survive in the murkiness of contemporary culture; instead it leaves us, as readers, with the 'stray smells' of youth with which we started this chapter. Deliberating upon yet another story, Dag and Claire are left with a frustratingly open ending of a young man whose 'fate remains a cliff-hanger' as he 'roams the badlands' (ibid.: 173). Selfconsciously or not, Coupland echoes earlier texts we have examined, *Catcher in the Rye* and *Badlands*, with images of stativity (the 'crazy cliff') and rebellion (badlands), before providing Andy's dream of a harmony beyond consumerism, where humanity and nature co-exist with 'grace' (ibid.: 173). The 'seductive outside', much-cherished in youth texts, reemerges here as an antidote to the world adults have created, replacing it with 'an instant family' of 'mentally retarded teenagers' (and so fixed in time), unafraid to show genuine emotion to Andy in an overwhelming 'crush of love...unlike anything [he] had ever known' (ibid.: 179). The surreal ending emphasises the novel's ultimately ambiguous idealism and counters much of the darkness associated with *Generation X*, rekindling a strong sense of wonder at the radiance of youth and its capacity to replenish and to save.

## NOTES

- 1 Rock music is not only 'youth' music, since people of all ages listen to it, but the origins of it as a popular form, and its appeal to spaces beyond the everyday, are persistent and significant themes within it.
- 2 The concept of a 'threshold moment' is an important idea in youth texts, marking the liminal 'rite of passage' between the worlds of childhood and adulthood. It is a classic element in the endings of many texts such as Plath's *The Bell Jar* (see [Chapter 7](#)) or *Rebel Without a Cause*. For a useful discussion of liminality see R.Shields (1991) *Places on the Margin*, pp. 83–101.
- 3 Larry Clark's film and photographs could be seen in the context of extreme youth texts like Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*.
- 4 Other 'slacker' films have followed Linklater's original and warrant some consideration; *Singles* and *Reality Bites* are two examples, whilst Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* is an excellent retro-film taking a look back at the 1970s in a similar way.
- 5 The idea of 'micronarratives' replacing the grand meta-narratives was first discussed by J-F. Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) and function to legitimate diverse groups rather than a single voice, enabling a 'splintering of the social world [and] rather than confirming a monological conception of truth ... they offer an alternative model of knowledge' (Clayton 1993:100).

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### FOLLOW-UP WORK

- 1 We have not considered television in this section, but it is a rich source for the debates examined here. We suggest consideration of current and classic 'youth' television in two ways: first, to examine shows that are aimed at the young but which are broadly 'realist' in approach, such as *My So-Called Life* (1994–5) which examines family tensions surrounding the teen-dramas of Angela Chase, who in one episode said, 'Lately I can't even look at my mother without wanting to stab her repeatedly'. Explore its portrayals of youth 'types' and its self-conscious issue-led scripts that are dominated by a classical Hollywood need for resolution. Equally interesting are detailed ideological readings of *The Wonder Years*, *Blossom* or *Saved By the Bell*. And, second, to examine youth-oriented television such as MTV in terms of its style, modes of address and value systems.
- 2 Music video itself is an interesting area to consider as another source of the 'language' of youth. Analyse a popular video and discuss it in relation to the broad themes we have set out in this chapter. Such consideration might be

given to how it imagines rebelliousness, conformity or how it articulates gender roles amongst the young or relations with institutions of power.

*Assignments and areas of study*

3 Consider the following:

- (a) ‘Sincerity opposes duplicity and honesty opposes hypocrisy in American youth cultural texts.’ Discuss this comment and say to what extent it is a helpful way of interpreting the texts you have studied.
- (b) How do any of the cultural texts you have studied demonstrate the confrontation between youth and social institutions, such as the family or education, and what are the consequences of the contest?

## Chapter 9

# Beyond American borders

America is our home, declared President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his second inaugural address in 1957, 'yet it is not the whole of our world. For our world is where our full destiny lies—with men, of all peoples, and all nations, who are or would be free.' Eisenhower's words made it clear that by the 1950s America's 'full destiny' involved a committed role in world affairs. 'No people,' he went on, 'can live to itself alone...No nation can longer be a fortress, lone and strong and safe. And any people, seeking such shelter for themselves, can build only their own prison.' In this chapter we want to explore a number of themes to do with the implications of this vision of America's role as a world power, as a corollary to the emphasis on domestic life elsewhere in this book, but in so doing, we want to retain Eisenhower's link between 'home' and 'world'. In examining American identity, it is helpful to look at some of the ways in which America's various roles beyond her borders have connected with life within them. The drawing of too sharp a distinction between the international and the national spheres may obscure how closely they are related. This has wider significance for the aims of this book. As we have tried to show in other chapters, approaches to American identity which emphasise the way in which it is constructed through conflict and difference in relation to such issues as race and gender, may be more rewarding than those which seek to define 'the American character' or 'the American mind' as if it was only one thing. But to leave America's external relations out of the picture may nevertheless be to assume that American identities arise out of the admittedly complex interaction of internal forces, unaffected by the world outside the country's borders. 'America', from this perspective, even a multicultural, multi-vocal 'America', is to be understood as a result of what has happened within America, rather than as a consequence of the way in which Americans have reflected and acted on other cultures and nations, and those cultures and nations have reflected and acted on America. This is not to argue that America's international role is more important than her domestic history in seeking to understand American culture, but that the two are inextricably linked.

Our focus here is necessarily selective, given the scale of American involvement in the international order since the end of the nineteenth century. Rather than attempting a brief survey of American foreign policy, we want to look at some of the ways in which Americans have characteristically expressed

their aims and ambitions in the world, moving beyond the analysis of foreign policy from a political or historical perspective, to explore how Americans have responded in a range of other ways, including fiction and film, to the issues that intervention abroad raised, both at a personal level, and as part of the national debate about what kind of role the United States should play in the wider world. To leave it there, however, would be to assume that America's identity in the world was something constructed only by Americans. How other peoples have reacted and responded to the presence of 'America' in their lives is also revealing, and reminds us that the assumptions which lie behind much American foreign policy rhetoric may be interpreted and understood in many different kinds of ways. Approaches to American identity may come as well from relationships Americans have had with other peoples and cultures. How Americans have seen themselves with regard to others and how other peoples have come to terms with America may be as illuminating as how particular groups have interacted with each other in America. In this context we want, first, to use the example of the Vietnam War and its aftermath to open up ways of interpreting American policy abroad, and how that experience has been represented in a number of different kinds of cultural forms in a way that links with the opening discussion about ideological themes in American history. The stories which Americans have told themselves about Vietnam may be used here as examples of the way in which they have thought about the world and their place in it, but they may also be usefully compared with emerging Vietnamese responses to what in the West has often been seen as an 'American' war. Second, we want to look at some of the ways in which American culture has been received in the world beyond her borders, and how that connects with interpretations of American identity.

### **THE WILL OF HEAVEN: THEMES IN THE IDEOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY**

The Americans, wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835, 'have grown up unnoticed, and whilst the attention of mankind was directed elsewhere ... have suddenly placed themselves in the front rank among nations'. They were proceeding 'with ease and celerity along a path to which no limit can be perceived' and were 'marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe' (de Tocqueville 1965:286-7). De Tocqueville's prophecies about future American greatness and his invocation of America's missionary role in the world tapped into a vein of political rhetoric which was well established by the 1830s and which survived to influence American foreign policy well into the twentieth century. 'We have it in our power to begin the world all over again,' wrote Thomas Paine in his pamphlet *Common Sense* on the eve of American Independence in January 1776. The overthrow of British rule would be the occasion of 'the birthday of a new world', through which the American continent would become 'the glory of the earth.' (Hunt 1988:20) Paine drew on a tradition of religious and

republican thought in making his appeal which only added to the force of his language. The idea of America as a nation with a strong sense of mission, for instance, not only in the historical development of the North American continent, but also in the wider world, leant on such early statements as John Winthrop's famous sermon on the *Arbella* as it sailed across the Atlantic to the New World in 1630, discussed in a number of the places in this book. Winthrop's invocation of America as a special place, where the holy commonwealth of Massachusetts would be as 'a city upon a hill', a model for the rest of mankind, underlined the importance of America's role in the world, from the earliest days of colonial foundation. Winthrop emphasised the exemplary purpose of the American experiment, but others who followed gave it more of a missionary slant, in a way that foreshadowed Paine. This is well illustrated, for instance, by John Adams's diary entry of February 1765: 'I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth' (Donoghue 1988:229). America from this perspective had a special purpose in the world, one that was closely tied to the process of redemption. America would banish darkness with light, bring freedom in place of slavery, and save the world from condemnation. Not only would America exemplify the virtues necessary for long-term success, but it would also apply those same virtues to the wider world and to the way in which nations dealt with each other on the international stage in the future. Paine, of course, was writing before the successful achievement of American independence, and he played little part in the events of the revolution after 1776. However, the general claims he made for America's historic role in the world remained to be answered. How would Americans make the world begin over again? What kind of relationship should the United States adopt with other nations of the world? What responsibilities did it have to extend its own enlightened principles to less fortunate peoples and races? What dangers lay in store if the country followed an interventionist foreign policy abroad? To what extent might attempts to spread freedom in the wider world threaten liberty at home? Many of these questions were of such importance that they would echo down through the corridors of American history, and more specifically American foreign policy, for the next hundred and fifty years, and still remain significant in contemporary debates within America about the rightful role for the country in the world at the end of the twentieth century. However, putting these questions in this manner assumes that America's role in the world can only be discussed within the framework set up by Paine and Adams. The American experience from this perspective was seen as exceptional. America was different from other nations, and her involvement in the world would follow a distinctive path, in which the signposts would be her own professed ideals. In John Gast's vision of America floating serenely across the continent, the advance of civilisation brings light and banishes darkness. But if one looks at the scene from the point of view of the Indians cowering at the edge of the picture, then a different set of questions

emerge. The extension of the nation's boundaries might more realistically be seen as imperial conquest, in which those who stood in the way either had to conform or disappear. The process of continental expansion might not in the end be very different from the colonial expansion of European powers in the nineteenth century, and the American experience less exceptional than the conventional rhetoric argued.

Nevertheless, throughout the nineteenth century these questions were debated again and again in American public life as the nation encountered the prospects of territorial and commercial expansion. In general two broad answers emerged in opposition to each other. The first, and the one that generally prevailed, was that pursuit of national greatness in world affairs was entirely compatible with the cause of liberty. 'It will be worthy,' George Washington declared in his Farewell Address in 1796, 'of a free enlightened and at no distant period a great nation to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.' This was reflected in the consistent expansion of the United States both in terms of territory and economic power and influence throughout the nineteenth century and for the first fifty years of the twentieth. As Democrat Senator Henry Breese from Illinois declared in February 1848: 'Let us expand to our true and proper dimensions, and our liberty will be eternal, for in the process, it will increase in strength, and the flame grow brighter, while it lights a more extensive field.' Expansion in territory across the American continent was justified because it would bring with it republican institutions and practices, in a way that made the spread of American borders qualitatively different from the expansionist policies of other nations. Throughout the process of the acquisition of new lands in the first half of the nineteenth century, from the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 to the capture of California and the South-West from Mexico in the war of 1846–8, many Americans assumed that such a process was both benevolent and natural.

The second answer to the questions Paine left unresolved, while it was never able to successfully resist the first, nevertheless remained as an opposing set of arguments right up until the Vietnam War. Generally this sought to resist the argument that liberty and a full role in world affairs could go hand in hand. Pursuit of some kind of interventionist or imperialist role abroad would threaten the stability of the republic at home, and endanger those virtues which distinguished the American experiment from the experience of other nations. The acquisition of empire would mean the development of a more powerful army, a stronger executive, and a larger bureaucracy in a manner that would threaten the democratic and egalitarian nature of the American way of life. 'Militarism is an evil from which it has been our glory to be free,' declared the American Anti-Imperialist League in 1899, in opposition to the acquisition of the Philippines in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War.

Older analyses of America's relationship with the rest of the world sometimes adopted an alternative way of classifying its development since the late eighteenth century. For much of its history in the nineteenth century, the United



States had practised a policy of isolation, aloof from political involvement with other nations. It was only in the twentieth century that the changing demands of the world order, and ever-expanding national power forced it into an overtly internationalist position, in which the country committed itself to an activist foreign policy role. One of the difficulties with this analysis is that, as we have seen, for much of the nineteenth century the United States was an expansionist nation, which considerably extended its own boundaries, albeit within the confines of the North American continent. Isolation hardly seems the right term for such a process. It may be more helpful to see isolationism as an expression of the particular circumstances under which the United States expanded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. American growth reflected the way in which the American continent was separated both from Europe and Asia by ocean, as well as by the relative stability of both regions in terms of international relations. America could expand for much of this period without having to concern itself much with the attitudes of other countries. Where its interests might be threatened by rival powers, as in the case of Latin America, there was never any question of isolationism, as the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 made clear. Isolationism, it has been suggested, might more accurately be translated into a belief that the United States should always seek to retain its freedom of action, and should be constantly alert to the dangers of involvement in the affairs of other nations, when it was not in the national interest. Seen from this perspective, the apparent tension between isolationism and expansionism dissolves somewhat.

Despite the criticisms of those who feared the consequences of expansionism, during the nineteenth century the commitment to national greatness was often given an added gloss, as many Americans developed a way of thinking about other peoples and nations which linked the spread of liberty to assumptions about racial supremacy. Racial attitudes from the earliest days of the Republic were an integral part of the debates about America's proper role in the world, and frequently affected specific foreign policy decisions. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, American leaders often justified an expansionist foreign policy on grounds which assumed a hierarchy of racial values, arguing that the future of international civilisation depended on the spread of Anglo-American values and institutions into less fortunate parts of the world. Many Americans, for instance, assumed that skin colour and physical typology carried with them distinctive moral, spiritual and behavioural qualities. At the top of the racial order came whites or Anglo-Saxons who embodied such attributes as leadership, energy, perseverance, and independence. It was this race, Josiah Strong argued at the end of the nineteenth century, which was becoming 'more effective' in the United States than Europe, and which with its

unequalled energy, with all the majesty of numbers, and the might of wealth behind it—the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilisation—having developed peculiarly

aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth.

(Ions 1970:72)

These attitudes had a powerful influence on the making of foreign policy. As Michael Hunt has argued, 'by its grip on the thinking of the men who debated and determined these policies, by its influence over the press, and by its hold on the electorate, race powerfully shaped the way the nation dealt with other peoples' (Hunt 1988:52). Race, from this perspective, provided an apparently clear and effective way to categorise other peoples both inside and outside the North American continent. It offered a link between attitudes towards Native Americans and African Americans at home, and policies towards the peoples of Asia, Europe and Latin America. At the same time it flattered the assumptions of those who made American policy, since most of them came from the Anglo-Saxon tradition within the United States, at the same time as it fitted in with the views of many ordinary citizens, who were susceptible, for a number of reasons, to appeals which took for granted the historic destiny of the white race. Many of these attitudes may clearly be seen in the relentless progress of the American nation to the Pacific Ocean in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent settlement of the interior of the continent in the second half of the century, as discussed in [Chapter 5](#). The defeat and dispossession of Native-American tribes were justified by arguments that, as part of an inferior race, they were doomed to 'vanish' before the advance of a superior form of civilisation. Lewis Cass wrote in 1827, shortly before he became Secretary of War under President Andrew Jackson,

An Indian never attempts to imitate the arts of his civilised neighbors. His life passes away in a succession of listless indolence, and of vigorous exertion to provide for his animal wants, or to gratify his baleful passions... Efforts...have not been wanting to teach and reclaim him. But he is perhaps doomed to disappear with the forests.

(Takaki 1979:83)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as it became clear that pacification and reservation policy had assured the defeat of Native Americans, there was a temptation to give their demise a tragic dimension. Images of feckless and incapable Indians were accompanied by a more sentimental vision of noble savages who had failed to survive, not so much because they were inadequate, but because their simplicity, valiant as it might sometimes be, was bound to give way before the progressive march of a superior race. Luther Standing Bear, meditating on white-Indian relations in *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, sought to expose the inadequacies of such arguments in a manner that connects with the arguments put forward by others who have sought to resist incorporation into the American empire or to assert their own cultural identity against the weight of

American influence. The white man did not understand the Indian because he did not understand America. He was 'still a foreigner and an alien... who excused his presence... by saying that he had been guided by the will of his God; and in so saying absolved himself of all responsibility for his appearance in a land occupied by other men'. White men further justified their right to the land through their control of 'the Word' which encouraged 'a blind worship of written history, of books, of the written word' at the expense of the power and sacredness of the spoken word. Knowledge, as expressed in written language, became conflated with power. Civilisation, justified in the name of progress, had been thrust on the Indian, in a manner which was 'sickening and deadening'. The result was subjection and dehumanisation. In response Indians could make America aware of its full identity by reviving and reasserting the spirit of Indian art, religion and culture. The Indian could save America. (Luther Standing Bear 1974:567-77)

Attitudes towards Native Americans were repeated in encounters with other peoples as the United States advanced West. In the 1830s as Americans came into open contact with Latin Americans in the SouthWest a range of stereotypes emerged which provided a mix of justifications for the appropriation of territory or for intervention in Latin American affairs. Latin Americans were, like Native Americans, backwardlooking in their bigotry and corruption, and unfitted for the exercise of political responsibility or essentially childlike and untutored, and thus in clear need of the training and education which Americans could provide. Both perspectives emphasised American superiority and Hispanic inferiority. As was the experience with Native Americans, however, cultural clash in the SouthWest was reflected in expressive forms which sought to resist the overwhelming impact of white settlement, through the assertion of Hispanic pride. Mexican-American *corridos* in the second half of the nineteenth century articulated through narratives of the experiences of farmers and cowboys patterns of resistance to Anglo-American domination. In the ballad of *Gregorio Cortez*, the Americans, whiter than poppies out of the fear they have for his gun, come in search of Cortez, who has killed a sheriff. Trying to overtake him was like following a star: even if they did catch up with him, few of them would return because of his prowess as a fighter. Cortez is eventually overwhelmed but only by superior numbers, and chooses to surrender himself. 'You will take me if I'm willing, but not any other way' (Lauter 1990:802-7).

Despite attempts to resist assumptions of white dominance, such attitudes, while they have become progressively tempered by the way in which explicitly racist thought has come under scrutiny in the twentieth century, have nevertheless continued to act as a filter through which foreign policy leaders and many ordinary citizens have seen foreign interventions, as well as how those interventions have been represented in a range of cultural forms. Henry Stimson, for instance, justified American involvement in China with the argument that 'American idealism' and 'our economic civilisation' would help her along the pathway of modern civilisation, while at the same time believing that social

equality between black and white in the United States was impossible, and that black Americans might make reasonably good soldiers only if they were commanded by white officers (Thorne 1979:3, 6). During the Second World War, despite both official and unofficial American hostility to the legacy of European imperialism, many American politicians, military commanders and ordinary soldiers found it difficult to divest themselves from a racialist perspective both on their enemies in Asia, as well as those whom they were trying to protect against aggression. Christopher Thorne has commented that the Pacific War of 1941 to 1945 was to a considerable degree a racial war, not so much because of its immediate causes, but in the sense that Western suspicion of Japanese behaviour, both before and during the war, fed off a hundred years of explicitly racialist arguments about the characteristics of the Japanese people. American policy in an area like East Asia was often significantly affected by perceptions and prejudices which need to be examined alongside its long-held commitments to liberty and equality.

Alongside notions of cultural supremacy, Americans have often assumed, when assessing the experience of other nations, that the American model of development has some kind of general application. As Emily Rosenberg has suggested, 'To many Americans, their country's economic and social history became a universal model' (Rosenberg 1982:7). If other countries, particularly outside of Europe, wanted to follow the path to modernisation, then they should seek to emulate the American experience. To those who guided American policy, this meant amongst other things, a suspicion of radical political change of a kind which threatened the stability deemed necessary for economic growth. Though the United States had been born out of a revolutionary struggle, this did not mean that all revolutions were of themselves good things, since they might undercut those conditions which would supposedly promote modernisation, such as private enterprise, plentiful cheap labour, and unrestricted access to land development. Particularly after the Russian Revolution of 1917, when American forces had briefly intervened on the side of anti-Bolshevik forces, many American officials came to see revolutionary activity as a barrier to American influence, even when they might be in sympathy with, say, the anti-colonialist ambitions of those who were tempted to join such struggles. This, of course raised policy problems. As Rosenberg has put it: 'How could foreign countries who resisted American-prescribed "development" (often called "civilisation" or "modernisation") be handled without violating their "liberty" to try out competing ideas or techniques?' (Rosenberg 1982: 234). One way round this dilemma was to argue that the United States could help such countries to see the light, and discard the blinkers which restricted their vision. American belief in the supremacy of its own missionary role would justify persuading, perhaps even forcing, peoples to accept American ways.

These ways of thinking about America's role in the world all emerged in the nineteenth century, but they remained an abiding influence as the growth of American power more regularly involved the nation in European and Asian

politics in the opening years of the twentieth century. Woodrow Wilson led the United States into the First World War with the declaration that

right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

(Brinkley 1995:630–1)

When he campaigned in 1919 for American membership of the League of Nations he described the American soldiers who had died in the First World War as crusaders.

They were not going forth to prove the might of the United States. They were going forth to prove the might of justice and right, and all the world accepted them as crusaders, and their transcendent achievement has made all the world believe in America as it believes in no other nation organised in the modern world.

(Wrage and Baskerville 1962:85)

Wilson's call for full American political involvement in the international order was not realised in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, though American economic and cultural influence outside its own borders continued to grow through the 1920s both in Europe and Asia. The decade of depression marked something of a hiatus as national politics demanded a concentration on domestic recovery but involvement in the Second World War brought a full-scale restatement of the links between America's national destiny and the extension of liberty. After the successful prosecution of the Second World War, however, it soon became apparent that hopes for a stable international order were going to be difficult to realise. Though the United States emerged from the war as the strongest nation in the world, however that might be measured, Americans quickly found that such unprecedented power brought with it a fresh set of demands, which ensured a fresh commitment to an international role. The development of the Cold War in the five years after 1945 convinced many American foreign policy leaders that the United States had to commit itself to protect liberty against what they perceived as the omnipresent threat of international Communism. 'At the present moment in world history,' President Truman declared in 1947, 'nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life...I believe that we must assist free people to work out their destinies in their own way' (Griffith 1992:113). The rhetoric of the Truman Doctrine guided much American policy through the 1950s and 1960s, finding clear echoes in such statements as Eisenhower's 1957 inaugural address cited at the beginning

of this chapter, and John F. Kennedy's inaugural address of 1961 when he declared that America would 'pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, or oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty' (Wrage and Baskerville 1962:318). The 1970s brought a reappraisal of this kind of open-ended commitment, particularly in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the development of *détente* with the Soviet Union and China, and the relative decline of American economic power, though the ideological assumptions which had accompanied it never entirely disappeared, and re-emerged in the 1980s during the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

Our purpose in raising these broad themes in the way Americans have thought about and conceptualised their relationship with the wider world is to provide a context for an examination of how they have been reflected in specific episodes in American foreign policy, and at the same time how they have affected the stories which have been told about those episodes, whether in fiction, film or historical analysis. At the same time, they reveal both the enduring nature of a belief in the exceptional destiny of the United States, and continuing attempts to defy the implications of that destiny by those who stood in its way

### **THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTANDING THE WAR**

Between 1964 and 1973 the United States became heavily embroiled in a bitter and, in the end, unsuccessful attempt to resist what it saw as the spread of Communism in Indochina. The focus of this attempt was her intervention in the long-running and complex civil war in Vietnam, an intervention which had profound consequences both for American foreign policy, and also for social and political life at home. American involvement in the war was frequently justified in language that drew heavily on the ideological assumptions discussed above. Robert McNamara, reviewing in 1995 his own role as Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the escalation of the war, still argued that

the United States of America fought in Vietnam for eight years for what it believed to be good and honest reasons. By such action, administrations of both parties sought to protect our security, prevent the spread of totalitarian Communism, and promote individual freedom and political democracy.

(McNamara 1995:333)

In making such claims he was only following in the footsteps of many arguments put forward in the 1960s, and repeated since, both by supporters and critics of the war. Looking back on the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, writer Tobias Wolff recalled his own impressions about being a soldier in Vietnam, and in so doing replayed one of the most consistent themes in stories about the war, the voyage from innocence to experience. American soldiers did not go to war in

the spirit of mercenaries or legionnaires; they had to think of themselves as crusaders. 'It may be selfdelusion, but a sense of chivalric purpose is essential to our spiritual survival when we find ourselves called upon to kill others and risk being killed. In its absence we become at worst cynical and corrupt, at best simply professional.' Wolff argued that any sense of an American crusade was destroyed in the Tet offensive of 1968, but his explanations of American involvement follow a familiar template (Wolff 1995:24). Ernest May wrote:

The paradox is that the Vietnam War, so often condemned by its opponents as hideously immoral, may well have been the most moral, or at least the most selfless war in all of American history. For the impulse guiding it was not to defeat an enemy or to serve a national interest; it was simply not to abandon friends.

(Brinkley 1995:838)

The justification of 'selflessness', however, was also undoubtedly affected by the other two strands in American ideology inherited from the nineteenth century. Americans brought to Vietnam, as they had brought to much of Asia in their dealings with the region throughout the twentieth century, an ethnocentrism which frequently bordered on the explicitly racist arguments for American power which figures like Strong had voiced in the nineteenth century. It is true that in the 1940s and 1950s American officials were cautious about being dragged into a 'white man's' colonial war in Vietnam, but under the pressure of events in late 1950s and early 1960s these concerns were often forced to give way to the more basic assumption that Americans knew what was best for the region. Richard Slotkin, amongst others, has argued that there have been strong continuities between the language and attitudes of Americans in Vietnam and the assumptions which lay behind western expansion in the nineteenth century. G.I.s frequently called their Vietnamese enemies Indians, and the jungle in and out of which they moved quickly became Indian Country. This linked to the way in which American soldiers in Vietnam talked about 'slopes' and 'gooks' in a way which helped to dehumanise their enemies in a manner which drew on the racial epithets used against the Japanese in the Second World War. As Christian Appy has argued in his analysis of combat troops during the war, 'the point was not to know the enemy but to despise him'. Military training encouraged hostility towards all Vietnamese, whether members of the Viet Cong or non-combatants. As one veteran recalled, 'the only thing that they told us about the Vietnamese was that they were gooks; they were to be killed. Nobody sits around and gives you the historical and cultural background. They're the enemy. Kill, kill, kill' (Appy 1993:107).

American involvement in South-East Asia was also justified by that third strand in American ideology which assumed that America's own history provided a model for national self-determination in the Third World, and which encouraged a fear of revolutionary action which might threaten stability and

orderly progress. American concern with nationbuilding in South Vietnam is revealing here, however limited the results of that policy were in practice. Based on development theory which emerged in the 1950s, American officials in Vietnam devised strategies which would both help to modernise the Vietnamese economy and act as a bulwark against Communist insurgency. American aid and American institutions would act as a stimulus on those societies which did not appear to have the resources or the ability to help themselves.

By 1968 it was becoming clear that even a ground army of half a million men, supported by massive military technology, was going to have difficulty in persuading North Vietnam to accept the seventeenth parallel as its southern border, particularly as the costs of the war in terms of both men and money mounted inexorably, and dissent from the purposes of the war grew at home. For the next five years, the Nixon administrations wrestled with the problem of how to extricate American troops without appearing to concede defeat. 'Vietnamisation' was the concept which it was hoped would square the circle, but when the last American troops left in 1973, it was already clear that South Vietnam on its own was going to have great difficulty in withstanding further pressure from the North. Two years later Saigon fell to the Communists and the war was over.

Ever since the end of the war in 1975, two years after the final American withdrawal, Americans have sought to come to terms with what may, with justice, be described as the most difficult episode in the history of their foreign relations. Defeat in South-East Asia raised a host of questions as to American involvement in the region. How and why had the United States become involved in the first place? What were the motives behind the American military and economic commitment to South Vietnam? Once committed, why had the might of the American military machine not been more successful? What kinds of lessons might be learnt from the Vietnam experience which might guide American policy more successfully in the future? These tended to be the kinds of questions which exercised politicians and historians, but there was also a second list of questions which were concerned not so much with how the war might be analysed but rather how it might be adequately represented. How, for instance, could the emotional experience of being a participant in the war be communicated? Could conventional historical and journalistic accounts convey the 'truth' about the war or were they fatally compromised by the way in which they approached their subject matter? Might not works of the imagination be more effective in unlocking the door to a real understanding of the war? What is striking about the Vietnam experience is how varied a range of answers both sets of questions have provoked, and what we therefore want to raise in this chapter is some sense of the debate over how the Vietnam episode is to be approached by examining how the war has been variously understood and interpreted by historians, politicians, writers, and film-makers, as well as the wider American public.



If Vietnam material is notable both for its profusion and its preoccupation with the American dimension of the war, it is not surprising that there has been so much difficulty in coming to terms with its meaning. Every significant episode in the history of American foreign policy, of course, is continually being revised and reinterpreted, but it may be that the American experience in Vietnam particularly resists the imposition of a clear and agreed narrative upon it. In a recent story Tim O'Brien talks about the uncertainty which was such a feature of the Vietnam War, particularly for those who participated in it:

For the common soldier...war has the feel—the spiritual texture —of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong, order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.

(O'Brien 1990:78)

This sense of confusion and ambiguity, feeding off the division and dissent which were so clearly a part of the war both at home and abroad, have meant that Vietnam has remained a strongly contested ground for attempts to make sense of its complexity. There will always be attempts to impose narrative closure on the war, but they are unlikely to prevail, and in the end only add a further dimension to the continuing debates as to how the war should be understood. Guenter Lewy, for instance, in *America in Vietnam*, declared that his aim was 'to provide a reliable empirical record of American actions in Vietnam and, in the process, to clear away the cobwebs of mythology that inhibit the correct understanding of what went on—and what went wrong—in Vietnam' (Lewy 1978:vi). However, the reaction to his arguments in *America in Vietnam* suggested 'a correct understanding of the war' had not on this occasion been reached, and perhaps never could be reached. Much of the criticism of Lewy came from other historians who disagreed with his use of evidence and his interpretative conclusions, but his claims about the possibility of arriving at an accurate record of the war raise wider questions about the different ways in which historians and imaginative writers have approached the conflict. Many of the latter have argued that it is the practice of history itself which has signally failed to give any convincing explanation of what the war was in the end about. For many of them there will never be a discrete, single, agreed-upon 'History' of the war, because they distrust what they describe as conventional history, with its emphasis on rational analysis, the patient accumulation and sifting of evidence, and the consequent emergence of the truth about any specific situation. 'History, history... you could let it all go,' wrote Michael Herr in one the earliest and still most influential accounts of the war (Herr 1978:44). Straight history, in all its many versions, had not provided any real answers to the riddle of Vietnam, it had not

even asked the right questions. The war had a 'secret history' which 'all the books and articles and white papers, all the talk and the miles of film' had failed to uncover. The only alternative was to find a different approach, to go 'running in there to bring it out' (ibid.: 51). This distrust of orthodox history has been followed in a wide range of work since *Dispatches* first appeared in 1977. Mark Baker, in *Nam*, a collection of interviews with ordinary participants in the war, criticised the way in which academic analysis left out the humanity and individuality of those who fought and died in Vietnam, preferring to concentrate on statistics, history and politics. While he denied that the stories he had collected were the Truth' about the war, he nevertheless felt that 'filled with emotion and stripped of ambition and romance' they brought us closer to the truth than we had come so far (Baker 1981:xii). In his novel *Going After Cacciato* Tim O'Brien talks about the marked differences between the official versions of the war propounded in Washington and the confusion that many ordinary soldiers felt on the ground in Vietnam itself. These soldiers

did not have a cause. They did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite... They did not know the names of most villages. They did not know which villages were critical. They did not know strategies. They did not know the terms of the war, its architecture, the rules of fair play.

(O'Brien 1975:320)

Rational explanations of American policy meant nothing to those who were doing the fighting, and therefore their experiences of the conflict needed to be recounted in a form which avoided the discredited language and arguments of American politicians and officials. Fiction here could tell what the war was really like, by evoking, far more effectively than sober documentary, its surreal and chaotic nature. Many Vietnam writers, and film-makers, went one stage further here by experimenting with form in order to try to convey what they felt was the madness of the war. Sober realism only succeeded in packaging the war in ways which made it appear more assimilable and less threatening. It sought to make sense of the war through narratives which explained what was going on, and attempted some form of resolution. But to set the record straight about the war, many writers came to feel, was an impossible task. What mattered far more was to question the whole business of explicating the war in a sane and rational way. If this was a crazy war, then its qualities could only be captured through a disregard for convention and a willingness to experiment.

This theme has been picked up once more by Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* where he returns again and again to the problem of how to tell stories about the war, to the extent of entitling one of the stories in the collection 'How to Tell a True War Story'. For O'Brien what matters is less that a particular event or episode is actually true, than that in writing about it some kind of emotional truth is being communicated. Literature should be judged less by the

question—‘Is it true?’ than by the question— ‘Does it ring true?’ Whether an event happened or not is less important than the story which is being told about it and the way in which that story succeeds keeping alive what might otherwise be forgotten. For the protagonist in ‘Spin’,

the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future... Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.

(O’Brien 1991:35)

For O’Brien, stories are not so much a way of making sense of the war, as of finding an imaginative alternative to the limitations of historical analysis, through acts of remembrance in which that which is past, or even dead, may be brought back to life, through the power of imagination and language (*ibid.*: 225). ‘I have written some of this before,’ he wrote in a piece marking the twentieth anniversary of the ending of the war, ‘but I must write it again’ (O’Brien 1995: 16).

All of this suggests that Vietnam is best viewed from a variety of perspectives, as having multiple histories, which have taken a range of different forms and have been expressed in a host of different ways. John Hellman has argued that ‘Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a story, a distinctly American story, would unfold’ (Hellman 1986:x), whereas in practice what have emerged have been a wide range of stories, sometimes complementing, but equally often, opposing each other. This might be illustrated in a number of ways, but we want here to look at three different examples of those stories and how they have played a significant part in attempting to resolve the war’s meaning.

### **REMEMBERING THE WAR I: OTHER VOICES**

At the outset, it is revealing to note how extensive the effort to come to terms with the war has been. Ever since the end of the war, there has developed what one historian of Vietnam has described as a ‘veritable growth industry’ in novels, memoirs, television documentaries and feature films about America’s role in South-East Asia and its impact on American society at home (Duiker 1995:xvi). What is striking about much of this material, however, is that it is almost wholly focused on the American experience in the war, and pays very little attention to the complexities of Vietnamese society and history. ‘When Americans uttered the word “Vietnam” [in the 1960s and 1970s]’, Richard Crockatt has argued, noting that the same holds true today, ‘they generally meant not a country several thousand miles from their shores, but a whole complex of social conflicts associated with a great divide in the American experience’

(Crockatt, 1995:235). This reflects the lack of knowledge most Americans had about Vietnam during the war itself. Most knew nothing about the leaders of North Vietnam, for instance Ho Chi Minh or Vo Nguyen Giap, or the world out of which they came, and the cause for which they were fighting. These attitudes are clearly reflected in the way American films about Vietnam have largely concentrated on the war as an episode in American culture. It is American attitudes in Vietnam which are conventionally explored and discussed, why the United States entered the war in the first place, how American soldiers were affected by the experience of war, what happened to them when they returned home. The temptation has been to see the war in American terms, rather than as a war in which there were two or three major protagonists. Very few films attempt to come to terms seriously with the Vietnamese as subjects. Rather, the war in Vietnam has been portrayed through such tropes as tragedy, in which Americans have betrayed their best principles, or as examples of exploitation and cruelty which reveal the hypocrisy at the heart of American policy. Individual Americans are presented as being torn by the pressures of coming to terms with the consequences of war. Oliver Stone's 1986 film, *Platoon*, for instance, was presented as providing a much more realistic account of the experience of combat in Vietnam, with all of its attendant squalor and misery, and certainly conveys something of the confusion of guerrilla warfare in the jungle. But, in the end, it is not so much concerned with the Vietnamese dimensions of the war as with the way in which it provides the context for a conflict of different visions of what it meant to be American. The hero of the film, Chris Taylor, admits, 'I think now looking back, we didn't fight the enemy, we fought ourselves, and the enemy was within us.' In much the same way as Wolff, Stone is preoccupied with the way in which Vietnam provides the setting for the move from innocence into experience in a way which marks the war as an episode in American rather than Vietnamese culture. When Michael Herr famously intoned 'Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there', it was this American Vietnam he was describing, a place far removed from the realities of life in Vietnam itself (Herr 1978:207).

It is in this context that the significance of a novel like Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1994) becomes significant. Just as Luther Standing Bear sought to challenge the power of the American 'Word' to stamp and label Indians as savages, and to present the Indian world as a human world (Luther Standing Bear 1974:570-1), so too *The Sorrow of War* works to erode the conventional portrayal of the war, by insisting on the humanity and sacrifice of the North Vietnamese, as well as the way in which they were also brutalised by the conflict. The main protagonist in the novel, Kien, resorts to writing his experiences as a front-line scout in the 27th battalion of the North Vietnamese army in a desperate attempt to recover what the war has taken from him. After the American phase of the conflict, Kien is sent to retrieve the bodies of missing soldiers in an area which he calls the Jungle of the Screaming Souls, where his efforts to trace the dead prefigure his later attempts as a writer to bring back to

life those whom the war had destroyed. Assailed by nightmares and dark visions, he tries to make sense of a war which chooses its victims with indiscriminate abandon. Political loyalties play little part here. The consequences of American fire-power are graphically described, but the book hardly engages with the ideological struggle which so exercised politicians in America and Vietnam. Instead, Kien concentrates on the way in which his own life, and that of those closest to him, is made meaningless by the war's casual destructiveness. Those of his fellow veterans who manage to survive, end up, like many of their American counterparts, on the margins of Vietnamese society, where they drift into crime or drink. Kien's own personal tragedy is the loss of his girlfriend, Phuong, who initially joins him at the front, but then is seriously wounded in an American air-raid. Her physical and emotional scars effectively destroy the relationship, and when he eventually returns to civilian life, they have nothing left to say to each other. Like Tim O'Brien, Bao Ninh is concerned with the desperate difficulty of narrating a war without meaning or logic. Kien struggles with his characters in isolation, his only friend a deaf-mute girl who though she becomes his lover can never replace the lost innocence of his earlier life with Phuong. After reaching some sort of conclusion, he then vanishes, leaving his story behind him, for the narrator of the finished novel in turn to try to make sense of. But, in a text like this, a coherent and seamless narrative has long been made impossible by the sheer demands of depicting the full sorrows of war, where the victims are not only those who lose their lives, but those who survive.

### **REMEMBERING THE WAR II: THE VIETNAM MEMORIAL**

The memorial act implies termination' writes David Lowenthal in his survey of the myriad ways in which we continually remake and are remade by our past, *The Past is A Foreign Country* (Lowenthal 1985:323). The concept of termination in turn implies that the events or people we are commemorating are over or dead. Through the process of memorialisation we recognise what has finished, but in the very act of finding an appropriate way of marking what has ended, we inevitably enter into the business of making history, of choosing what seems to be the most appropriate form of remembrance. The memorials we build become historical statements about the events we are commemorating, stories about the past which seek to give it shape and make it intelligible. But because history itself is always open to revision, so too is a historical artefact like a memorial. It is not surprising therefore that the memorial to such a controversial and bitterly contested war as the Vietnam conflict should become the focus of heated dispute, since it inevitably raised questions as to how the war should be remembered, particularly in contrast with earlier wars in American history, which, with the exception of the Confederate cause in the Civil War, celebrated victory, rather than having to acknowledge defeat. The main Vietnam Veterans' Memorial was built in 1982 on a site on the Mall in Washington, after

a nationwide competition won by Maya Lin, a Chinese-American undergraduate at Yale University. Lin's design is made up of two walls of black granite set in a V, and meeting at an angle of 125 degrees. Each wall is divided into a series of panels, on which the names of those Americans who died in Vietnam are inscribed, not in alphabetical order, but in the order in which they were killed, beginning with the first death of a soldier in 1959, and ending in 1975. The two walls are set into the ground, rising from their outer edge to a height of ten feet, where they join at the monument's centre. Already it may be seen that the memorial is in marked contrast to the other main monuments of Washington. First, it is scarcely visible from even a short distance. In Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, 'the Washington Monument is a gleaming pencil against the sky...[it] rises up out of the earth, proud and tall'. By contrast, the Vietnam Memorial is 'a black gash in a hillside, like a vein of coal exposed and then polished with polyurethane'. Sam Hughes, her grandmother and her uncle stumble in its direction until they suddenly come upon it. 'It don't show up good', Mamaw says anxiously, 'It's just a hole in the ground' (Mason 1987:239). The other memorials and monuments in Washington, generally in white and rising up into the sky, are built to be seen from afar, emphasising their role as symbols of national pride and honour, but the Vietnam Memorial remains resolutely grounded in the earth.

Though initially supported by veterans, who felt that the design was modest and apolitical in a manner which allowed those who had died to be remembered without continuing controversy and rancour, the Memorial soon attracted criticism from those who felt that it demeaned the bravery and patriotism of the soldiers who had given their lives for their country. The proposal was a 'degrading ditch', whose colour, black, was 'the universal colour of shame, sorrow and degradation in all races, all societies worldwide,' argued one veteran (Hess 1987:265). Ross Perot, the Texan millionaire and future presidential candidate, who had contributed considerable funds towards the memorial, described it as 'a slap in the face'. James Webb, the author of the Vietnam novel *Fields of Fire*, called it a 'wailing wall for anti-draft demonstrators'. The V at the meeting of the two walls, might stand for Vietnam or veterans, but it could also evoke the peace sign of anti-war activists. Other critics focused on the formal qualities of the design. Tom Wolfe charged that in its avoidance of any figurative qualities Maya Ling's design was a hostage to modernist elitism; its abstract qualities would only distance it from the families of the many ordinary men who had died in Vietnam. Faced with such pressures the organisers of the memorial decided to compromise and commissioned a second memorial from the sculptor Frederick Hart, which would be much more in the tradition of conventional war memorials like the Iwo Jima statue commemorating the American effort in the Pacific in the Second World War. Hart's design was made up of three soldiers, two white and one black, dressed in combat gear though otherwise not engaged in the kind of heroic action celebrated at the Iwo Jima memorial. He declared that he wanted to use realism to give some sense of the youth and innocence of the

19-year-olds who had served in Vietnam—to give a little dignity to those who fought the war (Hess 1987:273). When located, the statue would be joined by the national flag, something which had been missing from the original proposal. There was even a suggestion that Hart's sculpture be placed at the heart of the Lin memorial, but it was eventually agreed to site it and the flag in a wooded grove forty yards away.

The original competition for the Vietnam memorial stipulated that it should be apolitical, and that its function was to honour those who had died, rather than to make a specific statement about the war. Lin herself argued that her piece was apolitical in the sense that it did not comment directly on the war—only on the men that died (Hess 1987:271). But the furore over her proposal only demonstrated how difficult it was to be apolitical over an episode like Vietnam. Any memorial implied a perspective on the war, no matter how much effort was made to avoid explicit political comment. The decision, for instance, to list all the names of those who had died encouraged, in the context of America's eventual defeat, a reading of the memorial which signified waste, and it thus became a kind of anti-war statement. The fact that Lin was both a woman and a Chinese American and that her design resisted the phallic symbolism contained in many other war memorials, could suggest a female, even pacifist, approach to the conflict, in contrast with more conventional tributes to male heroism and valour. As Sam Hughes passes the Washington Monument on the way to the memorial, 'she remembers Tom's bitter comment about it—a big white prick. That guy who put pink plastic around those islands should make a big rubber for the Washington Monument, Sam thinks' (Mason 1987:238). She eventually stands in the centre of the V, deep in the pit.

The Washington Monument is reflected at the centre line. If she moves slightly to the left, she sees the monument, and if she moves the other way she sees a reflection of the flag opposite the memorial. Both the monument and flag seem like arrogant gestures, like the country giving the finger to the dead boys, flung in this hole in the ground.

(Mason 1987:240)

On the other hand, Hart's three figures themselves invite a very different reading of the war from Lin's, one which implies that the war did have a noble purpose, as argued by revisionist historians and patriotic politicians. What is also the case is that their juxtaposition only reinforces the way in which they suggest alternative interpretations of the war. Tom Wolfe and Phyllis Schlafly called the Lin memorial a tribute to Jane Fonda, but others have countered that the Hart statue is a tribute to John Wayne. Nevertheless many of those who have visited the memorial, regardless of political orientation, have found it a place where they could in their own ways come to terms with the legacy of the war. Frederick Hart derided those who said '*you* can bring what you want to Lin's memorial. But I call that brown bag aesthetics. I mean you better bring something, because

there ain't nothing being served' (Hess 1987:274). But the evidence suggests that is one of the things that works about Lin's piece. People do bring things: photographs, bits of clothing, personal belongings, wreaths, flowers. And as the ending of *In Country* suggests, in bringing themselves, they also find the opportunity for some personal resolution of what has been left unfinished after the war's end. Sam finds her father's and then her own name on the wall, and hears her grandmother say

Coming up on this wall of a sudden and seeing how black it was, it was so awful, but then I came down in it and saw that white carnation blooming out of that crack and it gave me hope. It made me know he's watching over us.

Her uncle Emmett, meanwhile, sits cross-legged in front of the wall, studying the names low on a panel. 'Slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames' (Mason 1987:244–5).

### **REMEMBERING THE WAR III: THE VIETNAM SYNDROME**

American failure in Vietnam symbolised by the final withdrawal of troops in 1973, and the fall of Saigon in 1975 has cast a long shadow. American foreign policy and American culture in the years since the mid-1970s have been exercised with the bitter and unforeseen consequences of the struggle in Vietnam. One important theme here involved attempts to revise explanations of the American role in Vietnam and, in particular, to explain in a manner that was not so offensive to national pride why America's supposedly superior military might had failed to prevail in South-East Asia. There were several strands to the revised version of the war which emerged during the Reagan administrations of the 1980s. First came the argument that the United States had come to grief in Vietnam because it had lacked the necessary resolve. America's problems in Vietnam were not caused by the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese regulars but by the uncertain and divided attitudes of Americans themselves. If only the country had been more united and dissent less divisive then American might would surely have carried the day. This was easily linked to a second strand which argued that uncertainty and confusion about the American effort in South-East Asia had only compromised the ability of the American military to act effectively. The concept of a limited war espoused by Lyndon Johnson and his advisers circumscribed the ability of military commanders to make the decisions that successful prosecution of the war demanded. President Reagan, who became a popular spokesman for both of these arguments in the 1980s, summed them up in a conversation with Bobby Muller, founder of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. The trouble with Vietnam was that we never let you guys fight the war you could have done, so we denied you the victory all the other veterans enjoyed.' If only the



American army had been able to take the war to North Vietnam on its own terms, then victory would have been assured. Explaining America's problems in this way was part of the process of exorcising memories of Vietnam, but what was also needed was a foreign adventure which would provide a fresh example of American military success, and reaffirm that older faith in American power, discussed earlier in the chapter. There were a number of possible opportunities for such a renewed demonstration of American might in Nicaragua and the Lebanon in the 1980s, but in both cases their intractability and complexity persuaded the United States that intervention carried too many risks, and would only confirm the errors of Vietnam rather than banish them. Small-scale interventions in Grenada and Panama helped to some extent to restore some sense of national prowess, but much more significant in helping to get rid of what had come to be described as the 'Vietnam syndrome' was the Gulf War of 1991, which at one level, at least, can be seen as an attempt to confront and thus overcome the bitter legacy of Vietnam. As George Herring, the leading historian of the Vietnam War, argued, the Persian Gulf Conflict appeared at times as much a struggle with the ghosts of Vietnam, as with Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Walsh and Aulich 1995:28). When George Bush announced the successful conclusion to the war, he declared, 'It's a proud day for Americans and by God, We've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all' (Summers 1994:53). What Bush meant here was that American foreign policy since the mid-1970s and the end of the Vietnam War had, in the words of one of the leading revisionist historians of the 1980s, Harry G. Summers, Jr., 'somehow lost its nerve' (ibid.: 53). Although the various branches of the United States military remained potentially powerful, their effectiveness was undermined by a series of self-imposed restrictions which limited the capacity of the American government to intervene abroad, even when it considered its interests to be threatened. These included the fear that no American mission abroad could hope to succeed without the full support and commitment of the American people. Johnson's mistake in Vietnam had been his reluctance, in Dean Rusk's words, 'to stir up the anger of the American people over Vietnam... we did not have military troops parading through our cities or put on big war bond drives. Neither did we send movie stars across the country, whipping up enthusiasm for the war' (ibid.: 54). In future, the American people would have to feel that that they had been fully consulted about any decision to commit US forces to combat, and the government, in turn, would have to feel that it could rely on their support. A second concern, drawn from the lessons of Vietnam, insisted that the military be given the freedom to pursue whatever strategy it thought appropriate, without detailed supervision from the political arm of the government. The assumption here was that sustained public support would give the military that necessary freedom, but there was always the danger that certain kinds of military action might alienate political and public opinion. This might be avoided if the war could be presented to a domestic audience in a controlled and edited manner, unlike Vietnam where, revisionists argued, the media had been given too much latitude to report the costs of war in a way that

only gave evidence to the anti-war movement. A third problem with Vietnam, as the most protracted war in American history, was that it had gone on for far too long, thus allowing cracks to appear in the necessary partnership between government, military and people. There was far less risk of losing popular support if any future involvement in war could be short, with specified aims which could be readily delivered. Lyndon Johnson had publicly agonised in his State of the Union address in January 1967 as to whether Americans could

fight a war of limited objectives over a period of time...whether we can continue to act with restraint when the temptation to 'get it over with' is inviting but dangerous; whether we can accept the necessity of choosing 'a great evil in order to ward off a greater'.

(Campbell 1974:207)

His own admission was that any resolution in Vietnam would be slow in coming, and that he had no option but to call for 'sacrifice' on the part of the American people. Many Americans, in the end, revisionists had noted, had found that sacrifice impossible to bear; in future they needed to be reassured that open-ended commitments would only be asked for in the last resort. Every effort should be made to keep combat involvement as short and as well-targeted as possible.

All of these considerations had a clear effect on the conduct of the Gulf War. First, considerable thought was given to awakening public support. After some hesitancy during the period of economic sanctions against Iraq in the early autumn of 1990 the Bush Administration launched a media campaign on television and in the press in November which sought to ensure that the public fully supported possible military action. When the air war against Iraq began on 16 January 1991, 83 per cent of the American public approved of the action and support remained high throughout the conflict. This was helped by the brevity of the war. Aerial bombardment of Iraq lasted for a month and a half, while the ground war lasted for precisely 100 hours, a specific contrast with the 10,000-day war in Vietnam. The announcement of the cease-fire was timed to ensure the round number of a 100 hours, a move which impressed the commander of the Allied troops, General Norman Schwarzkopf: 'I had to hand it to them they really knew how to package a historic event' (Walsh and Aulich 1995:32). Particular attention was given to building an Allied coalition for economic sanctions against Iraq which included most of the major governments of the world, and to ensure that the military coalition also was widely based. There would be no opportunity, as in Vietnam, for critics to charge that American involvement was self-serving and nationalistic. The application of military power was also carefully planned to ensure its maximum effectiveness. The build-up of forces along the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia border eventually reached 690,000 before the final fighting began, with the United States contributing 425,000 men, and they were supported by a massive assembly of military technology. All

this was in marked contrast to Vietnam where critics of American strategy argued that escalation had been far too gradual and reactive. At the same time, responsibility for leading this massive army would be left with the military, without the kind of detailed interference from Washington which had characterised the Johnson administration in Vietnam. All of this seemed to work. At the end of the war Bush had an approval rating of 90 per cent.

### THE TRANSMISSION OF AMERICAN CULTURE

The presence of the United States in the lives of peoples beyond her borders has been felt not simply through military might or economic power, but also through reflection on the very idea of America. As Marcus Cunliffe, amongst many others, has pointed out, there has been a vast literature of responses to the country, which have often fallen into a series of broad classifications despite variations according to time and place (Cunliffe 1964:492–514). He grouped these responses into two main historical categories, the heroic, which included such images as ‘the land of liberty’, ‘the earthly paradise’, and the villainous, which emphasised America as a place of excess or libertinism. The developing capacity of America to spread her culture beyond her own borders gave these images an added potency. Since the late nineteenth century a range of American cultural products have become increasingly widely dispersed throughout the world, partly through the active encouragement of the United States government, particularly during the Cold War, and partly through the energies of capitalist production.

This process has raised a range of questions about the impact of America on the wider world, and has provided the opportunity for a host of debates about the way in which the export of American popular culture, in particular, has been received by non-American markets and audiences. As a result, it has allowed a continuing opportunity for many non-Americans to reflect on the place of America in their lives, and, in so doing, to contribute towards the way in which the United States is perceived in the contemporary world. It has also frequently enabled participants in the debate to identify what they valued or disliked in their own culture, sometimes with striking results.

Two linked concerns emerged here. Fear or delight at the spread of American influence in specific contexts was often connected to the debate over the merits of popular culture as distinct from ‘high’ or serious culture. ‘Americanisation’ and all that it implied, therefore, raised questions about cultural identity at the same time as it highlighted the way in which culture was transmitted and its impact on the audiences who consumed it. In Britain, for instance, the spread of American cultural products in the years after the First World War encouraged a widespread reaction on the Right to what was seen as a threat to established standards. Often, fear of cultural levelling was explicitly conflated with anxiety about the full implications of democratisation. The literary critics F.R. and Q.D. Leavis quoted the words of the Victorian writer Edmund Gosse as part of their worries

over the impact of American values on British life. The revolution against taste, once begun, will land us in irreparable chaos' (Webster 1988:180). America, from this perspective, became a symbol of both cultural and political levelling, in a manner which endangered educated values. These concerns found an alternative form of expression from a number of cultural critics on the Left after 1945, who worried that the intervention of America into British working-class culture, in particular, would result in the promotion of a superficial consumerism, dominated by the market, at the expense of political solidarity and the cohesiveness of traditional patterns of community which nourished it. Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), described what he saw as the success of a 'shiny barbarism' associated with the import of American goods and values, which rendered its consumers less capable of responding openly and responsibly to life. This was reflected above all in the life-style of jukebox boys who spent their time 'listening in harshly lighted milk-bars to the nickelodeons... living to a large extent in a myth world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life'. For Hoggart, this was all a thin and pallid form of dissipation, 'a sort of spiritual dry-rot' which affected the 'quality of ordinary working-class life' (Hoggart 1957:247-50). America was seen as 'the homogenising agent' in the modern world, serving as 'the image of industrial barbarism; a country with no past, and therefore no real culture, a country ruled by competition, profit and the drive to acquire' (Hebdige 1988:47-54). Though Hoggart in 1957 retained some optimism that British workers still retained sufficient moral resources to resist the worst effects of mass consumerism, his position reflected a wider set of assumptions about the one-way process of cultural transmission across the Atlantic, which was shared in other European countries as well as Britain. A feminised Europe lay open to an American invasion in which military muscle and economic power conspired with mass culture to undermine national or communal identities. In other parts of the world the dangers of Americanisation might call for stronger responses. In Egypt, the Islamic fundamentalist, Sayyid Qutb, who was executed in 1966 for plotting against President Nasser, used the example of America to argue for the creation of fundamentalist societies in the Middle East, where a purified Islam would regulate life totally, in an effort to resist the social consequences of unrestrained individualism. In America, the people 'had no faith in themselves or in life around them'. They were, on the one hand, as 'machines that move with madness, speed, and convulsion that does not cease' but they were also taken with 'indulgent pleasure'. Both trends had to be resisted if God's sovereignty was to prevail (Rippin 1993:92).

However, an alternative perspective suggests that it is misleading both to treat America as undifferentiated threat, and the consumers of its products as uncritical and unquestioning. European audiences, for instance, frequently proved adept at selecting and adapting those elements in American culture which had meaning and value for them in their own lives, while rejecting other aspects which they distrusted, and the same has been true of other non-European societies. Paul

Oliver has noted how in the aftermath of the Second World War in Britain, 'jazz had become a symbol of the irrepressible creative spirit of Blacks in the face of racial and economic oppression...a symbol of revolt against their parents, against war, against commercialism'. This had paradoxical political implications, as what was, after all, an American cultural form was taken up by the Left as the Cold War got under way (Oliver 1990:80–1). Similarly, Paul Gilroy has shown how aspects of American culture provided 'powerful sources of solidarity and pleasure as well as a means to organise themselves' for black minority groups in Britain. African America, in particular, was 'a source of cultural and political raw material for UK blacks in the postwar period' (Gilroy 1992:171). It was not only the narrative of black political protest which acted as an inspiration here, but also the cultural expressiveness which developed alongside it, through a range of musical forms like soul, jazz and rap, 'which exported to Europe the idea that black communities in the inner city, particularly the young, could define themselves politically and philosophically as an oppressed "nation", bound together in the framework of the diaspora by language and history' (ibid.: 184). America, for the critic and novelist Malcolm Bradbury, looking back on his own education in the 1950s, provided a direction 'in which the mind might go to look for images of alternative and otherness' (Bradbury 1979:120). Aspects of American culture could provide an encouragement to liberation in one context, while acting as a threat in another. Put another way, America itself provided a text which contained its own ambiguities and contradictions, which allowed its readers to adopt and adapt meanings and pleasures for their own purposes. This was not to deny the context within which American cultural products were produced or the resources which supported their availability, but it was to suggest audiences exercised discretion in using America in ways that suited them (see also [Chapter 10](#)).

## CONCLUSION

Since the end of the Gulf War, some of the enthusiasm about the banishing of the uncertainty and lack of purpose which the Vietnam War had bequeathed to American policy seems to have been misplaced. The ending of the Cold War in the late 1980s had left the United States in the position of being, as she had been in 1945, by far the most potent nation, in military terms at least, in the world. The Gulf War seemed to suggest that when it summoned the will, the United States could translate that power into effective action. But the analogy with 1945 was misleading. In the late 1940s power had become linked to a specific purpose, the containment of what was perceived to be the aggressive threat of international Communism. The very different world order which had emerged by the early 1990s did not permit such a convenient division of the world into the camps of freedom and tyranny which Truman had described in 1947, and it left American foreign policy-makers as well as the American public uncertain as to how American power should be exercised. After his apparent triumph, for

instance, in banishing the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’ in the Gulf War, President Bush found that not as much had changed as he had perhaps hoped. The Iraqis had been driven out of Kuwait, but only to allow the return of the autocracy in the country. Saddam Hussein remained in power in Iraq, still at liberty to persecute internal opponents of his regime like the Kurds. Despite the Gulf victory, the Vietnam experience still testified to the problems an actively interventionist foreign policy might cause. A year and a half after the end of the Gulf War, Bush was defeated in the 1992 presidential election by a candidate, Bill Clinton, who had escaped the draft of Vietnam and questioned America’s purpose in the war. The Clinton administration found it no easier to establish new guidelines for American policy in the future, though it is revealing that in the debate about America’s place in the rapidly changing world at the end of the century, his advisers found themselves returning to conventional arguments which clearly drew on the rhetoric discussed in the first part of this chapter. Clinton’s National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake, for instance, in 1993, declared that whereas during the Cold War the United States had been preoccupied with containing the apparent threat of Communist expansion, now, as it looked towards the twenty-first century, it should seek to enlarge the reach of the market democracies. As Richard Crockatt has noted, this concept of ‘enlargement’, though it had less of a flourish, sounded very much like the kinds of statements American politicians had been accustomed to make about the country’s destiny in the world in the hundred years or so before the Truman Doctrine (Crockatt 1995:377–8). On the one hand, the legacy of Vietnam remained as a warning about America’s capacity to begin the world over again; on the other, the ideological perspectives which had helped to encourage intervention in the first place still seemed to be part of the national political discourse. At the same time, as we have tried to show elsewhere in this book, the very concept of a clear-cut national identity had become increasingly fragile by the early 1990s, under pressure from the continuing fragmentation of American society and culture in the last quarter of the century. Americans, seeking to redefine America’s role in the world for the next century, would have to come to terms with that fact, as would non-Americans as they in turn sought to adjust to what this changing America might mean for them.

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### FOLLOW-UP WORK

- 1 The concept of 'exceptionalism' has long guided how many Americans have thought about their own history, but comparisons of the American experience with those of other nations may suggest common themes. How does the expansionist ideology of nineteenth-century America fit with the imperialist rhetoric of European powers in the same period? Has empire



meant the same thing in America as in Europe, and if not, how has American empire differed?

- 2 What may the voices of those who were on the receiving end of American expansion tell us about this debate? Americans themselves have regularly debated the implications of their role in the world, but it may be equally instructive to consider the views of those who interpreted American action and rhetoric from the position of their own cultures.

*Assignments and areas for further study*

- 3 Consider the following:

- (a) To what extent do the films about the Vietnam War, or any other foreign venture, draw on earlier American myths in the way in which they dramatise the experiences of individual Americans in the conflict? How does race intersect with the Vietnam experience? How are the Vietnamese portrayed in Hollywood films about the war? How does the war relate to racial conflict within America in the 1960s and 1970s?
- (b) What links do you perceive between the formal experimentalism of many Vietnam novels, and their authors' distrust of conventional realist approaches to the war in Vietnam? What kinds of narrative style are used to disrupt the patterns of the realist text, and what consequences do these have for the way in which we read the war?
- (c) How do discussions of the impact of American popular culture abroad link with wider debates about how popular culture is produced, transmitted and consumed?

# Chapter 10

## Technology and media cultures

### ‘The uncertain trajectory’<sup>1</sup>

The inaugural European edition of the magazine *Wired* published in April 1995 had on its cover a startling fluorescent image of Tom Paine (1737–1809), the radical American democrat and his words ‘We have it in our power to begin the world again’. The magazine reclaims, Paine for the age of the Internet as a ‘Patron Saint’ of the new worlds of cyberspace and computer technology. The magazine develops connections between Paine’s vision and the possibilities they associate with the potential of global communications through the Net. His words become the clarion call of another new age born out of technological advance rather than revolutionary struggle. ‘We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts than those we formerly used’ (Katz 1995: 16). The emphatic attention given to a break with the past and an embracing of the future in which the free flow of information and exchange was necessary is the link drawn between Paine and the Internet, for ‘media existed to spread ideas, to allow fearless argument, to challenge and question authority, to set a common social agenda’ (ibid.:64). So just as Paine had employed the rotary press of the 1700s to disseminate radical opinions and debates, so, the article contends, can the Internet in the 1990s. Paine wrote, ‘he who denies the right of every man or woman to his own opinion makes a slave of him or herself, because they preclude the right of changing their own minds’ (quoted ibid.:66). Set against the powerful controllers of thought, Paine used the small press as a method of democratic resistance in the same way that the Net is being heralded as a bulwark against corporate hegemony and control of the media.

This exciting article demonstrates the way that new media technology can be seen as liberatory and radical, redefining ideas of citizenship and opening up channels of communication across traditional cultural and state boundaries. In this vision of the media, possibility replaces threat, and openness diminishes the fear of authoritarian control. These binary positions have for so long emerged in all discussions of the media and technology within American culture where it has been celebrated by the likes of Marshall McLuhan who wrote of the ‘new languages with new and unique powers of expression’ (Stearn 1968:138), while simultaneously viewed as a dangerous encroachment into individual lives. Media technologies, rather than dictating to their audience, could be engaged with, but only if people learnt their ‘languages’ and were prepared to enter a productive

dialogue. The alternative would be oppression, said McLuhan, for ‘propaganda begins when dialogue ends’, and it is essential to ‘talk back to media and set off on an adventure of exploration’ (ibid.: 13).

The very ‘Americanness’ of these images of new worlds and exploration in both *Wired’s* Paine and McLuhan emphasise the new, vital energy of technology and its capacity to open new language-worlds. This hope of the media as a democratising force has often been overcome by a contrary impression of a manipulative ‘octopus’ limiting and closing off communications. Media criticism has tended to follow two broad paths: seeing the media and technology as moulding and hegemonic, on the one hand, and, on the other, as capable of influence, but without any single, shaping power. The potential extensions of these positions can be seen both in the media itself and in the cultural texts that refer to and articulate discourses of technology, such as science-fiction film and literature. They are very often realised as visions of utopia or dystopia, that is of a perfected world or one of chaos and disintegration. This chapter will explore these binary positions with reference to traditional media technologies, like television, and the new media technologies which have continued this contest of meanings, and suggest a new and alternative position through which they might be viewed.

### **MEDIA POWER: THE TELEVISION FAMILY**

In a 1944 advertisement for DuMont televisions, the slogan claimed it would make the viewer ‘an armchair Columbus...on voyages of discovery’ sailing ‘with television into exciting new worlds’ and having ‘the world actually served to you on a silver screen’ (Tichi 1991:15). Curiously similar to the examples of Paine and McLuhan given above, this positive reading of technology is located within established myths of America, whilst also retaining the post-war security of the home and the hearth. Television promised access to ‘new worlds’ without having to leave the armchair representing both something exciting and adventurous as well as safe and domestic.

Television as a key element of the American media boom of the postwar era shares with other parts of the media this kind of dual representation. In this case, the new technology had to be non-threatening to its consumers, but also fascinating enough to warrant a substantial investment of the family finances. This balance between the threat and the safety of media technology, between its ‘window on the world’ and its private, inward status, has been played and replayed in a number of different debates surrounding media technology in the twentieth century. In the same way that American corporations had hailed electrification, radio and cinema with the appeal of utopia and dreams, they now devised similar approaches to television, cultivating ‘an ambiguity meant to reassure all respondents’ (Tichi 1991:16) wherein contradictions could be resolved by the power of the product, its medium and its message: Columbus and the armchair, for example. The media had to be presented through an ‘exercise in

the simultaneous expansion and containment of meaning' (ibid.: 16), offering allure and familiarity, the exotic and the safe. Like the mythology of Hollywood, much media technology appears to offer utopianism, that is

a Utopian version of the audience's own world: Utopian in the sense that it is a place of more energy and more abundance than the 'real' world, and also...that its issues, problems, and conflicts are clearer and more intense than those we experience in our day-today reality

(Maltby and Craven 1995:22)

But this world has to be 'partially familiar' (ibid.: 390) for it to appeal to the audience, and for precisely the same reason this utopianism is ideological because it 'obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths... is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence' (Belsey 1980:57-8).

Thus in considering the ways in which media technologies were themselves represented and in turn represented the world, through programmes and 'messages', it is crucial to examine them and 'bring to consciousness the concealed politics of its operation' (Maltby and Craven 1995:394).

Cecelia Tichi uses the phrase 'electronic hearth' to suggest the ways in which television technology became ideologically identified with the home and therefore sold as an essential element of utopian suburbia in the 1950s. It was a focal point, like the hearth, and so reassuringly homely and 'warm', but at the same time it was new, 'electronic', and therefore associated with the immense technological progress of the times. This contradiction was, in part, resolved through the representations of television to its new consumers.

Television became mythic and ideological as the unifier of the fragmented post-war family, an emblem of 'togetherness', of technology's domestication and as a sign of suburban achievement. If it was the new 'electronic hearth', it had replaced the family icons of the blazing fire and the piano around which people grouped to interact in some nostalgic scene from the past. In the post-war world, all significance had been transferred to the television, as this letter to *TV World* suggests: 'Since we got our television set, we've had to change the arrangement of furniture in our living room, and *we just can't keep the piano*' (Spigel 1992:38—our emphases). Domestic living space, where the family met and bonded, had become integrated with the space of the television and it was represented as 'a kind of household cement that promised to reassemble the splintered lives of families who had been separated during the war' (ibid.: 39). By 1951 a respondent to an Atlanta television survey said that 'It keeps us together more', whilst another claimed, 'It makes a closer family circle' (ibid.: 44). Television was, therefore, embraced, its mythologies creating a sense of well-being and cohesion that outweighed any fears that people had about the new medium's

power, as it took on the utopian possibilities of the cinema, but now, most importantly in the home itself.

With its spatial relation to the home so central and because of its simultaneous rise alongside the massive growth of post-war suburbia, television tended to locate its programming within a similar cluster of social settings. Because the home is 'the focus of experience and intention, memories and desires' and an 'important source of individual and communal identity' (Silverstone 1994:27), it is significant that it was always linked with television. The place in which the television was now central should naturally be the subject for its programmes, as if a double reassurance was taking place in which the viewer, from the comfort of the home, watched another home in action: familiar and yet slightly different. If television has always been central to the home and represented it through its programmes, it has also been controlled precisely because it was seen within the very specific space of the home with all its associations of family, identity and origins.

However, the potential for television to also unsettle the mythic American hearth and home has always been present, for its greatest power is to expose the order of the domestic and private world to the disorder of the public sphere. Once again, the media has traversed these seeming contradictions and been cautious, if not conservative, in its images of the home. Its mediation of the home tended to reinforce a precise set of values and beliefs that were firmly rooted in traditional patterns of family, home, gender, class and race. In this regard, television guards its own myths of family and resists any representation which is too extreme, problematic or controversial.

### **SIT-COMS: 'MODELS OF APPROPRIATE DOMESTICITY'?**

This guarding of ideology was noticeable in the early programming of domestic comedies which in many ways presented an ideal American family that stood for fundamental, almost sacred, beliefs. Television sought to provide 'models of appropriate domesticity' (Silverstone 1994: 41) for gender and class roles, consumption, the work ethic, and other aspects of life-style through one of its most popular forms, the situation comedy (sit-com). In this genre, the family is directly represented in a familiar environment where the emphasis is placed upon social relations rather than upon the wider world of class and economics. Many sit-coms naturalised middle-class life, making it appear to be the norm, the 'natural' way of things as opposed to the economic determinations and other cultural factors that in reality shape lives. The sit-com has the effect, as a myth of American family life, of masking social contradictions and problems and presenting instead a portrait of life easily resolved and set in established roles and expectations. Early shows rarely, if ever, involved non-white characters, except as minor or subservient characters, and therefore perpetuated specific regimes of representation that excluded ethnicity as an issue in the media. The

enclosed world of the sit-com, defined usually by the home itself, habitually shut out any sense of public politics or struggle. Its domain was the family and its 'struggles' and crises, all of which could be resolved and set right within the context of the comedy itself.

*Father Knows Best* (1949–54), as the title suggests, was an example of sitcom conformity wherein gender hierarchy within the family was preordained and unchallenged. The system of authority was clear and orderly in the family guaranteeing an equally secure and decent society beyond the home. Programmes were based on the formula of conflict resolution, so that whatever intruded into the programme's orderly world was resolved and set right by its close, thereby reasserting its hegemonic patterns and values. For Kellner, sit-coms can be read as 'television morality plays present[ing] rituals that produce and transmit hegemonic ideology' (Kellner 1979:21) because 'they celebrate the triumphs of the norms, values and good will that enable one to resolve conflict successfully' (ibid.: 21). Many sit-coms reproduced this formula throughout the 1950s and seemed to function to preserve and perpetuate a view of social order and identity fixed within the nuclear family with its established roles.

However, the idea that the media imposes itself onto a passive audience and reproduces and reaffirms certain values can be questioned by looking at other popular sit-coms. An example is *Bewitched* (1964–72) which ran during a time in which the issues surrounding women's liberation were prominent socio-political concerns, and although far from a radical text, does offer some alternatives to the absolute norms of 1950s' sit-coms. It can be seen as part of a sit-com cycle that David Marc (1989) has called 'magic' sit-coms, all of which were concerned with unlikely outsiders entering the suburban family environment bringing with them certain 'abnormal' powers. In *Bewitched* this meant the figure of Samantha, a witch married to the totally suburban man, Darrin, who tries to fit into the normalised world of the suburbs, but has to resort to magic to cope with the demands of her new life. The husband forbids her magic, a similar plot device as used in *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70), wanting her to be a contented housewife by conforming to a prescribed role and by suppressing her abilities and skills. The model of control is apparent here and reinforces the ideal of the normal, as Marc writes,

The message is clear: Don't be fooled by the glitz and glamour of easy (that is, magic) ways of doing things. The discipline of and respectability of a nine-to-five, Thank-God-It's-Friday existence are valorized as far more satisfying than the freedom to gratuitously manipulate the world to one's individual pleasure. Supernatural powers are nice, but being nice is nicer.

(Marc 1989:132)

Every time *Bewitched* asserted the potential chaos of magic against the goodness of marriage and stable domesticity, it reinforced precise ideological notions of the family that supported preferred, traditional patterns of behaviour.

However, as Marc points out, the contradictions that sit-coms appear to smooth over may indeed emerge in the reception of the text to the point that an audience identify with the 'chaotic' forces of magic, especially as opposed to the staid and predictable figure of Darrin, the husband. Indeed, Samantha's magic can be seen as a manifestation of the latent energies of women long held back by men in their domestic prisons and, therefore, her exercise of these powers is a reclaiming of her 'power' in a culture that seeks only to privilege and assert masculine versions of order. As Kellner writes, 'individual television viewers are not passive receivers of encoded television, but rather tend to process television images according to their life situations and cultural experiences' (Kellner 1979: 24–5). The success of *Bewitched* may, to some extent, be down to such contrary and varied readings of the format which verged on the mocking of male inadequacy in a time when the patriarchal monolith was itself under attack in society. At the very least, *Bewitched* permitted some sense of the struggle over roles within the bounded environment of the home, and although the show usually reaffirmed the sacred nuclear family, *en route* it played with contrary and disruptive forces such as Endora (the divorced mother) and Serena (Samantha's twin) who both suggested roles for women outside of the American home. Clearly though, the show upholds the family, even if it has, to an extent, raised sub-textual questions about its structure and the implicit roles that give it form. It might be seen as transitional, since the 1970s did begin to move away from the 'realism' of the nuclear family and seek to reproduce some of its essential values within surrogate models of propriety.

The 1970s offered variations upon the sit-com family in shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77), *All in the Family* (1971–9) and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972–83), and to an extent challenged the hegemony of the suburban, nuclear norm. *All in the Family* presented a working-class family headed by a racist, Archie Bunker, and had the look of the conventional family sitcom, with its domestic setting and conflict-resolution-style narrative which maintained that, despite everything, problems could be sorted out 'all in the family' structure. However, its heroes are the young couple, Mike and Gloria, whose 'views are consistently presented as centrist and reasonable, while Archie's "conservative" views contain obvious and glaring flaws of logic and/or character' (Marc 1989:183), suggesting in the show's dialogical structure the clash between Archie's attitudes and those of a newer generation of more liberal, tolerant people. The show's position always seemed to favour the future over the regressive intolerance of Bunker, whose name indicates an entrenched and unmoving stance that is held up for ridicule in the show. The problems of racism and bigotry it allowed to surface into the closed world of sit-coms were unique at the time, but never offered 'solutions that transcend the limits of the current society' (Kellner 1979: 38–9). It is as though the show purged therapeutically some of the social ills by

airing them on prime-time television, but never stepped outside the established system to do so. The media could be critical, even satirical, but this merely proved how resilient the system was and how able it was to alter a popular genre without altering the central code of values that it sought to preserve and promote.

*M\*A\*S\*H* replaced the family with a support structure akin to a new family of different ages, sexes, and races in the displaced environment of Korea. The show provides an indirect commentary on the Vietnam War, but perhaps more cogently, a commentary on the kind of America that might emerge from that experience. The supporting, caring, tolerant and sceptical characters of 'Hawkeye' and Trapper John suggest a new frontier, as John Kennedy called the challenge facing the USA, in which new values such as social conscience and humanity were more important than the pursuit of power and influence. The show often demonstrated the heartless bureaucracy and dehumanised patriotism by pillorying and exposing it through its debunking humour.

Yet despite its anti-establishment credentials, *M\*A\*S\*H* was still a sitcom contained by certain generic traditions, in particular its efforts to close individual episodes and resolve the stories within them. Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* (1987) comments on this aspect of the show whilst reminding us that the audience is not passively manipulated by any media artefact. Her central character, Samantha Hughes, comments that in the show 'things were too simple' suggesting an easy solution to a particular problem in the episode. She 'could see right through' the scripted myth that aimed at closure and explanation and put alongside it the experience of lived reality as something far more complex where 'you knew everything didn't turn out happily. That was too easy' (Mason 1987: 83, 164).

Into the 1990s, sit-coms still celebrate the family and the home, with varying degrees of irony and ridicule (see *Married...With Children*, *Roseanne*, *Blossom*). In many of these cases, and in sit-coms that emerged (and faded) in the 1980s, the programmers searched out variants on the 'family'; single-mothers, two-fathers, single-dads etc. as a recognition, however superficially, of the changing nature of the definition of 'family'. What most of these shows proved was that the development of alternatives to the nuclear family, or the suggestion that it might no longer represent any sense of the 'norm' was ultimately impossible. Different issues could be raised, discussed and encircled within the formula, but only to be resolved by the tearful affirmations of familial love and safety. The often given example of *The Cosby Show* (1984–94) shows how race made little difference in the sit-com because what emerges is still the bonds of family and its powers of socialisation and control in contemporary America, or the version presented in television. Thus in a survey of white viewers of *The Cosby Show*, up to 70 per cent referred to the Huxtables as 'typically American' whilst rejecting the idea that the show was about being black. One function of these sit-coms might be to neutralise with safe, familycentred images, the violent threats of black life and poverty presented in the news media because 'a happy fantasy about the black middle class dispels the grim reality of the black underclass' (Merelman 1995:



264–5). This is too simplistic, but it does once again suggest the way in which sitcoms have been regarded as affirmative, non-threatening representations of American life.

Currently, one of the top-rated shows in the USA, *Home Improvement*, with 20.5 million viewers in one week in August 1995, rekindles the traditional appearance of the sit-com with the home as the focus for almost all the family action and its constant ‘dealing’ with individual family problems and crises in each episode. Certain quirks exist within its formula, such as its own self-conscious use of television through the medium of Tool Time’, its central character’s own cable TV programme. However, although a 1990s’ show with a strong female/mother character, it is still patriarchal—if not through Tim, the husband, who is shown to be often over-reaching and foolish—then through the key patriarchal ‘voice’ (he is never fully seen on screen) of Wilson the next-door neighbour, who offers advice and commentary upon the struggles of Tim to come to terms with the demands of a complex social reality. Once again, the show seeks to resolve and to reorder any crisis that might have been established and thereby asserts the fundamental white, middle-class values of the programme. One episode involved the surprise return of a High School girlfriend of Tim’s and set up the opportunity for humour and for a series of ‘moral’ lessons, such as telling the truth, not avoiding unpleasant tasks, but also for reaffirming Tim’s fidelity to his wife Jill and the holistic nature of the family itself. Ultimately, the show is centripetal, with all its energies centralised upon the home and family, constantly reassuring the audience that despite a difficult world outside its domestic heart is worth preserving. Just as Tim Taylor’s Tool Time’ advises its ‘live studio audience’ how to make their homes better places, the sit-com of which it is a part extends a similar ideological view to us as audience. Despite the jokes, the show always seeks to ‘improve’ the home, or at least bolster its inherent values.

Other current sit-coms suggest continued variations upon these formulaic genre models, but all assert similar value-systems based on the notion of ‘family’ (see *Ellen*, *Grace Under Fire*, *Murphy Brown*, *Cybill*, all Top Twenty shows). The most popular sit-com on US television in 1995 was *Friends* with 24.0 million viewers in one week in August, a show which substitutes the biological family with idealised friendship and simply re-employs all the standard devices of other sit-coms, including set details, conflict-resolution plots and reassuring emotional closure. Sit-coms do not find it easy to represent families as ‘dynamic social entit[ies] extending, potentially and actually, beyond the confines of house and home’, because to do so would be to acknowledge the idea of the family as ‘process’ (Silverstone 1994:33), a rather too complex, non-mythic, interpretation of the family and society. It may be that *Friends*, like *M\*A\*S\*H* before it, has tried to show that the breakdown of the nuclear family does not mean the loss of its essential values, for they can reappear in other social groupings and other television genres as an important ‘structural presence’ (Silverstone 1994:43) (see the cop show ‘family’ of *Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue* or *Homicide*, the

workplace family of *Murphy Brown* or *ER*). Here is the central reason for the examination of the media's fascination with the family, for in its various guises the 'family becomes community [and]...values that have their origins in the family are extended and transformed' into other spheres of life (ibid.: 43). Thus, the media constructs a 'social-family' ideal in which resolution is possible as long as the values it presents are enacted to that end. We, of course, must laugh at the struggles against these norms and the efforts of sitcom characters to stretch and test their boundaries, but ultimately what remains and what appears 'natural' is the sanctity of the mythic American social family. As Barthes has written, myth 'abolishes the complexity of human acts...it organizes a world that is without contradictions' (Barthes 1973:143).

The mythic American sit-com family 'assigns...the narrow limits within which [we are] allowed to suffer without upsetting the world' and 'harmonizes with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself' (ibid.: 155). It is perhaps no coincidence that in 1992, during the Republican Presidential Campaign, Dan Quayle spoke out against the sit-com *Murphy Brown* for allowing its unmarried central character to have a baby which the Vice-President read as an affront to 'family values' (Garber *et al.* 1993: 40) and a sign of American social corruption. Media awareness and criticism are one way to guard against such a closed, stifling ideological impasse and to challenge the undialectical and common-sense representations of the media.

In looking at the arguments surrounding the representation of the family in the sit-com, we have focused upon a particular strand of criticism that has argued for the hegemonic power of media, in particular television, to reinforce certain modes of social behaviour and privilege specific ideological positions over others. However, as we have already suggested, this 'hypodermic' view of the media, that is its injection of influence into the passive body of the audience, has to be called in to question. As Tichi suggests, the media (she is talking just of television), is 'the paradoxical site of sedentary activism...[and] the locus of a new, multivalent consciousness' (Tichi 1991:209); trusted, adored, feared and despised all at the same time. These ambivalences are essential to any consideration of the media in US culture, for its contradictions and complexities are immense.

### FROM SUBURBAN HOME TO GLOBAL VILLAGE

Lynn Spigel's important study of television and the family ends with a very brief discussion of 'cyberspace' and 'virtual reality' in which she refers to the latter as 'like jumping into your TV' (Spigel 1992:185), suggesting a crucial move beyond the boundaries of the home and actually into the worlds of media technology. The 'inventor' of cyberspace, William Gibson, claims that the 'media' had more influence on him as a writer than fiction and his 'feelings about technology are *totally* ambivalent' (McCaffery 1993:265, 274). It is these twin characteristics that give his work a particularly resonant connection to the

developments in contemporary media cultures. His work is not about the future as such, but rather an examination of the present as viewed from the future in which media and technology have become central to the culture until it suffuses the language itself. Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) opens with an image of startling relevance: 'The sky above the port was the color of television tuned to a dead channel' (1986:9), and constantly uses other media-soaked metaphors, like 'hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames...a blurred fragmented mandala of visual information' (ibid.: 68). It is a web of communication and information connecting his world into a McLuhanesque 'global village', the 'matrix', rather like an elaborate version of a total Internet that Gibson's friend and co-author Bruce Sterling has written of as an

expansive and seamless Net of television-telephone-telex-Tape recorder-VCR-laser disk...Phone line, cable TV, fiber-optic cords hissing out words and pictures in torrents of pure light. All netted together in a web over the world, a global nervous system, an octopus of data.

(Penley and Ross 1991:299)

These versions of a contemporary 'World Wide Web' culture relate to global tendencies in many of these cyberpunk writers wherein power is no longer in the hands of government, but with corporations, or what Gibson calls 'zaibatsus': 'multinationals that shaped the course of human history [and] had transcended old barriers...[and could] access vast banks of corporate memory' (Gibson 1986: 242).

However, unlike earlier traditional science fiction, cyberpunk is unwilling to completely condemn the dominance of such media technologies, preferring instead to acknowledge a certain inevitability about its presence, which although not wholly desirable, may have advantages for those willing to use it. This kind of media technoculture, a 'mediascape', of multinationals and information processing, confirms the idea that 'cyberpunk is really about the present' (Rucker 1993:9), because it refers to debates about media control and in particular 'Americanisation'. Although cyberpunk's *zaibatsus* are not American, they do suggest the potentially imperialist force that would spread certain preferred ideologies throughout the world via the media networks. An American mediascape, like the *zaibatsus*, has been viewed as an example of 'monovocal capitalist ideology' (Fiske 1987:309), speaking with one voice and imposing that view on global others—in common language, it is the fear of 'wall-to-wall Dallas'.

### AMERICAN MEDIA IMPERIALISM

The intense fear of media imperialism has a long history, going back to the post-war period in particular, with the belief that America sought to homogenise world cultures at the expense of individual, authentic and local cultures. This

fear was expressed in many ways, over a number of years and formed a part of the intense anti-mass culture feeling expressed by certain critics such as Dwight Macdonald, who saw it as a direct threat to 'high culture'. The argument used earlier in relation to hegemonic sitcom mythology can be seen as part of an approach that fears the power of the media to privilege and bolster a narrow range of values and interests to the detriment of others. Macdonald believed that mass culture was 'imposed from above', with audiences who were 'passive consumers', amid material that 'mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture' (Storey 1993:30, 32). The effects, for Macdonald, of such a culture, are 'narcotized acceptance... as a substitute for the unsettling and unpredictable... joy, tragedy, wit, change, originality and beauty of real life' previously captured in the works of high culture. In place comes 'standardization' and the 'spreading ooze of Mass Culture' (ibid.: 42) which became particularly associated with all things American. As the mass production techniques of industrial capitalism could reproduce endless copies of the same, standardised object, like sit-coms, records or paperbacks for example, fears grew that a similar process would occur in all cultural practices. In Britain, for example, Richard Hoggart, who recognised some of the energies of American popular culture, was concerned about the ways its values and practices might affect working-class youths and drive them away from their authentic lives to a fantasy embodied in the juke-box full of American records 'doctored for presentation' (Hoggart 1958:204).

A more theoretical critique of mass culture was supplied by the Frankfurt School in the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer who saw mass culture as a product of state monopoly capitalism seeking to mould the minds of working people by encouraging false needs whilst diminishing alternative ways of thinking that might have offered some opposition. They termed it the 'culture industry' so as to suggest the imposed system of values being expressed from above ensuring a conformity upon its recipients and driving out all oppositional, resistant ways of thinking. Combining standardisation with predictability 'Its products encourage conformity and consensus which ensure obedience to authority, and the stability of the capitalist system' (Strinati 1995:64). Thus mass culture is a way of maintaining the *status quo* through flattening out all desire for alternatives and for other modes of expression. Herbert Marcuse called this idea 'one dimensionality', meaning that alternative, fuller dimensions were removed, leaving only a limited and circumscribed uniformity of response. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood... it becomes a way of life... and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change' (Marcuse 1967:27). The American critic Theodore Roszak wrote of 'technocracy' and its intention to 'charm conformity from us by exploiting our deep-seated commitment to the scientific world-view' (Roszak 1970:9).

If all this were true, as Jeremy Tunstall has written, 'false consciousness would be plugged into every human home' with the growth of media technology

(1977:39), ensuring that American mass culture would ‘rule the global village’ (ibid.: 18). However, there are huge assumptions contained in the approaches of Macdonald, the Frankfurt School and other perpetrators of this argument against mass culture. For example, it assumes that all people receive and use the media in the same way, under the same conditions and for the same reasons, whereas, in fact, there is enormous diversity and difference in these matters. Tunstall makes this point well when he argues that the spread of American media in the world may not produce homogeneity at all, but respond to and facilitate ‘the world...splitting up into smaller units and ethnic identities’ and thereby enabling ‘localism, separatism, talking back to, and switching off from, authority, the centre, the national and foreign media’ (Tunstall 1977:274). Under these conditions, the media, rather than monolithic and homogeneous, speaks in many voices, becoming capable of what Tunstall refers to as the three levels: ‘international’; small, local, ethnic and ‘traditional’; and finally ‘national’ in the sense of ‘hybrid’ forms including and mixing different elements.

This argument, made in the late 1970s, has been updated by Morley and Robins (1995) who develop the tension between globalism and localism, stressing, however, that the two can and do coexist, and perhaps offer the ‘possibility of reinventing and rearticulating international and local cultures and identities’ (Morley and Robins 1995:2). Rather than the threat of an imperialist media culture, with America at the centre, in which everything becomes the same, they suggest an alternative through which the local and the global can co-exist, and go further to posit the possibility of media empowerment. Although the large multinational media corporations do exist (see the discussion of Viacom on pp. 286–88) and exercise enormous influence and control, ‘what is doubted is the cultural implications of this presence’ (Tomlinson 1991:57). This is partly to do with how audiences receive these messages, as we shall see later, and also connected to the explosion of media technologies which have provided new avenues for communication and expression to a wider base of people. This ‘new regionalism’ values ‘diversity and difference of identities... and seeks to sustain and conserve the variety of cultural heritages, regional and national’ (Morley and Robins 1995:17), especially through television. The newer media such as the Internet and computer technology have increased the channels of communication that can exist to resist and counter the potential hegemonic, corporate power of the multinationals (Gibson’s *zaiabatsus*) as we shall discuss later.

So often, as we have already suggested, this fear of the global corporation with its insatiable desire for hegemonic influence has been linked to the concept of Americanisation. The poet Allen Ginsberg asked in 1956, ‘Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?’ (Charters 1994:75), and created the name ‘Moloch’ to characterise the inter-linked technologies of consumerism, capitalism, weapons and the media that represented for him, and many during the 1950s and 1960s, a fearful imperial force invading the world from its invincible position in America. This imagery of media imperialism has been persistent throughout this century with the demonisation process taking over at the expense

of a more complex analysis of the ways in which the media functions within culture. It is, for example, as much about how the media is received and used by its audiences and consumers as it is about the 'intention' of the corporate 'sender' or provider. That is, we can read a television programme in different ways so that its meanings are plural rather than single, monologic and fixed. In 1980 the US soap opera *Dallas* was the top-rated show and watched throughout the world and, with its struggles for power and influence, it took the realm of the family into extraordinary new territory. However, it became the focus for those who felt that American media imperialism was rife and was even cited by Jack Lang, French Culture Minister, as 'the symbol of American cultural imperialism' eating its way into national life. Like McDonald's restaurants, *Dallas* was assumed to represent the worst facets of homogenised American culture, with all the fears of the Frankfurt School realised.

*Dallas* became the source of a study into audience responses by Ien Ang which suggested that audiences were very different in their reception of the programme and all seemed aware of what she calls 'the ideology of mass culture'. In her use of this phrase, it means the negative image of mass media often attributed to American productions with their specific ideological messages. Yet the audiences appear to be fully aware of the 'norms and prescriptions [that] exert pressure on them' (During 1993:415) and Ang concludes that the 'strategies' audiences come up with resist, to some extent, the hegemony of the media and prove 'it is wrong...to pretend that the ideology of mass culture exercises dictatorial powers' since 'alternative discourses do exist which offer alternative points of identification' for *Dallas* watchers (ibid.: 416). Ang goes on to conclude an important point about the media, which is that it is 'talked about' in one way and yet in 'practice' may be used very differently. In people's cultural practices, they might mix, combine and 'pluralise' their use of the media in a manner that cuts across many of the theoretical groupings that appear to be significant and inject pleasure into the process. Ang's argument is that pleasure gained from watching *Dallas* or similar media products does not replace real life, but goes alongside it and 'it need not imply that we are bound to take up these positions and solutions in our relations to our loved ones and friends, our work, our political ideals, and so on' (Ang 1985:135). Thus the arguments about a manipulative, single-minded media position or hegemony can be challenged, and as a consequence, so can the idea of a global as opposed to a local media culture. Ang's writings provide evidence to support the multiple and complex resistances and uses of the media in the contemporary world where 'no fixed standard exists' (ibid.: 136) for the plural and diverse audience.

John Tomlinson (1991) suggests that 'imperialism' has been superseded by 'globalisation', which he describes as 'less coherent or culturally directed' than imperialism, and indicative of the 'interconnection and interdependency of all global areas' (Tomlinson 1991:175). The idea of an all-powerful nation-state like America dictating an agenda through its media has become less viable in the age of the multinational corporation. The idea of cultural imperialism drew on the

image of secure, powerful nations exercising influence over less powerful cultures, but as the sense of individual nations acting alone becomes less feasible, it has been replaced by a 'new decentered global network' (Jameson 1991:38) of multinational corporations. They occupy a space beyond our human perception and so difficult for us to 'map' and, therefore, control. It is a vast, interconnected and global space 'made' of information exchange and processing where messages are constructed, reproduced and consumed by a massive and varied audience—it is a new media arena akin to what has been termed 'cyberspace' (of which more later).

### THE CORPORATE VOICE—CASE STUDY: VIACOM

We are seeing the emergence of truly global, decentred, corporations in which diverse media products...are being combined into overarching communications empires...shaping a global space of image flows.

(Morley and Robins 1995:32)

During 1995 Time-Warner, a corporation that included *Time*, *Fortune* and *Time Life* magazines, Warner, Electra, and Atlantic music labels plus film assets such as Warner Brothers studios and television, HBO cable channel and the Six Flags Mountain Theme Park, merged with Turner Broadcasting Systems (CNN cable, TNT cartoon channel, New Line and Castle Rock film studios, etc.) to create the world's largest media company with an estimated annual revenue of \$18.7 billion. This put it ahead of the Disney/ABC group with a revenue of \$16 billion. These media groupings are the transnational companies that Morley and Robins are referring to above, which are involved in various aspects of production, distribution and delivery of a range of media and continually seeking to increase their interests and influence throughout world markets.

An example of a similar corporation with a growing influence and control within America and the world is Viacom Incorporated, which now owns brand companies in a range of media industries: Blockbuster video, Virgin Interactive, Paramount, Spelling Entertainment (*Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210*) and MTV. By recognising the nature of technological change and use within society, Viacom has expanded rapidly in these various areas. A recent survey predicted that it would be well placed to outgrow its competitors, Time-Warner and Disney, over the next few years in part because of its awareness of audience differences and its willingness to foster the idea of 'branding'. This is a targeting of specific audiences needs, of which MTV provides the classic example.

MTV was launched in 1981 at a specific youth market that felt comfortable with inter-linked media technologies and with a style of programming aimed at intense visual and aural stimuli drawn from comics, video games and other sources. It has been described as a 'seamless rolling collage' because it's hard to

see 'where the "programming" begins and the adverts end' as MTV 'becomes both subject and object of its own round-the-clock promotional campaign' creating in the process a 'revolutionary genetic hybrid' (Sweeting 1994:5). At the heart of MTV was the desire to capture the excess of information that these new forms represented and, as Jameson puts it, the effect was to 'wire up the context and make space musical around the consumer' (Jameson 1991:299). By 1993, MTV Networks were 'generating more operating profit than the network operations of CBS, ABC and NBC combined' (Batelle 1995:90) but despite its success, it has been criticised as video wallpaper for its use of promotional videos supplied by the music industry to sell its 'products'. However, the nature of MTV has developed to offer a wider programming base, still aimed at a very precise audience of 15–34-year-olds, but now offering current affairs, sports, game shows and other television output. These often incorporate aspects of MTV's style, employing particular visual codes suggesting a fresh, young approach, such as the unusual use of graphics, fast-cutting of images, sound-track and odd camera angles. These techniques were developed through the video making associated with MTV which continually demanded more exciting, innovative modes of communication in order for each individual video to be distinguishable from those that surrounded it on 24-hour programming. This 'MTV style' has been influential in other media too; in advertising, where 'youth' products, both on television and in magazines carry some of the hallmarks of MTV's combinations of music, editing and colour; in television, where shows like *Miami Vice* used setting, lighting, fashion, product-placement and music to construct an experience akin to the music video. Such 'influences' have been termed postmodern because of the flow back and forth between different texts, so that it is hard to tell if *Miami Vice* is quoting MTV or vice versa. As Grossberg has argued, '*Miami Vice* is...all on the surface. And the surface is nothing but a collection of quotations from our own collective historical debris, a mobile game of Trivia' (Kellner 1995: 239). The same can be said of MTV itself, and yet the network's use of mobile surfaces, sampling techniques (as in rap music) and direct, often extreme methods of delivery have created an influential and vibrant new media aesthetic.

Viacom has already invested heavily into interactive media as the possible future for the industry, and sees it in almost visionary terms. David Vogler, executive producer of a new on-line Net service, Nickleodeon Online, said it would become 'the ultimate theater, library, clubhouse and meeting place for millions who have the common bond of "Good TV"... the place for interaction with classic ads, games, music, products, experiences, events, movies and other forms of pop culture' (Batelle 1995: 111). In these terms Viacom articulates itself as a 'mediascape', but claims to be concerned with 'empowering kids'—'Letting kids know that they should be inquisitive, that they should ask questions, that they should explore, that they have more power than they think, that they're creative' (ibid.: 111).



This, of course, represents an interesting reversal of the usual assumptions about the media as hegemony, pacifying and moulding rather than allowing any creative involvement. Obviously this commitment to empowerment is heavily ideological and depends on who has access to the technology and the social system within which they might use it. However, it does indicate, to an extent, some of the new possibilities inherent within the new media and may further suggest the shift, if one exists, from the imperialist view of media technology to a new globalisation.

One line of argument suggests that MTV is representative of the mediasaturated culture discussed by the French theorist Jean Baudrillard, where it is 'no longer possible to separate the economic or productive realm from the realms of ideology or culture, since cultural artifacts, images, representations, even feelings and psychic structures have become part of the world of the economic' (Storey 1993:162). In a media culture that decentres and disorients identities, a 'new space' is created in which people open themselves to the possibilities of alternative ways of seeing and experiencing life. Beyond the mundane 'real', exists the 'hyperreal' where reality has collapsed into a version of itself, a simulation, a facade—the 'surfaces' often associated with MTV. Storey calls Baudrillard's position a 'resigned celebration' (ibid.: 165) suggesting the ambivalent response to the changes he records and yet with little sense of empowerment or struggle because 'the medium and the real are now in a single nebulous state whose truth is undecipherable' (Baudrillard in Tomlinson 1991:59).

### IMAGINING THE PRESENT: CYBERPUNK

'It is not necessary to write science fiction' because we are in it, wrote Baudrillard (Bukatman 1993:182), and the work of cyberpunk writers reinforces this idea. Indeed, cyberpunk's innovative form 'is to traditional narrative as MTV is to the feature film' (McCaffrey 1993:334), with its 'optical prose' (ibid.: 334), full of sharp, condensed, cut-up surfaces. Rejecting, as William Gibson does, the label of science fiction, he writes instead about 'the world in which we live' (quoted in Kellner 1995:299). Where Baudrillard retreats into acceptance and cynicism, cyberpunk is more forthright in its embrace of media technology, seeing in it both a dark side as well as the opportunities it might contain for a redefinition of the human. Marshall McLuhan wrote of 'electric technology' as a means to extend 'our central nervous system itself in a global embrace...[in a] technological simulation of consciousness' (McLuhan 1965:3) the results of which he was uncertain. By the time of Baudrillard and especially Gibson, the electric, media technology impacts upon the human in equally ambiguous ways, suggesting a 'double articulation in which we both find the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen'—a 'terminal identity' (Bukatman 1993:9). Through this approach, media technology is transformative, offering a 'subversive reconception of the subject that situates

the human and the technological as coextensive, codependent, and mutually defining' (ibid.: 22), rather than simply oppressive, conditioning and reductive. Under these terms, new technologies are represented as in dialogue with the human and not just as a threat or as a controlling force, as was so often the case with traditional science fiction.

The theorist Donna Haraway has used the term 'cyborg' to name a 'new subjectivity' emerging from this human-technological mix in which the two are wedded together and interfused. Media and technology in this argument are not demonised but embraced as the means of 'reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection to others, in communication with all of our parts' (Penley and Ross 1991:308). Instead of dividing the world into for and against, pro and con, this 'cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves' (ibid.: 308). We must try to understand the full potential of media technology and pay close attention to all its facets so that we can 'look for ways to subvert and turn [it] to new liberatory uses' (ibid.).

In Gibson's work, there is a 'polyglot mix of styles and cultures' brought about by the 'convergence and globalization of national economies' (ibid.: 300) which directly opposes the earlier notions of Americanisation and suggests a contrary movement. It is an internationalisation in which American imperialism is only one of the players and traditional demarcations of power are eroded because media technology has entered the lives of all the people creating a 'new alliance...of the technical world and the world of organized dissent...[and] the technical revolution reshaping our society is based not in hierarchy but in decentralization, not in rigidity but in fluidity' (Sterling 1994:x).

The old notion of media imperialism and the question of hegemonic control looks increasingly suspect alongside such 'new alliances' through which new groups contest for power and seek to present their points of view. These might be 'power blocs' or 'alliances of social interests formed strategically or tactically to advance the interest of those who form them' (Fiske 1993:10), or commercial groupings to promote and sell new products. All such alliances are 'a disposition and exercise of power' (ibid.: 10) and need to be examined with care.

### NEW ALLIANCES

The launch of the Microsoft Windows 95 package was given all the hype of an MTV production for a new rock album, its magazine advertisements addressed its audience as sexualised friends about to have 'fun' as they experimented with 'turning the thing on'. The product was 'explained' in video-manuals by the stars of the sit-com *Friends*, Jennifer Aniston and Matt Perry (The Microsoft Windows 95 Video Guide') and launched on the NBC television network across the USA with a half hour 'infomercial starring Anthony Edwards, the character Mark Green from *ER* (lying third behind *Friends* in August 1995's ratings) and a commercial using The Rolling Stones' song 'Start Me Up'. This shows clearly

the way that computer technology has begun to merge within a popular media culture, stressing accessibility, pleasure, familiarity and the home as opposed to earlier versions of technology-elites and eggheads. Although clearly a commercial tactic, it is part of the process by which the 'new media' is becoming less distinct from other media and its forms used to reinforce one other. Just as Lucille Ball, who starred in the classic 1950s' sit-com *I Love Lucy* and generated a whole industry of products, was re-represented in other media like a comic strip for King Features from 8 December 1952 —30 May 1955, records and Dell comic books, so too these 'convergences' are taking place in the realms of new technology. In 1994 Americans bought \$8 billion worth of personal computers, only just behind the \$8.3 billion they spent on televisions.

Even Courtney Love, widow of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, has become part of media convergence shifting from music into autobiography into the Internet with her postings between July 1994 and January 1995 in which she 'spoke' about her life and feelings as if to counter the versions of her life being presented by the more traditional media. For her, one assumes, the Net was a channel of reply to the traditionally maintained and controlled voice of the Press and television through which she could speak directly to her fans about herself. Throughout the media there is a new hybridity emerging in which video games become films (*Mortal Kombat*, 1995), television becomes film (*Morphin Power Rangers*), graphic novels are reinvented as films, films become games (*Terminator*), Internet postings become plays (*Love in the Void*—based on Courtney Love, by Elyse Singer).

This brings the argument back to the fundamental uncertainties that seem to exist within American media culture, with its tendencies 'to swing from one extreme to the other, from hype and romanticism to fear and loathing' (Elmer-DeWitt 1995:9). The media, in many forms, has been seen as democratising because it could offer expression and arenas of debate, or be a vehicle for mind-control and legitimisation of authorised and official cultures. This endless debate is once again epitomised with the current discussions over 'the information super-highway', including the Internet and other future fibre-optic technologies. As the *Wired* editorial discussed at the beginning of this chapter suggests, there has been almost a countercultural fervour surrounding the Internet or 'cyberspace' in its more mystical form, harking back to the 1960s. For example, in the same way that 1960s' counter-culture embraced new technologies as 'radical politics that could bypass institutions and nations and go directly to the people, producing alternatives to corporate America' imagining a 'global village, radically hooked up' (Mellencamp 1992:56), so cyberpunks look to William Burroughs, a 1960s' counter-cultural figure, as a major influence with his work 'like a rusty can opener on society's jugular' (Rucker 1993: 70) and to Timothy Leary, the founder of psychedelic experimentation, who became a spokesperson for the radical potential of the Net. Some critics are wary of this new communitarianism focused on the idea of creating 'virtual communities' or

groups who talk across the Net, and see it as a 'throwback to the '60s' and a desire for an unreal utopia.

This anti-authoritarian mood which has always existed around the debates over new media is perhaps best demonstrated by the 'mission statement' of the Electronic Frontier Foundation which speaks of 'a new world arising in the vast web of digital, electronic media which connects us... These communities without a single, fixed geographical location comprise the first settlements on an electronic frontier' (Rucker 1993:88). The Foundation's aim is to 'civilize the electronic frontier; to make it truly useful and beneficial not just to a technical elite, but to everyone' (ibid.: 88) so that it 'threatens the hegemony of the government/corporate paradigm by empowering millions of individuals' (ibid.). However interesting and exciting it is to have American myths of 'frontier' re-used in relation to new dreams of independence and freedom, there have emerged within the new media contrary forces of control, censorship and regulation. The political appropriation of the super-highway has been marked in recent years, with Clinton and Gore in 1992 promising the access of Americans to this new technology and more recently the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich claiming that, 'cyberspace is the land of knowledge and the exploration of that land can be a civilisation's truest, highest calling' (Elmer-DeWitt 1995:4). Both these appropriations of 'cyberspace' begin to curtail its radical potential as it is claimed by established political institutions and interests and engulfed by the mainstream. The Electronic Frontier Foundation are particularly concerned about 'Operation Sun Devil', which they claim is a combination of 'agencies like the FBI and Secret Service', who are working with 'large information corporations' to 'radically limit...the digital media' (Kapor and Barlow 1990:2). In fact, the idea of the Internet's 'democracy' is limited by economic access, government agencies that would censor and restrict the flow of information across the Web (Senator Exon's Telecommunications Decency Act), and those corporations that are beginning to establish their own versions of the Net, like Microsoft's 'Network'. This is the fear of William Gibson, who celebrates the pleasures of cyberspace and its potential 'urge toward freedom', but whose 'concern now is whether it [Internet] can be dismantled by corporate interests who want something more structured so they can sell us stuff' (Rosenberg 1995:2).

### **'HELLO, YOU'RE TALKING TO A MACHINE...': *THE TERMINATOR* FILMS AND CYBORG CULTURE**

Science fiction has consistently articulated America's responses to media and technology, providing an arena removed from the political sphere in which issues of identity, power, machine culture and apocalypse could be examined through narrative exploration. In earlier sci-fi, technology (in which we include the media) is associated with the forces of modernity, that is rapid change and alteration of traditional social institutions and structures, and therefore deemed a

potential threat to the fabric of society. In sci-fi literature and films, a dystopian, dark side of technology could be played out and resolved in an environment that was carefully disassociated from the idea of the domestic home. As non-human, technology is always likely to go out of control, to destroy and to impose itself on emotive and compassionate humanity. This technophobia manifested itself in different ways, for example in the 'invasion' films of the 1950s, in which the 'alien' threatens the structures of American life—in particular the family, as in *Invaders from Mars* (1953). The threat was linked to fears of Communism and its perceived desire to invade, impose its values and control the core values of American life, unsettling its democratic culture and destabilising the traditional nexus of the ordered family unit. Unlike the later jokiness of the TV sit-coms' playful use of the 'alien' (as in *Bewitched* and *My Favourite Martian*), these films expressed genuine sociopolitical fears about the outsider and the difference that their values represented. Technology thus became a code by which America could dramatise its uncertainties about unchecked progress and its consequences. In all these films, however, technology has two faces, one good, one bad. In the hands of an ordered, democratic 'family', the gadgets of the consumer-driven 1950s' suburban culture were perfectly acceptable, after all, as we saw earlier, this is the era of television, of the new domestic technology and of the atom bomb. But there was the possibility of it falling in to the 'wrong' hands and being 'misused', or being reinvented in some more advanced state by the alien: those beyond American cultural control and order.

As in cyberpunk novels, the *Terminator* films (1984 and 1991) are concerned with ambivalent responses to media technologies and this tension between control and order. The last words in the second film are: 'The unknown future rolls toward us. I face it for the first time with a sense of hope because if a machine, a Terminator, can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too.' These are spoken by Sarah Connor, the mother of John Connor, the saviour of humankind. The religious significance is very strong here, with the image of the sacrificial 'JC' (Jesus Christ/John Connor) having 'taught' even the heartless machine something of the power of sympathy and love. However, the films themselves reach this point through a hybridisation of humanity and machinery, with a mutual 'learning' taking place. It is for this reason that the films reject simple oppositional readings of technology and present a more ambiguous and fluid relationship between the machine and the human. In the same way that *Blade Runner* (1982) 'offers a mediation between technology and human values' (Kuhn 1990:62) when it presents an ambiguous relationship between Deckard and Rachel, so *Terminator 1* and *Terminator 2*, explore contested images of technology in America.

*The Terminator* is set in the 1980s; media technologies are everywhere, providing benefits and hindrances to everyday lives, and the film makes much of this. It is saturated by machinery, screens, gadgets and automations and suggests that 'the defence network computer (Skynet) of the future which decided our fate in a microsecond had its humble origins here, in the rather more innocuous

technology of the film's present' (Kuhn 1990:117). Characters have problems with technology all through the film, suggesting it is prone to break down or to misuse and therefore that there is nothing inherently bad about technology, only in the ways it can be used. For example, warnings fail to reach characters in the film because of technology, suggesting that we might rely on it to make the communication (the telephone, the beeper, the answering machine, etc), but if the message is impeded or distracted, no connection is made. A key scene in the first film takes place in a club called 'Tech Noir', linking together the duality of the film's concerns with the pleasures of technology and its dark (noir) side, associated, as in this violent scene, with death and destruction. The very structure of techno-culture—music, lights, video etc., can be obliterated by the same forces that created it in the first place and, in this regard, the scene encapsulates much of the films' concerns with the possible effects of technology.

What the films propose is a learning process, signified by the merging of human and machine, so that Sarah becomes a 'hard body' and closer to the Terminator's single-mindedness and rigour, whilst the Terminator in 'T2' becomes 'humanised'—a parent to John Connor who kills no one but, rather, cares and saves. It is a 'partial and ambiguous merging of the two, a more complex response...[not] the Romantic triumph of the organic over the mechanical, or the nihilistic recognition that we have all become automata' (Kuhn 1990:118), and a recognition that culture can be reconceived, or re-parented, in a way that acknowledges the central role of technology and yet maintains humanity too. This is a humanity transformed and no longer locked into a hopeless oppositional mentality, but one in which a variety of 'norms' have been questioned and alternatives proposed. This includes gender issues (see Haraway 1991), as well as those of power, authority and control, all of which are examined in the films. Technology, in the forms of automated factories, close both *Terminator* films and it is there that the Terminators 'die', in one crushed by a machine, in the other smelted down to its constituent parts, as if to remind the audience of the fact that it is all man-made and that 'technology is an expression of our humanity' (Coupland 1995); it is our responsibility, 'the machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment' (Haraway 1991:180). The horror of nuclear war, the Skynet program and the eerie world of 'Cyberdyne Corporation', the Tyrrel Corporation (in *Blade Runner*) and Gibson's *zaiboatsus* are from the same scientific, technological minds that also produce the basic, ubiquitous technologies of everyday life.

The 'fruitful coupling' (Haraway 1991:150) of human and technological can be part of what Kellner refers to as 'emancipatory cultural production' (Kellner 1979:42) because it transgresses the boundaries that fix people into set ways of thinking and acting. Just as the Internet might emancipate and democratise, so might other technologies, and together adjust American culture and move it away from certain 'norms', like the stereotypical family and the suburban home or home and workplace. In the reconstituted family of contemporary sci-fi, for example, the old televisual family has been critiqued and expanded, forcing a

‘reconstruction’ (Kuhn 1990:65) in which new roles are adopted and differences encouraged. These texts suggest the ways in which technology can be accommodated and indeed used positively to emancipate, to alter and to challenge the traditional and conventional ways of life, without any necessary loss.

### **CONCLUSION: ‘A POWERFUL INFIDEL HETEROGLOSSIA’**

Haraway (1991) argues for a ‘cyborg world’ where, rather than clinging on to a traditional view rooted in the idea of technical domination and the call back to an ‘imagined organic body to integrate our resistance’, we must make ‘a perverse shift of perspective’ which engages us more fully within ‘technologically mediated societies’ (ibid.: 154). As she says, ‘single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters’ (ibid.: 154) and so we must try to push beyond the limited and fearful perceptions of technology and adopt instead the fluidity and complexity of the cyborg. Haraway is particularly concerned with the need to challenge notions of gender, but her theory helps to frame new attitudes to technology in general.<sup>2</sup> As she writes, the contemporary postmodern world cannot maintain an ‘anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology’, but must find ways of ‘embracing the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life...Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves’ (Haraway 1991:181).

What Haraway sees in the potential of human-machine connection is ‘a powerful infidel heteroglossia’ (ibid.: 181), that is, a means of many voices speaking out or finding a space for their articulation in the new technologies of the late twentieth century (see Introduction and [Chapter 1](#)). If, as we have seen, media and technology have for so long been defined as centripetal, that is, forcing everything towards the centre, towards a onevoiced control, then what Haraway proposes is centrifugal, diverse and multi-voiced. The emancipatory and the technological, in this theory, are not mutually exclusive, indeed, the latter is vital to the struggle for empowerment and expression if we are to learn what the Terminator learns, ‘the value of human life’.

### **NOTES**

- 1 This phrase is taken from Douglas Kellner’s book *Media Culture* 1995, p. 299 (see bibliography).
- 2 Donna Haraway’s work is relevant to our discussions of gender and sexuality in [Chapter 7](#) since, for her, the cyborg is beyond gender and represents a new possibility for ‘recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control (Haraway 1991:175). She considers the work of writers like Cherrie Moraga and Audre Lorde in her analysis.

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### FOLLOW-UP WORK

- 1 Film exercise using *Blade Runner*. Using the opening sequences of the film, analyse the multiple representations of media technology and how it both relates to and intervenes in human life. How does the film connect this futuristic vision to the American past (its origins stories?) and with what thematic, ideological consequences? End your consideration with the scene

in which Deckard visits Tyrrel in his office, tests Rachel, etc. How does the film introduce aspects of power and control at this point?

*Assignments and areas of study*

2 Consider the following:

- (a) *Star Trek* can be viewed as USA in space, but what vision of the USA does the show convey? Analyse the programme drawing on the ideological and historical readings of the text—for example, how it positions the non-Anglo crew, or represents women. Connect it to our debates here about utopian/dystopian ideas.
- (b) Examine the notion of ‘global’ multinational corporatism through the VIACOM group, analysing their corporate ‘identity’, values and products. Do they provide a pattern of interests, concerns and methods of targeting? What are its characteristics? What values do its interests convey and how?

## Epilogue

The final chapter's discussion of technoculture is an appropriate way to conclude this book since it connects with our introduction, the Bakhtinian fascination with multiplicity, and the search for new ways of articulating the American experience. Haraway's cyborg metaphor subverts and questions 'the old story of origins [and] original wholeness' which she exposes as fictions 'written' by those with power as 'they map a totalizing uniformity on diverse peoples and experiences through a specified locus of identification' (Smith 1993:179). This is how America has so often been read, imagining a single nation defined by its exclusions of others and its insistent desire to create and maintain a mythic, uniform identity which holds hegemonic power at the centre through consensus. Just as the cyborg breaches the conventional borders and boundaries, especially that of organism/machine, so a new view of America must be unafraid to break down the closed ways of seeing and crossing borders of gender, sexuality, race, generation and ethnicity so that, as in the ending of *Terminator*, 'we can learn from our fusions...how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos' (Haraway 1991:173). To hold on to the myths of America and its origin stories, is to be 'colonized' by them (ibid.: 175) and so it has been part of our purpose in this book to retell stories from outside the mainstream, from the 'margins', where different perspectives struggle 'against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly' (ibid.: 176). This anti-metanarrative process Haraway calls 'liminal transformation' (ibid.: 177) because in it, the voices once demeaned and erased from American culture, have survived on its edges and can now provide transformative possibilities in the true spirit of 'new beginnings', by 'actively rewriting the texts of their bodies and societies...in this play of readings' (ibid.: 177). Stepping beyond simplistic mythic or dualistic readings of America enables a new perception of the nation as 'hybrids, mosaics, chimeras' (ibid.), plural, shifting and in contestation for power and authority. It is a place where identity is not fixed and where politics is no longer 'unity—through—domination or unity—through—incorporation' (ibid.: 157), but is a new cultural politics of 'affinity' and difference. We would contend that this new politics must, however, be cognisant of the 'power relations that structure difference' (Jordan and Weedon 1995:564), since plurality does not mean that all the voices are socially equal or that oppression and domination do not still remain. It is 'the

politics of living identity through difference...[which is]...recognizing that all of us are composed of multiple social identities, not one' and that we are all 'complexly constructed' by 'different antagonisms' that operate on us in different ways (King 1993:57).

To draw these connections between national and individual identity has limitations, but it does allow us to contest previous stories about America whilst exploring new perspectives and approaches to a country that 'still feeds on the diet of otherness' (Pile and Thrift 1995:272). Indeed, the future of American Studies, which we begin to suggest here, will be an expansion of the areas of study to include a broader range of cultural texts (graphic novels, computer packages, video art, etc), and a more dramatic collapsing of disciplinary boundaries to include productive new approaches. Ultimately, the multiplicitous cultures of America have to be examined using many disciplines—as we have here—but the future may demand, as Kellner argues (1995), the 'transdisciplinary' approach that refuses to stop at the borders of the text, but moves from text to context, and from text to culture and society. His terms, 'critical, multicultural and multiperspectival' are all relevant to the kind of American Cultural Studies that we would see as evolving now and worth developing further in the future.

The study of American cultures must continue to criticise itself and alter its methods because in this productive revision exists a healthy instability. This mirrors the fluid condition of the nation itself, with all its 'living mix' of voices and opinions, power and change. As Ishmael Reed, the AfricanAmerican novelist has written, America's new 'exciting destiny' is 'to become a place where the cultures of the world crisscross', and this particularly optimistic vision is more feasible 'because the United States is unique in the world: The world is here' (Simonson and Walker 1988: 160). The task of American Cultural Studies is, we believe, to continue to find new and different ways to reflect and comment upon such a place.

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