Roots Too

White Ethnic Revival in Post–Civil Rights America

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To my family, root and branch
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Roots Too
I am an Italian-American who doesn't speak Italian, just as I am a French-American whose French ranges from tremulous to nonexistent, as well as a Russian-American who barely recognizes the sound of Russian and has never seen a street in Russia. Because of all these complex combinations, moreover, I am an American-American who spent years denying being American, years inhabiting a country (or perhaps countries) of hyphenation—maybe even a hyphen nation.

—Sandra Gilbert, “Mysteries of the Hyphen” (1997)
Introduction:
Beyond Hansen’s Law

The notion that the intense and unprecedented mixture of ethnic and religious groups in American life was soon to blend into a homogenous end product has outlived its usefulness, and also its credibility. . . . The point about the melting pot . . . is that it did not happen.

—Nathan Glazer
and Daniel Patrick
Moynihan, Beyond the
Melting Pot (1963)

The leader of an antiracism workshop in the 1990s once noted a disquieting inclination on the part of the group’s white participants to dissociate themselves from the history and persistent reality of white privilege by emphasizing some purportedly not-quite-white ethnic background. “I’m not white; I’m Italian,” one would say. Another, “I’m Jewish.” After this ripple had made its way across the group, the seminar leader was left wondering,
“What happened to all the white people who were here just a minute ago?”

Such modifications of whiteness were not unheard of on the American scene: earlier generations had spoken of the Celtic, Hebrew, Slavic, or Mediterranean “races” even though these peoples had entered the country as the “free white persons” of American naturalization law. But the salience of these distinctions had largely faded away in the middle decades of the century. In the realm of self-ascription, such evasions of whiteness would have been rare—unthinkable, in some parts of the country—by the 1950s. In the late twentieth century the sense of a statement like “I’m not white; I’m Italian” rested on several historical preconditions, now loosely relayed in the term “ethnic revival”: the Civil Rights movement had heightened whites’ consciousness of their skin privilege, rendering it not only visible but uncomfortable (the more so, perhaps, because it was so hard to disown its chief comforts). The example of Black Nationalism and the emergence of multiculturalism had provided a new language for an identity that was not simply “American.” After decades of striving to conform to the Anglo-Saxon standard, descendants of earlier European immigrants quit the melting pot. Italianness, Jewishness, Greekness, and Irishness had become badges of pride, not shame.

What the second generation wishes to forget the third wishes to remember, observed Marcus Lee Hansen before an audience of Swedish immigrants in the 1930s. According to Hansen, a typical member of the second (American-born) generation of Swedes “wanted to forget everything: the foreign language that left an unmistakable trace in his English speech, the religion that continually recalled childhood struggles, the family customs that should have been the happiest of all memories.” At the time, Hansen’s
oratory was as much a jeremiad as it was a sociological lecture: nothing could “absolve the traitors of the second generation,” who in their rush to become American “deliberately threw away what had been preserved in the home.” But for Hansen the immigrants’ grandchildren represented “a new force and a new opportunity”: reversing the assimilationist trajectory of their parents, members of this generation strive to remember and to recover what has been lost. Hansen called this “the principle of third-generation interest.” His observation on the ethnic behavior of generations, thought to transcend ethnic boundaries and perhaps history as well, eventually achieved semi-official status as “Hansen’s Law.”

Discussion of the ethnic revival of the 1960s and after must begin with Hansen’s Law, not necessarily because of its explanatory power, but because, in the decades since, Hansen’s Law has shaped Americans’ very understanding of the new, resurgent ethnicity. As a matter of simple definition, Hansen’s Law in action is in fact what the ethnic revival is widely presumed to have been. Ethnic traces and trappings that had been lost, forgotten, or forcibly cast off by prior generations in their rush to Americanize were now rediscovered and embraced by a younger generation who had known nothing but “American” culture. Polish and Gaelic language lessons; The Joys of Yiddish; klezmer records and folk dancing; a hunger for Old World history; the elaborate recreation of family genealogies—take this individualized identity quest and multiply it by a few million, and there is the ethnic revival.

A few objections might be raised. When we cast a glance back across the ethnic landscape to texts like “Americans All—Immigrants All” (1938), Louis Adamic’s Nation of Nations (1944), or
John F. Kennedy’s *Nation of Immigrants* (1958), we get the feeling that, whatever death or slumber ethnicity was supposedly “revived” from in the ethnic revival, the hiatus could not have been very long. Perhaps “ethnic reverie” would be a better term. But indeed there was a surge in popular “ethnic” concerns in the 1960s and after, and the common focus on the personal dimension of identity is too limiting to accommodate the full circuitry of the new ethnicity and its social and political significance. It is not just that many, perhaps millions, of people became newly absorbed in the idea of their ethnic heritage at the same moment, but also that they received all kinds of support and direction from the key institutions that engaged their lives. Psychological dynamics undoubtedly played some part in the wish to recover Grandma and Grandpa’s lost heritage. But missing from the standard Hansen’s Law reckoning are the surrounding cultural, institutional, and political forces: trade presses and television networks, which produced mass paperbacks and TV shows like *Roots*; news agencies, like *Time* magazine, which turned the roots phenomenon into a roots craze by providing instruction in genealogical research; publishers, scholars, and universities, which produced studies like *World of Our Fathers* and offered college credit for *Roots*-inflected family histories; and politicians like Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, who sanctified a vision of “ethnic heritage” that had vast implications not only for individuals and families but for the nation itself and for reigning notions of “Americanness.”

Ethnic pride and a newfound passion for genealogy are only part of the story. The culture industries—especially publishing, Hollywood, and television—lavished a new attention on ethnic particularity, at times actually generating ethnic interests (*Roots, Holocaust*) and at others merely reflecting them (*Fiddler on the
Roof). Academic commentators forged a new consensus, after Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, that America was less a “melting pot” than a “mosaic.” Teachers and students across the country engaged in a series of institution-building movements on behalf of Italo-American, Irish, Jewish, or Ethnic Studies. Immigration history emerged as a subfield, revising the received national narrative and proliferating distinct “ethnic” histories. New ethnic merchandise and marketing practices appeared, ranging from the kitsch shamrock key chain to the tourism industry’s “discover your homeland” touring packages across Greece, Ireland, Italy, or Lithuania. And perhaps most significant, the state itself became engaged in the construction and celebration of “immigrant heritage” in projects like the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program and the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Is-
land restorations. Working-class whites who had never exactly lost their ethnic identifications now mobilized on the basis of this new public language of group cohesion, collective destiny, and, often, group rights under siege. “This is a Warsaw ghetto mentality,” said one Jewish resident, describing a busing conflict in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn. “It’s an uprising like the Masada.”

Taken together, these developments mark the emergence of a wholly new syntax of nationality and belonging—a change in personal feeling for some, perhaps, but a shift in public language for all. In the mid-1960s the sociologist Talcott Parsons could still assert with some confidence that Americans’ “emancipation” from the “particularist solidarities” of ethnicity, religion, regionalism, and class was accelerating, and that the United States was adopting “universalistic norms.” By 1975, however—even before Roots aired—Parsons had reversed himself, conceding that “full assimilation” in the sense of ethnicity’s becoming “absorbed within the single category of ‘American’ is very little the case.” It was not the interiority but the collectivity of the ethnic revival whose reach in American political culture was most important—not the politics of “identity” for individuals, but the politics of “heritage” for the nation at large. Far more momentous than any individual’s experience of that “single category of American” has been the shifting conception of America itself that attended this decades-long contest between “universalistic norms” and “particularist solidarities.”

“The 1960s was the decade of gaps,” reflected Peter Schrag in a piece for Harper’s in 1970, “missile gaps, credibility gaps, generation gaps—when we became, in many respects, a nation of outsiders, a country in which the mainstream, however mythic, lost its compelling energy and its magnetic attraction.” Schrag called this “thinning” of the mainstream “The Decline of the WASP.”
This shift in collective identities did not disrupt, but actually bolstered, the racial whiteness that had long held the key to American belonging and power relations, though it did generate a new set of popular narratives about who these “Caucasian” Americans were and where they had come from. It relocated that normative whiteness from what might be called Plymouth Rock whiteness to Ellis Island whiteness. In the years beyond the melting pot there arose a new national myth of origins whose touchstone was Ellis Island, whose heroic central figure was the downtrodden but determined greenhorn, whose preferred modes of narration were the epic and the ode, and whose most far-reaching political conceit was the “nation of immigrants.”

“Ellis Island whiteness” conveys two ideological currents that coexist uneasily and in tension: “Ellis Island white” (the long-standing white hegemony of U.S. political culture has persisted in somewhat revised form) and “Ellis Island white” (myths and symbols of a distinctly immigrant whiteness jostled with the older icons of WASPdom, radically revising the conceptions of American diversity and “Americanism” that had prevailed before). These competing meanings, along with the tension they generate, have lent a peculiar cast to the political struggles and the culture wars that have raged in one form or another since the time of the Moynihan Report. (“England out of Ireland—Niggers out of South Boston”; “I’m not white; I’m Italian.”)

The roots obsession, then, was not some quirky, momentary identity quest; nor can its impact be measured by the attendance at St. Patrick’s Day parades, by box office receipts for Fiddler on the Roof, or by the volume of visitors to the nation’s genealogical archives. Rather, in their loving recovery of an immigrant past, white Americans reinvented the “America” to which their ances-
tors had journeyed. The ethnic revival recast American nationality, and it continues to color our judgment about who “we” Americans are, and who “they” outside the circle of “we the people” are, too. As early as 1967 Martin Luther King, Jr., decried the notion that the United States was a “nation of immigrants,” and he cautioned against the damning exclusions inherent in such a conception. Citing the line inscribed on the Statue of Liberty that identifies her as the “mother of exiles,” King exclaimed that it is no wonder “the Negro in America cries, ‘Oh Lord, sometimes I feel like a motherless child.’” As late as 2004, even though the American political imagination was gripped by blue-state/red-state warfare—and hence “white” political mobilization conjured images of Protestant evangelicals more readily than Emma Lazarus’s huddled masses—still the Republicans kicked off their national convention on the hallowed ground of Ellis Island. Amid pious talk of how the site “represented the Republican Party’s commitment to cultural diversity,” speakers appealed to Americans’ populist conceptions of “the people” by enumerating the many immigrant Bushes, Cheneys, Patakis, and Giulianis whose names grace Ellis Island’s “wall of honor.”

Ultimately the language, symbols, and logic of the white ethnic revival profoundly influenced those political movements, both progressive and conservative, that are the legacy of the 1960s—neoconservatism, the New Left, second-wave feminism, multiculturalism, and both pro- and anti-immigration coalitions. Though clearly a political resource for progressives, as evidenced in the ethnic awakenings of figures like Tom Hayden and Judy Chicago, the net effect of the Ellis Island epic has pitched decisively toward the right: appeals to the romantic icon of yesterday’s European immigrant—downtrodden, hard-working, self-reliant,
triumphant—have shaped policy debates about everything from affirmative action and the welfare state to slavery reparations and contemporary immigration. The pervasive conceit of the nation of immigrants, as King recognized, blunted the charges of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and eased the conscience of a nation that had just barely begun to reckon with the harshest contours of its history forged in white supremacism.

Quite aside from Marcus Lee Hansen’s notion of interior, psychic, hyphenated identities, there is such a thing as hyphen-nationalism; and indeed ours has become a hyphen nation. Like those that came before, this mode of American nationalism is founded in large part on white primacy. However appealingly draped in a celebratory rhetoric of diversity and inclusion, however attentive to the “little people” of American history, it serves in part to protect that primacy. If hyphen-nationalism has articulated and celebrated one myth of origins for the United States and its white population, then it has effaced an older one. Ellis Island remembrance, that is, has perhaps entailed an even more portentous forgetting of the gradual and violent history of this settler democracy in the making long before the first immigrants of the Castle Garden–Ellis Island variety ever came ashore. Indeed, in order fully to understand how white primacy in American life survived the withering heat of the Civil Rights era and multiculturalism, we must understand the displacement of Plymouth Rock by Ellis Island in our national myth of origins.

Jennifer DeVere Brody writes that “the hyphen performs—it is never neutral or natural.” Early in the twentieth century the hyphen performed a kind of adopted Americanism that was largely rejected in the majority view. In the 1910s “hyphenated Americanism” amounted to un–Americanism, as far as some were con-
cerned; it was the subject of much surveillance and worry. But two generations later, in that political era “beyond the melting pot,” the Americanism performed by the hyphen has risen above reproach. Ethnic hyphenation, if not neutral, has at least become a natural idiom of national belonging in this nation of immigrants.

The prodigious performance of the hyphen is indispensable in assessing many of the political tendencies of the late twentieth century—both rightward and leftward—that remain largely unremarked and unnamed. Historiography, we know, is a presentist pursuit; the biggest game it is after is never simply “the past” but a usable past. If the period from the 1960s to the early 2000s is not yet distant enough to qualify as “history,” then it is still worth highlighting some obscured political patterns and trying to crack some of the culture’s unacknowledged codes, because a more usable present wouldn’t be such a bad thing.
Chapter One

Hyphen Nation

Maybe the melting-pot idea was a bad one. Maybe it’s better to be a Corleone than a Loud, better to be tribal and ethnocentric than urbane and adrift. We are like jelly fish in the vast ocean, dropping our young into the waves and immediately losing them because we are all merely transparent.

—Anne Roiphe, New York Times Magazine (1973)

In the summer of 1963, amid much fanfare on both sides of the Atlantic, John F. Kennedy returned to Ireland. Whether he had ever actually been there before was not the point (though in fact he had visited three times). Rather, the President’s celebrated “return” referred to his clan’s century-long absence from the green fields of County Wexford, where Kennedy’s great-grandfather had been raised. Ireland readied for the visit with all the excitement befitting the return of a favorite son. “Preparations were tackled with tremendous enthusiasm,” according to one account. “The walls of thatched-roof cottages were freshly whitewashed,
choirs and bands in the towns and villages he would visit practiced incessantly, women bought new outfits, and altogether throughout the country excitement reached fever pitch.”

The familial brogue of this state visit did not go unnoticed in the United States. “President to Visit Home of Ancestors in Ireland,” the New York Times announced in May; and on his arrival: “President Kennedy arrived in Dublin this evening and in a sense, he said, it was like coming ‘home’ . . . Mr. Kennedy was hailed by President Eamon de Valera as the ‘first citizen’ of the United States but also by the people of Dublin as the local boy . . . who made good.” Kennedy told a cheering crowd in New Ross that it had taken him “115 years, 6000 miles and three generations to make the trip.”

If Kennedy’s ascendance to the White House seemed to denote the absolute assimilation of the Irish in American life, his sentimental journey in the summer of 1963 suggested that perhaps “assimilation” itself was more complicated than many had assumed. The election of an Irish-American president, remarked the Irish Independent, symbolized “the closing of a chapter in our history . . . After three generations a young man of fully Irish stocks [sic] has reached the last point of integration into American life—the chief executive post of the nation.” And yet, as Kennedy himself said in response to de Valera’s welcoming address, Ireland’s “sons and daughters” scattered throughout the world “have been among the best and most loyal citizens of the countries they have gone to, but have also kept a special place in their memories, in many cases their ancestral memory, [for] this green and misty island, so, in a sense, all of them who visit Ireland come home.”

Kennedy had earlier defined the United States as “a nation of
immigrants,” the title of his slim 1958 volume on the contributions of diverse ethnic groups to American life. In a 1957 address before the Irish Institute in New York, he had spoken at length about what that meant from an Irish-American perspective in the context of the Cold War:

All of us of Irish descent are bound together by the ties that come from a common experience; experience which may exist only in memories and in legend, but which is real enough to those who possess it. And thus whether we live in Cork or Boston, in New York or in Sydney, we are all members of a great family which is linked together by that strongest of chains—a common past...

2. Cork, 1963: John F. Kennedy’s “return” to Ireland. Received by Irish throngs as a favorite son, Kennedy articulated a brand of hyphenated Americanism that became increasingly common in ensuing years.

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]
Let us here tonight resolve that our nation will forever hold out its hands to those who struggle for freedom today, as Ireland struggled for a thousand years.\(^4\)

The President’s Ireland visit lent this conceit a new stateliness, pomp, and circumstance; his appearances in Dublin and New Ross were thrilling embodiments of this newly articulated pluralism. It had only been a few years since the sociologist Will Herberg had asserted with an astonishing confidence that “the ethnic group . . . had no future” in American life, that “ethnic pluralists were backward-looking romantics . . . [who] were out of touch with the unfolding American reality.”\(^5\) Although the weight of social-scientific authority had concurred with Herberg in the 1950s, Kennedy’s own Irish sentiments confounded such facile formulations.

The ethnic accent of Kennedy’s Ireland speeches added two distinct notes to his Cold War homilies (which were, after all, the main point of his European tour: he had been to Berlin to peer over the wall earlier that same week). First, having benefited perhaps above all others from America’s historic role as an asylum for the oppressed, the Irish understood and appreciated most readily the United States’ role—not least, its anti-Soviet role—as a global savior. Second, “knowing the meaning of foreign domination itself,” Ireland held a special place as both example and inspiration for those who engaged this freedom struggle against world communism: “how many times was Ireland’s quest for freedom suppressed only to be renewed by the succeeding generation? Those who suffer beyond that wall I saw on Wednesday in Berlin must not despair of their future. Let them remember the constancy, the faith, the endurance, and the final success of the Irish.”\(^6\)
There was nothing “un-American” about Kennedy’s Irishness, in other words. But his pronouncements and his wild Irish reception did indicate a new way of imagining Americanness itself. In his official state welcome, Eamon de Valera greeted Kennedy three times over as “the chief executive and first citizen of the great Republic of the West,” as “the representative of that great country in which our people sought refuge when the misery of tyrannical laws drove them from the motherland,” and as “the distinguished scion of our race who has won first place amongst his fellow countrymen.” In his speech before the Dublin Parliament, Kennedy responded that, if Ireland had achieved its present political and economic stature a century or so ago my great-grandfather might never have left New Ross and I might, if fortunate, be sitting down there with you. [Applause] Of course, if your own President had never left Brooklyn, he might be standing up here instead of me. [Applause] . . .

... My presence and your welcome... only symbolize the many and the enduring links which have bound the Irish and the Americans from the earliest days. 7

This emergent public language of “enduring links” between Americans and their many homelands—Kennedy’s conceit of the “nation of immigrants”—was to become increasingly apparent in sociology and history textbooks, in Hollywood blockbusters, in the national passion for genealogical research, in the heritage industries devoted to “ethnic” merchandise and marketing strategies, in the public discussions of citizenship and social policy, and in the shifting racial politics of “we” and “they” at a moment
when the wretched, tempest-tossed “we” of Ellis Island memory assumed the aura of national mythology. Kennedy had not single-handedly authored these developments in U.S. political culture, either in Nation of Immigrants or in his celebrated “return” to Ireland during what turned out to be the final summer of his life. But the symbolism of Kennedy’s visit to Ireland proved the early stirring of a profound reorientation in American civic life. The visit was greeted with enthusiasm by Irish Americans; perhaps it was greeted with bemusement among those non-Irish Americans who had worried about Kennedy’s Catholicism during the campaign of 1960. But people on all sides were astonished to hear the President say, as he did before an adoring crowd in Limerick, “This is not the land of my birth, but it is the land for which I hold the greatest affection.”

Kennedy’s Irish awakening and his version of being at once American and Irish have become more legible, even natural, in the years since his “return” than they would have been anytime before. That same year William Shannon began The American Irish with the observation that, when referred to as “an Irishman,” Joseph Kennedy had once lashed out in exasperation, “I was born here. My children were born here. What the hell do I have to do to be called an American?” Nineteen sixty-three marks an end to that particular variety of exasperation: both Kennedy’s return and Shannon’s pluralistic portrait of an unmelted Irish America signal an emergent understanding—soon to be widely shared—that to seize and celebrate the hyphen is not to diminish a given group’s “Americanism,” but rather, as Shannon put it, “to show what kind of Americans they are.”

By the time Ronald Reagan “returned” to Ballyporeen, County Tipperary, two decades later, such roots talk had become ubiquitous in American culture. When Reagan joined townspeople “to
worship at the modest Church of the Assumption in Bally-
poreen,” where his great-grandfather had apparently been bap-
tized in the 1820s, a marching band played a peculiar medley of
Irish tunes and Hollywood themes—including the theme from
Rocky, the “roots” era’s greatest paean to an underdog-triumphant
white identity. As the Times reported, presidential aides, mean-
while, “have not even tried to conceal their delight over the re-
sonance that today’s visit is expected to have with millions of Irish-
American voters at home, and with many other Americans who
lately have become fascinated with tracing their ancestry. The
camera crew from the President’s re-election campaign was here
filming the scene for campaign commercials later in the year.”10

The mid-1970s represented the consolidation of this new eth-
nicity; the heritage fest of the nation’s bicentennial, followed im-
mediately by the broadcast of Alex Haley’s blockbuster Roots, de-
noted Americans’ heightened self-consciousness about their own
roots and about the new, pluralized idioms of national mem-
bership. In its editor’s choice column for the best books of that year,
the New York Times Book Review included Alex Haley’s Roots, “a
study of . . . how a people perpetuate themselves, how each gen-
eration helps to doom, or helps to liberate, the coming one”;
Maxine Hong Kingston’s Woman Warrior, portraying “the crises
of a heart in exile from roots that bind and terrorize it”; and
Irving Howe’s World of Our Fathers, a study of “bedraggled and
inspired” immigrants on the Lower East Side, “a complex story of
fulfillment and incompleteness.”11 The concurrence and enthusi-
astic reception of these three landmark publications on the black,
Chinese, and Jewish experience in the United States marked the
maturation of a long-term development in American intellectual
life and the entry into a new phase of cultural politics.

In its formative moments, “multiculturalism” was not the ex-
clusive province of Afrocentrism, Ebonics, or Bilingualism, as is often supposed; nor does its genealogy simply run from *Roots* to *The Joy Luck Club* to *The Mambo Kings* and beyond. Irving Howe’s work, for example, may have spoken to insular, specifically Jewish concerns of peoplehood, collective destiny, and memory, but the meanings affixed to the best-selling *World of Our Fathers* in the non-Jewish press may be more important. *Time* magazine set its review beneath the telling banner “Assimilation Blues,” situating Howe’s work alongside *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*, texts that spoke only imperfectly to the hungered past of those “many Americans whose non–English-speaking [forebears] were part of the huddled masses that funneled through Ellis Island at the turn of the century.” *Business Week* mused on ethnicity’s new status as “a literary and political buzzword,” noting that “135 colleges have established ethnic studies programs, and recently President Ford appointed a special assistant for ethnic affairs”; *World of Our Fathers* is “the most impressive of the recent ethnic books.” The *Christian Science Monitor* ventured that Howe’s Jewish masses were “the archetypes of the immigrant (one wants to say American) experience.” This reviewer went on to remark that the greatest Jewish successes in this promised land were reserved not for the immigrants themselves but “for their children and grandchildren, who moved into the professions and into the suburbs—diaspora.” His equation of mobility and suburbanization with “diaspora”—a dispersion from the “promised land” of immigrant immediacy—says a great deal about the reveries of the second, third, and fourth generations at mid-century. As Marcus Klein remarked in *The Nation*, “Everybody wants a ghetto to look back to.”

Everybody. The story of the ethnic revival might begin with
psychic interiors—the villages and ghettos of family legend that Americans privately looked back to with strange yearning—but finally it leads outward to the political culture at large, to the revision of American history textbooks; to the massive, state-sponsored project of restoring and sanctifying Ellis Island; to wholly new ways of imagining the nation and articulating the individual citizen’s place within it and relationship to it.

**The Roots of the “Roots Phenomenon”**

The “new ethnicity” sprang on the United States from many directions at once. The first, most politically potent source of the ethnic revival was the Civil Rights movement, which introduced a new and contagious idiom of group identity and group rights on the American scene. Of course, in the history of the Republic, white male property-holders had been enfranchised as a group; blacks had been enslaved, emancipated, and granted citizenship as a group, only to be disenfranchised as a group; Native Americans had been dispossessed and subject to slaughter and “removal” as a group; Mexicans had been conquered and annexed as a group; Chinese immigrants had been excluded as a group; women had been disenfranchised and later enfranchised as a group; Japanese immigrants and their children had been interned as a group; and now African Americans had fought for and won their civil rights as a group. But American liberalism has long cherished the notion that individual liberties reside at the very core of the nation’s political culture and values, and that appeals to group rights and protections were profoundly un-American. Never was this insistence more powerful than during the Cold War.

Only with the Civil Rights successes of 1964 and 1965 did the
dominant discourse of national civic life acknowledge the salience of group experience and standing. The effect of this acknowledgment was electrifying, not only for people of color, whose racialized experience with society, law, and the market in the United States suggested a political kinship with African Americans, but also for white ethnics, whose inchoate sense of social grievance required only the right vocabulary to come alive. There exists “an inner conflict between one’s felt personal power and one’s ascribed public power: a sense of outraged truth, justice, and equity,” wrote Michael Novak, suggesting the limits of white privilege in “The New Ethnicity” (1974). If European ethnics were indeed white, they weren’t that white. Howe himself wrote, “even in the mid-twentieth century many American Jews, certainly a good many of those who came out of the east European immigrant world, still felt like losers.”

The group-based mobilization of the Civil Rights movement, the group-based terms of its victories in 1964 and 1965, and the group-based logic of rising black nationalism all suggested a model for action. As Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael wrote in Black Power (1967), “we have been oppressed as a group, not as individuals. We will not find our way out of that oppression until both we and America accept the need for Negro Americans, as well as for Jews, Italians, Poles and white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, among others, to have and wield group power.” By 1970 the Ukrainian Weekly could comment, “The notion of ‘Ukrainian Power’—a borrowing to be sure, from America’s black community—is passing in Ukrainian circles from a mere phrase to a workable and quite feasible concept.”

These white movements modeled on Black Power could be quite studied; the founding manifesto of the Radical Zionist Alliance (1970) asserts:
North American Jews are a marginal people in a society of economic, political, and cultural oppression. The Jewish community has adopted a tradition of ignoring its own needs, and has structured itself in an undemocratic manner, geared toward assimilation and disappearance as a functioning nation. We call for the liberation of the Jewish people and the restructuring of our people’s existence in such a way as to facilitate self-determination and development of our own institutions so as to control our destiny as a nation.

At a protest following the harassment of a Jewish recruit at boot camp in South Carolina (he had allegedly been ridiculed as “Jew boy” and “Bagel,” and had a Star of David forcibly painted on his forehead), Radical Zionist Alliance activists echoed Muhammad Ali’s famous observation, “No Viet Cong ever called me nigger,” with placards reading, “No Viet Cong ever called me Bagel.”

The Civil Rights movement influenced the ethnic consciousness of nonblacks in another way, too. The sudden centrality of black grievance to national discussion prompted a rapid move among white ethnics to disassociate themselves from white privilege. The popular rediscovery of ethnic forebears became one way of saying, “We’re merely newcomers; the nation’s crimes are not our own.” Reporting an exchange with a Native American speaker who was decrying “what our ancestors did to his ancestors,” Michael Novak wrote, “I tried gently to remind him that my grandparents... never saw an Indian. They came to this country after that. Nor were they responsible for enslaving the blacks (or anyone else). They themselves escaped serfdom barely four generations ago.” Similarly, commenting on the deep significance of the Holocaust and the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire to American Jews, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz wrote, with a fully incandes-
cent candor, that these are “images of greater persecution than most American Jews are subject to today. As Jews, afraid of the myth of Jewish power . . . guilty about our skin privilege, we are so hungry for innocence that images of oppression come almost as a relief.”

Such ethnic self-distancing from whiteness and privilege is open to critique, as Kaye/Kantrowitz suggests. Novak’s comment on his newcomer status (“my grandparents never saw an Indian”) is typical, in that it fossilizes racial injustice in dim national antiquity, and so glosses over more recent discriminatory practices in housing, hiring, and unionization, for instance, which did benefit these “newcomers,” fresh off the boat though they were. This move to distance oneself or one’s group from monolithic white privilege gave way in some cases to a politics of white grievance that pitted itself against unfair black privilege (as in the ensuing affirmative action debates), often, ironically, couched in a Civil Rights language poached from blacks themselves. If the logic of group rights was so irresistible, as Carmichael had proposed and the Radical Zionist Alliance had concurred, nonetheless the idea of white group rights was uneasy in the wake of Montgomery, Birmingham, Jackson, and Selma. Even as various racialized struggles over busing, housing, or “community control” helped white ethnics “to complete their journey to unambiguous white identity”—as their whiteness became increasingly salient in the black-white conflicts of Boston, New York, or Detroit—a language of ethnic specificity, of not-quite-whiteness, became ever more valuable. Ethnic particularity provided a newly legitimate language for the “nervous provincialism” that stemmed from the era’s social conflicts.

Another impetus to ethnic revival was a powerful current of
antimodernism, the broadly accepted notion that ethnicity represented a haven of authenticity that existed at a remove from the bloodless, homogenizing forces of mass production and consumption, mass media, commodification, bureaucratization, and suburbanization. If antimodernism has been one of modernity’s most potent legacies, a certain tribalism has been antimodernism’s chosen idiom. History has “carried us away from the shtetls of Russia and Rumania, Poland and Hungary,” wrote Anne Roiphe in Generation without Memory (1981),

We were driven or we drifted onto the Lower East Side, out to the fringes of Flatbush and onto the streets of the Western world, to medical school, to condominiums in Boca Raton, to suburbs and exurbs. As a family we moved from the eleventh century to the twentieth in two generations. The speed has been dazzling. We are shaking like astronauts passing through dimensions of space and sound . . . We are in Sartre’s terms “nonauthentic.” We have escaped the night of ignorance, of superstition, of poverty, of the narrow streets of the Old World where science and technology had been beyond all reach . . . We escaped, but along the way we lost comforts, consolations, communities. We escaped, but we are more alone than ever before.19

As early as 1924, Horace Kallen had equated assimilation with absorption into an undignified and vacuous modern mass. “In these days of ready-made garments, factory-made furniture, refrigerating plants, boiler-plate movies and radio,” he had lamented, “it is almost impossible that the mass of the inhabitants of the United States should wear other than uniform clothes, use
other than uniform furniture . . . or eat anything but the same kinds of food, read anything but the same syndicated hokum, see anything but the same standardized romances and hear anything but the same broadcast barbarisms.” In Kallen’s view, pluralism—
that insistent respect for and claim to one’s “ancestral endowments”—ennobled the spirit and provided an oasis in the cultural desert of modern, mechanized, mass-consumed lifeways.20

With the advent of the postindustrial order, such misgivings about the modern would become more urgent still: as modern advances “lighten the family labor, they increase the futility of family life,” wrote Harry Braverman; “as they remove the burdens of personal relations, they strip away its affections; as they create an intricate social life, they rob it of every vestige of community and leave in its place the cash nexus.”21 Like Kallen before them, many latter-day pluralists rebelled “against ‘mindless’ and ‘soulless’ modernism,” in Michael Novak’s words, by seeking refuge in the symbolic, “pre-modern” communion of ethnic identity. According to David Lowenthal, “we mourn worlds known to be irrevocably lost . . . We yearn for rooted legacies that enrich the paltry here and now.” Heritage becomes strictly a “minority virtue, with mainstream ‘progress’ its regrettable antithesis.” The radical rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote of a rising generation of anti-
“establishment” Jewish students in the 1960s; many “whose par-
ents had proudly assimilated themselves to the American Promise . . . find they do not want to be ‘Americans’ after all . . . Many of our youth began to celebrate, not mourn, the end of the melting pot, and to herald the creation of a real Jewish community. They began to criticize as assimilationists those Establishment elders who had triumphed in the triumphs of America.” “Establish-
ment” here implied the political arenas of the Cold War and
Vietnam, but it also evoked materialism, commercialism, the suburbs’ interchangeable houses and manicured lawns, office work, impersonal bureaucracies, and sprawling “multiversities” of the kind championed by Berkeley president Clark Kerr. In short, versions of community and authenticity cast in ethnic terms would be the salve to those postindustrial discontents that 1950s observers like David Riesman and William Whyte had spelled out in *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Organization Man.*22

The ethnic revivalists’ “rhapsody on history” involves not only an elevation of forebears to the status of giants but also a sentimental journey to the harsh circumstances that those giants endured and overcame. If twentieth-century America has become “a nation of big business and little men,” Henry Miller’s “air conditioned nightmare,” then Famine Ireland or the shtetl offer ready escape. Markers of this tacit connection among ethnicity, authenticity, and antimodernism include the Native American and peasant motifs of hippie fashion (“We are no longer die-cast parts of a national mechanism,” commented the *East Village Other*. “We are a tribe.”), as well as the explicit appeals to mighty, blood-coursing tradition in popular “mainstream” stage plays like *Zorba the Greek* and *Fiddler on the Roof.* “Sentimentally speaking,” lamented Anne Roiphe, “I wish we could return to an earlier America when society surrounded its members with a tight sense of belonging, of being needed. Maybe the melting-pot idea was a bad one.”23

In David Mamet’s “Disappearance of the Jews” (1982), Joey tells Bobby Gould, “I would have been a great man in [pre-emigration] Europe—I was meant to be hauling stones, or setting fence posts . . . I should be working on a forge all day. . . . [I]t’s good to harvest wheat, to forge, to toil.” For many like Joey, the fire and storm of Old World hardship provide an antidote to the
The hollowness of modern masculinity no less than to the weightlessness of modern living.\textsuperscript{24} More recently, Anthony Rotundo writes that \textit{The Sopranos} “gives us values such as loyalty, rootedness, and interdependence—values that have provided a foundation for Italian American manhood and offered common manly ground to the Artie Buccos and Tony Sopranos. Part of Tony’s humanity—and part of his tragedy—is that he knows America . . . is hostile to those values.” In this respect the antimodernist accents of the ethnic reverie (as embodied by \textit{The Sopranos} no less than by \textit{Fiddler on the Roof}) update not only the pluralism of Horace Kallen’s “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” but also the masculinism of Teddy Roosevelt’s “Strenuous Life.”\textsuperscript{25}

Yet another source of the ethnic revival was the nationalist fervor of many ethnic subcultures in the United States, and the ways in which contemporary events in the Old World pulled for emotional involvement among those in the New. Soviet domination in the nations of the Eastern Bloc, the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, the Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, the “Prague Spring” of 1968, and the workers’ movement in Poland all captured the attention and sympathy of overseas ethnic compatriots, whose diasporic cultures had invested Old World nationalist causes with a kind of mantric power. Such engagements in Old World affairs may have been symbolic in the sense that Americans had no intentions of actually returning to the homeland; but they were nonetheless organic in the sense that the logic and mythology of ethnic cultures often positioned immigrants and their descendants as “exiled” members of the homeland, uniquely placed to serve its cause.\textsuperscript{26} In the wake of the Six Day War, for instance, Jewish Americans from across the country volunteered for Israeli military service, including more than 2,000 in New York City alone.\textsuperscript{27}
Members of the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID) protest Prince Philip’s visit to Lincoln Center, October 1980. CORBIS.
In addition to renewed initiatives on the part of older associations like the Polish National Alliance, new organizations devoted to “homeland” politics also sprang out of the melting pot in these years: the American Committee for Democracy and Freedom in Greece (1967), the National Association for Irish Justice (1968), the Serbian National Committee (1968), American Students for Israel (1969), the Latvian Foundation (1970), and the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID, 1970). Among the New York Times Book Review’s “best” books of 1976 were To Jerusalem and Back, Saul Bellow’s portrait of an Israel “pocked with scars,” and The Damnable Question, a compendium of “palatable and unpalatable” truths of Anglo-Irish relations from 1800 to 1922—a kind of Roots of the Irish “Troubles.”

4. Several thousand Polish Americans in Chicago’s loop protest the imposition of martial law in Poland, December 1981. BETTMANN/CORBIS.
Within this context of overdetermined ethnic consciousness, a stream of popular literary and cinematic texts charted the rise of the new pluralist sensibility. After languishing in neglect for decades, Abraham Cahan’s *Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) found its way back into print in a popular paperback edition in 1960, followed soon after by new editions of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, Ole Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*, Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*, and many others. Fresh literary renditions of the ethnic saga, too, now found an eager audience: most famously, perhaps, Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen* (1967) and Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* (1969). Audiences flocked to stage productions and films like *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Funny Girl*, and they reclaimed Old World cuisine with the help of “community cookbooks” like *The Badenfest Cookbook*, *From Zion’s Kitchen*, *Shalom Y’all*, and *Czech Your Cooking*.29

Even television rediscovered diversity. The urban ethnic families of early television’s *The Goldbergs*, *Life with Luigi*, and *Mama* had yielded in the assimilationist 1950s to the whitebread pedigrees of *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie and Harriet* (the Goldbergs themselves became “de-Judaized” and moved to a homogenized suburb called Haverville). In American television from about 1954 to 1968, “ethnicity” was the exclusive preserve of a handful of culturally isolated—if lovable—oddballs: Lucy’s husband, Ricky Ricardo; Danny Thomas’s uncle, Tonoose; Rob Petrie’s cowriter, Buddy Sorrell. Indeed, in the early 1960s Carl Reiner’s pilot about an unmistakably Jewish comedy writer, based on his own experience with *Your Show of Shows*, became the ethnically “neutral” (read: WASP) *Dick Van Dyke Show*: Buddy Sorrell proved the only surviving trace of Reiner’s original ethnic vision.30

But by the late 1960s and early 1970s, popular programming began to revel in ethnic particularity in shows like *Arnie; Bridget.*
Loves Bernie; All in the Family; Welcome Back, Kotter; Rhoda; Kojak; and Columbo. (As Bernie Steinberg put it in Bridget Loves Bernie [1972], “I don’t believe this. I’ve lived with you people all my life. Now why is everyone all of a sudden being so Jewish?”) The advent of the miniseries and the made-for-TV movie generated “serious” treatments of ethnic subjects in Holocaust (1978), The Triangle Factory Fire Scandal (1979), The Diary of Anne Frank (1980), Golda (1982), The Winds of War (1983), Ellis Island (1984), Evergreen (1985), and Escape from Sobibor (1987). Such trends in “ethnic” programming extended through what Herman Gray calls “the Cosby moment” and beyond, a period of feverish attention to diversity in programming whose white ethnic exemplars include shows like Chicken Soup, thirtysomething, Brooklyn Bridge, To Have and to Hold, Seinfeld, The Education of Max Bickford, Costello, Trinity, Legacy, The Sopranos, Will & Grace, and Everybody Loves Raymond.31 Television provided the shorthand for this entire complex of developments in U.S. culture, when the wildly popular 1977 miniseries Roots lent its name to the roots phenomenon. Decades later Fran Drescher’s The Nanny, the most over-the-top 1990s ethnic sitcom, paid homage in an episode entitled “Fran’s Roots,” in which the Jewish nanny mistakenly supposes that her true biological mother is black.

Schooled in Pluralism

The new ethnicity was helped along by academia. Beginning in the early 1960s, standard academic conceptions of both the ethnic group and the nation underwent a sea change. Common understandings of group behavior and the national narrative came under drastic revision in these years, revisions which made their
way into social studies and history textbooks at every educational level. Calls to alarm by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Dinesh D'Sousa, Lynne Cheney, or Richard Bernstein may seem overblown, but these critics are at least correct that a generation of American pupils has been schooled to look on matters of ethnic integrity, national composition, and American belonging quite differently from any previous generation.32

Although “ethnicity” is now invoked to emphasize particularity, when the concept ascended in social-scientific thought in the 1940s it carried quite the opposite connotation. In sharp contrast to the stubborn, biological, fixed inheritances of “race,” “ethnicity” stressed culture: it represented an outlook rather than a condition of birth; a cultural affiliation rather than a bloodline; a set of sensibilities and associational habits that, however tenacious, were subject to the forces of assimilation and change. The ascendance of ethnicity as an analytic category was one element in a powerful tendency in American social thought at mid-century to revise away the concept of biological “difference” and move toward universalism.

The general movement in late-twentieth-century American thought has been a steady shift from a paradigm of human unity to one of ethnic particularity. The near consensus on universalism between World War II and the 1960s—as evidenced in Wendell Willkie’s *One World* (1943), Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Female* (1953), and Edward Steichen’s *Family of Man* (1955)—was woven of many threads.33 One was the ascendant “culture concept” in sociology and anthropology, beginning earlier in the century with thinkers like Franz Boas and Robert Park. Another, more urgent impetus was that events in Nazi Ger-
many had rendered the race concept ever more unpalatable in liberal American social thought; figures like Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Ashley Montagu sought to expunge “race” from social analysis wherever possible. Montagu labeled race “man’s most dangerous myth,” and he self-consciously promoted the term “ethnic group” precisely because “the conventional stereotype of ‘race’ is so erroneous, confusing, and productive of injustice and cruelties without number.” As a corrective to race, the concept of ethnicity accomplished less as a term of distinction than it did as a partial erasure of “difference”—a universalizing appeal to the underlying sameness of humanity and to the assimilative powers of American culture.

Nationalist imperatives during World War II and the early Cold War also encouraged universalism. Neither the nation’s touted “war against racism” in Europe nor the coming war against communism could tolerate anything that seemed to undermine the notion of unalloyed Americanism. Ethnicity, then, became a symbolic building block of American national unity. In popular culture the universalizing and nationalizing gestures of ethnic diversity come through most clearly in the multiethnic platoon of the Hollywood war movie. The Irish soldier, the Jew, the Pole all working together and defending one another—this is America. One popular wartime song expressed impatience for the day “When Those Little Yellow Bellies Meet the Cohens and the Kellys.”

Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole’s *Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945) was among the first studies to advance ethnicity as an alternative to what had earlier been America’s white “races.” Warner and Srole did not entirely escape the biologizing concept of race in this discussion: their delineation of ethnic groups con-
spicuously breaks down along the line of “light Caucasians” (like the South Irish and English Jews) and “dark Caucasians” (like Sicilians). But even if the traces of race remain in this conception of ethnicity, the book shares a universalizing perspective with other works of the period. Any group whose differences were “minor” (meaning “ethnic” rather than “racial”) could expect to be fully assimilated into the nation’s core culture; and indeed, Warner and Srole close with the prediction that the future of white ethnic groups as self-conscious groups was “limited,” and that European immigrants and their children would be absorbed speedily and completely. This was the view Will Herberg endorsed when he asserted that national or cultural minorities in America were but “temporary, transitional phenomena,” and that ethnic pluralists were “out of touch with the unfolding American reality.” If this prevailing view of the 1940s and 1950s spoke to a generation whose ethnic differences were waning in salience (as English-language proficiency increased, for instance, and as suburbanization broke up the older ethnic neighborhoods), so did it neatly answer the imperatives of the moment.

But scarcely had the ink dried on such pronouncements when both scholarly and street-level assessments of ethnic particularity underwent a revolution. By 1963, Glazer and Moynihan were matching Herberg’s confidence in assimilation with their own confidence in pluralism—the melting pot “did not happen.” A year later, in Assimilation in American Life, Milton Gordon noted that while ethnic particularity in the realm of culture might be fading, “structural pluralism”—the force of ethnicity in shaping residential, occupational, economic, institutional, and organizational life—still prevailed. By 1971 Michael Novak could celebrate The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics; and by 1981, Thomas Sowell
could remark, “The massive ethnic communities that make up the mosaic of American society cannot be adequately described as ‘minorities.’ There is no ‘majority.’”

In the years since the 1940s, race has been the larger body around which the concept of ethnicity has quietly revolved, as a moon around a planet. Each turn in the one has caused an adjustment in the other. In the early years of World War II, the culturally based concept of ethnicity may have seemed an alternative—a solution—to the biologically based “race concept,” as Montagu and others suggested. But race and its inheritances have been stubborn indeed: the mid-century’s ethnic revision of race stopped at the color line, universalizing whiteness by lessening the presumed difference separating “Hebrews,” “Celts,” and “Anglo-Saxons,” but deepening the separation between any of these former white races and people of color, especially blacks. Ethnicity was born precisely when the American color line was sharpening in new ways—the “Negro Problem,” as Stephen Steinberg puts it, “had migrated from South to North.” By the 1980s and 1990s, not only had ethnicity failed to displace race as an analytic category, but—since race had been so thoroughly etched into social practice and encoded in law—no conception of ethnicity could explain much if it failed to reckon with the undergirding structures of race. This has been apparent in both street-level politics (where ethnic particularism has been among the idioms of white backlash—“Niggers out of Boston, Brits out of Belfast”) and scholarly discourse (where the most sophisticated recent analyses of ethnicity have taken up the term in conjunction with racialized categories like white, black, Asian, or Latino). The concept of ethnicity has become—not the “race concept’s” replacement, as Montagu and Boas had once hoped—but its inseparable sibling.
The burgeoning literature on ethnicity between the 1950s and the 1970s was almost exclusively about “white ethnics,” though the full significance of the modifier “white” remained invisible for some time. In *Ethnic Options* (1990) Mary Waters warned that whiteness lent a certain flexibility to ethnic identity for Jews, Italians, or Poles in the United States—they do choose their grandparents, to a certain extent—which in turn led many of them to misconstrue the experience of their counterparts across the color line. Those who presume that African-American identity is just like Irish or Italian in its cultural basis and its sentimentality are not likely to grasp the structural, juridical features of race that come into play around questions of blackness. In *Ethnic Identity* (1990), Richard Alba traced the gradual formation of a “European American” identity among those for whom conceptions of Old World origin—romances of departure, arrival, and resettlement—are fundamentally defining. The normative status of this European-American experience, in Alba’s view, may ultimately determine “the rules of the game” in American discussions of things like class, mobility, opportunity, discrimination, and welfare. But in any case, by the end of the twentieth century “ethnicity” evoked specificity, not universalism; Jewish or Irish or Greek ethnicity represented a distinguishing from—either people of color or other “whites,” depending on the circumstance—not a merging with.

As the social sciences reshaped conceptions of the ethnic group, U.S. historiography was also revising the national narrative, reintroducing “underdog elements”—like immigrants—who since the early Cold War years had vanished as historical actors. Kennedy’s *Nation of Immigrants* (1958) was one of the first such works, depicting ethnic diversity as the nation’s greatest strength and its good fortune. Here American culture is not a melting pot but a
smorgasbord (to borrow a term from our Swedish fellow citizens). Each ethnic group arrived bearing its own particular brand of the work ethic, and each brought a unique dish to the national banquet—the Irish their political genius; Danes, the talent to establish America’s dairy industry; Germans, their orchestras, glee clubs, and martial valor; Jews, the requisite skills to develop “the clothing industry as we know it today.”

Kennedy’s was the multiethnic vision that would triumph over the course of the next generation. In an apocalyptic speech before the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1962, the historian Carl Bridenbaugh decried the professional impact of the shifting demographics of the university in the postwar period, particularly as a result of the GI Bill. “Many of the young practitioners of our craft, and those who are still apprentices,” he worried, “are products of lower middle-class or foreign origins, and their emotions frequently get in the way of historical reconstructions.”

Indeed, historiographic focus shifted over the next decades, giving rise to the “new social history,” Black Studies, immigration history, women’s history, and Ethnic Studies. But the national narrative was already under significant revision. An early signal was Oscar Handlin’s famous remark, “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.” By the time Bridenbaugh stood wringing his hands at the podium of the AHA, the universalism of the early Cold War was already on its way out. Along with The Uprooted and A Nation of Immigrants, John Higham’s Strangers in the Land (1955), Barbara Miller Solomon’s Ancestors and Immigrants (1956), and Maldwyn Allen Jones’s American Immigration (1960) had established beachheads for a new subfield;
the founding of the Immigration History Society in 1965 was but a stone’s throw away; and a generation of social historians was just over the horizon.43

Among the quickest, most dramatic measures of the growth of ethnic or “immigration” history in the first full decade of the ethnic revival is the contrast between two state-of-the-field essays by Rudolph Vecoli, written in 1970 and 1979, respectively. In the first essay, “Ethnicity: A Neglected Dimension of American History,” Vecoli remarked on Black Power’s influence on student outlooks, and the unmet demand for courses in “minority” history. A survey of course offerings in 100 U.S. colleges revealed that only 38 offered some opportunity to study American diversity (including 20 courses in general social history; 19 in African-American Studies; 4 in Native American Studies; and 4 in immigration). The other 62 colleges offered no courses at all. At the graduate level, reported Vecoli, the United States had produced only 127 doctoral dissertations on immigration between 1893 and 1965 (or less than 2 per year), just over half of which had appeared since World War II. This paucity was due in large part, Vecoli thought, to the “powerful and pervasive grip of the assimilationist ideology”—elsewhere referred to as “the blight of assimilationist ideology”—in American scholarship: “Because of their expectations that assimilation was to be swift and irresistible, historians and sociologists have looked for change rather than continuity, acculturation rather than cultural maintenance. Since ethnicity was thought to be evanescent, it was not considered worth studying.” He could discern a few signs that “the long winter of neglect of ethnicity is coming to an end,” including AHA President John Fairbank’s urging “a truer and multivalued, because multicultural, perspective.”44 But for the most part, the picture was bleak.
In a 1979 issue of *American Studies International*, however, Vecoli announced a startling reversal: “we are [now] inundated by a virtual flood of books, articles, and dissertations dealing with the roles of race, nationality, and religion in American history.” Vecoli cited more than seventy-five book-length studies of immigration that appeared in the 1970s, many directly traceable to “the contemporary search for ‘roots’ among Americans,” including studies of politics, religion, labor, and mobility, in addition to works devoted to particular groups or locales. More significant still, Vecoli demonstrated the astonishing pace of change in the “infrastructure of research facilities and resources,” including “Research Centers and Collections,” “Microfilm and Reprint Editions,” “Reference Tools,” and “Historical Societies and Publications.” “Thanks to the ‘new pluralism,’” he wrote, “the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program... the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, private foundations, and ethnic communities have all provided generous funding for building collections, preparing reference tools, and sponsoring research.” Publishing houses like Arno and R & E Research Associates had reprinted “several thousand volumes” pertaining to the history of immigration, including government documents like the Dillingham Commission Report, reformist tracts like *How the Other Half Lives*, and treatises in early sociology like E. A. Ross’s *Old World Traits Transplanted*. By the late 1970s, as Vecoli had discovered, the new pluralism was a vested interest; the knowledge industries’ apparatus was now in position; and America was poised to know itself anew.45

What was clear to Rudolph Vecoli by 1979 was that “a pluralistic perspective has transformed the basic paradigm of American historiography. Ethnicity has been generally accepted as a perva-
sive attribute which affected all areas of American life.” This break with the scholarship of the past “presages a rewriting of the history of the United States which will be multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-lingual in its interpretation of the American experience (or better yet, experiences).” As a flyer appealing for donations to the Immigration History Research Center put it in the 1970s, “Your Ethnic History Is American History.”

The same year as Vecoli’s second survey, Frances Fitzgerald’s America Revised offered a detailed portrait of the textbook nation that had been presented to students from one generation to the next. According to Fitzgerald, whereas David Saville Muzzey’s An American History (first published in 1911, but still in use in some schools into the 1960s) treated immigrants as an alien “they” whom “we” had better “mold into citizenship” lest they pose “a constant menace to our free institutions,” later textbooks introduced immigrants in terms that were both more positive and more normative—in a word, more as “we.” Clarence Ver Steeg and Richard Hofstadter, for example, averred in A People and a Nation (1971, 1974) that immigrants “introduced variety into American life, adding immeasurably to its color and interest”; “in time they showed their ability to enter the mainstream of American life without giving up either their identity or their distinctive qualities.”

By the late 1970s, Fitzgerald found, “most current texts” covered European ethnic groups in chapters on nineteenth-century industrialization, where a certain attention to poverty, injustice, and the brutality of working-class life was now allowed. In later passages on “modern-day life” the authors “describe . . . working-class families that came originally from Poland, Greece, or Russia, and they contend that the European culture of these families
has not melted away.” They insist—following Glazer and Moynihan—“that the ‘ethnics’ have not been assimilated but have separately added to the wonderful variety of life in America.” Fitzgerald also notes that “a number of the authors of these American-history books are the children or grandchildren of such immigrants.” In contrast to the melting-pot paradigm that had reigned supreme in school texts in the 1940s, by the late 1960s “most of the texts” had ceased “to talk about ‘the immigrants’ as distinct from ‘us Americans.’” The “new orthodoxy,” according to Fitzgerald, was the conceit that “we are a nation of immigrants.”

School children today are far more likely to learn about Plymouth and Jamestown in the thematic context of Ellis Island—“America’s First Immigrants”—than they are to learn about immigration in the context of settler democracy.

Among the greatest monuments to this pluralistic outlook on the nation (aside from Ellis Island itself) is the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (1980), a project undertaken with federal funding from the Ethnic Heritage Research Program. The Encyclopedia encompasses the work of 120 contributors over 6 years; it comprises 106 group entries, 29 thematic essays, 87 maps, and a number of statistical tables. As the editors wrote in the introduction, “It is generally assumed that maintenance of ethnicity is desirable, that preservation of differences is healthy, and that loss of group identity is to be deplored. The view that ethnicity is a social good became fashionable during the 1970s. The Encyclopedia’s underlying premise is that ethnicity, whether good or bad, has been and remains important in the American social fabric.”

This interest in refashioning the national narrative intersected with a widespread passion for genealogy and ancestral heritage in the 1970s, exemplified in Alex Haley’s *Roots*. “I feel that [my
ancestors] do watch and guide,” Haley wrote in the closing lines, “and I also feel that they join me in the hope that this story of our people can alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners.” American history in the years since has largely been rewritten by a previous era’s downtrodden losers. Insofar as it was an institutional phenomenon—engaging publishers, universities, research foundations, federal granting agencies, scholarly organizations, and the disciplines themselves—the roots trip was as much a national phenomenon as a familial or personal one.

The Heritage Project

“After Haley’s comet,” Time magazine remarked, in reference to the best seller Roots, “not only blacks but all ethnic groups saw themselves whole, traceable across oceans and centuries to the remotest ancestral village . . . Americans have become like those adoptees who demand the long-denied knowledge of heritage.” Although Haley himself had been concerned with recovering the “story of our people,” by which he meant African Americans, readers from all backgrounds embraced Roots as a generic romance of ancestry lost and found. Dell emblazoned its cover with the legend, “the saga of an American family,” and the New York Times proclaimed that Haley “speaks not only for America’s black people, but for all of us everywhere.” Roots is important as a national phenomenon not only because the book and the miniseries were so eagerly devoured by millions across the country, but because, over time, the roots idiom revised the vernacular imagery of the nation itself.

Roots speaks to all of us, certainly; but for all of us? The print
and televised versions of Roots gave the history of slavery the broadest public airing it had ever received in American culture, and yet Haley’s narrative was quickly appropriated as a moveable template for considering anyone’s familial origins in any distant village. In the wake of the broadcast in January 1977 (seen by an estimated 80 million viewers, according to Neilson) hundreds of thousands of white Americans descended on local libraries and archives in search of information, not about slavery or black history, but about themselves and their own ethnic past.54

Although Roots sprawls across two centuries of history—seven generations—and across 729 pages of text, public attention was riveted on the final fourteen years, the final 27 pages. It is here that Roots addresses, not slavery and emancipation, but Haley’s own work in sleuthing his family’s saga. In these closing pages, Haley’s detective work takes on a drama of its own: “When I had been thoroughly immersed in listening to [family stories] of all those people unseen who had lived away back yonder, invariably it would astonish me when the long narrative finally got down to Cynthia . . . and there I sat looking right at Grandma!”55 If Roots brought black history to life, so did it bring an unusual dash of romance to the work of genealogical discovery. This narrative of Haley’s quest represents an epic in itself, composed of trips around the world, encounters with the “exotic,” and a moment of Old World celebrity.

In the author’s journey Roots most forcefully relays its fable of American incorporation. Time characterized the book as “the story of the Americanization of the Kinte clan,” a generations-long process whose completion is at once symbolized and in a sense proven by Haley’s encounter with “authentic” Africa.56 Here his unfamiliar sensation of being an “exotic” among his trans-
atlantic kin underscores the extent to which Haley, as the final issue of the Kinte clan, has become not African American so much as simply American. “It embarrasses me to this day,” he confesses, “that up to then my images about Africa had been largely derived or inferred from Tarzan movies and my very little authentic knowledge had come from only occasional leafings through the National Geographic.”

It was in part the narrative’s powerful contrast between “assimilated Americanness” and an “exotic,” premodern village past that gave Roots its appeal across lines of ethnicity and color, touching, as Haley saw it, “some deep pulse that transcends racial things.” In the wake of the miniseries’ airing on national television, libraries and archives across the country experienced a run, not on books about slavery, but rather on materials relating to the genealogical search for roots in myriad “exotic,” premodern villages—whether in County Cork, Abruzzi, Vilna, or Crete. Whatever narrative power Haley was able to generate regarding the specificities of the African experience in America, Roots was rather nimbly appropriated as a generic saga of migration and assimilation, not an African-American story, nor even an American story, exactly, but a modern one—a story that “speaks for all of us everywhere.”

As Time pointed out, Americans’ interest in “stalking their forebears” had been on the rise for some time: groups like the Chicago Irish Ancestry Workshop predated the televised Roots, as did how-to pieces like the one published in Italian Americana titled “Interviewing Italian Americans about Their Life Histories.” But Roots added impetus to Americans’ quest for an ethnic past. While specialists at the National Archives and the New England Historic Genealogical Society could point to a long-term increase
in Americans’ genealogical interests dating from the early 1960s, institutions with extensive archives all reported an unprecedented boom in 1977. Books with titles like *Searching for Your Ancestors; Finding Your Roots; Finding Our Fathers;* and *The Handy Book for Genealogists* suddenly found a massive audience. 59

Within months of the first airing of *Roots,* widely circulating publications like *Time,* *Newsweek,* and the *Christian Science Monitor* were printing articles with titles like “Everybody’s Search for Roots,” complete with bibliographic guides to the genealogical literature and summaries of archival holdings. One archivist declared that, no longer the exclusive province of those in search of royalty or an otherwise notorious ancestor, genealogy had become “a small ‘d’ democratic phenomenon”—or, as *Newsweek* put it, a “National Parlor Game,” “Better than Bingo.” After the previous year’s bicentennial, *Newsweek* reported, “Americans seem to be focusing not so much on their country’s history as on their own. The names they are poring over like precious artifacts are not Yorktown or Valley Forge, but Grodno and Galway and Hallingdal.” Pronouncing Hansen’s Law in “full force,” the magazine went on to describe the energy with which “younger hyphenated Americans are digging into their roots to reclaim a heritage denied them by assimilationist parents and grandparents—and in the process they are groping toward a redefinition of their Americanism.” One observer later calculated that “millions of roots-seekers” had swamped the genealogical registries and that the “fallout from *Roots* and the national bicentenary by the mid-1980s spawned fifty thousand family-tree experts.” 60

For some, the search for roots entailed not only ancestor hunting in the local archives but “heritage tourism” in the “homeland” itself. Chicago’s Poland Travel Agency doubled its charter book-
nings to Poland between 1976 and 1977, for instance, and Pan Am began promoting world travel with a series of “two heritage” commercials (“All of us came from someplace else”). The airline also produced an ethnic quiz and a board game called “Heritage Hunt.” A major competitor later adopted Haley-esque advertising copy: “Roots: Trace Them to Ireland on Northwest Orient.” Finer print would go on to urge readers, “Experience the land of your grandparents’ past . . . Let Northwest Orient help you say hello to an old friend. Your homeland.” As late as 1998, “Five out of six ancestry searches in Italy are made by Italian-Americans. Dublin is deluged with inquiries from Sons of Erin abroad . . . So many Jews today seek memories of shtetl forebears that Eastern Europeans call them ‘roots people.’”  


The discoveries in this “land of your grandparents’ past,” as Northwest Orient put it, tend always to be self-discoveries. As “an
Armenian American traveler returned from a voyage among the Armenians,” Michael Arlen saw himself “in some ways like the proverbial Indian who has been brought up by white men and who years later makes and returns from a visit to his old tribe. Where do you stand now, sir? Are you with us or with them? Alas, by then the alternatives are mostly rhetorical.” If, like Alex Haley in Africa, Arlen discovered on this voyage just how American he actually was, he discovered a great deal else besides—what it felt like to stop hating being Armenian, what it felt like to be hated for being Armenian, what it felt like to be proud of being Armenian.64 Even Howard Jacobson’s Roots Schmoots (1993), a self-conscious send-up of this roots tour phenomenon, ends in a confession that the author-traveler has been moved after all. Ja-
cobson chases the roots trail and the elusive meaning of modern Jewishness from his native England, first to America, next to Israel, and finally back to the real origin (for him), the ancestral home of his Litvak ancestors. Jacobson had initially set out for America, where he could test his theory that “New York out-Jerusalemed Jerusalem,” he could “eat Jewish, talk Jewish, fight Jewish, forget about being Jewish Jewish.” Only at the journey’s end, in Serhai, Lithuania, is his irreverence pierced. Jacobson’s flamboyantly unsentimental journey comes to an end in a long-neglected, overgrown Jewish cemetery, where he finds himself with the feeling that “yes, I admit it . . . it is something, not nothing, that a Jew descended from this community has come back and for an hour or two on a wintry afternoon entertained a thought for those who lie here . . . it is ironic that it should be me of all people, the least familial, the least loyal, the least nostalgic of Jews, who has come . . . My presence is the proof, if anything ever can be, that no one should count himself forgotten and unvisited forever.”

But eclipsed in the emphasis on interior mindscapes and the psychic self-discoveries of the roots trip is the fact that the new ethnicity ramified outward through the larger units of social organization, from the individual, to the family, to the ethnic group, to the nation. A survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau among Polish Americans in the early 1970s found that over one million more people now identified themselves as Polish Americans than had done so in the census only a few years before. This development may embody more than one million interior sagas of one sort or another, each a volume unto itself; but so does it portend something quite important for Poles as a group, and for those heritage industries organized around Polishness. Moreover,
as nearly moribund conceptions of group existence came springing out of the cauldron, “America” itself underwent drastic reconsideration. This was the beyond of “beyond the melting pot.”

Ethnic organizations often stood in for the very heritage that individual roots-seekers understood themselves to be rediscovering. The new pluralism may not have been a boon to all such organizations, many of which had begun to falter in the 1940s and 1950s as a result of suburbanization, shifting demographics, and the steady erosion of welfare and insurance functions that had once been the site of “ethnic” responsibility. If some ethnic voluntary organizations did indeed receive a mild boost in these years (the Polish Falcons experienced incremental increases in membership between 1970 and 1985; the Ukrainian National Association reached its high-water mark in 1974), others were plainly in trouble. But the appearance of new organizations did bespeak ethnicity’s resurgence as an organizer of certain political and social activities that in previous decades had become increasingly cosmopolitan and nonsectarian. Emergent ethnic organizations in the 1960s and 1970s included purely cultural endeavors directed at recovering or preserving the ethnic past, such as the Irish American Foundation (1963), the Byelorussian-American Union (1965), the American Italian Historical Association (1966), and the Polish Cultural Foundation (1972). They included conservative political groups like the Jewish Defense League (1968) and the Ethnic Millions (EMPAC, 1975), as well as New Left groups like Breira (1973). They included organizations borne of a new self-recognition within nonethnic institutions, such as Italian Executives of America (1964) and the Harvard Jewish Law Students Association (1977); antidefamation groups, like the Conference of American Polonians (1972); groups devoted to particular events,
like the Westchester Columbus Committee \((1970)\); groups devoted to social life, like the Armenian Churches Sports Association \((1967)\) and the Albanian Social Club \((1972)\); and groups borne of a renewed dedication to the homeland, like NORAID.\(^{68}\)

The impulse toward cultural preservation also resulted in a range of local efforts of commemoration and ethnic exhibition. In their \textit{Guide to Ethnic Museums, Libraries, and Archives} \((1978)\), Wynar and Lois Buttlar identified local museums around the country devoted to Czech, Dutch, German, Hungarian, Jewish, Lithuanian, Slavic, Slovak, Swedish, Ukrainian, and Welsh life in the United States, all dedicated between 1965 and 1978. Typical mission statements not only pay tribute to \textit{preservation} as a guiding value—to “preserve the artifacts of Czech and German origin used in the local community,” “to preserve Dutch-American artifacts,” “preserving the Welsh experience and heritage”—but often speak of some wider civic aim as well: “to develop awareness of the Jewish experience in America,” “to unify the Lithuanian community,” “acquainting Ukrainian-Americans and the community at large with [Ukrainian] cultural contributions.”\(^{69}\)

The most spectacular ethnic preservation project was the National Yiddish Book Center, a drive begun in the late 1970s by a twenty-three-year-old McGill graduate student to “rescue” the thousands of old Yiddish books that sat neglected in basements and attics across North America. Aaron Lansky had no idea at the outset just what lay in store, though he did come to appreciate how impeccable his timing turned out to be: “If I had tried to do this fifteen years earlier, there would not have been sufficient interest. Fifteen years later, it would have been too late.” The center collected not thousands but millions of Yiddish volumes. By the 1990s Lansky had a new, eight-million-dollar facility and a fleet of trucks; and the National Yiddish Book Center had so success-
fully stocked U.S. libraries that Lansky now turned his attention to reestablishing Yiddish collections in Europe. “It is a new day in America,” Lansky later declared, “a day when we can begin re-claiming our baggage, our luggage, our cultural specificity, and bring it back into the American whole.”

If ethnic reclamation tended toward the academic in one direction, it shaded toward the commercial in the other, as perhaps Lansky’s empire indicated. *Fortune* magazine reported in 1984 that “the ethnic sell” had become popular not only among candidates for political office—notably Geraldine Ferraro and Mario Cuomo—who had “decided that the immigrant experience is a good sell,” but also among big business: “Thirteen corporations, including Coca-Cola, Eastman Kodak, and Kellogg, have launched ad campaigns tied to the 1986 Statue of Liberty centennial celebration.” CBS, too, was to begin a series of one-minute specials “about America’s lesser-known heroes and heroines, including Emma Lazarus, the poet whose words appear on the Statue of Liberty,” while Joe DiMaggio now “leads viewers nostalgically around Ellis Island in a commercial for the Bowery Savings Bank.” There is no small irony here, given the antimodern impulse of the roots phenomenon. As Vincent Brook notes, “The construction of ethnic particularism in the interests of privatized consumerism served a postwar U.S. economy and commercial televisual institution better than it served ethnic particularism itself.” Perhaps this is why *Fortune* was able to draw glowing commentary on “the ethnic sell” from a creative director at Ogilvy and Mather, while the Harvard historian Stephan Thernstrom, editor of the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, skeptically dismissed the ethnic revival as “a fad that may go the way of mah-jongg and macrobiotic diets.”

The most popular symbolic site for ethnic reclamation projects
was the Lower East Side, represented as a literal way station in the history of Jewish migrations and deployed as a cultural shorthand for the generic “immigrant experience.” As the historian Hasia Diner has amply documented, between the 1960s and the 1990s a veritable Lower East Side industry arose—a scholarly, institutional, and commercial infrastructure that generated and catered to ever heightened levels of interest. Early on, The Jewish Catalog, “one of the key documents to emerge from the Jewish counterculture of the 1960s,” captured the antimodern flavor of the late-twentieth-century’s ghetto yearnings, even as it promoted an unabashedly modern “consumption of Jewishness.” The Jewish Catalog defined the Lower East Side as “American Jewry’s sacred place,” where “a Jew could engage with authentic Judaism . . . [and] a suburban Jew could sensually imbibe the residue of a more traditional past.”

This rising industry ultimately produced a vast library, from Howe’s World of Our Fathers and Ronald Sanders’s Downtown Jews, to novels like Gloria Goldreich’s Leah’s Journey (1978) and Meredith Tax’s Rivington Street (1982), to exhibition catalogues like Allon Schoener’s Portal to America (1966), to genealogical guides in the true roots tradition—Orphan in History: Retrieving a Jewish Legacy (1982) and Tracing Our Jewish Roots (1993). It produced films about immigrants, like Hester Street (1975), and about their meaning-seeking descendants, like Crossing Delancey (1988). It produced serious historical projects such as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (1988) and the Eldridge Street Synagogue restoration (1991); and it produced Lower East Side walking tours—pilgrimages, really—like the Big Onion tours, as well as do-it-yourself guides like Six Heritage Tours of the Lower East Side (1997). And it produced kitschy and commercialized time-
travel experiences, like Sammy’s Rumanian Restaurant (1974), where bottles of schmaltz on every table quickly answer the question of why “the world of our fathers” came to an early end for so many of them. In 1976, inspired by the nation’s bicentennial, one rabbinical student devised “Lower East Side Games” as a simulation for children at a Jewish summer camp: the children reenacted the immigrants’ arrival in America, had their papers inspected and their names changed, and were forced to learn American manners.73

Among the most complete fossilized records of this impulse to recover ethnic heritage is Martin Scorsese’s 1974 documentary *Italianamerican*. Like the many college students of the 1970s whose assignments included a heritage hunt, Scorsese sits in his parents’ Little Italy apartment, prompting them gently as they recount their families’ Sicilian-American odysseys and reminisce about the neighborhood in the old days. Mrs. Scorsese disappears to the kitchen occasionally to stir a pot of “authentic” Italian sauce, the complete recipe for which is finally revealed in the closing credits. In the meantime, in a mildly competitive but loving banter, the couple weaves a rich tapestry-in-memoir that encompasses their families’ harrowing Atlantic crossing; work in the shipyards, failed ventures in fruit and vegetable retail and sewing homework in the garment industry; winemaking at home; the communal spirit of the old neighborhood (“Anybody talks bad about this neighborhood—for get it”); a return visit to Italy; a symbol-laden fable about one relative’s “splendid” Staten Island bungalow and its fall into disrepair with the passing of the older generation; and the mournful disappearance of an entire world.

Along with the sauce recipe, the closing credits of *Italianamerican* also reveal that the film was funded in part by a grant
from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a detail worth pursuing, as Scorsese was scarcely alone here. Significantly, many activities on behalf of ethnic particularity and cultural pluralism in this period received official state recognition and public funding. Among the signal developments in the state’s mounting interest in pluralism was the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program of 1972, an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Authorization for the Act spelled out in some detail the perceived relationship between “ethnic history” on the one hand and the state’s vested interest in patriotism and domestic harmony on the other: “In recognition of . . . the fact that in a multiethnic society a greater understanding of the contributions of one’s own heritage and those of one’s fellow citizens can contribute to a more harmonious, patriotic, and committed populace,” and that “all persons in the educational institutions of the Nation should have an opportunity to learn about the differing and unique contributions to the national heritage made by each ethnic group,” the title afforded students opportunities “to study the contributions of the cultural heritages” of their own and other ethnic groups. At the rate of about $2 million per year, the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program contributed to the development of ethnic studies courses, the collection of oral history material, and the compilation of various neighborhood histories.

The nation’s bicentennial observances in 1976 demonstrate the mutual engagement of grassroots ethnic activity and state-sponsored “heritage”: massive events that were funded and staged by the state harnessed the street-level energies already at play around ethnic pride and the nation’s mosaic heritage. For instance, the Festival of American Folklife evolved precisely during the years that the new ethnicity was in ascendance. The first festival, in
1967, had celebrated “democratic art” and the grassroots impulses of American creativity. But by the bicentennial celebrations of 1976, the festival had become a self-conscious tribute to ethnic diversity and American cultures—in the plural. One of the festival’s stated aims was now “to stimulate cultural self-awareness and inter-cultural understanding.” Similarly, in the 1970s festival exhibitions in Washington on “old ways in the New World” sought to “reflect accurately one of the principal facts that has made the U.S. so unique in world history, that America is the first unified yet genuinely pluralistic civilization in the history of mankind.”

Indeed, in trying to explain the boom in genealogical research in 1977, one archivist in Fort Wayne, Indiana, called it “bicentennial fallout.” It was not just that Americans were hoping to discover a revolutionary soldier in their family’s past (though some were, just as they had during the centennial celebration a hundred years earlier), but that the images conjured in this national celebration adopted ethnic diversity as a central motif. In an atmosphere in which “American folklife” was defined as “old ways in the New World,” and presidential candidates were trumpeting “ethnic heritage” as “the living fiber that holds America together,” the tempest-tossed ancestor from Grodno, no less than the minuteman, became newly interesting in both personal and civic terms.

The candidates’ pronouncements on ethnic heritage, like the festival’s celebration of old ways, embody two highly significant strands in American civic life in these years. One is the presentation of the problematic notion of “heritage” itself, as if the authenticity of this “great treasure” were self-evident and could be pinpointed and named with reliability. “Heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed,” writes Barbara Kirshenblatt-
Gimblett. “Despite a discourse of conservation, preservation, restoration, reclamation, recovery, re-creation, recuperation, revitalization, and regeneration, heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past.” In fact, heritage is best understood not as memory but as “a mode of cultural production in the present.”

Second, then, is the confluence of the ethnic revival with U.S. political culture, that is, the emergence of heritage as an idiom of American nationalism. The ethnic contributions model of American nationality may have been a significant departure from the homogenizing model of the melting pot, but it did share with the waning paradigm an almost absolute erasure of power relations that made for a fairly sanitized and happy national narrative: diversity as feast, the nation as smorgasbord. The harsher realities of power that are most often hidden in the celebratory rhetoric of heritage became exposed unexpectedly in the spring, when Jimmy Carter endured a firestorm for using the unfortunate phrase “ethnic purity” in reference to historic city neighborhoods. Just where did this Southerner stand on federal housing policy and residential segregation, many African Americans wanted to know? What might “preserving our ethnic heritage” mean? Richard Pryor similarly punctured the heritage industries’ pacific myths in a haunting monologue called “Bicentennial Nigger.” But by far the majority of bicentennial renditions of “old ways in the New World” celebrated the nation’s varied roots in such a way as to exalt the hospitalities of U.S. political culture right alongside the fortitude of its myriad adoptees, and to occlude the history of conflict, inequality, and violence that had attended the convergence of the world’s peoples at this global crossroad.

By the observance of the Statue of Liberty Centennial in 1986
the conceit of the “nation of immigrants” had become an article of civil-religious faith. As the Washington Post put it, 1986 was “clearly the immigrant’s year—the year . . . of immigrant chic.” New York mounted two separate centennial celebrations—one on the Fourth of July, and a second marking the anniversary of Grover Cleveland’s October dedication of the Statue of Liberty. Even those who were not thrilled by the July Fourth festivities had to be impressed by their scale. Thousands camped in lower Manhattan as the weekend approached in order to ensure a visit to Liberty Island during the four-day celebration; some 30,000 vessels crowded New York’s inner harbor by July 3. New York reportedly spent more than 11 million dollars on the four-day extravaganza, which included a fireworks display of 40,000 shells with more than 2 million people in attendance. Special photographic exhibits held in conjunction with Liberty Weekend included “The Ellis Island Experience” and “Liberty’s Legacy” at local museums. Headlining musical performances included Frank Sinatra singing “The House I Live In,” his 1940s paean to the diversity of the American folk, and Neil Diamond singing “America,” his 1970s paean to the continuing tradition of immigration. Festivities also included a symbolic swearing in of 300 recent immigrants at Ellis Island, including Mikhail Baryshnikov, along with thousands of others in various U.S. cities via satellite. Baryshnikov later performed to the music of George Gershwin, an irresistible piece of immigrant symbolism. “It’s a circle,” explained one of the producers: “Balanchine, an immigrant, fell in love with Gershwin and did this choreography. Now Baryshnikov, another immigrant, is dancing his choreography.”

The October celebration hit many of the same notes, minus the costly fireworks and the seven-digit attendance figures. The
autumn commemoration included “The First International Immigrants’ Parade” down Broadway. The celebration ended with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic’s rendering of Richard Wilbur’s cycle of poems “On Freedom’s Ground,” the last movement of which, “Immigrants Still,” depicted American history as an unfinished process: “We are immigrants still, who travel in time, bound where the thought of America beckons.”

The circuitry is critical—ethnic clubs and associations, cookbooks, games and ephemera, festivals, roots tours, a rising genealogy industry, and, not least, an increasingly common brand of ethnic celebration and pageantry sponsored by the state. Each of the station stops on this national roots trip—Alex Haley’s best seller, Northwest Orient’s “homeland” advertisements, the Heritage Hunt board game, Jimmy Carter’s diversity-sensitive oratory, the Festival of American Folklife, Richard Wilbur’s “Immigrants Still”—assumed significance by its relation to the cultural tapestry as a whole. In its psychology, the roots trip served diverse functions for diverse individuals; heritage could resonate in many different ways. But it is the pervasiveness and variety of Americans’ “heritage” quests, the collectivity and concurrence of these ventures, and their corresponding power to redefine not only the self but the nation that give the roots phenomenon its meaning. If many Americans were busily redefining themselves as “immigrants still . . . bound where the thought of America beckons,” as Wilbur put it, so were they fundamentally redefining America as precisely such a beckoning land—a nation whose historic significance and political genius were best apprehended by the incoming immigrant from Europe. Presidential candidates’ attempts at the “ethnic sell,” and the participation of the state in the folklife of 1976 and the pageantry of 1986, hint at the civic reach
of the ethnic revival. But as extravagant as they often were, none of these state-sponsored activities or installations could compare with what was taking place at Ellis Island itself between 1965 and 1990—the creation of “an official view of the American heritage of European immigration.”

Sanctifying Ellis Island

By the time John F. Kennedy was pronouncing on America’s character as a nation of immigrants, the once teeming administrative buildings of Ellis Island had fallen into disuse, neglect, and increasing disrepair. Untamed bushes and weeds encroached on the grounds, finally engulfing buildings which themselves had become ruins of dilapidated brickwork, cracked plaster, peeling paint, and exposed lath. The island now served mainly as a refuge for huddled masses of wharf rats. As the New York Times had reported in late 1954, “Without ceremony, the career of Ellis Island as an immigration station came to a virtual close” after decades of declining use. Two years later a group searching for a suitable location for a proposed American Museum of Immigration rejected Ellis Island, because for many the site was “a depository of bad memories”; a fleeting reference in the New Republic in 1964 characterized the island’s complex of medical and administrative buildings as “human stockyards.”

But fortunes turn: President Johnson designated the immigration station a part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument in 1965; the National Park Service began limited tours of Ellis Island in 1976; and after a costly restoration campaign, the refurbished buildings and a new immigration museum were opened to the public in 1990. By the century’s end, the pilgrimage of “rec-
reational immigrants” to Ellis Island numbered between ten and fifteen thousand per day—higher than the number of actual incoming immigrants during the peak immigration year of 1907.  

Nostalgic theme park, or sacred ground? There is a certain kitsch element to the ferry ride across the harbor from Battery Park, and the museum gift shop does offer a T-shirt depicting Mickey Mouse as an immigrant. But in their rituals and their contemplative hush as they pass through the exhibits, many of the visitors themselves resemble nothing so much as pilgrims at a holy shrine. As one citizen wrote to President Eisenhower way back in the 1950s, as controversy swirled around the federal government’s plans to sell off the island, “To millions and millions of Americans Ellis Island was the nineteenth and twentieth century counterpart of Plymouth Rock. [T]his little piece of land has associations of deep affection.” The depth of this affection—even if second- or thirdhand—is daily in evidence as thousands of pilgrims gaze upward upon the vaunted ceiling or reach out to lightly touch the brickwork of the Great Hall.

In the symbolism it deployed and the narratives it generated, the project to restore and sanctify Ellis Island represents the most significant instance of state sponsorship at play in the ethnic revival. President Johnson initially annexed Ellis Island to the more popular and better-kept Statue of Liberty National Park as part of his public relations campaign on behalf of a liberalized immigration bill. “Our beautiful America was built by a nation of strangers,” he intoned at the signing in 1965, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. “From a hundred different places or more they have poured forth into an empty land, joining and blending one mighty and irresistible tide. This land flourished because it was fed from so many sources—because it was nourished by so many cultures and traditions and other peoples.”
A familiar sentiment, more familiar now, perhaps, than at the time the words were spoken, but certainly at one with JFK’s *Nation of Immigrants* and his celebrated homilies in Ireland. That this project to reclaim and restore Ellis Island unfolded against the backdrop of a mounting interest in ethnic history and a shifting language of national diversity is crucial, though these developments did not always make the efforts on behalf of the project any easier. If the ethnic revival boosted the project by providing a natural community of invested, energetic, and interested parties, so did it heighten the perceived stakes of the project to such an extent that an easy consensus on matters of form, style, or historical interpretation was unlikely. The enthusiasm for the restoration is yet another artifact of the ethnic revival, that is, but so is the raucous history of wrangling and disagreement over whose memories would be enshrined there.

One of the striking things about the Ellis Island restoration in retrospect is that the renown of “the isle of hope and tears” is relatively recent: there was a time not so long ago when the recognition factor of Ellis Island (the measure by which modern marketing departments gauge the public’s familiarity with a particular brand) stood at only 20 percent. The first stirrings in what would become a vast restoration project were in 1955, when a group called AMI, Inc., was chartered to finance and execute an American Museum of Immigration. AMI began work at the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty late in 1961, in cooperation with the National Park Service, though financial problems plagued the project early on. Congress appropriated public monies in 1967 and 1968; and in the early 1970s, Peter Sammartino, founder and chancellor of Fairleigh Dickinson University, formed the Ellis Island Restoration Commission (EIRC), successfully lobbying congress for $8 million in appropriations by 1983.86
The ten-year period between the bicentennial year of 1976 and the Statue of Liberty Centennial in 1986 marked the escalation of the Ellis Island project in earnest, and the point at which the longer-term efforts of AMI, the resurgent interest associated with the EIRC, and the broader currents of the ethnic revival all converged. Barbara Duvall and Beverly Dolinski, among the first visitors to the island when tours began in 1976, sought permission to launch a fundraising campaign for the island’s restoration. Their plan crystallized in the May 1982 establishment of the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Centennial Commission, whose figurehead was immigrant-cum-magnate Lee Iacocca, the CEO of Chrysler. The centerpiece of this fundraising effort, Iacocca’s brainchild, was a plan under which donors could pay 100 dollars to have their immigrant ancestors commemorated on an American Immigrant Wall of Honor at Ellis Island. By 1990 “the wall” had generated $40 million. The numbers alone, from the initial congressional appropriation of $8 million to Liberty–Ellis Island’s ultimate fundraising tally of $305 million (of which the Ellis Island installation finally cost $150 million), chart the meteoric rise of Henry James’s “terrible little Ellis Island” in the national consciousness amid a collective fascination with heritage and roots.

This was not a smooth process. By far the most difficult debates had to do with the message of the museum. Discussions took place just as American historiography took a distinct turn toward bottom-up social history, and when immigration history was taking shape as a distinctive subfield within the discipline. Discussions that had begun in the climate of melting-pot sociology and consensus history in the 1950s were now unfolding, not only in an intellectual cosmos dedicated to the new pluralism, but within a framework of interests represented by scholars such
as Rudolph Vecoli—whose research tended to overturn the older melting-pot assumptions—and by new institutions such as the Immigration History Research Center (1964), the Center for Migration Studies (1965), and the Immigration History Society (1965). The celebratory, assimilationist vision of the AMI’s inaugural planning sessions did not sit well with this emergent gallery of scholars whose own findings cut in a very different direction. More explosive still was the question of who, exactly, should be depicted in the museum. As the project broadened in scope from a modest immigration museum to a more ambitious gesture toward American liberty and national character, the inevitable questions arose: what of today’s immigrants? And what of those millions of Americans for whom Ellis Island was not the touchstone? One official on the board of directors candidly remarked
that “the most recent immigration . . . did not fit in line with [the board’s] particular cultural perspectives and that this was going to be a white man’s museum.”

Although not solely a “white man’s museum” in the end, still Ellis Island was the point of entry for migrants who were overwhelmingly admitted as the “free white persons” of U.S. naturalization law; and so the iconic figure of the white immigrant has dominated all others. This goes not only for the site itself but for the considerable industry of Ellis Island remembrance that has emerged in recent years—trinkets, “ethnic” memorabilia, and T-shirts sold at the museum gift shop, as well as coffee-table books, children’s books, popular histories, and TV documentaries. The largest single boost to this remembrance industry was the Statue of Liberty Centennial, whose festivities included the publication of *Liberty: The Statue and the Dream; In Search of Liberty; Ellis Island: A Pictorial History; Images of Liberty; Maiden Voyage; The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World; Sam Ellis’ Island*, plus several postcard books, Dover Press’s *Cut-and-Assemble New York Harbor* and *Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island Coloring Book*, and, as one Random House official put it, “about a gillion” children’s books.

In constructing the prototypical, epic-heroic “immigrant,” these artifacts also construct a very particular version of “the nation.” In a 1963 review of Elia Kazan’s film *America America*, the *New York Times* commented that the film was “not only a tribute, but also a ringing ode to the whole great surging immigrant wave. An ode—that is what it is, precisely, for the story conveyed in this film . . . is a minor odyssey that has major connotations of a rich lyric-epic poem.” This notion of the immigrant saga as both ode and epic captures the spirit of much that goes on under the aegis
of Ellis Island remembrance. In fact, it is striking just how hard it has been for people on all sides of the question to break out of that generic mold. The project on behalf of Ellis Island remembrance has been steeped in conservative politics of one sort or another ever since the idea for an immigration museum first surfaced in the 1950s. One dominant motif has been America’s Cold War “leadership of the free world.” As one proponent put it in 1951, the museum’s depiction of the immigrants’ search for “liberty and opportunity” ought to bolster the United States in its “worldwide struggle for men’s minds and aspirations.” In his overall assessment, National Parks Service historian F. Ross Holland credits the restoration with “bringing the country out of the Vietnam syndrome” and “healing the wounds the nation had inflicted on itself. The restoration was a patriotic effort that most Americans could rally around, and the celebration . . . marked the nation’s emergence from the shadow of the Vietnam experience.”

But Cold War politics aside, the history enshrined at the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island National Park exerts a quieter but more significant force when it comes to this country’s domestic social relations. Richard Nixon sounded the keynote in his 1972 speech for the dedication of the immigration museum (then housed on Liberty Island). The immigrants “believed in hard work,” he declared, encoding a racial comparison that could hardly have been lost on his listeners. “They didn’t come here for a handout. They came here for an opportunity and they built America.” Nixon here annexes the European immigrants to the national legend of rugged individualism, even as he redefines the legitimate national community itself to exclude the supposed welfare-mongers of the present-day ghetto.

“Opportunity” and “liberty,” both of which evoke individual-
ism, are still the dominant themes at the site. The overall effect, in the words of the historian John Bodnar, has been to reinvigorate “the view of American history as a steady succession of progress and uplift for ordinary people.” This self-congratulatory national storyline might have been particularly resonant in the 1980s, as anxieties surfaced over the nation's ability to deliver opportunity and progress. Insofar as it is the governmental, administrative dimension of the immigration saga that is evoked at Ellis Island, according to Bodnar, the site resurrects the republican trinity of liberty, equality, and fraternity as the best available explanations of the American experience, and thus “forges a link between the state and all of its citizens.”

Both the Ellis Island site and the experience of visiting and celebrating it perform a delicate but transformative maneuver on behalf of the national imaginary. The rituals and artifacts of Ellis Island remembrance might tap into the personal impulses of the ethnic revival, but ultimately they turn outward toward the nation at large. In a characteristic paean to both the immigrants and their adopted country, the preface to Island of Hope, Island of Tears explains,

[This] is the story of all those tens of millions who came to America searching for peace and several kinds of freedom—and in the main found what they were searching for; the story of the wit, humor, irony and compassion of ordinary people made extraordinary in the process of braving an extraordinary time. In short, this is the story of our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and neighbors; of their voyage to America and their passage through Ellis Island to freedom.
The movement here between national affirmation ("in the main [they] found what they were looking for"), personal epic ("ordinary people made extraordinary"), and national redefinition ("our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents") recapitulates with wonderful economy the pivotal ideas of Ellis Island remembrance. In the first instance, the immigrants stand as proof of the goodness of the nation—of all the places in the world, they came here looking for peace and freedom, and they found it. In the next instance, the immigrants themselves are exalted for their hardiness, wit, and courage—they were deserving of the nation's greatness, in other words. And finally, by the end of the third sentence, the immigrants are the nation, just as the nation is its immigrants. If America is defined solely by the "freedom" the immigrants sought, so, finally, is America composed solely of these seekers and their descendants. The tremendous power of the mythic immigrant is threefold: the image of the immigrant "functions to reassure workers of the possibility of upward mobility in an economy that rarely delivers on that promise"; the "hegemonic myth of an immigrant America" obscures the nation's less flattering "foundings" (conquest, slavery, expansion, annexation, and more slavery); and finally the immigrant provides "a nationalist narrative of choiceworthiness."94

Here is one of the reigning ironies of the ethnic revival, and one of the mainsprings of our national political life in the decades since. If the project to restore Ellis Island initially took root in the soil of an ethnic-revival ethos of disquiet—even of outright protest against the homogenizing forces of modernity—it ended in an ancestral vision that has been made fundamentally nationalist. And if the "nation of immigrants" paradigm began as a push for
recognition and inclusion, it ended in a vision of the nation that is strangely exclusive, even in its celebration of diversity. As the African-American historian John Hope Franklin remarked of the centennial spectacle in 1986, “It’s a celebration for immigrants and that has nothing to do with me.” William Harris, president of Paine College, concurred: “If you can’t communicate to blacks that when you talk about liberty you are talking about more than just European immigrants . . . then there just isn’t much in it for me.” Although the Centennial Commission made at least a few gestures toward broad inclusiveness—awarding the Ellis Island Medal of Honor to Muhammad Ali, César Chavez, Daniel Inouye, Rosa Parks, and Chien-Shiung Wu right alongside European recipients like Victor Borge, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Claudette Colbert, Joe DiMaggio, Martina Navratilova, and Michael Novak—still many black critics joined Franklin and Harris in their skepticism. The Schomberg Library in Harlem mounted a dissenting exhibition, “Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor...? ; and Jesse Jackson urged that this “would be an excellent time to redeem and amend the Statue of Liberty just as we redeemed and amended our Constitution to outlaw slavery.”95 Such dissenting comments point to the potent ideological “accomplishment” of Ellis Island remembrance: if “liberty” is coterminous with what European immigrants sought and found in the New World, then most of U.S. history slips off the page and the legitimate range of our public discussion of both past and future narrows considerably.

Ellis Island remembrances of the sort tacitly but firmly encouraged by the National Park Service actually conflate two quite distinct themes: immigration as geographical movement versus immigration as legal standing, citizenship, and civic incorporation. It is only in the first sense that this country is really anything
like “a nation of immigrants”—everybody came from somewhere, whether from JFK’s New Ross, Alex Haley’s Kinte-Kundah, or across the land bridge from Asia. But this meaning has eclipsed the second, more profound meaning when it comes to comprehending the body politic. To celebrate this as a “nation of immigrants,” to construct “America” solely through the eyes of the incoming European steerage passenger, is not only to redraw a line around the exclusive white “we” of “we the people,” but simultaneously to claim inclusivity under the aegis of commonly held “liberty.” Steerage, chains, whatever. A collective gaze trained on the diverse avenues of civic incorporation (as well as the diverse obstacles) would result in a vastly different understanding of “liberty” and of “the American experience.”

In 1963 a team investigating the possibilities for restoring the immigration station declared that “Ellis Island has been as important in fact as Plymouth Rock has become in fancy.” Now, after decades of celebration and sanctifying rituals, the Ellis Island of popular fancy has come to rival the significance of either of these sites in fact. Vice President Dan Quayle once remarked, “What we celebrate in Ellis Island is nothing less than the triumph of the American spirit.” The new, improved Ellis Island has become, as the performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña has written with considerable skepticism, “the mythical island of American genesis”—a creation of the ethnic revival, to be sure, but also the single most important site and symbol channeling the energies of the ethnic revival toward a very particular version of American nationalism.96

In a brilliant, ironic comment on the appeals of ethnic community, Vivian Gornick recalls accompanying her mother to a lecture
at Hunter College in commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. When they arrive at the auditorium, they stand outside the open door for a time, listening to the proceedings. Inside, two or three hundred Jews sit

listening to the testimonials that commemorate their unspeakable history. These testimonials are the glue that binds. They remind and persuade. They heal and connect. Let people make sense of themselves . . . My mother and I stand there on the sidewalk, alone together, against the sound of culture-making that floats out to us. “We are a cursed people,” the speaker announces. “Periodically we are destroyed, we struggle up again, we are reborn. That is our destiny.”

The words act like adrenaline on my mother. Her cheeks begin to glow. Tears brighten her eyes. Her jawline grows firm. Her skin achieves muscle tone. “Come inside,” she says softly to me . . . “Come. You’ll feel better.”

This is a version of “feeling better” that has become increasingly common on the American scene in the years beyond the melting pot. Such “culture-making” among the cursed and reborn peoples now in America has been made to carry a varied freight—respite from the “air conditioned nightmare”; symbolic reconstitution of life on a human scale, the “trusted interdependency” that seems to have been ploughed under and paved over by modernity; solace in a world of tamed masculinity; redemption from the class betrayals entailed in New World paths of mobility and assimilation; certification of underdog status (and hence of moral rectitude) in battles over urban housing and schools, in which white-
ness might be taken as a marker of immense privilege (and hence of culpability).

Culture-making in the accents of ethnicity might be experienced as primarily emotional or intellectual; it can be interior and private, or social and self-consciously political; it can tend to the left or to the right. It represents a powerful idiom for the expression of meaning, not meaning itself. But in this decades-long heritage hunt, Americans’ myriad identity quests and their articulations in civic terms have produced a portentous new image of the nation and its make-up. The phrase “middle America” long carried an unmistakable connotation of white Protestantism—one thinks of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*, the Lynds’ *Middletown*, or television families like the Andersons or the Cleavers. But in 1976, around the time that American nostalgia discovered Arthur Fonza-relli and Detroit anchorman Tom Conrad reverted to his “lost” name, Korzeniowski, the *New York Times* pronounced “white ethnics . . . the largest segment of Middle America.” As the nation has held itself up to the media mirror in the decades since, the image of white America that reflects back looks less and less like the whitebread, Protestant world of Rob and Laura Petrie, and rather more like, well, a big fat Greek wedding.
Coda: Ireland at JFK

The country is in a very delicate condition. They’re facing some sort of revolution as their culture pulls apart. I’ll say it here, now. Somebody has to say it: beef up the borders. Get new Border Patrol agents on the line, and be ever vigilant. There will be a new onslaught of foreign-speaking strangers that we can no longer support. There is no more room in the lifeboat, and their ways are not our ways...

New hordes of Québécois and Canadians are going to sneak into Vermont and Maine.

—Luis Alberto Urrea, 
*By the Lake of Sleeping*  
*Children* (1996)

Everybody knows exactly what is meant by the words “illegal alien.” Indeed, until 9/11 one group in particular had so dominated public concern that INS officials took to referring to immigrants from all other nations under the blanket term “OTM”—“Other Than Mexican.” Twenty years after John F. Kennedy addressed the admiring throngs in Galway on the special affini-
ties between Irishness and Americanness, Americans quietly began to note—positively, for the most part—a new wave of immigration from the Emerald Isle. The immigration happened to be illegal, though no one seemed to mind terribly. Beginning in about 1982 a new generation of Doughertys and Flahertys and Ryans began to disembark at JFK and Logan airports, their intentions to stay and work in the United States safely tucked in their six-month tourist visas. They arrived by the thousands—as many as thirty thousand settling in Boston and fifty thousand in New York within the first few years of the new wave—and this when the political culture at large was in full mobilization around the “crisis” represented by illegal immigration. The fact that Americans organized to aid the undocumented Irish at a time when “control of our borders” was among the nation’s chief concerns says a great deal about our national life beyond the melting pot. “Because of my color,” says Guadalupe Avila, “I think I will never be an American.” By contrast, the new Irish, as the New York Times put it, were “Illegal, but Not Alien.” This was a “white” country after all, and the Irish disembarking at JFK Airport were learning that fact as surely as were the Mexicans at the border near El Paso or Nogales.

In a 1989 article on illegal Irish immigration titled “The Re-Greening of America” (which has an entirely different ring from “the browning of America,” one notes), Time described with some ambivalence the travails of the estimated 100,000 Irish newcomers. On the one hand, “the U.S. immigration act of 1965 discriminated against the Irish and other Europeans” through a system of preferences that inadvertently favored Asian and Latino immigration. The “amnesty” program of the 1986 immigration reform, too, had largely passed by the new Irish, as the residency re-
quirement for amnesty was slightly longer than most of them had been in the United States. Thus the illegal Irish were victims, unfairly relegated to a harsh and fearful life in the shadows. “Like their more numerous Hispanic and Asian counterparts,” the article stated, “the undocumented ‘new Irish’ switch jobs often, worry about the costs of sickness without Medicaid, and can do little but gnash their teeth when family crises occur in their homeland, because to leave the U.S. might mean never to return.”

But on the other hand, this article also seemed to ask, just how sorry can we feel for them? Unlike “the flood of Third World immigrants, the Irish come with advantages: white skin, good education, a knowledge of the language and a talent for politics that would make Boston’s legendary Mayor James Michael Curley beam with pride.” And political connections—or at least sentimental connections. Boston’s Mayor Raymond Flynn announced that “the welcome mat is out” for Irish aliens, and he created a special office to provide them with legal aid. In New York, Ed Koch assured the undocumented Irish that they had “nothing to fear in utilizing fully the services [of the city],” and he granted $30,000 to establish a counseling hotline. These benefits came in addition to the initiatives of the Catholic Church, Irish-American politicians, the Irish-American press, and political groups like the Irish Immigration Reform Movement, including the publication of *A Guide for the New Irish in Chicago, Emigrating USA*, New York City’s official “Guide for Irish Immigrants,” and Boston’s *Guide for the New Irish*. The Archdiocese of Boston, meanwhile, operated a special Irish Pastoral Center to attend to the social and legal needs of the illegal Irish, modeled after the Archdiocese of New York’s Project Irish Outreach; Cardinal O’Connor urged a special presidential amnesty for all undocumented Irish.
The social and political weave of Flynn’s “welcome mat” is what the *Irish Echo* editor Ray O’Hanlon had in mind when he later noted, “The Irish were fast becoming the most officially briefed and municipally accepted lawbreakers on the North American continent.” At the national level various proposals emerged to encourage higher rates of immigration from Europe—all favoring the Irish and all, ironically, articulated in the language of enhancing “diversity”: Joe DioGuardi’s bill allowing for “a new wave of Irish immigration that will again result in a better United States”; Ted Kennedy and Alan Simpson’s proposal “to facilitate immigration from countries in Western Europe” (by awarding 54,000 visas according to a point system favoring, among other things, English competency, though this provision was ultimately defeated); Brian Donnelly’s visa program, in which the Irish won 3,500 of the first 10,000 visas; the so-called Berman lottery, in which the Irish won 40 percent of the first 10,000 visas; and Bruce Morrison’s “regional diversity” provision, whose inclination toward the peoples of Western Europe led one commentator to describe it as “virtual amnesty to all the illegal Irish immigrants in the country.”

For the moment, however, *Time* magazine was having a hard time deciding whether this was a story of victimization or of unfair advantage. But in a sense, the popular story of Irish victimization was the Irish immigrants’ unfair advantage. Mayor Koch, for example, urged President-elect Bush to declare an executive amnesty on behalf of the Irish, who endured “pain, anguish, and inequalities” while “languishing in a troubling limbo.” A *Wall Street Journal* article on the new Irish in 1987 concluded, in the first-person voice of the young illegal immigrant, “Listen, dad, I don’t feel that I’m doing anything illegal. I’m trying to make a future for myself.” When he launched his special municipal programs for
aiding the illegal Irish, Mayor Flynn cited Boston’s “special relationship to Ireland.”

Such sentiments have not translated particularly well into Spanish or Chinese. It is difficult to imagine an argument evoking the “special relationship” between Los Angeles and Mexico, for instance; and setting aside the issue of popular empathy with immigrants’ endurance of “pain, anguish, and inequalities,” even the degree of individuation carried in the phrase, “Listen, dad,” has been absent in most U.S. media coverage of migration from Mexico and the “Third World.” Indeed, in these accounts immigrant subjectivity is more often effaced behind aquatic metaphors of massive and uncontrollable volume: “Immigration Law Is Failing to Cut Flow from Mexico”; “U.S. Plans a Ditch in California to Stem the Flow of Illegal Aliens”; “Wave of Immigrant Children Strains Schools and Housing”; “wave of Latin American immigrants now flooding Texas, California and Florida”; “Tide of Illegal Aliens Headed for the U.S.”; “Amnesty Law Is Seen as Failing to Slow Alien Tide.”

When the Golden Venture ran aground carrying a desperate cargo of “illegal” Chinese immigrants in 1993, the columnist A. M. Rosenthal was more or less alone in his call to “let them in” and to “honor those heroes from China, those men and women who sought the beautiful land.” By nightfall, immigration officials had “put them in handcuffs, sent them to distant prisons and made sure they did not see any lawyers.”

By contrast, press coverage of the “new Irish” gave voice to that “emotional sense of loss in the collective Irish soul” for the Emerald Isle’s demographic hemorrhage, or bemoaned the fact that “over 100,000 have now hawked their dream to America like millions of Irish before them.” If the Irish immigrants could not become naturalized in the legal sense, at least the Irish presence was rendered “natural” in the cultural sense. “It’s part of the Irish
identity to become an American citizen,” explained the *Times*. “It’s easy to slip into the culture.” In 1986 only 1,839 Irish were admitted legally as permanent residents, but another 98,188 arrived on temporary visas (no one knows how many were to overstay and “slip into the culture”). In the wake of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, too, “surprising numbers of Irish, British, Italian, and other Europeans who overstayed tourist visas” claimed amnesty, including “thousands of Poles” in Chicago alone. In the early 1990s, New Yorkers were taken aback to find that their state had “more illegal Italians and Israelis than illegal Chinese,” though nothing in media coverage or public debate had ever suggested such a trend.9 The story of the undocumented Irish was not about taking American jobs or draining American social services; like other “invisible aliens” from Europe, the new Irish claimed national attention for a time, but never as a source of civic concern.

In *Black Hole, Green Card* (1994), an exploration of the new, global Ireland of the late twentieth century, Fintan O’Toole noted the odd convergence of a well-worn American nostalgia with an emergent Irish social reality in a place called the Tipperary Inn in Montauk, at the far eastern tip of Long Island. Rather sad and tattered, the Tipperary Inn is decorated in maps of Ireland—genealogical maps, literary maps, maps whose towns and territories are indicated in Gaelic—an almost generic expression of American attachment to some (imagined) homeland. “If you’re Irish,” writes O’Toole,

There is something surreal about the way Ireland, or a version of Ireland, can be a holiday destination even in New York state. You can visit a little bit of Ireland without ever leaving America.
What is even more surreal is that you visit America without ever really leaving Ireland. Every shop, every bar, every hotel in Montauk seems to be staffed by young Irish people. You walk in feeling hip in your shades and shorts, only to be asked in familiar tones: “What’s the weather like at home?” You have to think for a moment where home might be when a whole generation seems to be over here.¹⁰

With the backward glance of its Irish décor and the forward look of its new Irish staff, the Tipperary Inn captures the theme of “where home might be” more overtly and honestly than is usually the case. But in the era of ethnic reverie on the one hand and globalization on the other, such musings on “home” have textured the public discussion of a wide range of concerns. Since the 1990s, of course, the entire debate over immigration has been respun according to new and pressing questions of terrorism and national security. One report in 1993 concluded that New Yorkers’ anti-immigration sentiment was on the rise, in part in response to the first World Trade Center bombing: 85 percent of those surveyed said that immigration “had been good in the past,” though “only 40% thought current immigration to be a good thing.” Further, 55 percent “thought illegal immigrants to be a terrorist threat, and 82% of the American-born and 68% of the foreign-born . . . said they believed the trade center bombing in February would not have occurred if controls over immigration had been tighter.”¹¹ Indeed, in the post-9/11 world the “OTM” of immigration and naturalization discourse might well be taken to mean “Other Than Muslim.”

In a discussion of the LA8, a group of seven Palestinians and one Kenyan arrested on shaky evidence as a terrorist cell in 1987, the legal scholar David Cole noted, “Had the government sought
to deport a similarly situated group of white immigrants allegedly associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the popular outcry would have almost certainly been more substantial. Over the course of the LA8 case, Irish immigrants and citizens living here actively and notoriously supported the IRA, yet the INS never sought to deport a single person for association with the IRA, or for seeking to raise money for its illegal activities,” though it did “seek to deport persons accused of engaging in actual terrorist acts.” “Because the Palestinians were more easily portrayed as ‘other,’” concluded Cole, “the government could treat them in ways that it certainly could not have treated citizens, and probably could not have treated many white immigrants.”

It was thus altogether fitting that during the Concert for New York in the wake of 9/11, among the most straightforward and well-received expressions of outraged Americanism was the firefighter Michael Moran’s exhortation, “Osama bin Laden, you can kiss my royal Irish ass!” Like JFK’s “return” to Ireland and William Shannon’s pluralistic portrait of a distinct and unmelted Irish-America in 1963, the racial valences of the discourse of “terrorism” signal a widespread understanding that to emphasize and even to celebrate the hyphen is not to diminish individuals’ “Americanism,” but rather, as Shannon put it, “to show what kind of Americans they are.” But as David Cole’s attention to the racialized patterns of antiterrorism suggest, and as George W. Bush’s visit to Ellis Island for the first anniversary of 9/11 affirms, it must be the right kind of hyphen. Such patterns in our collective sense of naturalized Americanness should command the strictest attention, as should the mythology of the “nation of immigrants” that binds them. These more than anything else constitute the historical weave of that hypnotic political ideal, *America.*