

What is the larger, long-range solution? During the textbook battle, Sylvia Wynter, then a Stanford University professor of Spanish, Portuguese, and Black Studies circulated a provocative position paper. The textbooks present a dual problem, Wynter observed. First, they are dominated by a Eurocentric perspective. Second, this perspective is not acknowledged but is camouflaged by a "multiculturalist alternative." The supposed alternative remains entrapped by an assumption that the United States is integrated as a nation on the basis of a single, Euro-American culture. Thus the "multiculturalist alternative" seeks to save the Euro-American nation model by multiculturalizing it. The real solution, however, is to de-imagine the United States as a nation and then reimagine it as a "world": a community of communities relating on the basis of mutual respect and integrity.

Such a goal would require a massive shift in power relations throughout U.S. society. It sounds like a dream, like the idea of textbooks that make real sense out of American history. Still, defining one's goals—no matter how distant they may seem—matters. Honesty about the past can shine the light of freedom on a new kind of future.

chapter five

REINVENTING "AMERICA"

Call for a New National Identity

For some 15 years, starting in 1940, 85 percent of all U.S. elementary schools used the Dick and Jane series to teach children how to read. The series starred Dick, Jane, their white middle-class parents, their dog Spot and their life together in a home with a white picket fence.

"Look, Jane, look! See Spot run!" chirped the two kids. It was a house full of glorious family values, where Mom cooked while Daddy went to work in a suit and mowed the lawn on weekends. The Dick and Jane books also taught that you should do your job and help others. All this affirmed an equation of middle-class with whiteness with virtue.

In the mid-1990s, museums, libraries and 80 Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) stations across the country had exhibits and programs commemorating the series. At one museum, an attendant commented, "When you hear someone crying, you know they are looking at the Dick and Jane books." It seems nostalgia runs rampant among many Euro-Americans: a nostalgia for the days of unchallenged White Supremacy—both moral and material—when life was "simple."

We've seen that nostalgia before in the nation's history. But today it signifies a problem reaching a new intensity. It suggests a national identity crisis that promises to bring in its wake an unprecedented nervous breakdown for the dominant society's psyche.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in California, which has long been on the cutting edge of the nation's present and future reality. Warning sirens have sounded repeatedly in the 1990s, such as the fierce battle over new history textbooks for public schools, Proposition 187's ugly denial of human rights to immigrants, the 1996 assault on affirmative action that culminated in Proposition 209, and the 1997 move to abolish bilingual education. Attempts to copycat these reactionary measures have been seen in other states.

The attack on affirmative action isn't really about affirmative action. Essentially it is another tactic in today's war on the gains of the 1960s, a tactic rooted in Anglo resentment and fear. A major source of that fear: the fact that California will almost surely have a majority of people of color in 20 to 30 years at most, with the nation as a whole not far behind.

Check out the February 3, 1992, issue of *Sports Illustrated* with its double-spread ad for *Time* magazine. The ad showed hundreds of newborn babies in their hospital cribs, all of them Black or brown except for a rare white face here and there. The headline says, "Hey, whitey! It's your turn at the back of the bus!" The ad then tells you, read *Time* magazine to keep up with today's hot issues. That manipulative image could have been published today; its implication of shifting power appears to be the recurrent nightmare of too many potential Anglo allies.

Euro-American anxiety often focuses on the sense of a vanishing national identity. Behind the attacks on immigrants, affirmative action and multiculturalism, behind the demand for "English Only" laws and the rejection of bilingual education, lies the question: with all these new people, languages and cultures, what will it mean to be an American? If that question once seemed, to many people, to have an obvious, universally applicable answer, today new definitions must be found. But too often Americans, with supposed scholars in the lead, refuse to face that need and instead nurse a nostalgia for some bygone clarity. They remain trapped in denial.

An array of such ostriches, heads in the sand, began flapping their feathers noisily with the publication of Allan Bloom's 1987 best-selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom bemoaned the decline of our "common values" as a society, meaning the decline of Euro-American cultural centrality (shall we just call it cultural imperialism?). Since then we have seen constant sniping at "diversity" goals across the land. The assault has often focused on how U.S. history is taught. And with reason, for this country's identity rests on a particular narrative about the historical origins of the United States as a nation.

The Great White Origin Myth

Every society has an origin narrative that explains that society to itself and the world with a set of stories and symbols. The origin

myth, as scholar-activist Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz has termed it, defines how a society understands its place in the world and its history. The myth provides the basis for a nation's self-defined identity. Most origin narratives can be called myths because they usually present only the most flattering view of a nation's history; they are not distinguished by honesty.

Ours begins with Columbus "discovering" a hemisphere where some 80 million people already lived but didn't really count (in what became the United States, they were just buffalo-chasing "savages" with no grasp of real estate values and therefore doomed to perish). It continues with the brave Pilgrims, a revolution by independence-loving colonists against a decadent English aristocracy and the birth of an energetic young republic that promised democracy and equality (that is, to white male landowners). In the 1840s, the new nation expanded its size by almost one-third, thanks to a victory over that backward land of little brown people called Mexico. Such has been the basic account of how the nation called the United States of America came into being as presently configured.

The myth's omissions are grotesque. It ignores three major pillars of our nationhood: genocide, enslavement and imperialist expansion (such nasty words, who wants to hear them?—but that's the problem). The massive extermination of indigenous peoples provided our land base; the enslavement of African labor made our economic growth possible; and the seizure of half of Mexico by war (or threat of renewed war) extended this nation's boundaries north to the Pacific and south to the Rio Grande. Such are the foundation stones of the United States, within an economic system that made this country the first in world history to be born capitalist.

Those three pillars were, of course, supplemented by great numbers of dirt-cheap workers from Mexico, China, the Philippines, Puerto Rico and other countries, all of them kept in their place by White Supremacy. In history they stand alongside millions of less-than-supreme white workers and sharecroppers.

Any attempt to modify the present origin myth provokes angry efforts to repel such sacrilege. In the case of Native Americans, scholars will insist that they died from disease or wars among themselves, or that "not so many really did die." At worst it was a "tragedy," but never deliberate genocide, never a pillar of our nationhood. As for slavery, it was an embarrassment, of course, but do remember that Africa also had slavery and anyway enlightened white folk finally did end the practice here.

In the case of Mexico, reputable U.S. scholars still insist on blaming that country for the 1846–48 war. Yet even former U.S. President Ulysses Grant wrote in his memoirs that “[w]e were sent to provoke a fight [by moving troops into a disputed border area] but it was essential that Mexico should commence it [by fighting back].” (*Mr. Lincoln’s General: Ulysses S. Grant, an illustrated autobiography* [New York: Dutton, 1959].) President James Polk’s 1846 diary records that he told his cabinet his purpose in declaring war as “acquiring California, New Mexico, and perhaps other Mexican lands.” (*Diary of James K. Polk 1845–49* [Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1910].) To justify what could be called a territorial drive-by, the Mexican people were declared inferior; the U.S. had a “Manifest Destiny” to bring them progress and democracy.

Even when revisionist voices expose particular evils of Indian policy, slavery or the war on Mexico, they remain little more than unpleasant footnotes; the core of the dominant myth stands intact. PBS’s eight-part documentary series of 1996 titled “The West” is a case in point. It devoted more than the usual attention to the devastation of Native Americans, but still centered on Anglos and gave little attention to why their domination evolved as it did. The West thus remained the physically gorgeous backdrop for an ugly, unaltered origin myth.

In fact, “The West” series strengthens that myth. White Supremacy needs the brave but inevitably doomed Indians to silhouette its own inevitable conquest. It needs the Indian-as-devil to sustain its own holy mission. Remember Timothy Wight, who served as pastor to Congress in the late 1700s and wrote that, under the Indians, “Satan ruled unchallenged in America” until “our chosen race eternal justice sent.” With that self-declared moral authority, the “winning of the West” metamorphosed from a brutal, bloody invasion into a crusade of brave Christians marching across a lonely, dangerous landscape.

Racism as Linchpin of the U.S. National Identity

A crucial embellishment of the origin myth and key element of the national identity has been the myth of the frontier, analyzed in Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), the last volume of a fascinating trilogy. He describes Theodore Roosevelt’s belief that the West was won thanks to American arms, “the means by which pro-

gress and nationality will be achieved.” That success, Roosevelt continued, “depends on the heroism of men who impose on the course of events the latent virtues of their ‘race.’” Roosevelt saw conflict on the frontier producing a species of virile “fighters and breeders” who would eventually generate a new leadership class. Militarism thus went hand in hand with the racialization of history’s protagonists.

No slouch as an imperialist, Roosevelt soon took the frontier myth abroad, seeing Asians as Apaches and the Philippines as Sam Houston’s Texas in the process of being seized from Mexico. For Roosevelt, Slotkin writes, “racial violence [was] the principle around which both individual character and social organization develop.” Such ideas have not remained totally unchallenged by U.S. historians, nor was the frontier myth always applied in totally simplistic ways by Hollywood and other media. (The outlaw, for example, is a complicated figure, both good and bad.) Still, the frontier myth traditionally spins together virtue and violence, morality and war, in a convoluted, Calvinist web. That tortured embrace defines an essence of the so-called American character—the national identity—to this day.

The frontier myth embodied the nineteenth-century concept of Manifest Destiny, a doctrine that served to justify expansionist violence by means of intrinsic racial superiority. Manifest Destiny saw Yankee conquest as the inevitable result of a confrontation between enterprise and progress (white) versus passivity and backwardness (Indian, Mexican). “Manifest” meant “God-given,” and the whole doctrine is profoundly rooted in religious conviction going back to the earliest colonial times. In his short, powerful book *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, Professor Anders Stephanson tells how the Puritans reinvented the Jewish notion of chosenness and applied it to this hemisphere so that territorial expansion became God’s will.

Linking the national identity with race is not unique to the United States. National identity always requires an “other” to define it. But this country has linked its identity with race to an extraordinary degree, matched only by two other settler states: South Africa and Israel. Given its obsession with race and the supremacy attached to whiteness, the U.S. national identity inevitably reserved a special disdain for “half-breed” peoples—above all, Mexicans. “The West” documentary series reflects that disdain with its offhand treatment of Manifest Destiny and the U.S. expansionist takeover of Mexico, violations of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, land robbery, colonization backed by violent repression, the role of Mexican people in

building vast wealth in the West, and the West as a reflection of Mexican culture. In doing so the series typifies all the other standard historical treatments of people of Mexican origin. Who could care less? is their message. If anyone in this society remembers Mexicans before the twentieth century, it is usually as "bandits" who fought the U.S. occupation, or señoritas on big California ranchos who had the good sense to marry Anglos. Almost never have we formed part of the origin myth.

Manifest Destiny Dies Hard

The concept of Manifest Destiny, with its assertion of racial superiority sustained by military power, has defined U.S. identity for 150 years. Only the Vietnam War brought a serious challenge to that concept of almightiness. Bitter debate, moral anguish, images of My Lai and the prospect of military defeat for the first time in U.S. history all suggested that the long-standing marriage of virtue and violence might soon be on the rocks. In the final years of the war the words leaped to mind one day: this country is having a national nervous breakdown.

Perhaps this is why the Vietnam War continues to arouse passions today. Some who are willing to call the war "a mistake" still shy away from recognizing its immorality or even accepting it as a defeat. A few Americans have the courage to conclude from the Vietnam War that we should abandon the idea that our identity rests on being the world's richest, most powerful and indeed *best* nation. Is it possible that the so-called Vietnam syndrome might signal liberation from a crippling self-definition? Is it possible the long-standing belief that "American exceptionalism" had made freedom possible might be rejected someday?

The Vietnam syndrome is partly rooted in the fact that, although other societies have also been based on colonialism and slavery, ours seems to have an insatiable need to be the "good guys" on the world stage. That need must lie at least partially in a Protestant dualism that defines existence in terms of opposites, so that if you are not "good" you are bad, if not "white" then Black, and so on. Whatever the cause, the need to be seen as virtuous, compared to someone else's evil, haunts U.S. domestic and foreign policy. Where on earth would we be without Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi, and that all-

time favorite of gringo demonizers, Fidel Castro? Gee whiz, how would we know what an American really is?

Today's origin myth and the resulting concept of national identity make for an intellectual prison where it is dangerous to ask big questions about this society's superiority. When otherwise decent people are trapped in such a powerful desire not to feel guilty, self-deception becomes unavoidable. To cease our present falsification of collective memory should, and could, open the doors of that prison. When together we cease equating whiteness with Americanness, a new day can dawn. As David Roediger, the social historian, has said, "[Whiteness] is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity on what one isn't, and on whom one can hold back."

Redefining the U.S. origin narrative, and with it this country's national identity, could prove liberating for our collective psyche. It does not mean Euro-Americans should wallow individually in guilt. It does mean accepting collective responsibility to deal with the implications of our real origin. A few apologies, for example, might be a step in the right direction. In 1997, the idea was floated in Congress to apologize for slavery; it encountered opposition from all sides. But to reject the notion because corrective action, not an apology, is needed misses the point. Having defined itself as the all-time best country in the world, the United States fiercely denies the need to make a serious, official apology for anything (I'm not counting the unofficial apologies that Clinton issued as an individual in 1998, so cautiously worded that they were meaningless). To press for any serious, official apology does imply a new origin narrative, a new self-image, an ideological sea-change.

Accepting the implications of a different narrative could also shed light on today's struggles. In the affirmative-action struggle, for example, opponents have said that that policy is no longer needed because racism ended with the Civil Rights Movement. But if we look at slavery as a fundamental pillar of this nation, going back centuries, it becomes obvious that racism could not have been ended by 30 years of mild reforms. If we see how the myth of the frontier idealized the white male adventurer as the central hero of national history, with the woman as sunbonneted helpmate, then we might better understand the dehumanized ways in which women have continued to be treated. A more truthful origin narrative could also help break down divisions among peoples of color by revealing common experiences and histories of cooperation.

A new origin narrative and national identity could help pave the way to a more livable society for us all. A society based on cooperation rather than competition, on the idea that all living creatures are interdependent and that humanity's goal should be balance. Such were the values of many original Americans, deemed "savages." Similar gifts are waiting from other despised peoples and traditions. We might well start by recognizing that "America" is the name of an entire hemisphere, rich in a stunning variety of histories, cultures and peoples—not just one country.

The choice seems clear, if not easy. We can go on living in a state of massive denial, affirming this nation's superiority and virtue simply because we need to believe in it. We can choose to believe the destiny of the United States is still manifest: global domination. Or we can seek a transformative vision that carries us forward, not backward. We can seek an origin narrative that lays the groundwork for a multicultural, multinational identity centered on the goals of social equity and democracy. We do have choices.

There is little time for nostalgia. Dick and Jane never were "America," they were only one part of one community in one part of one country in one part of one continent. Yet we have let their image define our entire society and its values. Will the future be marked by ongoing denial or by steps toward a new vision in which White Supremacy no longer determines reality? When on earth will we transcend the assumptions that imprison our minds?

At times you can hear the clock ticking.

chapter six

FOLLOW ME HOME

The Movie That Makes Magic with Pennies

Falling in love with a movie can happen now and then, but how often does a dazzling film like *Follow Me Home* come along? A film whose aesthetics are marvelously unpredictable and whose politics make the revolution seem possible after all. A film that not only confronts the nightmare of today's dehumanized, racist society but also suggests what is needed to transform it—without denying all the obstacles, including those inside ourselves?

Yet *Follow Me Home*, the first feature film of 34-year-old writer-director Peter Bratt, is a film without a commercial distributor or advertising. In a world where the average Hollywood flick costs \$60 million, this one cost \$300,000. Its sheer existence calls for thanks to a crew that worked for free and donations from the San Francisco Bay Area's community of indigenous people (Bratt's mother is indigenous, from Peru). Once completed, *Follow Me Home* made its way from theaters in the West to the East Coast primarily thanks to enthusiastic word of mouth. As for reviews, too often they were written by white critics who labeled the film "anti-white" or just didn't get it.

The film's basic story line presents four street artists—two Chicanos (Abel and Tudee), one African American (Kaz) and one Native American (Frank)—who set out in a van from San Francisco for Washington, D.C. They plan to paint a mural on the White House, to re-create that symbolic structure with "our colors and our images," "the faces of our ancestors." Along the way, in Nebraska, the artists pick up an African-American woman, Evey, whose car has just collided with that of a white man costumed as an Indian on his way to a local reenactment of U.S. history. He has died in the accident and the ancient tomahawk in his van full of native paraphernalia has vanished. This leads our group to be attacked by the white man's friends, also on their way to the reenactment and costumed as Civil War soldiers.

Call it a "road movie" if you like, but remember that in Gringolandia there are roads and then there are *roads*. The artists' long drive