

Ethnicity in 20th Century American Literature

LETTERATURA ANGLO-AMERICANA III

ANGLO-AMERICAN LITERATURE III

MODULE 2- 15 HOURS

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Primary Sources

- **John Fante:** “The Odyssey of a Wop”
- **Sandra Cisneros:** “Mericans”
- **Amy Tan:** “Two Kinds”
- **Leslie Marmon Silko:** “Lullaby” from *Storyteller*
- **Percival Everett:** “The Appropriation of Cultures”

American Myths

- The American Dream
- The Melting Pot
- 'E Pluribus Unum'
- Hybridization?
- Ethnicity?
- Poliphony ?
- Diversity?

The Declaration of Independence

Action of Second Continental Congress,

July 4, 1776

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created **equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain **unalienable Rights**, that among these are **Life, Liberty**, and the **Pursuit of Happiness.**”

What is **The American Dream?**

James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, 1931

“That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

(Adams, 214-215)

The exclusion of diversity ...

The promises and premises of the American Dream have been challenged/undermined by a series of events in the history of the USA, which seem to suggest the American Dream is mainly part of **white Anglo-Saxon America**:

- The Indian Removal Act **1830**
- The Chinese Exclusion Act **1882**
- Black Codes (**after 1865**, mainly local) and Jim Crow Laws (starting around 1870s/1880s in the South) mandating racial segregation
- KKK (Ku Klux Klan) established in Tennessee in **1865**



Americans All

Of Plymouth Rock and Jamestown and Ellis Island; or,
Ethnic Literature and Some Redefinitions of "America"
by Werner Sollors

- Crèvecoeur (1782)
- Croly: “miscegenation” (1863) ; *Glimpses of the Future, Suggestions as to the Drift of Things* (1888)
- Hamilton Holt: *The Lifestories of Undistinguished Americans: as told by themselves* (1906)

- Henry James (1907)
- Howard Chandler Christy: his poster
“Americans all” (1917)
- The Statue of Liberty: Whittier “The Bartholdi Statue” (1886) v. Emma Lazarus “The New Colossus” : ‘the wretched refuse’ (1888)
- Mary Antin: *The Promised Land* (1912),
equation: Plymouth Rock= Ellis Island



- Old Stock Americans v. New Immigrants
- The EXCLUDED: Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Americans of Japanese descent, Chinese immigrants and African Americans ...
- **African-Americans:** “Plymouth rock landed on us!” (Malcom X)
- DuBois: *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903). American beginnings in Jamestown (but the beginning of slavery as well): the first ship with African slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619
- Melvin B. Tolson: “Rendezvous with America” (1942)

John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813)

Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.

I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones* from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations* are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. (43)

The Myth of the Melting Pot

Heike Paul, *The Myths that made America*

Imagine if you can, my dear friend, a society comprising all the nations of the world: English, French, German. [...] All people having different languages, beliefs, and opinions. In short, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without routines, without common ideas, without national character. [...] **What ties these very diverse elements together? What makes a people of all this?**

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE TO ERNEST DE CHABROL, JUNE 9, 1831

Was it not possible, then, to think of **the evolving American society not simply as a slightly modified England but rather as a totally new blend**, culturally and biologically, in which the stocks and folkways of Europe were, figuratively speaking, indiscriminately mixed in the political pot of the emerging nation and melted together by the fires of American influence and interaction into a distinctly new type?

MILTON GORDON, *ASSIMILATION IN AMERICAN LIFE*

The myth of the Melting Pot resonates with America's motto 'E Pluribus Unum'= Out of Many, One (see the one-dollar bill).

According to Heike, the myth of the Melting Pot revolves around the making of American society. However, it is a **problematic** and **ambiguous** symbol, because it features contradictory elements such as the notion of 'forced acculturation' which has often resulted in the violent assimilation of non-white Americans; in addition, the notion of 'melting' implies the presence of some dominant elements (whiteness?) and the loss of others (specific ethnic backgrounds? Diversity?).



- ***The Melting Pot*** : a play written by Israel Zangwill (1864-1926).
- The play debuted in Washington DC in October 1908. it was a commercial success.
- The play depicted the American experience as an amalgamation of races; it also popularized the expression 'melting pot' as the ultimate representation of the cultural assimilation of immigrants in America .

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, **this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.** One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1997 [1903]: 38)

W.E.B. Du Bois. ***The Souls of Black FolK***, chapter 1* “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”, 1903. previously published as an article “The Strivings of the Negro People in *The Atlantic* in August, 1897

MultiEthnic Americans

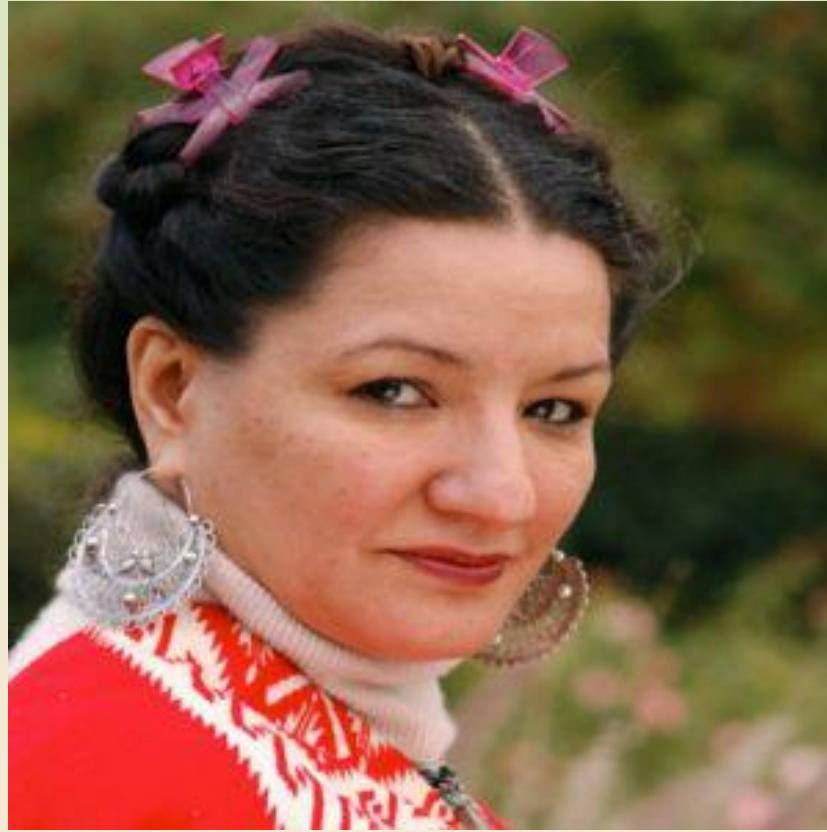
In the last decades, in which American society has been labeled “post-racial” or “post-ethnic” by critics such as David Hollinger – who has also (half-seriously) suggested that American society may be described as a “quintuple melting pot” (*Postethnic America 24*) differentiated into Euro-Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and Indigenous peoples (cf. *ibid.* 23) – more inclusive versions of the melting pot have been articulated that attempt to bridge the divide between blacks and whites (cf. Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies*; Elam, *Souls*). Upon the founding of the Association of *MultiEthnic Americans* (AMEA) in 1988, activist Carlos Fernandez quipped: We who embody the melting pot [...] stand up [...] as intolerant participants against racism from whatever quarter it may come [...]. We are the faces of the future. Against the travails of regressive interethnic division and strife, we can be a solid core of unity bonding peoples together in the common course of human progress. (qtd. in Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies 141*)

Currently, the AMEA is one of the most influential mixed-race organizations.

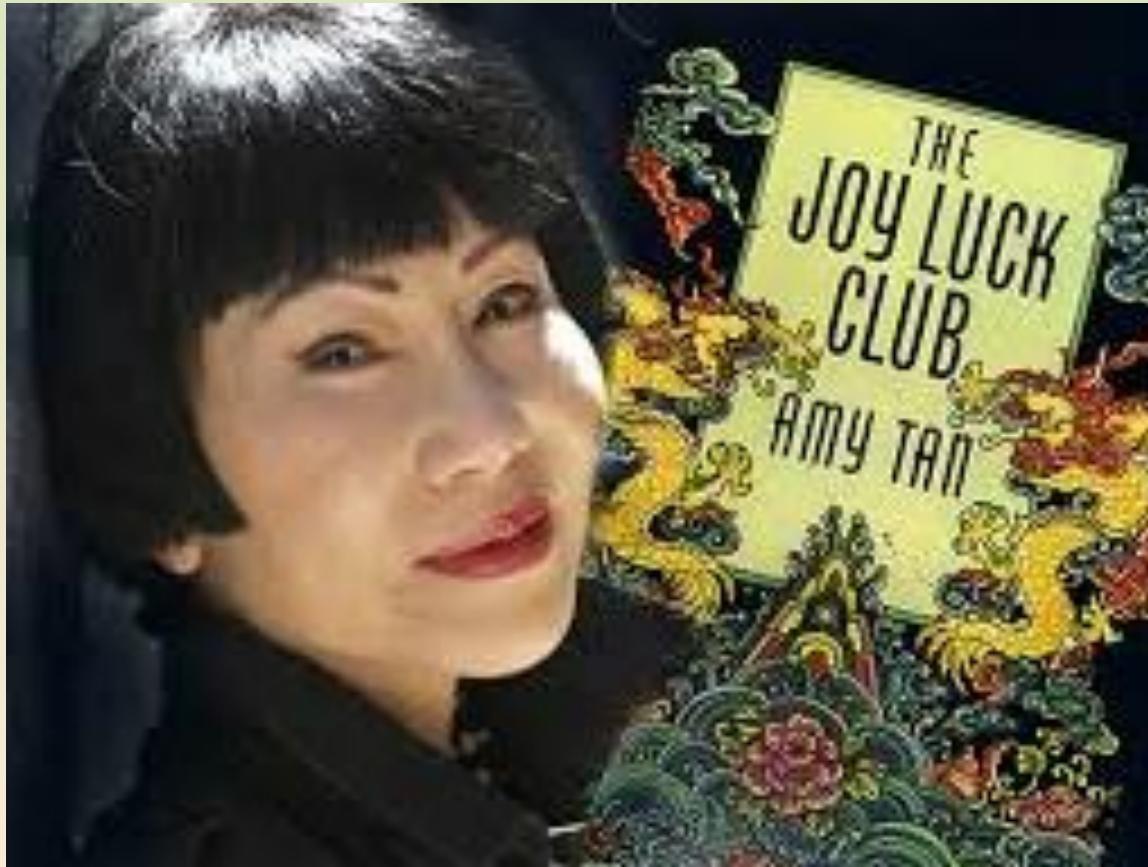
- How do/did the following writers **chronicle/depict/confront** their experiences of the Melting Pot, of the American Dream and the definition of Americaness?
- Their texts explore a variety of themes associated with the **American experience**: the denial/rejection of one's ethnic backgrounds; the values associated with the dominant cultural discourse; the process of hyphenation/hybridization/reinterpretation of private (individual) and public (community) identities.



John Fante (1909-1983)



Sandra Cisneros (b. 1954)



Amy Tan (b.1952)



Leslie Marmon Silko (b. 1948)



Percival Everett (b. 1956)