Introduction

A spirited debate on college campuses in recent years has focused on the content of the undergraduate curriculum. Advocates of reform and defenders of current practice square off on a central question: Should we continue to focus general education requirements around classic works in the Western civilization tradition, or should we broaden that canon to include other cultures and traditions?

This book enters that debate by offering examples of student writing that demonstrate the compelling importance of multicultural identities in students' lives. Written as "Roots" papers for an undergraduate course on American immigration and ethnicity, principally by students in their first two years of college, these essays show that students can make a significant contribution to our understanding of fundamental social processes in American society in the late twentieth century.

The essays and poems in this book were written between 1977 and 1994 by students at two campuses of major state universities, the University of California, San Diego, and the State University of New York at Binghamton. The essays demonstrate that many of these students do not occupy a comfortable place in American society. They are sometimes excruciatingly aware of the cultural boundaries they must cross to succeed in their own cultural setting and in the larger dominant culture to which the university gives them access. At the university in general, and in this course in particular, they have struggled to understand this cultural process and

its discontinuities and to come to terms with its meaning in their own lives and in the larger society.

These essays speak movingly about individual lives, but the fact that all were written by young people attending two state universities in the past twenty years also highlights the role of public higher education in the United States today. Public universities continue to offer immigrants and the children of immigrants the means for personal growth and development and the chance to explore "American" values even while they are in the midst of assessing their own inherited values. These essays reveal how vital this process is to the maintenance of democratic traditions in the United States, for despite their differences these students are all involved in the same fundamental activity: constructing an identity that is both personal and social, private and public. These essays should give pause to those in our society—particularly prominent in the states of California and New York—who are promoting regressive and short-sighted public policies that threaten to dismantle the systems of higher education that offer this opportunity for self-reflection and growth to talented members of less privileged groups.

Although from the start I appreciated the social significance of this student writing, I did not immediately act on this understanding. Over the years I had reproduced some of the papers for use in subsequent classes, and each year I asked a few students to read their papers to the class as a whole. Still, I felt strongly that the essays deserved an audience beyond this specific course; to friends and family I described the struggles these essays revealed and the richness of the perspectives they offered. Finally, others who responded to my enthusiasm about the work convinced me that I should edit a collection of the papers for publication.

As I assembled the collection I was gratified by the enthusiasm with which former students greeted the project. They were eager to see their work reach a broad audience and responded generously to editorial suggestions and requests for family photographs. Together we reached a shared understanding that theirs were more than personal stories, that their essays revealed how extremely diverse students at opposite sides of the country share common struggles in dealing with issues of identity in a multicultural society.

These essays, so expressive of the struggles of recent college students, should prove useful in a number of contexts. Teachers of writing know that students learn most effectively when their writing engages them personally. These essays offer particularly rich examples of engaged, first-person prose and of the value of linking personal experience with broader so-

cial processes. Written primarily by beginning college students, they offer examples of strong writing to their peers in introductory composition courses. Their rich views of multicultural America and contemporary issues of identity are also relevant to college students in introductory courses in sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Finally, these essays should prove useful in the study of ethnic history and ethnicity in American society today. Through these essays students can move from theoretical concepts to everyday realities and observe how broad social processes work themselves out in daily lives.

Revising U.S. Immigration History

During the years that I have taught about immigration and ethnicity in the United States, these essays have become increasingly diverse in tandem with the readings I have assigned to students. When I began teaching this course in January 1977, American immigration was treated by historians as an almost exclusively European phenomenon. The available historical writings were commonly organized in terms of "first" and "second" waves of immigration, a conceptualization of the field that assumes the overwhelming importance of European immigration. There were scattered writings about Chinese and Japanese immigration, but they were more focused on dominant, white attitudes toward Asians than on the actual experiences of Asian immigrants themselves. The years since I began teaching this course have seen both a dramatic growth in contemporary immigration and a reconceptualization of immigration as a worldwide, rather than simply a ,European, phenomenon. There is now an extensive bibliography that permits one to integrate Asian and Latin American immigration into the course. It has truly become a multicultural course over the past two decades.[1]

The shifting conceptualization of U.S. immigration history provides a framework for viewing the personal and familial accounts offered in this volume. Before 1970 U.S. immigration was typically examined in isolation, viewed as a unique phenomenon in world history. Immigrants whose experiences were studied were almost entirely of European origins, and the focus was commonly on the process of assimilation once the immigrant landed on American shores. This focus, narrow as it was, was nonetheless understandable given the legal framework within which U.S. immigration occurred between 1924 and 1965. Immigration declined drastically after the passage of the Johnson-Reid Act in 1924, and the national origins

quota system established by that legislation ensured that immigrants of European backgrounds would predominate among those granted admission thereafter. Within this new context it is not surprising that scholars focused their interpretive powers on the process of cultural assimilation that took on increased significance as immigration slowed.

The reopening of the gates to increased immigration with the repeal of national origins quotas in 1965 dramatically changed both the actuality of U.S. immigration and the way scholars conceptualized the phenomenon. Virginia Yans McLaughlin edited a collection of essays, *Immigration Reconsidered*, in which she summarized the ways that recent scholarship challenged the earlier "accepted wisdom." Three developments seemed particularly crucial from her vantage point: "the international ecology of migration; a questioning of the classical assimilation model. . . and . . . a denial of American exceptionalism."[2] She highlighted a new willingness to place American immigration within the worldwide movements of people that have accompanied the internationalization of industrial capitalism over the past two centuries. These movements have included internal migration within nations, migration within Europe and Asia, migration across the Pacific as well as the Atlantic, migration to Latin America and Australasia as well as to North America, and finally, return migration to emigrants' countries of origin.

American immigration remains an important element in this more broadly conceived phenomenon, but it is now viewed on a wider canvas and no longer appears unique. Within this new conceptual framework, the phenomenon of immigrant assimilation becomes only one among a great variety of cultural responses to the challenges posed by the economic and social changes entailed in migration.[3] Although my teaching typically focused more on the immigration experience than on historical interpretations of the phenomenon, student explorations of their own ethnicity reinforced the broadening of perspective evident in the writings of professional historians.

The shifting vantage point of the course no doubt reflected the changing nature of U.S. immigration and of writings about immigration in this period, but I also responded to the growing diversity of my students, a phenomenon evident at both universities at which I taught. When I began teaching at the University of California, San Diego, about 15 percent of entering first-year students were black, Hispanic, or Asian American. By 1994 minority students comprised almost 30 percent of entering full-time students at the State University of New York at Binghamton.[4]

Memory, History, and Identity

The ethnic makeup of the students I have taught has evolved since I began teaching this course, but my approach to the "Roots" paper assignment has been consistent: I provided students with relatively flexible guidelines; I encouraged them to interview parents, grandparents, or other relatives and think about the changing meaning of ethnicity in their family; I asked them to reflect on the significance of ethnicity in their own lives and consider its meaning within the historical experience of their family. The assignment required them to think about their family within the broader context of immigration and ethnicity in the nation's history.[5] Lastly, I offered them the opportunity to deposit their papers in special collections in university archives for use by students and scholars.

These essays are typically the products of bright, beginning college students—predominantly students in their first two years of college who had come directly from high school. There were older, returning students and advanced undergraduates sprinkled through the class, but not many. Few had previously given much thought to the meaning of ethnicity in their lives, though those students who were .Mrican American, Hispanic, or Asian American were more conscious of their ethnicity than were those of white European descent.

These essays draw primarily on personal, familial sources and only occasionally on related scholarship. Not all the comparisons and contrasts drawn would withstand careful scrutiny; even the facts noted in placing a family's experience within a broader context are not always accurate. The writing, moving in many cases, can also be awkward at times. In editing these essays for publication, I have offered suggestions but have tried not to homogenize the writing or mume the distinct "voices" that emerged. I sought to help the students communicate their ideas and experiences rather than produce polished prose. In all cases, students have had an opportunity to respond to editorial suggestions, have offered their own revisions, and have approved the publication of their essays.

As editor, I have generally accepted their revisions, except for cases in which the rewriting would have materially changed the original paper. It seemed important to preserve the integrity of the papers' content even when the older graduates today might be able to write more sophisticated or polished papers. These student "Roots" papers are rich examples of exercises in historical memory and the construction of identity rather than historical writing per se. Students brought to the assignment ideas and ex-

pectations that came from their own experiences. They commonly interviewed older family members who themselves offered another set of filters for the family's historical experience. We will probably never know if the stories they tell about themselves and their families are "true"—whether an exhaustive attempt to find corroborating contemporary evidence would bear out the versions of events presented here. Still, these stories have a meaning, a truth, to the students who wrote them. They have distilled from the stories they were told and from their own experiences the particular meanings these events had for them at the time they wrote these papers. As such, they provide rich source material for anyone interested in the meaning of ethnicity among college students in the past two decades.[6]

I began working on this collection by reading many of the student papers deposited in the libraries of the University of California, San Diego, and the State University of New York at Binghamton. I selected fifty or sixty essays from each university for further consideration. The numbers were purposely larger than I could include in this volume to allow for attrition as I contacted student authors and to permit me to make final selections in a way that took into account the themes of the essays and identities of their authors. Then I tried to reach all the student authors and secure their permission to consider the essays for publication. Ultimately, I succeeded in reaching about sixty students, and it was from their work that I selected the essays published here. Given the time that had elapsed since I had taught in San Diego, I had more success in reaching former Binghamton students, a fact that accounts in part for the relative balance of the essays published here.

As I read over the essays and thought about which to include in the collection, they seemed to fall into three groupings. The largest group consisted of third-person accounts of the immigration or migration experiences of grandparents or more distant relatives. Students typically based these essays on interviews with their parents or other family members and reconstructed the experiences of one or two sets of grandparents. They also often addressed the changing significance of ethnicity with the passage of time between their grandparents' generation and their own. They viewed their attitudes toward their own ethnic identity as very much the product of a historical process that involved their grandparents, their parents, and themselves.

For the authors of the two remaining groups of essays the impact of immigration was more direct. One group of essays focused on the students' immigrant parents and the impact of their parents' ethnicity on their own lives. For these students, generational conflict lay at the center of their sto-

ries. Their lives revolved around the different experiences that they and their parents had in the United States and the conflict between the expectations of their parents and the pressure of their peers. The final set of essays are first-person accounts exploring issues of race and ethnicity in the lives of student authors who are themselves immigrants. Intergenerational conflicts are less pronounced for these students. Their concerns focus instead on issues of multiple and conflicting identities, and several students describe how they have vacillated between extremes at different points in their lives—at times identifying themselves as Americans, at other times as Mexican or Indian or whatever their particular nativity. The shifts in cultural identity that occurred across two, three, or four generations in the other essays are compressed within a single lifetime, often within a single decade, in these final accounts.

Most of the essays in this collection address the experiences of immigrants or the children and grandchildren of immigrants, and the accounts written by African Americans speak to many of the same issues. It is particularly striking in reading through the essays how often students of quite different racial and ethnic groups describe basically parallel cultural experiences. LaToya Powell begins her account on precisely this point: "Although generations before me did not come to the United States from a different country, we as African Americans have endured our own form of immigration." She goes on to describe the different ways that she and her migrant grandfather relate to dominant white culture in terms that reveal generational differences strikingly parallel to those for European-born immigrant grandparents and their U.S.-born grandchildren.

The essays offer countless examples of the shared cultural experiences of students from very different ethnic backgrounds. Thus students of Finnish (Tanya Mlodzinski), Korean (Sang-Hoon Kim), and Mexican (Jaime Dominguez) descent can each describe periods in their lives when they identified strongly as "Americans" and resented their parents' ethnic identification. All came over time to appreciate their ethnic background and to overcome an earlier need to distance themselves from those ethnic roots.

Similarly, students from different backgrounds can describe themselves as having multiple identities and see themselves as synthesizing the best features of several cultures. Shana Rivas sees Puerto Rican and African American culture as equally important in her identity; Melissa Algranati embraces her Egyptian Sephardic Jewish and Puerto Rican Catholic traditions; and Puwat Charukamnoetkanok acknowledges his triple identity, as Chinese, Thai, and American. For those of us who teach, our classes are

multicultural not just because our students come from diverse backgrounds. As individuals many students themselves are multicultural because their families are blended by parentage across racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. This hybridity of our students has implications for our teaching. It is important for students to understand the varied experiences and cultures of different groups not simply to learn to respect and accommodate others, but also to understand themselves—and to understand the varied cultures that have contributed to their own identities.

These student essays show that the forging of a new national identity—a theme so much a part of the history of the United States—continues in the present. The French-born immigrant J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur posed the question in 1782, and Americans continue to answer it more than two hundred years later: "What then is the American, this new man?"[7] Although we rephrase this question in more gender-neutral terms today, Crèvecoeur's version and ours address the cultural consequences of the multi-ethnic nature of American society. The essays in this volume help us understand the construction of American identity in the late twentieth century, in fact, along much broader racial, ethnic, and national lines than in Crèvecoeur's lifetime. By entering into these accounts, we gain insights into the nature of American society today and into ourselves. Multiculturalism in the classroom and in American society throws new and useful light on longstanding and important questions. We come away from the encounter with understandings at once new and yet steeped in tradition.

Notes

1. This contrast emerges quite starkly in a comparison of the documentary collection I used when I first taught the course, Stanley Feldstein and Lawrence Costello, eds., *The Ordeal of Assimilation: A Documentary History of the White Working Class* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974) and the overview text I first used in 1995, Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).

Two useful works that draw on this new bibliography are Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) and Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

2. Virginia Yans McLaughlin, ed., *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

3. For a similar discussion of the transformation of the study of European emigration in this same period, see the introduction to Rudolph J. Vecoli and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *A Century of European Migrations, 1830-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

4. My thanks to Mae Brown at Thurgood Marshall College at the University of California, San Diego, and Geoffrey Gould, director of admissions, State University of New York at Binghamton, for the statistics offered here.

5. See the Appendix for a sample of the assignment to which students were responding in writing their papers.

6. For an excellent group of articles addressing the issues of historical memory and the construction of identity, see "Memory and American History;" a special issue of *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989). See also Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays in the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Ronald J. Grele, ed., *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History,* 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1991). In reflecting on these essays, I am aware of how much the perspectives I offered in course lectures and the questions I posed in the assignment helped shape student thinking about their own ethnic roots. As Frisch has emphasized in his explorations of oral history, my students and I have a "shared authority" in the portrait of contemporary ethnicity that emerges in this volume.

For a similar point about oral history evidence, see Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Avon, 1971), 17.

7. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (1782; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1981), 70, as quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America,* (Knoxville, Tenn.: Whittle Direct Books, 1991), 1. I have quoted Crèvecoeur and addressed related themes in a more strictly historical context in the introduction to *Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America,* 1773-1986 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).