Introduction

Picture to yourself... a society which comprises all the nations of the world—English, French, German; people differing from one another in language, in beliefs, in opinions; in a word, a society possessing no roots, no memories, no prejudices, no routine, no common ideas, no national character, yet with a happiness a hundred times greater than our own... What is the connecting link between these so different elements? How are they welded into one people?

—Alexis de Tocqueville

Being an American is not something to be inherited so much as something to be achieved.

—Perry Miller

In an early essay of the genre, "What is American about America?" the Boston Brahmin and Harvard English professor Barrett Wendell tried to explore the nature of the "national character of America." One of the central texts he chose (after arguing that the first Puritan settlers were already "American") was an excerpt from a reply, probably written by John Cotton, to an inquiry by Lord Say, Lord Brooke, and "other Persons of quality." The English noblemen had asked, according to Wendell, "whether, in case they should emigrate to New England with their families, their descendants could be assured of the sort of distinction which persons of quality would enjoy in the mother country" (Liberty 28). Here is the official reply, which Wendell considered "characteristically American."

Hereditary honors both nature and scripture doth acknowledge (Eccles. 2:17) but hereditary authority and power standeth only by the civil laws of some commonwealths, and yet, even amongst them, the authority and power of the father is no where communi
cated, together with his honors, unto all his posterity. Where God blesseth any branch of any noble or generous family, with a spirit and gifts fit for government, it would be a taking of God's name in vain to put such a talent under a bushel, and a sin against the honor of magistracy to neglect such in our public elections. But if God
should not delight to furnish some of their posterity with gifts fit for
magistracy, we should expose them rather to reproach and prejudice,
and the commonwealth with them, than exalt them to honor, if we
should call them forth, when God doth not, to public authority.
(Hutchinson, History 412)

One could probably assemble a whole bookshelf full of answers to
similar requests by European noblemen and dignitaries, but I shall
be content here with one more—very prominent—reply to another
such inquiry. It is a letter dated June 4, 1819, in which John Quincy
Adams answered Mr. Morris de Furnenwaerther's question whether
German emigrants might expect, as an incentive, special favors or
privileges in America. In his reply, Adams reminded German emi-
grants that they
come to a life of independence, but to a life of labor—and, if they
cannot accommodate themselves to the character, moral, political,
and physical of this country, with all its compensating balances of
good and evil, the Atlantic is always open to them to return to the
land of their nativity and their fathers. To one thing they must make
up their minds, or they will be disappointed in every expectation of
happiness as Americans. They must cast off the European skin, never
to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than
backward to their ancestors, they must be sure that whatever their
own feelings may be, those of their children will cling to the preser-
dices of this country... (Ruchin, Immigration 47; see Hansen, Atlantic
96)

These two passages, both consciously written or quoted to invoke
the "character... of this country," may seem to be of little imme-
diate interest to readers concerned with American ethnicity, yet they
are of central importance to the way ethnicity is symbolized in the
United States. When Wendell discussed the excerpt, he pointed out that Cotton
"knew all the while, as everybody knows, that the grace of God is not
apt to descend hereditarily in prolonged family lines" (Liberty 69).
Wendell saw at the core of "the American national character" a
denial of legitimacy and privilege based exclusively on descent. The
excerpt from Adams, which was included in a recent reader on immi-
gration, expresses the classic American idea of the newcomers' rebirth into a forward-looking culture of consent. Cotton and
Adams accepted the importance of descent, yet both also rejected it
as an exclusive category in structuring a commonwealth. This tension
between the rejection of hereditary old-world hierarchies (embodied
by the European nobility) and the vision of a new people of diverse
nativities united in the fair pursuit of happiness marks the course
that American ideology has steered between descent and consent. It
is this conflict which is at the root of the ambiguity surrounding the
very terminology of American ethnic interaction.

Amused by the imaginative ways in which American historians
have avoided using terms such as "imperialism," Robin Winks spoke
of "semantic safety-valves" to which scholars resort (Kroes 145). The
world of American group interaction is discussed with a whole arse-
nal of such safety-valves, terms which are both ambiguous and elu-
sive. Trying to grasp one concept, we are led to another; and as we
are focusing on that, to yet another one. The feeling is reminiscent
of grabbing a balloon filled with water: as our grip tightens, the
substance escapes. Terms like "ethnicity," "melting pot," "intermar-
riage," "regionalism," and "generation" are all used in a dazzling vari-
ety of elusive ways. They squish this way and that depending or
how hard we squeeze the balloon.

The historian Frederick Jackson Turner's work is representative
for many, as it provides us with numerous instances of heavily
charged terms which are loosely arranged around his central meta-
phor of the frontier and offered as answers. In his famous collection
The Frontier in American History (1920), one can read such resonant
sentences as the following:

In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized,
liberated, and fused into a mixed race. English in neither nationality
nor characteristics. (23)

The middle region [between New England and South]... had a wide
mixture of nationalities; a varied society, the mixed town and county
system of local government, a varied economic life, many religious
sects. In short, it was a region mediating between New England and
the South and the East and the West. It represented that composite
nationality which the contemporary United States exhibits, that jux-
aposition of non-English groups occupying a valley or a little settle-
ment, and presenting reflections of the map of Europe in their vari-
ety. It was democratic and nonsectarian if not national; "easy,
tolerant, and contented," rooted strongly in material prosperity. It
was typical of the modern United States. (27-28)

In such instances the idea of an American crucible, the mental map
of the mediating region, and the distinction between "regional" and
"sectors" are not explanatory categories but only vague metaphors.
In order to avoid such semantic safety valves, I am here trying to
approach some of the most heavily charged terms head-on. In doing
so, I rely on, and develop, a less overused terminology which takes
the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ances-
tral, definitions of American identity—between consent and descent—as the central drama in American culture. Consent and descent are terms which allow me to approach and question the whole maze of American ethnicity and culture. They are relatively neutral though by no means natural terms. Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of “substance” (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of “law” or “marriage.” Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and “architects of our fate” to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems. As Wendell accurately perceived, an attack on the system of hereditary privilege has American overtones; and modern, democratic political and family relations are described in terms of the consent of the governed, the age of consent, or consenting adults. We could rephrase Tocqueville’s question and ask: How can consent (and consensus) be achieved in a country whose citizens are of such heterogeneous descent? And how can dissent be articulated without falling back on myths of descent?

Focusing on the tensions between consent and descent relations permits us to look at American culture anew, including even its familiar and ambiguous semantic safety valves. This enables us to make some new connections between Puritan typology and immigration, regeneration sermons and debates about the melting pot, or wedding imagery in church membership and American citizenship. Most striking in a great variety of American texts are the persistent attempts to construct a sense of natural family cohesion in the new world, especially with the help of naturalizing codes and concepts such as “love” and “generations.” The conflicts between descent and consent in American literature thus can tell us much about the creation of an American culture out of diverse pre-American pasts.

The literature customarily filed under labels such as immigration, race, regionalism, and ethnicity provides a unique testing ground for exceptionalist interpretations of America. If North American literature and culture are, indeed, dramatically different from European and other old- and new-world counterparts, then we can investigate the Americaness of American art in different ways. We may, as Barrett Wendell, Perry Miller, Ursula Brunnm, and Savel Bercovitch have done, date the origins of a characteristically American sense of selfhood to the transformation of old-world into new-world traits that took place in Puritan New England; we may also, as Quentin Anderson and Richard Potier have done, ascribe to Emersonian transcendentalism the crucial role of shaping a typically American, all-absorbing self; or we may think of other historical moments such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, or World War I as having given birth to a uniquely American cultural idiom. But whenever we were descended from diverse backgrounds but were, or consented to become, Americans. This way we may learn something about how Americanness in achieved, at the point of its emergence, and how it is established again and again as newcomers and outsiders are socialized into the culture—a process which inevitably seems to revitalize the culture at the same time. Works of ethnic literature—written by/about, or for persons who perceived themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups—may thus be read not only as expressions of mediation between cultures but also as handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americaness.

A cartoon published in the New Yorker in 1956 showed an exotic chiefman addressing a group of young males from his tribe with the words “Young men, you’ve now reached the age when it is essential that you know the rites and rituals, the customs and taboos of our island. Rather than go into them at detail, however, I’m simply going to present each of you with a copy of this excellent book by Margaret Mead.” This cartoon functions in a revealingly double-edged way. Of course, we all know that this is not the way “Coming of Age” works in Samoa. But at the same time, books published in America do reveal some of the socializing rituals that initiate newcomers into an American identity. From Crévecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer (1782) to Ratliff’s Giants in the Earth (1927), ethnic literature has provided Americans with a grammar of new world imagery and conduct. These writings have complemented popular culture in providing newcomers, outsiders, and insiders with the often complicated mental constructions of American codes. At times these codes may be contentless and merely contrastive definitions against an old world. With the help of such procedures America appears as the “un-Europe” characterized by negative catalogs as the land without kings, bishops, or medieval castles. Among more specifically defined codes are suggestive images of exodus and deliverance, newness and rebirth, melting pot and romantic love, epics against establishment figures and lost generations—all of which, most important, contribute to the construction of new forms of symbolic kinship among people who are not blood relatives. Ethnic literature may thus be read as part of that body of cultural products which tells American initiates and neophytes about, and reminds elders of, “the rites and
rituals, the customs and taboos of this country," rituals many of which were first developed by English immigrants of the seventeenth century. In this sense, ethnic literature provides us with the central codes of Americanism.

Though it is often regarded as a very minor adjunct to great American mainstream writing, ethnic literature is, as several readers pointed out in the past, prototypically American literature. In The Cultural Approach to History (1940), Caroline Ware argued for a broad ethnic interpretation of America: "Immigrants and the children of immigrants are the American people. Their culture is American culture, not merely a contributory to American culture" (87). In his famous introduction to The Uprooted (1951), Oscar Handlin echoed: "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history" (3).

John F. Kennedy's A Nation of Immigrants (1964) popularized this way of looking at America as immigration. As did Frederick Jackson Turner, Ware, Handlin, and Kennedy placed a great rhetorical emphasis on migration. Following this emphasis one is sometimes persuaded to view slaves euphemistically as newcomers among others and to ignore Indians or to reinterpret them as "America's earliest immigrants." Yet despite such crucial shortcomings, the gist of these pronouncements is right; and it is well worth it to interpret America not narrowly as immigration but more broadly as ethnic diversity and include the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the continent, the kidnapped Africans and their descendants, and the Chicanos of the Southwest—though they, too, are not classic immigrants. As the Bureau of the Census pamphlet "We, the Mexican Americans" put it: "The United States Came to Us" (Simmen 46).

It has perhaps become obvious already that in order to answer Tocqueville's question with the help of literature, I use the term "literature" in a broad sense—to include New Yorker cartoons and works of history. In the course of the argument, I shall refer to some nationally and some internationally recognized American writers (the two are not always identical) as well as to phonograph records, movies, comics, songs, paintings and illustrations, essays, plays, sermons, poems, and many B novels. My selection of texts is thus a very broad one, ranging from Cotton Mather to Young Frankenstein, from Crèvecoeur to James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, from "The Son of Alkonmook" to Horace Kallen's Culture and Democracy in the United States, and from John Brougham's burlesques to Liquid Sky. Rather than adhere to any canonization—be it main-
culture. These formations are palpable in imaginative literature of the most diverse ethnic provenance as well as in nonfiction, including academic discussions of the field. When Horace Kallen wrote that we cannot change our grandfathers, he was telling a story—even though he was telling it in the form of nonfiction. I shall pay special attention to such stories, written by writers or scholars, by ministers or essayists, in order to lay bare the lens through which fictional literature, historiography, and social sciences perceive consent and descent.

Perhaps the most popular literary text discussed by social scientists is Israel Zangwill’s The Melting-Pot (1909), a play which has rarely been read as literature. And yet, as we shall see in the melting-pot chapter, the social critics who take this play as the point of departure for an attack on the social concept which it supposedly embodies often go on to paraphrase the play’s contagious rhetoric in their own predictions. One yearns for better ways in which literary and historical-sociological methodologies might be combined in order to illuminate the conflict between consent and descent as it operates in American culture.

I shall here try to draw on more recent conceptualizations of kinship and ethnicity, most especially those by Fredrik Barth, Albrecht Cohen, George Devereux, Herbert Gans, Ulff Hannerz, Orlando Patterson, David Schneider, and others, and look at the ways in which symbolic ethnicity and a sense of natural kinship that weld Americans into one people were created. For this purpose I shall take the liberty of reading all texts as if they were literature. This procedure allows me to look at Handlin’s Upward as “the epic story of the great migrations that made the American people” (the book’s subtitle) in the tradition of Cotton Mather’s Vergilian format in the Magnalia Christi Americana (1702). Similarly, this approach might permit us to place Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s Beyond the Melting Pot or Michael Novak’s Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnicity in the tradition of community-building, both community-building, American sermon: these and many other books could be profitably interpreted in the framework of Svetlana Berlovitch’s study The American Jeremiahd as they move from social critique to prophecy and promise.

When we turn to literary criticism devoted to ethnic literature, we encounter a different weakness. Sociologists may often overestimate and even extol literature (in the narrow sense of belles lettres) as supreme evidence while underestimating their own reliance on literary devices and story-telling techniques. Literary criticism, on the other hand, tend to be either uninterested in anything but the lead-

ing American writers or unaware of the newer thinking on ethnicity. Although in 1972 the annual bibliography American Literary Scholarship called for a moratorium on further publications about, for example, William Faulkner’s overinterpreted story “A Rose for Emily” (114), the publication machinery continues to churn out the most intensely interpreted texts again and again (see American Literary Scholarship 1976, 137; 1979, 154). The selection of mainstream texts sometimes reveals the critics’ anxiety about the value of American literature vis-à-vis British literature. American critics who do turn to other texts, studied under such romantic categories as “forgotten voices,” “the outnumbered,” and “the proud people,” may feel so brave for simply touching these works and questions that they are sometimes contented to document them bibliographically or to “celebrate” their mere existence. With some important exceptions, scholarship of American ethnic writing has shown comparatively little theoretical interest in American-made ethnicity. Literary critics easily succumb to the danger of resorting to an implicit “good vibes” methodology (which approaches ethnic literature with well-intentioned optimism, though sometimes with moral indignation as its underti

ning), grounding close readings of texts on static notions of descent and on primordial, organicist, sometimes even biological—but in all cases largely unquestioned—concepts of ethnic-group membership.

Literary critics have seldom fully appreciated their texts in the context of newer theories of ethnicity. Instead of understanding their texts as codes for a socialization into ethnic groups and into America, readers have overemphasized and exaggerated the (frequently exoticized) ethnic particularity of the works—even if they were published in English by major American publishing houses. The literature is often read and evaluated against an elusive concept of authenticity, and the question of who is entitled to interpret the literature is given undue emphasis. The belief is widespread among critics who stress descent at the expense of consciences that only biological insiders can understand and explicate the literature of race and ethnicity. Published by Grove Press in 1965, The Autobiography of Malcolm X may appear to be a very American book to an innocent reader from abroad, who might be impressed by the classic account of a powerfully modern Augustinian conversion experience; yet Richard Bigsby, among others, has pointed out that the American readers could not possibly understand or review this American book and suggested a general moratorium on white critics reviewing black writers (Bigsby 36-49).
Illustrating the influence black literary debates of the 1960s exerted on ethnicities of the 1970s, this belief in ethnic exclusivity has proliferated into the various ethnic provinces of America, where it has been rephrased in different ethnic guises. At a professional panel in 1976, for example, a specialist in ethnic literature proclaimed:

Even though I am hurt that Mario Puzo had to write a novel as potentially defaming to Italian Americans as The Godfather, I admit that every page of it touches me in a way that Tom Sawyer could never do. . . For me, The Godfather is not ethnic literature. It is simply literature—but remember who is saying this. I am, myself, an ethnic and, even more specifically, an ethnic of the group that Puzo is writing about. . . The novel is no more ethnic than the food I eat at home. As far as I am concerned, the Thanksgiving turkey with its cranberry sauce is ethnic and baked lasagna is not.

This attitude is quite common in ethnic studies today. It is based on the assumption that experience is first and foremost ethnic. Critics should practice cultural relativism and stick to their own turfs (based, of course, on descent), since an unbridgeable gulf separates Americans of different ethnic backgrounds and most especially all white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (acronymically known as WASPs) from all non-WASPs. As evidence for his own entitlement, this same lecturer also used the sentence “she called herself Kay Adams” from the novel which he—ethnic insider that he is—knew was a “word-for-word translation . . . of the Italian chiaroscuro which means not ‘to call oneself’ but simply ‘to be named’.” And he concluded in his speech, which the ethnic journal MELUS considered worth reprinting in its spring 1977 issue: “I can only conjecture how readers not familiar with this Italian expression are interpreting the passage. Perhaps they find in it some doubt that the girl’s name is really Kay Adams” (2-4).

When the lecture was delivered at the Hilton Hotel in New York City, a professor from Italy pointed out that he thought of The Godfather as a very American book, closer to Mark Twain than the lecturer believed. (And this was still before Puzo wrote the screenplay for the ultimate immigrant saga, Superman—The Movie.) One could also say to the Italian-American Godfather critic that recipes for lasagna are as generally available in American cookbooks as are those for turkey, that many languages (among them French and Russian) know the reflexive “calling oneself” in the sense of “being named”; or that, by the lecturer’s own logic, one might assume that Italian-Americans might have difficulties understanding the first sentence of Melville’s Moby-Dick. One could furthermore indicate that the professor’s rhetoric was more deeply influenced by black-white interaction in the 1960s than by any Italian tradition, and that he himself drew freely on Alex Haley’s Roots without perceiving an analogous problem there. . . But all these objections would not go to the heart of the matter.

The heart of the matter is that in the present climate consent-conscious Americans are willing to perceive ethnic distinctions—differentials which they seemingly base exclusively on descent, no matter how far removed and how artificially selected and constructed—as powerful and as crucial; and that writers and critics pander to that expectation. “You will never understand me. Don’t you understand” is the gesture with which cultural interaction seems to function; and even the smallest symbols of ethnic differentiation (“she called herself Kay Adams”) are exaggerated out of proportion to represent major cultural differences, differences that are believed to defy comparison or scrutiny. “Call me Ishmael” is ethnic for Godfather-Americans, bastards but a French surname doesn’t make me an expert on Beaujoilais and critics should not give in to such demands for biological insiderism. Taken to its radical conclusion, such a position really assumes that there is no shared history and no human empathy, that you have your history and I have mine—in which case it becomes quite pointless to give lectures on ethnic literature. Agnes Heller recently reminded anthropologists that “no culture is absolutely hermetically sealed to all others” (272). This is, of course, even more true of the intricately interrelated ethnic and regional cultures in the United States. In the American Scholar (1976) Quentin Anderson described the self-authenticated values of American individuals who are, “socially speaking, reduced to units—w ith festivities” on their heads (417); the relativist position of ethnic insiderism uses ethnicity similarly to aggangeize and to wrap a cloak of legitimacy and authenticity around the speaker who invokes it.

Ironicaliy, the very popularity of defiant ethnic revivalism and exclusivism in the United States suggesta widespread backdrop of assimilation against which it takes place (Higham 198; HAEAG 50, 150). The process works only in a context where values, assumptions, and rhetoric are shared. You do not approach an enemy army pointing out that they have no understanding of the subtle way in which you use a reflexive verb. In an article in Center Magazine (July/August 1974), Nathan Huggins observed: “Despite what one may suspect, an Afro-American and the grandchild of a Polish immigrant will be able to take more for granted between themselves than the former could
with a Nigerian or the latter with a Warsaw worker" (56). It is, ironically, because Americans take so much for granted among themselves that they can dramatize their differences comfortably. Ethnicity is thus constantly being invented anew in contemporary America.

The dominant assumption among serious scholars who study ethnic literary history is that such history can best be written by separating the groups that produced literature in the United States. The published results of this procedure are the readers and compendiums made up of random essays on groups of ethnic writers who have little in common except so-called ethnic roots; meanwhile, obvious and important literary and cultural connections are obfuscated. The contours of an ethnic literary history are beginning to emerge which views writers primarily, if not exclusively, as members of various ethnic and gender groups. How an Italian-American academic picks up an Afro-American militant gesture from the 1960s and uses it for his own ends is not subjected to scrutiny. Instead, in the context of ethnic literary history, F. Scott Fitzgerald, whom Malcolm Cowley once described as an Irishman in disguise (Situation 153), drifts away from Ernest Hemingway (Anglo-American) and Gertrude Stein (Jewish-American, women’s literature) and moves closer to his fellow Irishman Finley Peter Dunne—with whom, of course, he has otherwise little in common. A student interested in American poetry of the 1950s may find the following directions in ethnic literary bibliographies:

Allen Ginsberg—see Jewish-American literature
Jack Kerouac—see Franco-American literature, French-Canadian literature
Frank O’Hara—see Irish-American literature, gay writers
LeRoi Jones—see Afro-American literature
Diane DiPrima—see Italian-American literature, women’s literature.

Taken exclusively, what is often called the ethnic perspective—the total emphasis on a writer’s descent—all but annihilates art movements such as the Beat Generation or New York poetry and can do little with a magazine of the late 1950s which contains all of these writers side by side.

I would like to take the Beat Generation of this example (as it was recently studied by Nathan Austern), or the Lost Generation of the previous one, as a model for American literature as a whole. If anything, ethnic literary history ought to increase our understanding of the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different backgrounds, the cultural mergers and secessions that took place in America, all of which can be accomplished only if the categorization of writers as members of ethnic groups is understood to be a very partial, temporal, and insufficient characterization at best. If we want to apply temporal ethnic distinctions to a fuller interpretation of American culture (which a study of the Beat Generation that totally ignored descent and overemphasized consent would also miss), we have to develop a terminology that goes beyond the organic imagery of roots and can come to terms with the pervasiveness and inventiveness of syncretism. Seen this way, the very assertion of the ethnic dimensions of American culture can be understood as part of the rites and rituals of this land, as an expression of a persistent conflict between consent and descent in America. Whether they know it or not, writers and literary historians participate in the delineation of this conflict. And the rhetoric in which this conflict is experienced and expressed may well be the “connecting link” that Tocqueville was looking for: the symbolic construction of American kinship has helped to weld Americans of diverse origins into one people, even if the code at times requires the exaggeration of differences.

In an article entitled “Symbolic Representation and the Urban Milieu” (1957–58), Richard Wohl and Anselm Strauss argued that “the complexity of the city calls for verbal management” (523), for symbolic representation ranging from the bird’s eye view to the personification, from “hymns of revulsion” to “paens of praise or devotion” (529). These symbolic representations provide a sense of order and organization—even when they are highly unflattering. Their observation is equally applicable to ethnicity and ethnic groups which exist as abstract, complex, unfathomable units in constant need of symbolic representation.

I shall attempt to describe these symbolizations, and I shall act as if I lived in a universe in which anything can be compared and in which disciplinary boundaries are a challenge—never insurmountable walls—to readers. I shall furthermore assume that historical forces operate across the board, even though they may appear in particular ethnic emanations, creating such phenomena of trans-ethnic importance as the Beat Generation.

A good illustration of literature as such a cultural code is provided by the carefully detailed ethnic rooms which appear in American writing as obvious maps for characters and readers. A good example from the mid-nineteenth century appears in Emil Klauber’s novel Cincinnati oder, Geheimnisse des Westens (1853–54)—which is, incidentally, also full of hymns of revulsion toward the Queen City of the
In this American hotel, where customers discuss the same political topics as guests in other hotels, difference is symbolically constructed by the images which convey a special sense of peoplehood to frequenters of the Hotel Dumas, the very name of which is taken from the feuding French novelist Alexander Dumas, whom the colored population recognizes with pride as a racial comrade; this often reminds them bitterly that in this land of human rights even the marquis of the Western romance shops would be generally despised on account of his skin color and his woolly hair. (249-50)

Although the colored Cincinnatians could hardly forget their identity, the hotel surrounded them with community-building imagery. What was programmatically absent, however, was a national symbol, an absence that is in itself a symbolic statement.

Immigrants of the twentieth century often imagined symbolic objects and surroundings that would represent the conflicting realms of new country and old. In Sommerday (1931), for example, the Danish-American minister Adam Dan pictured the Danish and the American flags on the Fourth of July:

Danish cross, and stars and stripes, both beloved the same, remind us where we built our home and from whence we came. (Skårdal 295)

An ethnic flag is similarly combined with the American colors in many ethnic group photographs of the World War I era and, in a rather elaborate surrounding, in Michael Gold’s We Are Not Money (1930): “At the end of the room,” Moscowite’s wine cellar on Rivington Street,

under a big American flag, hung a chrome showing Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill. At the other end hung a Jewish Zionist flag—blue and white bars and star of David. It draped a crayon portrait of

Dr. Theodore Herzl, the Zionist leader, with his pale, proud face, black beard and burning eyes. (81)

Calogero’s saloon in the Italian-American Rochester of Jerre Mangione’s childhood is decorated in comparably paradoxical fashion. Mangione wrote in Mount Allegro (1942):

What fascinated me most about the saloon was the art work on the huge mirror behind the bar. There I got my first glimpse of the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius. The volcano was in scarlet red and the bay in dazzling blue, and the whole scene was set in a tremendous gold frame on which were glued wooden roses. On the bay were a large number of sailboats, with their sails bent in opposite directions, so that it appeared as though the wind were blowing from two directions at the same time. A pure ribbon was draped over the top of the frame, and on it was printed in Italian, “See Naples and Die.”

Above the whole thing an Italian flag was enwined with an American one, between a calendar reproduction of “September Morn” and a sign with limestone letters which read, “Home Sweet Home.” (169-70)

Such rooms often have an ethnic and an American wall. In more recent writing the pattern continues, though the nature of the American and ethnic symbols may change. In the stage directions to his play The Chicken Soup Chinaman, Frank Chin described the apartment of the Japanese-American dentist Kenji in the “Oakland” ghetto of Pittsburgh: “The walls are covered with posters of black country, blues and jazz musicians that clash with the few Japanese prints and art objects” (Chin, Aisetter 55). This set may be representative of a whole group of new immigrant intellectuals and writers whose Americanization has taken place through contact with Afro-American culture. Though the opposition of symbols is somewhat different in this example, it dramatizes the same antithesis between American and ethnic symbols: though conflict is what we are supposed to think of in these rooms, we may also look at these rooms through Herbert Gans’s perspective and see popular objects used in the service of creating a sense of symbolic ethnicity—while leveling ethnicity and American identity to such parallel symbols as flags or portraits. As George Devereux showed in his seminal essay “Antagonistic Acculturation” (1943), even ethnic process may have assimilative effects. In contemporary America ethnic revivalists who want to defy assimilation often adopt black American styles rather than white ones—which makes cultural sense, though it does little to support claims for authentically indigenous ethnic styles.
The time has come for American ethnic literary studies to rethink ethnicity theory and for social scientists and historians to understand literary and rhetorical patterns in a new way, even in their own works. Such new openness may also aid teachers of ethnic literature, inspire students of American culture (there are many paper and thesis topics here), and provide Americans and non-Americans with new ways to understand the new world.

I am quite aware that—although I think of my subject and my texts as products of modern history—I shall attempt to work comparatively and to lay bare mental structures, which might create the false impression of an unhistorical, merely structurally oriented interest. My defense lies again in the image of the balloon. If I tried to discuss my subject by narrowing it down, for example, to "Consent and Descent in American Culture: The Case of the Chicago South Side Writers' Workshop from 1925 to 1934," I might be in better company with currently practicing ethnic historians. However, with such a procedure I would have lost the wider view, and I might have felt tempted to structure such a study along melodramatic lines—against the previous period from which the workshop liberated itself or against North Side attempts to co-opt the imaginary venture. In the present, admittedly large scope of the book, what Orlando Patterson called the "beast of ethnicity" (Ch. 10-11) has no exit. Thus the book can avoid denouncing periods and ethnic groups or vilifying Puritans, the second generation, modernization, or the most favored scapegoat in the field—the melting pot. It is the whole balloon that I am after.

This book investigates the origins and ambiguities of the term "ethnicity" and illustrates some of the newer theories (Chapter 1); describes the importance of New England's typological vision for the emergence of different peoples in America (Chapter 2); discusses the melting pot in some unusual contexts (Chapter 3); surveys the strange rhetorical conjunction of melancholy Indian and family drama in American popular culture (Chapter 4) and pursues developmental lines from Indian to urban motifs (Interlude); looks at and interprets some tales of consent and descent (Chapter 5); develops some mental maps of the idealism of group-affiliation thinking (Chapter 6); attempts to get closer to the mysteries of generational counting and ancestor constructing in America (Chapter 7); and, finally, considers some formal implications of writing on themes of ethnicity (Chapter 8).

In his discussion of conversions, William James described experiencing a "wide field" of consciousness, when he wrote in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902):

Usually when we have a wide field we rejoice, for we then see masses of truth together, and often get glimpses of relations which we divine rather than see, for they shoot beyond the field into still remoter regions of objectivity, regions which we seem rather to be about to perceive than to perceive actually. (231)

This experience can come about in many different ways, among them, by reading. As Malcolm X wrote in the chapter entitled "Saved" in his autobiography, "reading had changed forever the course of my life" (179). I had many such experiences in the years of researching and writing this book, and often felt that Jamesian excitement of suddenly seeing masses of truth together. This happened, for example, when I detected melting-pot rhetoric in biblical commentaries on "partition walls," when I found an anonymous Swedish immigrant who called America his bride and Sweden his mother, when Royce's Aristotelian construction of "wholesome provincialism" became a key to so many confusing texts on regionalism and ethnicity, or when theoretical essays on generations gave me the feeling that I had been blind when I had used the term so naively earlier.

I can only hope that I shall be able to convey here and there some of this excitement to a reader whose eyes might halt on a passage in this book—and who might then see a wider field and look at literature (and life) in a new light. I would be happy if the way I have learned to look at consent and descent in America could prove useful to some readers or, better still, turn out to be just a bit contagious even to readers initially skeptical.