

BEYOND ETHNICITY



CONSENT AND DESCENT IN AMERICAN CULTURE



WERNER
SOLLORS

BEYOND ETHNICITY

This page intentionally left blank

BEYOND ETHNICITY

Consent and Descent
in American Culture



WERNER SOLLORS

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1986

Oxford University Press
Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Nicosia

Copyright © 1986 by Werner Sollors
Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.,
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016-4314

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Sollors, Werner
Beyond Ethnicity

Bibliography: p.
Includes index

1. American literature—History and criticism
2. American literature—Minority authors
3. Ethnicity
4. Literature and society
5. Minorities—United States
6. National characteristics—American
7. United States—Civilization
8. United States—Emigration and immigration
9. United States—Popular culture
10. United States—Race relations

ISBN 0-19-503694-8

Printing (last digit): 9 8

Printed in the United States of America

For My Mother with Love and Gratitude,
To the Memory of My Father,
And for David

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a light push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.

—Franz Kafka, "The Trees,"
trans. Willa and Edwin Muir

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments and Prefatory Remarks



The undertaking of this project has met with much encouragement and support from numerous individuals and several institutions. Among the many teachers, friends, colleagues, copanelists, correspondents, students, critics, and helpers-without-responsibility-for-my-shortcomings, the following were most important to me: Daniel Aaron, Harold Abramson, Quentin Anderson, Nathan Austern, Sacvan Bercovitch, Warner Berthoff, William Boelhower, Robert Bone, Ursula Brumm, Carla Cappetti, Jules Chametzky, Abner Cohen, Donald Cunnigen, Mary Dearborn, Kathleen Diffley, Morris Dickstein, Janet Dolgin, Ann Douglas, Emory Elliott, Everett Emerson, James Engell, Geneviève Fabre, Thomas Ferraro, Philip Fisher, Fritz Fleischmann, Winfried Fluck, Joyce Flynn, Hans Galinsky, Herbert Gans, Cristina Giorcelli, Philip Gleason, Milton Gordon, Victor Greene, Olaf Hansen, Billy Joe Harris, Michael Hoenisch, Nathan Huggins, Everett Hughes, Michael Kramer, Karl Kroeber, Hans-Joachim Lang, Lawrence Levine, Christoph Lohmann, Agostino Lombardo, Glenn Loury, John Lowe, Richard McCoy, Elizabeth McKinsey, Jerre Mangione, Leo Marx, Martin Meisel, Sheldon Meyer, Geraldine Murphy, Albert Murray, Charles Nichols, Michael O'Friel, Ann Orlov, Berndt Ostendorf, Orm Øverland, Orlando Patterson, Tom Pearson, David Perkins, Joel Porte, Joseph Ridgely, David Riesman, Peter Rose, Jesper Rosenmeier, Paul Royster, Viola Sachs, Jack Salzman, Joseph Schoepp, Henry Shapiro, James Shenton, Mark Silk, Henry Nash Smith, Otto Sonntag, Leo Srole, Judith Steinsapir, the late Warren Susman, Thomas Tanselle, Alan Trachtenberg, Thomas Underwood, Gabriele Weber-Jaric, Lynn Weiss, Cornel West, Virginia Yans, and Rafia Zafar.

Harvard University, Columbia University, and the John F. Kennedy-Institut of the Freie Universität Berlin have given me institutional help throughout the years. The project was started in 1977-78 when I was an Andrew W. Mellon faculty fellow at Harvard and wrote the entry on literature for the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American*

Ethnic Groups. The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft permitted me to pursue my research during academic leaves; and the Columbia University Council for Research in the Humanities supported the project for a summer. Finally, for me, as a German, to teach American literature and Afro-American Studies to American students has been a special sort of continuous inspiration.

I have followed some formal guidelines that need a word of explanation. The traditional methods of indicating sources are cumbersome for readers, and the listing at the end of the book of works consulted for a chapter is insufficient for the scholar. I have therefore decided to use a modified version of the new Modern Language Association style sheet in conjunction with traditional social science citations. This means that sources are indicated by differing combinations of author, brief title, year, and page in parentheses throughout the text. All full titles and dates appear at the end in the bibliography, which is organized alphabetically by author. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are mine.) In order to emphasize the importance of biblical allusions to the language of American ethnicity, biblical references are identified in brackets throughout the book. The first chapter explains my inclusive use of the term "ethnicity." I have made no attempt to aim for representativeness by ethnic groups.

Some of my conclusions have appeared previously, and I have here used sections, arguments, and examples from essays and reviews published in *American Quarterly* (1981 by the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania), *American Studies in the Teaching of English*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, and Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press © 1980, by the President and Fellows of Harvard College), *In Their Own Words*, *Journal of American History*, Rob Kroes's *The American Identity*, *MELUS*, *Newsletter of the Intellectual History Group* (NYU Institute for the Humanities), *Prospects*, *Queen City Heritage* (by the Cincinnati Historical Society), *Literature d'America*, and *Studies in American Indian Literature*. The following copyrighted materials by other copyright holders are reprinted by permission:

Texts: From *New Writing from the Philippines*, ed. Leonard Caspar. Copyright 1966 Syracuse University Press. Reprinted by permission of the author.

From "Otherness" by Diana Chang. Copyright 1974 by Diana Chang. Reprinted by permission of the author.

From *The Penal Colony* by Franz Kafka, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. Copyright 1948, 1976 by Schocken Books. Reprinted by permission of Schocken Books Inc. and Secker and Warburg, Ltd.

From *Up Stream* by Ludwig Lewisohn. Copyright 1922 by Boni and Liveright. Reprinted by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

From *Collected Poems* by Vachel Lindsay. Copyright 1917 by Macmillan Publishing Company, renewed 1945 by Mamie T. Wheless. Reprinted with permission of Macmillan Publishing Company.

From *Chicago Poems* by Carl Sandburg. Copyright 1916 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1944 by Carl Sandburg. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.

From *Collected Poems, 1940-1978* by Karl Shapiro. Copyright 1942 and renewed 1970 by Karl J. Shapiro. Reprinted with permission of Random House, Inc.

From *Have Come, Am Here* by José García Villa. Copyright 1942, renewed 1969 by José García Villa. Reprinted by permission of Viking Penguin Inc.

From *Harlem Gallery* by Melvin B. Tolson. Copyright 1965 and reprinted with the permission of Twayne Publishers, a division of G. K. Hall & Co., Boston.

From "Transcontinental" by Richard Wright. Copyright 1935 Richard Wright. By permission of Ellen Wright.

Illustrations: William Hamilton, "Are we ethnic?" from *The New Yorker* © 1972. Chrystal Herne and Walker Whiteside in *The Melting-Pot*, John Brougham as Metamora, Cartoon of Edwin Forrest, *Harper's Weekly Supplement*, 29 July 1876, and Po-ca-hon-tas with permission of Harvard Theatre Collection. Photograph of Thomas Crawford, *The Dying Indian Chief*, courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City.

W.S.

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Introduction	3
1. Beyond Ethnicity	20
<i>The Roots of Ethnicity</i>	21
<i>Are Yankees Ethnic?</i>	24
<i>We Are Not like Them</i>	26
<i>I Am Absolutely Other</i>	31
<i>The Content of Ethnicity</i>	33
<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>	36
<i>The Limits of Ethnicity</i>	39
2. Typology and Ethnogenesis	40
<i>"Go Down Moses": Typology and Chosen Peoplehood</i>	42
<i>Imitation of Christ</i>	50
<i>How Puritanism Shaped American Ethnicity</i>	54
<i>Ethnogenesis: The Naturalization of Group Emergence</i>	56
<i>"One Blood": Acts and Shadows</i>	59
3. Melting Pots	66
<i>Just a Four-Act Play</i>	67
<i>Intermarriage and Immigrant Fidelity</i>	71
<i>Crèvecoeur, Pocahontas, and Fountain of Youth</i>	75
<i>The Biblical "New Man": The Melting Pot as an Antitype</i>	81
<i>Universal Regeneration</i>	87
<i>Genetics of Salvation</i>	88
<i>American Alchemy and the Melting Pot</i>	92
<i>Melting Pots before and after Zangwill</i>	94
<i>Other Melting Pots</i>	99
4. Romantic Love, Arranged Marriage, and Indian Melancholy	102
<i>The Contrast and "Indian" Plays</i>	104
<i>Romantic Love versus Arranged Marriage</i>	110

<i>With the Consent of the Governor</i>	112
<i>Indian Melancholy</i>	115
<i>Curses and Blessings</i>	119
<i>Fixtures</i>	125
<i>Conclusion</i>	128
Interlude: From Indian to Urban	131
<i>Ethnic Comedy and the Burlesque</i>	131
<i>The Tradition of the Mysteries</i>	141
<i>Emil Klauprecht's Urban Mysteries</i>	144
5. Some Tales of Consent and Descent	149
<i>Consent and Volitional Allegiance</i>	150
<i>Wives of Youth: Mothers and Brides</i>	152
<i>"Bluish-American Writing?"</i>	155
<i>The Ideal and the Real</i>	160
<i>Love and Kinship</i>	166
<i>Old Self, New Self: Practical Men by Visionary Americans</i>	168
6. The Ethics of Wholesome Provincialism	174
<i>The Mysteries of Un-Region and Un-Ethnic Group</i>	176
<i>Josiah Royce and the Ethics of Wholesome Provincialism</i>	179
<i>Kallen, Bourne, and DuBois</i>	181
<i>The Problem of Cultural Dominance</i>	191
<i>The "Real" Ludwig Lewisohn: American Identities of a German Jewish Immigrant to the South</i>	195
7. First Generation, Second Generation, Third Generation . . . : The Cultural Construction of Descent	208
<i>First, Second, Third . . . : Gradual Degeneracy?</i>	212
<i>The Third Generation as Redemption: Hansen's "Law" Revisited</i>	214
<i>Generations Lost to the Pied Piper: Community-building Jeremiads</i>	221
<i>Intermarriage and "Half-Breeds"</i>	223
<i>Revolutionary Genealogy and Fear of Frankensteins</i>	226
<i>We Are All Third Generation: A Cultural Grandfather Complex?</i>	228

8. Ethnicity and Literary Form	237
<i>Ethnic Encyclopedias, American Odysseys</i>	237
<i>What Is Ethnic Writing?</i>	241
<i>Ethnic Modernism and Double Audience</i>	247
<i>Washingtonian and Mosaic Modernism</i>	254
Conclusion	259
Notes	263
Bibliography	265
Index	283

This page intentionally left blank

BEYOND ETHNICITY

This page intentionally left blank

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

[B]eing 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. . . . [10:17]) 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 communicated, 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 Furstenwaerther's question whether German emigrants might expect, as an incentive, special favors or privileges in America. In his reply, Adams reminded German emigrants 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 prejudices of this country. . . . (Rischin, *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 immediate interest to readers concerned with American ethnicity, yet they are of central importance to the way ethnicity is symbolized in America. 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 immigration, 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 arsenal of such safety valves, terms which are both ambiguous and elusive. 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: just as our grip tightens, the substance escapes. Terms like "ethnicity," "melting pot," "intermarriage," "regionalism," and "generation" are all used in a dazzling variety of elusive ways. They squish this way and that depending on 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 metaphor 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 juxtaposition of non-English groups occupying a valley or a little settlement, and presenting reflections of the map of Europe in their variety. It was democratic and nonsectional 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 "sectional" 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 overtaxed terminology which takes the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ances-